

Long Term in the Short Run

Here's our predicament: We want to improve education now, right now, for the sake of today's students and the future of the nation; yet we know that quick fixes invariably fail. Problems are immediate and concrete, good solutions are generational and speculative.

This dilemma is one that Project 2061 had to confront from the start, having declared itself to be "long-term." Under-the-gun teachers and administrators, school-board members, governors, and legislators are understandably less than thrilled with a reform proposition that *deliberately* plans to take 25 years or so to have its full impact.

Not seeming to serve the immediate, urgent needs of practitioners is but one of the possible shortcomings of long-termness. Another is that it is difficult for long-term reform efforts to survive long enough to actually become long term. Given that resources for underwriting reform are in fact limited, it is difficult for foundations, government agencies, and industry to commit substantial funds year after year to projects whose payoff is over the horizon and, in the bargain, relatively uncertain. Moreover, it is vastly easier for a project to expound lofty goals and long-term strategies than to demonstrate that it is making acceptable progress in the here

and now toward those goals. Faith has its limits, and adherents as well as doubters want evidence of progress sooner rather than later.

No matter, AAAS was not willing to back away from its determination to launch and sustain Project 2061, a truly long-term reform initiative in science, mathematics, and technology education. It made sense, however, to take into account the traditional drawbacks of

*"Each new product will
provide immediate,
practical help and also
an opportunity to
ascertain whether
Project 2061 is on course."*

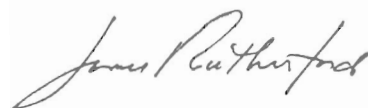
long-term reform projects, ameliorating them at least, and turning them to advantage when possible.

The project's mid-range plans call for it, among other things, to have produced, field tested, revised, and disseminated a set of interrelated reform tools by the year 2000, fifteen years after its beginning, and to have provided training in their use for all educators who desire it. But in view of the desirability of contributing to immediate reform needs and

of demonstrating near-term progress toward distant goals, Project 2061 decided to plan its work so that its products would emerge serially and, further, so that each would stand on its own as a useful resource for reformers.

Benchmarks for Science Literacy is a case in point. While *Benchmarks* was being developed, educators made extensive use of *Science for All Americans*, in the process reaching judgments on the quality and significance of the Project's work. And now, as other Project 2061 products are being developed, educators can use *Benchmarks* along with *SFAA* to further their current reform efforts and to make fresh judgments concerning the directions and value of the project and the feasibility of its long-term approach. In this way, each new product will provide immediate, practical help and also an opportunity to ascertain whether Project 2061 is still on course toward its ultimate goals.

The point is this: Long-term reform efforts can be designed to contribute significantly to near-at-hand improvements, but short-term efforts rarely contribute much to reform in the long run. Time counts—and so does timing. ■



F. James Rutherford
Director