Current educational reforms in Russia can be best explained by the major social, economic and political paradigm shifts taking place in our country. Nearly everything is in a state of flux. Russia is moving from a totalitarian regime to a civil society, from slavery economics to market economics, from a spiritual *gulag* with a general standardization of personality to freedom and individuality.

Both the scope and the depth of educational reform can best be described in terms of these changes, as can the difficulties encountered. And it is not purely economic obstacles that block the way of the reform, as is claimed by many people. Major problems have to do with the necessity for changing the mentality of the former Soviet society. These problems are difficult to solve.

The Russian educational system now is at a stage in which there are three distinct shifts: a political, ideological and philosophical shift; a pedagogical shift; and an economic shift. The present ideological breakthrough, or the first paradigm shift, is the most difficult to make because of its revolutionary nature. Soviet education was functioning in the paradigm of a totalitarian society and produced a corresponding type of personality and nation. A democratic civil society requires a quite different type of personality and nation, characterized by personal freedom and democratic rights.

This first political, ideological and philosophical shift predetermines the success of the two other shifts. But one should not be tempted ‘to cut corners’ in any of these shifts. You can bypass a lot of problems and enter a more or less neutral technological space where many educational processes and technologies are piloted, instructional designs are perfected and possibilities for scientific and technological progress are accumulated. Let’s not cut corners, for technological amendments without a total change of the old educational system will serve to stabilize and strengthen the former totalitarian regime.

The dramatic change in the regime makes the ideological, political and social problems of education even more acute. The school is at the epicentre of a political whirlwind. Schools have always been a focus of ideological and spiritual influence in Russia, and they are once again providing an arena for political contention. From the very beginning, revolutionary and revenge-
seeking forces have been consolidating and attacking. As the reform goes further and increases its scope, these attacks are becoming more frequent and aggressive and counter-revolutionary attempts more persistent (1991 and 1992 are solid proof of this).

The five basic principles which provide the underpinning to contemporary educational reform are:

- comprehensive democratization of education;
- pluralism (including flexibility in educational financing and multiple sources of financial support), multi-systems of educational finance, diversity and alternative patterns of schooling;
- regionalization;
- national identity development through the system of education; and
- openness of the system.

These principles determine the major axes, vehicles and mechanisms of the most important shifts in the political and philosophical paradigm of civil society.

Five further principles of the reform — humanization, humanitarization of education, differentiation of education, developmental and active character of education, and lifelong learning — set the basis and mechanisms of a pedagogical shift towards a new pedagogical paradigm which has a distinct ideological character, and is a negation of the former totalitarian pedagogy. A breakthrough towards a new economic paradigm is occurring in the context of the transition from state-ownership to a market economy. This shift sets the educational system free in terms of its financial obligation, begins to establish new economic mechanisms for educational development, and influences both the mentality, social psychology and self-esteem of educators and their educational practice. There is a change from a philosophy of consuming to a philosophy of producing.

These and other major changes within educational reform require consistent and often strenuous efforts, and results are not achieved easily. The old traditions have penetrated our blood and soul and have become deeply entrenched in our psyches. However, new market diseases are equally dangerous. They can block the way of educational reform, but not to the extent that it becomes futile and doomed. Sometimes our success is beyond expectations, which means that the educational environment is a healthy one and that the changes are needed and demanded.

I believe that there are two fundamental ideas which have become the basis for educational reform in Russia:

- A new society cannot be built on the foundations of an old school system.
- Education is not only the most important factor in personality and human-resource development (the only resource that is inexhaustable
in Russia and constitutes the nation’s treasure), it is also the major factor in the development of society leading to radical changes in all spheres of life.

Both this development and these reforms imply major changes in society itself, in the cornerstones of its beliefs and orientations. Thus the major tasks of reform are to change the system of values, to promote decision-making and independence, to awaken active forces within the human soul, to change the mentality of a society, and to do away with totalitarianism and communist and socialist ideology.

Changes in human thinking are the most difficult to achieve. You cannot stop a society as you can a ship, and put it into dock for repair works. You have to repair it while it’s afloat — even in stormy weather. Moreover, you have to change the whole configuration — the engine, the fuel and the steering wheel simultaneously. And, which is even harder, you have to cure the whole crew, since all of them suffer from a common disease — the old mentality. In the same way, you have to reconstruct the system of education, which requires similar comprehensive repair work. And what is more this reconstruction must precede other changes if education is to be of use to the society.

Accelerated development of education is a prerequisite for social development, because it is education that either limits this development or sets new horizons for it. It is education that changes the mentality of a society, destroys old, outdated stereotypes, prepares the way for a new political culture, and changes the very nature of a society from being closed, one-dimensional and unitarian, to being open, multidimensional and pluralistic.

Education is an important instrument in working out and implementing the new social ideology. It can be a powerful catalyst for intellectual and spiritual Russian revival, restoring peasant, entrepreneurial and intellectual communities which were dispersed or destroyed in the Soviet period. It is the major prerequisite of an efficient market economy which must be successfully introduced to solve the problems of unemployment and economic literacy, and to facilitate a market way of thinking and a market culture in the population. Education is a no-less-important prerequisite for agricultural reform, the revival of the countryside and private farming based on a revival of peasant culture and a sense of land ownership, and the development of motivation and skills for managing agricultural production. Finally, education is a major factor in society’s stabilization, its commitment to the care and development of children being future-oriented and, what is even more important, a working model of harmony in interethnic relationships leading to the revival and mutual enrichment of national cultures and traditions.

Today we are constructing a bridge from a side-road of civilization — which is in fact a blind alley — towards its main highway. Education is one of the cornerstones of this bridge. And the future of the country to a major extent depends on whether this cornerstone is reliable, whether the system of
education can meet the challenges of our time. It is the system of education that sets the framework for what Russia will be like in the twenty-first century, and determines whether Russia will stop ‘chasing’ economically superior countries and move into the front line, or whether it will remain in the rear.

An understanding of the important role which education plays in the contemporary world and its utmost importance to contemporary Russia has but superficially penetrated government and public consciousness, and it has not yet become an integral part of state policy. The first decree of the President of Russian Federation, though, dated 11 July 1991, confirmed the necessity for changing political strategy in relation to education as well as to changing educational policy. The President confirmed the necessity for stopping the constant adjustment of the educational system to pragmatic needs, and for making the accelerated development of education a major goal.

This goal was the basis for the principles of the new educational policy which resulted from the reform in 1987–8. This policy was regarded not just as a considered statement of economic reform, but as a concentrated embodiment of new social values. It was not considered ‘the art of possible’ (according to Gorbachev) but rather ‘the art of getting what is necessary’.

This new educational policy has proceeded from the assumption that past failures had proven the futility of piecemeal amendments within the system. Such amendments can’t resolve major contradictions; however, they can make them more dangerous. Our new policy was meant to depart from collective irresponsibility, and the short-sightedness of former methods of educational reforms that were often based on Napoleon’s principle of ‘first attack, and then we’ll see...’. We had to know the route very well before we could turn on the ignition and take the wheel. That is why the development of reform guidelines was a necessary prerequisite of new educational policy implementation.

**Major Characteristics of Educational Policy**

As a result we have now established the major principles underlying our educational policy:

- The popular ‘institutional’ approach to education and its provincial decentralization and self-sufficiency should be overcome by involving public mechanisms of educational management.
- The course of educational development should be dynamic, mobile and accelerated. It should eliminate the dogmatism and the double subordination of the former social policy which, firstly, always had to ‘interpret party and governmental decisions’ and, secondly, always followed social changes sometimes reflecting changes that had already occurred and sometimes contradicting them. This double subordination
lead to a paralysis of policy, which kept schools from advancing for quite some time.

- Educational policy should be realistic and independent, guarding against the former counter-reformist and new reformist myth-making. (As Yuri Levada has stated, ‘overcoming our illusions we get rid of nightmares of disillusionment’). Educational policy should use compromise as a possible strategy, but with a clear understanding of its limits, for where compromise ends, double thinking begins. Educational soil is capable of producing quite different plants from those that may have been expected. It is important to understand that one breakthrough does not constitute a reform, although it provides for it; that a reform is not a momentary change but an ongoing process, and a lengthy one at that. English ‘democratic’ law was cultivated for 300 years to become what it is now. Realism in educational policy indicates not just awareness of the existing educational reality; it indicates also an orientation towards a future reality and the skills that will be required to reach future goals, commencing from accepted points of growth.

This orientation implies much decision-making with a measure of flexibility consistent with educational policy. It provides for the protection of the educational system from the hardships of a transitory period, and from the rocks of political, economic and social mistakes or misunderstandings.

- There should be an emphasis on pluralism, openness, and truthfulness with just reference to the requirements of educational policy. New policies, unlike the former policies of the State, should (apart from the former policies of the State) be capable of taking into account not only the interests and needs of the State, but also the needs of the different strata of our society. Totalitarianism tried to fool itself, by constructing an ideologically homogeneous society. The normal state of society is heterogeneity. But with respect to this heterogeneity, educational policy should have two dominating tendencies — humanistic and democratic.

- Educational policy should be oriented to the rapid attainment of particular outcomes. Decades of ‘bright future’ prospects have exhausted the trust of Soviet people. Educational policy must include consistent goals, means, methods and results. The test of any policy is whether it achieves a significant result. This can be its crown or its tombstone.

Conclusion

The former school policy of the Soviet Union consisting of declarations and superficialities is dead and buried. Its tombstone bears an inscription similar to that on the tombstone of our 70-year-old social experiment, an anti-pedagogical axiom: ‘Don’t follow me!’