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Column: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

## Education Unions: I'm no fan but they get a bad rap

*My guest today is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.*

By Marion Brady

*"Good teachers are the key to good schools. A major obstacle to staffing America's schools with good teachers is union protectionism."*

So goes the conventional wisdom.

I'm no fan of education unions. I fault them for not taking the lead in education reform, for misplaced priorities, and for a willingness to support bad legislation just to keep a seat at the federal education reform table. I was hammering union leadership on those issues decades before I could do it with the click of a mouse.

That said, when it comes to education reform, teachers unions get an undeserved bad rap.

No way are they the major obstacle to school improvement. Mark that problem up to institutional inertia, innovation-stifling bureaucracy, and misguided state and federal policy. Trace union bad press back to its origins and it's clear that much of it comes from ideologues and organizations less interested in improving education than in destroying union political clout and privatizing public schools.

No, the main opposition to the education reform effort set in motion about twenty years ago by corporate heads and Congress isn't coming from go-along-to-get-along unions. The sustained and blistering attacks come from professional educators like Alfie Kohn, Susan Ohanian, Stephen Krashen, Ken and Yetta Goodman, and dozens of others I could name. And me.

Retired or otherwise independent, we can say what we think without fear of retribution or being accused of being self-serving. Most importantly, unlike the architects of "No Child Left Behind" and its gestating offspring, the "Race to the Top," we've spent thousands of hours in real classrooms working directly with real students.

What do we think about Washington-dictated education reforms? We think they're sufficiently abusive, counterproductive, and downright stupid to warrant a massive class-action suit by parents and grandparents against those responsible.

What explains the radically different views of experienced teachers and the suits in corporate suites and Congress who're now running the education show?

A sign that hung in Albert Einstein's Princeton University office sums it up: "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." Data-enamored, spreadsheet-studying, educationally clueless policymakers think Einstein was wrong.

What is it, exactly, that can't be counted?

Most people think babies are born with minds like blank paper. Parents, teachers, and others, "write" on that paper, filling it with advice, information, explanations, interpretations. Schools organize and compress the process with textbooks and teacher talk, and tests check how much kids can remember long enough to pencil in the "right" oval on a standardized test.

It's that simple.

Except it isn't. Not even close.

Kids' minds are never, ever, like blank pages. To matters they consider important, they attach explanatory theories. When a teacher or other explainer dumps information on them that doesn't match their theories, they reject it. They may play the school game—may store the explainer's theory in short-term memory until the test is over and the pressure is off—but rarely do they adopt it.

Kids don't change their theories because doing so would be too traumatic. Their beliefs—about themselves, about others, about how the world works—are their most valued possessions (just as they are for the rest of us). Their theories are "who they are."

Casually exchanging them for someone else's ideas would undermine their identities, their individuality, their confidence in their ability to make sense of experience.

I learned the hard way—from thousands of adolescents—that I couldn't teach them anything important. All I could do was try to get them to think about a particular matter, then ask them a question or give them something to do that their theories couldn't handle and let them struggle to work it out. Changing their minds had to be their doing, not mine.

Bottom line: It's impossible to count how much kids really know. Period. Standardized tests are an appalling, monumental waste of time, money, and brains. Especially brains.

To the "standards and accountability" cheerleaders—the Business Roundtable, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Governors Association, the US Department of Education, newspaper editorial boards, syndicated columnists, and so on—the complex, counterintuitive, kid-controlled, impossible-to-measure learning process I'm describing is alien.

But that process lies at the very heart of teaching and learning. Trying to shield it from destruction is why older, experienced teachers are the most vocal, determined opponents of the present reform fiasco. They know the "blank paper," count-the-right-answers theory propelling the standards and accountability fad is an intellect-gutting, society-destroying myth.

And they know that adopting national standards and tests will lock that myth in place far, far into the future.

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