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Education Policy Needs an Overhaul to Effect Real Change

By Marion Brady

The headline of the Orlando Sentinel's February 19th 2023, "Opinion," page reads, "Only you can save public education in Florida."

Believe the headline. Call or write legislators expressing opposition to vouchers, assaults on intellectual freedom, teacher autonomy, diversity, equity, funding, and much else aligned with authoritarian thinking.

I applaud the Sentinel, but assume lawmakers will do the usual—nothing, or the wrong thing.

Education policies now in place are examples of "wrong things"—policies approved and enthusiastically promoted by leaders of both major political parties. Competition, it's assumed, creates the necessary pressures on learners and schools to win "the race to the top," so we have voucher-enabled school choice, high stakes standardized testing, letter grades for rating schools, rewards and penalties for teachers and schools based on performance, public money handed over to private schools and charter chains, "standards and accountability," the Common Core State Standards and so on, all enabling and enhancing competition.

And academic performance stays flat. Healthy social institutions continuously improve as each generation "stands on the shoulders" of the previous generation, discarding its failures and building on its successes, but that hasn't happened in education. The assumption that competition improves academic performance isn't just wrong, it's destructive. The deeper, more powerful and proper motivator of good schooling is the human need to know, to expand understanding, to make good sense, to find meaning, to discover how things work, to satisfy curiosity, to do better the things that need doing, and core-based schooling isn't providing it.

If those who shoved professional educators aside a quarter-century or so ago had read what professional educators were writing or listened to what they were saying, they'd have known the underlying problem wasn't "the soft bigotry of low expectations," incompetent teachers, lazy kids or the institution's lack of "rigor." The major problem was and is the misnamed "core" curriculum adopted by America's high schools in 1894 that continues to organize most of the school day.

The Association of American Colleges and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching say the core has failed. I have dozens of quotes from nationally and internationally known experts saying the core has failed. Classroom

discipline problems, school dropout rates, a nationwide electorate with incompatible views about what's true, right and important, testify to the core's failure.

H. G. Wells was dead right when he wrote that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. To save our skins, we need to do more than protest. We need to give the legislature a jolt and open doors to change.

The jolt: Civil disobedience. Opt out of standardized testing. It wastes time, taxes and talent by perpetuating the nonsense that recalling secondhand textbook text and teacher talk prepares the young for the future they're inheriting.

What makes humanness possible is our ability to *think*—to hypothesize, infer, generalize, predict, imagine, synthesize, intuit, value and so on through dozens more thought processes not being taught. They're not being taught because they're not being tested. They're not being tested because their merit depends on their quality in specific contexts, and machine-scored tests can't measure quality.

The change: More than a half-century ago I left the Florida State University faculty and came to central Florida at the invitation of two school superintendents. They had read a journal article I had written outlining an alternative to the core curriculum based on systems thinking.

I wanted one of the districts to choose, quietly, its worst-performing middle school and let me work with its staff. At the end of the year, an unannounced several-day exam would be given to that school and the middle school administrators considered the district's best. The test would evaluate each class's collective ability to think creatively and productively about a local, real-world problem.

I was confident test results would trigger actions that would eventually make central Florida the epicenter of national curricular reform.

Didn't happen. Never underestimate bureaucratic rigidity and timidity.

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