

Education Reform: Wrong Diagnosis, So Wrong Cure

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"We must start with the recognition that, despite decade after decade of reform efforts, our public schools have not improved."

Sooner or later, a reluctant Congress is going to have to do something about replacing No Child Left Behind. If senators and representatives will listen, they'll learn why Education Secretary Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" initiative is a really bad idea, and why thoughtful educators think politicians, business leaders and wealthy philanthropists are bulls in the education china shop.

Back in the 1980's, corporate America, listening to privatizer Milton Friedman, came storming into the shop, not to buy, not to examine or talk about the stock, but to evict educators and take over. With the help of state governors, Congress and the mainstream media, this they did. Professional educators weren't just fired. Convinced that experienced teachers were tainted by "the soft bigotry of low expectations," the self-styled "New Progressives" barred them from the premises.

Non-educators have now been in near-total control of US education policy for more than a full kindergarten-through-12th grade cycle, and things aren't going well. Lou Gerstner, ex-CEO of IBM, RJR Nabisco and The Carlyle Group, a leader in the takeover of education by corporate interests, admitted in a December 1, 2008, op-ed in The Wall Street Journal, "We must start with the recognition that, despite decade after decade of reform efforts, our public schools have not improved."

Those who follow educational issues carefully enough to see past the public relations hype, the test-score manipulations and the statistical game playing, will agree.

Gerstner advocates nationalizing the "standards and accountability" approach. And so, apparently, do the new administration, state governors, the conservative Business Roundtable, the liberal Center for American Progress and educators who should know better. Notwithstanding the ideological "big government is bad" reversal it requires many to make, and notwithstanding the US Constitution's provision that educating is a state rather than a national responsibility, "national standards" probably has enough of a no-nonsense ring to it to counter the philosophical misgivings of most states' righters.

Before Congress opens the national standards and testing can of worms, it might want to examine more closely the assumptions about public education to which the New Progressives cling. Those assumptions are at odds with research and the facts on the ground, but are held with such conviction that behind-the-scenes strategies (including the use of industry-sponsored front groups) have been set in furious motion to convince politicians and the public that the assumptions aren't just valid, but that basing education policy on them assures the success of America's "Race to the Top."

- False Assumption 1: America's teachers deserve most of the blame for decades of flat school performance. Other factors affecting learning - language problems, hunger, stress, mass media exposure, transience, cultural differences, a sense of hopelessness and so on and on - are minor and can be overcome by well-qualified teachers. To teacher protests that they're scapegoats taking the blame for broader social ills, the proper response is, "No excuses!" While it's true teachers can't choose their students, textbooks, working conditions, curricula, tests or the bureaucracies that circumscribe and limit their autonomy, they should be held fully accountable for poor student test scores.

- False Assumption 2: Professional educators are responsible for bringing education to crisis, so they can't be trusted. School systems should instead be headed by business CEOs, mayors, ex-military officers and others accustomed to running a "tight ship." Their managerial expertise more than compensates for how little they know about educating.

- False Assumption 3: "Rigor" - doing longer and harder what we've always done - will cure education's ills. If the young can't clear arbitrary statistical bars put in place by politicians, it makes good sense to raise those bars. Because learning is neither natural nor a source of joy, externally imposed discipline and "tough love" are necessary.

- False Assumption 4: Teaching is just a matter of distributing information. Indeed, the process is so simple that recent college graduates, fresh from "covering" that information, should be encouraged to join Teach For America for a couple of years before moving on to more intellectually challenging professions. Experienced teachers may argue that, as Socrates demonstrated, nothing is more intellectually demanding than figuring out what's going on in another person's head, then getting that person herself or himself to examine and change it, but they're just blowing smoke.

- False Assumption 5: Notwithstanding the failure of vast experiments such as those conducted in eastern Europe under communism, and the evidence from ordinary experience, history proves that top-down reforms such as No Child Left Behind work well. Centralized control doesn't stifle creativity, imply teacher incompetence, limit strategy options, discourage innovation or block the flow of information and insight to policymakers from those actually doing the work.

- False Assumption 6: Standardized tests are free of cultural, social class, language, experiential and other biases, so test-taker ability to infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize and engage in all other "higher order" thought processes can be precisely measured and meaningful numbers attached. It's also a fact that test-prep programs don't unfairly advantage those who can afford them, that strategies to improve the reliability of guessing correct answers can't be taught and that test results can't be manipulated to support political or ideological agendas. For these reasons, test scores are reliable and should be the primary drivers of education policy.

- False Assumption 7: Notwithstanding the evidence from research and decades of failed efforts, forcing merit pay schemes on teachers will revitalize America's schools. This is because the desire to compete is the most powerful of all human drives (more powerful even than the satisfactions of doing work one loves). The effectiveness of, say, band directors and biology teachers, or of history teachers and math teachers, can be easily measured and dollar amounts attached to their relative skill. Merit pay also has no adverse effect on collegiality, teacher-team dynamics, morale or school politics.

- False Assumption 8: Required courses, course distribution requirements, Carnegie Units and other bureaucratic demands and devices that standardize the curriculum and limit teacher and learner options are products of America's best thinkers about what the young need to know. Those requirements should, then, override individual learner interests, talents, abilities and all other factors affecting freedom of choice.

- False Assumption 9: Notwithstanding charter schools' present high rates of teacher turnover, their growing standardization by profit-seeking corporations or their failure to demonstrate that they can do things all public schools couldn't do if freed from bureaucratic constraints, charters attract the most highly qualified and experienced teachers and are hotbeds of innovation.

- False Assumption 10: The familiar, traditional "core curriculum" in near-universal use in America's classrooms since 1893 is the best-possible tool for preparing the young for an unknown, unpredictable, increasingly complex and dangerous future.

These are the major assumptions driving the last two decades of education reform. Any one of them is destructive enough to push the institution over a cliff, and all ten are operative. What's now all but complete is an educational house of cards. Education policy is "data driven," the data comes from scores on corporately produced standardized tests, those tests are keyed to subject-matter "standards," the standards are keyed to the familiar math-science-language arts-social studies curriculum, and that curriculum is a primitive, backward-looking product of the late 19th century when standardization of parts, division of labor and mass production were the "new, big things."

"The Race to the Top" is reactionary in the fullest sense of the word. That 1893 curriculum was poor when it was adopted, and it becomes more dysfunctional with each passing year. Imagine a car being driven at high speed down a winding rural road, with all the occupants, including the driver, peering intently out the back window.

Consider: The familiar curriculum upon which America is betting its future has no agreed-upon overarching aim. It's so inefficient its use takes up most of the school day, leaving little or no time for apprenticeships, internships, co-op programs, individual and group projects, or for exploring the real world two-dimensionalized by textbooks. It has no criteria establishing what new knowledge is important, or what old knowledge to discard to make room for the new. It ignores the fundamental, integrated nature of knowledge, denying learners the benefits of seeing the whole of which random, specialized school subjects are parts. Its sheer volume assures that what's taught will rarely make it past learner short-term memory. It's keyed not to kids' aptitudes, abilities and interests, but to their ages. And it costs a great deal to administer.

That just begins a list of problems with the 1893 curriculum. Its over-the-top emphasis on reading short-changes other ways of learning. It doesn't progress smoothly through ever-increasing levels of intellectual complexity. It's so at odds with the natural desire to learn that laws, threats and other extrinsic motivators are necessary to keep kids in their seats and on task. It has no built-in mechanisms forcing it to adapt to change. Ignoring mountains of research about their importance in intellectual development, it treats art, music, dance and play as "frills." It isolates educators in specialized fields, discouraging their interest in and professional dialog about the state of the institution as a whole and their collaboration in its improvement. It fails to explore questions essential to ethical and moral development. It neglects important fields of study, inhibiting the phenomena-relating process central to the creation of new knowledge. Its

failure to model the integrated nature of reality makes it difficult to apply what's being taught to real-world experience. And its requirement that all kids jump through the same "minimum standards" hoops snubs major sources of America's past strength and success - individual initiative, imagination and creativity.

Any one of those problems is serious enough to warrant an emergency national education conference, and all are being ignored. And if Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" is implemented as currently envisioned, this problem-plagued, 19th century, reactionary curriculum won't just be imposed on today's young, but on their children and their children's children, locked in place by national standards.

It's hard to imagine a surer, more direct path to institutional irrelevance and eventual societal paralysis. The assumption that a curriculum adopted more than a hundred years ago merely to simplify admission to colleges and universities (which themselves suffer from all the curricular problems just noted), can provide the young with sufficient intellectual capital to cope with a complex, unpredictable, dangerous future would be laughable if the consequences weren't so grave.

There's no easy, quick fix, but one thing is certain. Doing with greater diligence and determination what brought America's schools to their present state will simply move forward the day when utter failure becomes obvious to all. There are, however, some things Congress and the administration could do.

- First, they could stop basing education policy on the opinions of business leaders, syndicated columnists, mayors, lawyers and assorted other education "experts" who haven't passed the 10,000-hour test - 10,000 hours of face-to-face dialog with real students in real classrooms, all the while thinking analytically about what they're doing and why. "Experts" who see more rigor, more tests, more international comparisons, more "data-driven decision-making," more math and science, more school closings, more Washington-initiated, top-down reform policy as the primary cure for education's ills are amateurs.

And policymakers who can't see the perversity of simultaneously spending billions on innovation and billions on standardization, should find other work.

- Second, Congress and the administration could accept the fact that, in formal schooling, the curriculum is where the rubber meets the road. No matter school type - public, charter, private, parochial, magnet, virtual, home, whatever; no matter the level - elementary, secondary, college or graduate school; no matter first-rate physical facilities, highly qualified faculty, enlightened administrators, sophisticated technology, generous funding, caring parents, supportive communities, disciplined, motivated students, no matter anything else affecting school performance, if the curriculum is lousy, the education will be lousy.

- Third, Congress and the administration could stop for a moment, think, then acknowledge what they surely must know, that the key to humankind's survival is, at it has always been, human variability. Trying to standardize kids by forcing them all through the same minimum-standards hoops isn't just child abuse. It's a sure-fire way to squeeze out what little life is left in America's public schools after decades of appallingly simplistic, misguided, patchwork policy. Maximum performance, not the minimum standards measured by tests, should be the institution's aim. Anything less invites societal catastrophe.

If Congress and the administration are wise, they'll use their levers of power not to tighten but to loosen the rigor screws and end the innovation-stifling role of Carnegie Units, course distribution requirements, mandated instructional programs, and other curriculum-standardizing measures. They'll do what enlightened school boards have always done and say to educators, "We want you to unleash creativity, ingenuity, resourcefulness, imagination and enthusiasm, and send the young off with a lasting love of learning. Tell us what you need in order to make that happen, and we'll do our best to provide the necessary support."

Even the suggestion of such a policy will appall many. We say we're big on freedom, democracy, individualism, autonomy, choice and so on, but advocating aligning our schools with our political rhetoric invites being labeled as too radical to be taken seriously. Such a policy, most are likely to believe, would trigger chaos, pandemonium, anarchy.

Not so. Two things would happen. In most schools, institutional inertia, entrenched bureaucracy and pressure from powerful corporate interests would maintain the status quo.

In most schools, but not all. A few would point the way to a better-than-world-class education by demonstrating what experienced teachers have always known, that the traditional curriculum barely scratches the surface of kids' intellectual potential.

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