

Washington Post

"The Answer Sheet" Column by Valerie Strauss

Posted at 11:47 AM ET, 10/23/2009

My guest today is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author. He writes about Education Secretary's Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" initiative, which is intended to be the successor to "No Child Left Behind."

'Race to the Top's' 10 false assumptions

By Marion Brady

"Race to the Top? National standards for math, science, and other school subjects? The high-powered push to put them in place makes it clear that the politicians, business leaders, and wealthy philanthropists who've run America's education show for the last two decades are as clueless about educating as they've always been.

If they weren't, they'd know that adopting national standards will be counterproductive, and that the "Race to the Top" will fail for the same reason "No Child Left Behind" failed—because it's based on false assumptions.

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 demanding 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.

"Human history," said H.G. Wells, "is a race between education and catastrophe."

If amateurs continue to control American education policy, put your money on catastrophe. It's a sure thing.

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