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Column: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

BRADY: When captains of business and industry 'hijacked' education--and teachers let them

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

By Marion Brady

MEMO: TO THE MEMBERS OF MY PROFESSION

"We have met the enemy, and he is us," said Pogo.

We educators should make the wise little opossum from Walt Kelly's comic strip our mascot.

The single, worst, shoot-yourself-in-the-foot act that contributed to our loss of control of education reform happened about 20 years ago. That's when leaders of business and industry, convinced that educators either didn't know enough or didn't care enough about educating the young to be trusted, hijacked our profession. And we let them.

The new leaders were certain they knew what was wrong with America's schools, and what had to be done to set them right: What was needed were "standards." Clear, no-nonsense standards. Tough, demanding standards. Standards that told every teacher exactly what every kid should know, in every subject, at every grade level.

Congress, no more appreciative of Alexander Pope's warning that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing than the new leaders, got in the act. Waving the "Standards and Accountability!" banner, they passed, with self-congratulatory cheers, the bi-partisan No Child Left Behind legislation. States that wrote standards for school subjects, and gave standardized tests to see how well the standards were being met, would get money. The standards started piling up.

Not much money, of course, but beggars can't be choosers. The states, routine under-funders of education, agreed to the bargain, and called on educators to produce the actual standards - page after page of lists of what kids should know about math, science, language arts, and social studies.

That's when we pulled the trigger, shooting ourselves in the feet. Instead of knuckling under, we should have explained in simple, one- and two-syllable words, why standards for school subjects were a lousy idea - a simplistic, reactionary, off target, costly, counterproductive, even irrelevant idea.

If you're looking for a surgeon to remove a cancerous growth, a plumber to fix a leaky pipe, an artist to paint a portrait, a caterer to produce a wedding dinner, you don't dictate which scalpels the surgeon picks up, which wrenches the plumber brings into the house, which brushes the painter will use, or select the caterer's kitchen utensils. Those are just tools, mere means to ends.

You want the patient to survive, the leak to be stopped, the portrait to be pleasing, the dinner to be memorable.

How the professional you've chosen accomplishes that task is beside the point. In fact, getting involved in the surgery issue at the scalpel level could mean writing off all the surgeons who use lasers. Telling the plumber which wrenches to use would probably just expose you to some colorful language and run up your bill.

What matters, finally, is the quality of the work. What a society has a right, even a responsibility to demand of its educators is that they do their best to help the young develop the qualities and characteristics the society values. Proper standards are for kids, not for school subjects.

The thousands of subject-matter standards Washington policymakers all but forced the states to produce are a curse, perpetuating policymaker naiveté, focusing attention and effort on peripheral concerns, undermining teacher professionalism and flexibility, and making the scores on primitive, intellect-stifling, curriculum-narrowing, horrendously expensive standardized tests the gauge of school quality.

But the greatest damage being done by subject-matter standards is their role in blocking adaptation to social change and the adoption of new ideas. They're the direct enemy of the educational innovation the new administration is spending billions to promote.

Consider, for example, what the standards fad did to the two ideas with the greatest potential for moving American education to a whole new level of performance - systems theory as it had emerged from World War II, and new insights into how the brain organizes knowledge.

These ideas showed how the massive amounts of random, disorganized information schooling was dumping into learners' short-term memories, only to be forgotten, could be welded into a single, organized, self-reinforcing, dynamic body of knowledge.

Faced with a test or problem and armed with systems thinking and an understanding of how their brains sorted information, kids could rely on logic rather than memory to find or formulate answers and solutions.

Reason is a better tool than remembering.

Little by little, those two ideas were gaining acceptance. Then, twenty years ago, when we should have said, "Stop trying to tell us how to do our jobs, just tell us what kind of citizens you want and hold us accountable," we said nothing.

We gave our profession to amateurs; they gave us No Child Left Behind, and now Race to the Top - NCLB on steroids.

A poor trade. We screwed up.

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