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“The Answer Sheet: A School Survival Guide for Parents (and Everyone Else)”

By Valerie Strauss | November 4, 2009; 11:30 AM ET

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## **Brady: Education Reform: Wrong Diagnosis, So Wrong Cure**

*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, intended to be the successor to "No Child Left Behind."*

By Marion Brady

When "Race to the Top" fails, as it will, the main reason won't be any of those currently being advanced by the corporate interests and politicians now running the education show. It won't fail because of lack of academic rigor, poor teaching, weak administrators, too-short school year, union resistance, differing state standards, insufficient performance incentives, sorry teacher training, or lingering traces of the early-20th Century Progressive movement.

It will fail primarily for a reason not even being mentioned by leaders of today's reform effort -- a curriculum adopted in 1893 that grows more dysfunctional with each passing year. Imagine a car being driven down a winding rural road with all the passengers, including the driver, peering intently out the back window.

The familiar, traditional curriculum is 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 solid 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 whole of which their specializations are parts.

It fails to explore questions essential to ethical and moral development, neglects important fields of study, and has no system for determining the relative importance of those fields it doesn't neglect.

Its failure to reflect the integrated nature of reality and the seamless way the brain perceives makes it difficult to apply what's being taught to real-world experience.

And that barely begins a list of the problems.

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 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.