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Column: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

The education reform train is off track

My guest today is Marion Brady, veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

My more than 75 years in education as student, teacher, college professor, administrator, book and article author, newspaper columnist, publisher consultant, and visitor to schools around the world, have convinced me that most Americans are over-schooled and under-educated.

Unfortunately, the federal dollars about to be channeled to the nation's schools will make the problem worse.

Instead of triggering a fundamental rethinking of education, Education Secretary Arne Duncan's billions will simply hasten the destruction of the institution I love - universal, free, public schooling.

Notwithstanding the press releases about the expected miracles from unleashed market forces, the money will be spent trying to salvage the institution rather than transform it (a strategy familiar to those who follow the banking industry).

American education, simply and emphatically, is on a wrong track.

As a vehicle for intellectual development, it began to slow down the day the young were pulled out of apprenticeships and other real-world learning experiences, put in rooms insulated from the real world, and made to sit, hands on desks, eyes front, mouths shut, being fire-hosed with facts.

The vehicle moved slower still starting in 1893, when the so-called "core curriculum" was adopted, narrowing the focus of study to math, science, language arts and social studies, and ignoring the integrated nature of knowledge.

It came to a stop and reversed when Congress mandated "No Child Left Behind." "Race To The Top" will accelerate its backward movement.

But the money will eventually run out. And when it does - when our aversion to taxes combines with our treasure-draining military adventures and forces us to live within our means - there will be genuine educational change.

"Human history," said H.G. Wells, "is a race between education and catastrophe." Catastrophe has an ever-widening lead, and when the money's gone and the catastrophe hits, "genuine educational change" is inevitable.

There will then be formal, official acceptance of a two-tier system - a privatized one for the relative few who can afford it, and a public one for the peasants.

It's this public system that most interests me, for if we're to survive, it's the system that, much altered, will take the lead. The private one will be too preoccupied with trying to improve the teaching of the core curriculum.

So, in no particular order, here are a few boundary-stretching suggestions aimed at those interested in thinking about building a system that costs a lot less money while helping kids get smarter:

-- Paying for student "seat time" is where the biggest chunk of money goes. Since most adults remember very little and use even less of what they "learned" in school after fourth grade, discontinue automatic seat-time funding for learners older than 10 years of age.

-- Take the term "neighborhood school" seriously. Where there's interest, form mixed-age steering committees to think and talk about neighborhood educational needs. Give the committees a little working money, assistance if requested, and let a thousand flowers bloom. Sure, some will die, but only totalitarians think top down social change works better than bottom up.

-- Don't think "school building." Rent or lease centrally located space large enough to accommodate, say, 25 people, not necessarily in the same room at the same time. A house will do.

-- Radically cut the list of required subjects. Capitalizing on the integrated nature of knowledge makes possible efficiencies that can shorten the need for coaching to two or three hours a day, allowing the same facility to accommodate more than one session.

-- Hire two- or three-person professional instructional teams, based on interviews and team-written proposals for meeting learner needs, and identify neighborhood expertise, talent, and ability.

-- Stop buying textbooks. The real world surrounding every kid is a learning resource far richer and more challenging than any textbook. Help teachers learn how to use it. Add Internet access if desired.

-- Specialized, occupation-related instruction such as that now being offered in magnet schools will never be able to keep up with the rate of change in the world of work, so transfer responsibility for teaching specific skills and knowledge to users of those skills and knowledge - employers. They may resist, so sweeten the pot with subsidies as necessary. (A bonus: Apprenticeship and internship arrangements will go far toward smoothing the transition to responsible adulthood.)

-- Spend whatever it costs to test and fix sight and hearing problems, fill empty stomachs, and provide some stability. It's a waste of money to try to educate learners who don't hear or see well, are hungry or afraid.

-- Get corporate hands out of the education till, starting with standardized testing and test prep materials. No way can computer-scored tests measure what kids know, much less what they can actually do with what they know. Neither can they evaluate the complex thinking skills that survival requires. (Don't worry about accountability. After a few weeks, even a lousy teacher knows far more about a kid's performance and potential than can be learned from any paper and pencil test.)

-- Find out who each learner really is. It's a mystery to me how a society can simultaneously sing the praises of individualism while forcing every kid down the same assembly line. For a tiny fraction of the cost of high-stakes subject-matter tests, every kid's

potential can be explored using inexpensive, off-the-shelf inventories of individual interests, abilities, personalities, and learning styles.

-- Forget grade and age levels. Start with where learners are and help them go as far as they can go in the direction they want to go.

-- Eliminate school buses, staff cars, athletic departments, athletic fields, cops on campus, attendance officers, warehouse workers, support personnel, and most non-teaching administrators.

-- Drastically shrink central administrations. Have them coordinate the forming of teacher teams, handle payroll, and relieve teams of paper shuffling, resource acquisition, and other non-instructional tasks.

-- Strip away all the non-academic roles and responsibilities state legislators piled on schools during the 20th Century. Create autonomous support systems for neighborhood-level, multi-age programs for music, art, dance, drama, sports, play, whatever.

-- See value in approaches to educating that contribute to self-reliance, a strong sense of neighborhood, vastly increased contact between generations, and family-based activities.

-- Assume that the transition from authoritarian, top-down, bureaucratic control of education to democratic, bottom-up leadership will take years and political will, but know that people will rise to the challenge.

-- Add in the tax savings from reduced prison populations, less need for neighborhood policing, and better physical and mental health.

Think my ideas are outrageous? Dream up your own. But start by accepting that what we're doing isn't working, it hasn't responded to a century of tinkering, it's at odds with democracy and human nature, and it costs far more than we can now afford.

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