

From [FloridaThinks.com](http://FloridaThinks.com), the forum for civil debate:

## **Firing Silver Bullets or Blanks to Improve Schools?**

Posted on February 11, 2010, 11:10 pm.

By Marion Brady

Bill Gates says that big, impersonal schools are obstacles to improved learner performance. He's right. His foundation has poured major money into a "small schools initiative," but thus far nothing much of educational consequence has resulted.

Eli Broad says that better leadership is the key to improved learner performance, and the Broad Foundation has put up significant money to train new ones. Obviously, good leaders are essential, but thus far, Broad-trained leaders haven't introduced any revolutionary new approaches to educating.

Jeb Bush, echoing the late Milton Friedman, says bringing market forces to bear shapes schools up. The market-based reforms he put in place in Florida led to teachers and schools being graded, compared, labeled, rewarded and punished. But cut through the political hype and the statistical game playing, and it's clear that after more than a decade, nothing of academic consequence has changed. Indeed, misapplied, market forces are counterproductive.

### **Rigor Overrated**

Policymakers in Tallahassee, like those in most other state capitals and Washington, have long argued the merits of greater rigor. They've pushed for more math, more science, more Advanced Placement courses, more International Baccalaureate programs, and more testing. But neither the evidence nor common sense suggest that "raising the rigor bar" for learners who can't clear the bars already in place will improve schools.

Bill Gates, Eli Broad, Jeb Bush and the policymakers in state capitals and Washington aren't the only ones with ideas about what's wrong with schools, and what would set them straight. Op-eds nationwide read about the same: End social promotion! Put all kids in uniform! Disband teacher unions! Close down schools of education! Get tough on parents! Expel the troublemakers! Give everybody vouchers! Put mayors in charge! Abolish tenure! Bring back corporal punishment! Convert all schools to charters! Increase spending! Adopt pay-for-performance schemes!

Check around, and it turns out that somewhere, all these "reform" strategies and many others have been tried and have made little or no difference. That's because – as most educators know but those actually running the big show refuse to admit – the main reason for poor learner performance is childhood poverty. Take away the test scores of kids on free and reduced lunch – those least likely to have had adequate health care, least likely to have had good diets, least likely to have had stable, stress-free home environments, least likely to have been exposed to books and rich, varied conversation, least likely to have traveled, least likely to have had music or other

kinds of private lessons – take away their test scores and the average of those left will be right up there with the best, not just in the United States but in the world.

Of the 21 richest countries in the world, the United States ranks next to last in average measures of childhood well-being. And, according to the [Anna E. Casey Foundation](#), on that near-bottom-of-the-barrel world list, Florida ranks about midway between New Hampshire and Minnesota at the top of the bottom, and Mississippi and Louisiana at the bottom of the bottom.

There's a problem, all right, but it isn't a problem that can be addressed by telling teachers to suck it up and get on with the job.

### **How to Make the Best of a Bad Situation**

Neither the nation nor the state has the collective will and brains to make a dent in childhood poverty, but I have an education-specific suggestion that could help make the best of a bad situation.

Several years ago, to illustrate a point I wanted to make in a column written for the *Orlando Sentinel*, I went to my nearest middle school and asked to see copies of the eighth-grade math, science, language arts and social-studies textbooks. The school obliged.

Sitting in the school's reception area, I counted the terms in the glossaries of the four books, rightly assuming that they represented what experts thought every kid should know.

One thousand, four hundred and sixty-five! That's how many terms were in the glossaries of just those four textbooks. That's 1,465 main ideas for 14-year-olds to learn in a school year, an average of about eight new ones a day. That's not just ridiculous; it's insane. In the real, adult world, an author who's trying to get just ONE new idea across assumes it will take a whole book. (Think Malcolm Gladwell and *The Tipping Point*, or Alexis de Tocqueville and *Democracy In America*.)

### **19th-Century Tool Outdated for 21st**

Americans, philosophically predisposed to think short-term, and more concerned with individual than with the general welfare, aren't going to do anything about childhood poverty. But that doesn't have to mean that it is impossible to make radical improvements in educating. Information overload is just one of at least 20 problems with the familiar "core curriculum," the static, 19th-century intellectual tool the young are being handed to guide them through the 21st.

Clinging to that curriculum is a recipe not just for educational but for societal disaster. If education policymakers in Tallahassee and Washington knew what they were doing, instead of demanding national standards and tests keyed to a curriculum generated in an era long past and no longer relevant, they'd be calling for an emergency national conference to rethink what's being taught, and why.