

From *FloridaThinks.com*, the forum for civil debate, February 2010:

Wrong Answers from Business Groups on Education Reform

“Tallahassee – Backed by Gov. Charlie Crist and former Gov. Jeb Bush, powerful business groups called Thursday for major changes in Florida’s education system – including tougher high school graduation standards and a revamped class-size law. The Florida Council of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce released the 69-page report during a news conference in the governor’s office.”

– From the Daytona Beach News-Journal, Jan. 15

By Marion Brady

The 69-page report, “Closing the Talent Gap: A Business Perspective,” is a well-written, beautifully packaged presentation of some solid ideas, including a few that – because they cost money – are unlikely to be met with enthusiasm by legislators and other policymakers.

The importance of early childhood experience from birth to the beginning of formal schooling is recognized, and there are specific suggestions for improvement. More equitable funding for education across the state is advocated, along with statistics pointing out that the costs of failure to adequately support education can have long-term consequences. Shortsightedness is expensive.

There’s much else to commend in the report, but the limitations of “a business perspective” are evident. As has long been true at both state and federal levels, legislators and other non-educators are so convinced that the conventional wisdom about educating is a sufficient basis for policy, they feel no need to consult those with long experience in the classroom. Policymakers who’d be appalled by a proposal to allow teachers to dictate hospital emergency room procedures, specifications for highway bridge design, or cockpit checklists for airliners, don’t hesitate to set policy for something inherently far more complex than any of those – educating.

If the Committee of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce had sought input from educators – and by that I mean teachers in classrooms – they would have been asked to defend their assumption that education should be shaped by “workforce needs” rather than human needs, of which work is but one of a broad range. They would have been asked to explain the emphasis on math and science when the state workforce is unable to absorb them, as evidenced by their noting that “only about half of those earning degrees in the science and math fields identified with the global innovation economy choose to stay in the state.” Does that not suggest a problem for which education shouldn’t be held accountable?

But perhaps most importantly, educators would have asked the committee and the chamber for an explanation of their great faith and confidence in standardized testing as an adequate measure of school performance.

There's only one learner ability that machine-scored tests can measure with precision – short-term memory – and the vast limitations of short-term are surely obvious. It isn't the ability to recall secondhand information from textbooks or lectures that sets the successful apart from their peers, but imagination, creativity, perseverance, the ability to connect dots, a willingness to take chances and make mistakes, and a long list of other traits and qualities.

How, when only one fleeting ability – the ability to remember information long enough to pencil in the right oval on a standardized test – can be measured accurately, can standardized tests be seen as indicators of relative educational quality?

The Council of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce have ignored the fundamental problem from which not just Florida's educational system but educational systems world-wide suffer: All use a curriculum designed in the 19th century – a simpler era pre-dating the knowledge explosion. That increasingly dysfunctional relic of a bygone era dumps so much random, irrelevant, disorganized information on kids that even the best of them can't process it in any practical, meaningful, permanently useful way.

“Closing the Talent Gap: A Business Perspective,” fails to address a fundamental problem. It calls for “transformational change,” then assumes that doing what's always been done, except doing it with greater rigor, diligence, and determination, will make Florida's schools competitive in international intellectual competitions.

Wrong diagnosis; wrong cure.

Marion Brady is a retired high school teacher, college professor and district-level administrator, and the author of textbooks, professional books, and journal articles. He is a frequent contributor to the Washington Post newspaper as a guest blogger. His website is www.MarionBrady.com.