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Memo to Lawmakers: You Don't Know What You're Doing on School Reform

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By Marion Brady

'Human history,' said the late H.G. Wells, "is a race between education and catastrophe." Read the front page of any Florida newspaper, and it will be obvious that catastrophe has a commanding lead. Dear legislators, since you're now running the education show, and the consequences of coming in second in the education-vs.-catastrophe race are pretty grim, perhaps you'd be open to a few observations from someone who's spent a half-century in Florida's schools actually doing the work.

Before retirement, I taught in two of the state's high schools and two of its universities, was a county-level director of instruction, wrote years of columns on education for the *Orlando Sentinel* and Knight-Ridder/Tribune, did consultant work for the state and many of its counties, wrote textbooks and professional books published by major publishers, and visited schools as far west as Japan and as far east as the Greek Islands. A little book on reform I wrote many years ago for Florida's Department of Education was so popular it went through five printings.

I'll try to be brief, an effort that may come across as blunt.

1. Your education policies are shaping minds, lives and Florida's future, and it's clear that you don't really know what you're doing.

The script you're following – the one written by the Business Roundtable – is appallingly simplistic. Educating – discerning the images of reality in kids' heads and convincing them there are better ones they'd do well to accept – is inherently the most complex of all intellectual challenges, and you are treating it as if it's a simple matter of distributing information. The Business Roundtable's approach to education reform isn't a product of teaching experience, of consultation with experienced teachers, or of research. It's a reactionary product of ideology and the conventional wisdom.

2. You're misdiagnosing the causes of poor performance.

Your stump speeches, campaign brochures and legislative proposals make it clear that you think the main problem with Florida's schools is a lack of rigor. You imply that Florida's educators aren't doing their best, that they're lazy or dumb or both, and that the situation calls for tough love, raised performance bars, more demanding courses, stiffer standards, and harsher penalties for failure.

Your version of rigor has kids and teachers working longer and harder doing what has brought education to crisis. Wrong diagnosis, so wrong cure.

3. You're assuming that the blame for unacceptable performance lies with people – primarily teachers and kids.

The late Edward Deming, one of the world's foremost authorities on quality, believed that poor institutional and organizational performance almost always meant there was a SYSTEM problem.

And system problems there certainly are. Lots of them. The curriculum you want to lock even more rigidly in place with national standards and tests was put in place in 1893, and accommodates the present knowledge explosion about as well as mule trains would accommodate today's freight transport needs. That 19th-century relic is at odds with kids' nature. It ignores the brain's need for order and organization. It makes no provision for new fields of knowledge. It relies almost exclusively on learner short-term memory. It treats art, music, play and other intellect-enhancing activities as expendable frills. Its overemphasis on reading to the neglect of all other ways of learning is cranking out hundreds of thousands of kids who hate to read.

That barely begins a list of Florida's unaddressed education problems, all of which No Child Left Behind exacerbated, and the Race to the Top is on course to make worse.

4. Hundreds of studies have established beyond any doubt that the single greatest cause of the so-called "achievement gap" is poverty.

Florida has more than its share, but you don't want to talk about it. If the subject comes up, it's met with an attempt to change the subject to the evils of tenure or unions or some other red herring, conveniently ignoring the fact that some of the best-scoring states aren't concerned with those matters while some of the worst use draconian measures to attack them.

5. To educational problems, you're bringing an ideologue's blind faith in Milton Friedman's opinion that privatization, charters, vouchers, merit pay and other free-market strategies can cure all educational ills.

Maybe because he was an economist, Friedman believed that what motivates stock brokers also motivates teachers, but that's simply not the case. Merit pay and other market schemes won't make a dime's worth of improvement in the only thing that counts: what goes on in kids' heads. What they do is undermine the cooperation, trust, sharing of expertise and other "family" characteristics essential to school quality. There's a reason market gimmicks are counterproductive in schools. They're based on flawed ideas about human nature.

6. You've put all of Florida's performance evaluation eggs in the FCAT basket.

It should concern you that the only thing machine-scored tests can measure with precision is a kid's short-term memory. How useful is an education if it doesn't help learners learn to think

better – infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize, value, and so on? The FCAT yields not a fraction of what a teacher who has worked with a kid for even a few weeks knows about her or his potential and problems. The test is anti-educational and a criminal waste of a great deal of time and money, robbing Florida's best and worst students of attention as schools pour resources into attempts to nudge the test scores of the "marginal middle" kids above a politically established pass-fail line.

If you're serious about education reform, you could learn from Finland, the highest-scoring nation in the world. The Finns moved from the middle of the pack to leader of the world by following a simple reform strategy:

True believers in education, they tax. Then they hire the cream of the academic crop. Next, they train them well. And finally, they trust and respect them enough to leave them alone.

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