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Column/Blog: "The Answer Sheet" by Valerie Strauss

De-legitimizing public education

My guest is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

The quality of American education is going to get worse. Count on it. And contrary to the conventional wisdom, the main reason isn't going to be the loss of funding accompanying economic hard times.

Follow along and I'll explain:

Step One: Start with what was once a relatively simple educational system. (For me, it was a one-room school with 16 or so kids ranging in age from about 6 to 15, and a teacher who, it was taken for granted by the community, was a professional who knew what she was doing.)

Step Two: Close the school, build a big one, buy school buses, open a district office, and hire administrators to tell teachers what they can and can't do.

Step Three: When problems with the new, more complicated system develop, expand the administrative pyramid, with each successive layer of authority knowing less about educating than the layer below it.

Step Four: As problems escalate, expand the bureaucracy, moving decision-making ever higher up the pyramid until state and then federal politicians make all the important calls.

Step Five: Give corporate America - the Gates, Broads, Waltons, etc. - control of the politicians who control the bureaucracy that controls the administrators who control the teachers.

Step Six: Pay no attention as the rich who, enamored of market forces, in love with the idea of privatizing schools, and attracted by the half-trillion dollars a year America spends on education, use the media to destroy confidence in public education.

Step Seven: As a confidence-destroying strategy, zero in on teachers. Say that they hate change and played a major role in the de-industrialization of America and the decline of the American Empire.

Step Eight: As the de-professionalization of teaching and the down-grading of teachers progress, point to the resultant poor school performance as proof of the need for centralized control of education.

So, what's next?

I don't have a clue. But if I were forced to guess, I'd say that what's next is whatever the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable - eyes fixed no farther than the next quarter's profit - want to be next. They've been wildly successful thus far.

It's possible, of course, that education policy next year will be just another excuse for partisan warfare, with little or no change in the status quo. Or it may be that some small congressional caucus will stick a wrench so firmly in the legislative gears that the simplistic, reactionary

education "reform" machine built by corporate America, sold to Congress, and showcased by non-educator-educators like Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee, will simply grind to a halt.

What particularly grieves me is that, whatever happens, it won't be a consequence of any real understanding of education. Neither will it cause the education establishment itself to take seriously what Erica Goldson said in her [June valedictory speech](#) at Cocksackie-Athens High School in New York:

"We are so focused on a goal, whether it be passing a test, or graduating as first in the class. However, in this way, we do not really learn. We do whatever it takes to achieve our original objective.

"Some of you may be thinking, "Well, if you pass a test, or become valedictorian, didn't you learn something? Well, yes, you learned something, but not all that you could have. Perhaps, you only learned how to memorize names, places, and dates to later on forget in order to clear your mind for the next test. School is not all that it can be. Right now, it is a place for most people to determine that their goal is to get out as soon as possible.

"I am now accomplishing that goal. I am graduating. I should look at this as a positive experience, especially being at the top of my class. However, in retrospect, I cannot say that I am any more intelligent than my peers. I can attest that I am only the best at doing what I am told and working the system."

And whatever happens next won't support and encourage educators to get a spine. They need to scream bloody murder at stupid policy, reject inappropriate use of market forces, point out mainstream media educational naiveté, and demand that policymakers listen before serving up dysfunctional programs like [No Child Left Behind](#) and [Race to the Top](#).

And when they do so and are dismissed as self-serving whiners who don't want to be held accountable, they should take to the streets in protest.

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