



SUNDAY 7 MARCH 2010

Falling Into the Ditch

Saturday 06 March 2010

by: Marion Brady, truthout | Op-Ed

Washington Post headline, February 18, 2010: "Lawmakers to launch bipartisan effort to rewrite No Child Left Behind."

Reading that headline, teachers familiar with the King James Bible are likely to recall one of Jesus' parables as quoted by Luke: "Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?"

With few exceptions, the education reform chatter of politicians of both political parties exhibits a level of ditch-prone educational ignorance that would be laughing-out-loud funny if its consequences weren't so dire.

That most of those in Congress who'll play major roles in shaping the future of American education know little about educating isn't surprising. All, of course, have had firsthand exposure to schooling. But distant, dimly remembered experience, filtered by selective perception and partisan ideology, is a poor foundation upon which to build education policy.

No other profession - not medicine, not finance, not engineering, not anything - is inherently more complex than teaching. The conventional wisdom has it that teachers just distribute information. In fact, to make a difference, they have to "get inside" kids' heads, figure out how what they find there is misaligned with reality, devise strategies that will cause kids to see those misalignments for themselves, then sell them on the necessity for making the necessary changes.

That's not fancy language dressing up something basically simple. It's a summary of an extremely complex, difficult process. That politicians who've never taught think they can write legislation that will reach into every classroom in America and cause something worthwhile to happen displays a level of hubris remarkable even by Washington's standards.

For proof that, in education policymaking, the blind are leading the blind, look at what the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers are doing. They've all but succeeded in signing up all 50 states to the "Common Core State Standards Initiative."

To noneducators - politicians, business leaders, newspaper editorial boards, syndicated columnists, television talking heads, radio commentators, and other opinion leaders - national standards for all school subjects sounds not just reasonable but highly desirable.

But to educators - at least those who've given the matter thought - adopting national standards for math, science, language arts and social studies is an appalling idea. The practical

effect of such standards will be to lock in place a relic of a bygone era - a curriculum adopted in 1893 that was poor when it was put in place, and grows more dysfunctional with each passing year.

Consider some (but by no means all) of the problems with that 1893 curriculum: A mountain of research says play, art, music, and so on, are essential to intellectual development, but the 1893 "core curriculum" shoves them aside as expendable "frills." It dumps so much raw information on kids, almost none of it moves beyond short-term memory. It has no criteria telling educators what new knowledge is important or what old knowledge it's O.K. to discard to make room for the new. It ignores the integrated way kids learn and how their brains perceive and process information. It's so inefficient it leaves little or no time for apprenticeships, internships or co-op programs. It's keyed not to kids' aptitudes, abilities and interests, but to their ages. It doesn't move learners smoothly through ever-increasing levels of intellectual complexity. At the elementary level, it emphasizes reading to the neglect of all other ways of learning. It has no built-in mechanisms adapting it to social change. It fragments the teaching profession, discouraging interest in and dialog about the overall state of the institution. Nowhere does it raise questions essential to ethical and moral development. It lends itself to simple tests of memory to the neglect of complex thought processes. Its implementation is horrendously expensive. Its emphasis on "achieving minimum standards" rather than on exploiting the riches of human variability snubs the major sources of America's past strength and success - individual initiative, imagination, creativity.

That's the curriculum that business leaders and politicians are hell-bent on freezing in place forever with national standards. Any one of those problems is sufficiently serious to warrant Congressional hearings, and all are being ignored. So certain are Washington's movers and shakers that tough love in the form of market forces can cure all educational ills, they've neither time for nor patience with educators trying to tell them they're misdiagnosing a fundamental problem.

That problem isn't low standards; it's wrong standards. No matter how demanding the standards, the curriculum adopted in 1893 will never do the job that needs doing. Sticking with it - merely doing longer and harder what brought us to crisis - will just move forward the date when the institution collapses in an irrelevant heap. Adopt every conventional wisdom reform strategy - stiffen the standards, destroy the unions, close schools of education, outlaw social promotion, mandate advanced placement programs, eliminate tenure, tie pay to performance, close the worst five percent of schools, radically expand the charter movement, put mayors in charge - do all that, but stick with the present curriculum, and none of it will make any difference in the only place where it matters - in kids' heads.

If America's parents and grandparents really understood what educational amateurs in Washington and state capitols are doing to their kids and grandkids, they'd mount the mother of all class-action suits. The situation doesn't call for tightening the status quo screws. It calls for an emergency conference of America's best minds - including, for a change, some educators - to rethink what we're doing, and why.

The Republicans and Democrats now meeting in committee to pool their ignorance about matters educational may bathe in the warm glow of mainstream media approval of the rare show of bipartisanship. But their refusal to face the educational implications of poverty, combined with their assumption that a 19th century intellectual tool will see the young safely through the 21st century, will bring disaster. Count on it.

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