

*Washington Post*, “The Answer Sheet” Blog, by Valerie Strauss  
Posted at 12:00 PM ET, 01/10/2011

## Has American education peaked?

*This was written by [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author. His latest book is [What's Worth Learning?](#) from Information Age Publishing.*

By Marion Brady

American education has peaked. Accept it. It has serious SYSTEM problems, and the present crop of reformers is making those problems worse. We're not going to get the schools we need by doing longer and harder what we've been doing for the last 150 years.

The notion that we're on the wrong education road is a really tough sell. President Obama doesn't think so. Neither does Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Congress, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the National Governors Association, the think tanks, the mainstream media, most of the general public. Neither, sad to say, do many educators.

Maybe selling the need for another road isn't even possible. The conventional wisdom about how to educate is limited by our imaginations, and our imaginations are limited by our past experience. “Just try harder” is in our blood. “Quit and try something different,” isn't.

But let me suggest an alternative to doing what we're doing in education, not claiming it's the best one, but pushing the walls of possibilities farther out.

Begin by simplifying the task and focusing it more sharply. Over the last century and a half, public schools have taken on responsibilities only marginally related to academics---fielding sports teams, teaching kids how to drive, sponsoring myriad clubs, staging artistic productions, developing technical and occupational skills.

Those programs meet important needs, and deserve better leadership than they often get from public school systems. Hand responsibility for them over to organizations designed to maximize their benefit, and give them the school building to share as they think appropriate.

Next, make communities the basic centers of learning. Rent or lease locations within easy walking or short-commute distance. Keep them open 24/7. Create various-sized places for dialogue, and for older learners to teach younger ones. Equip them with adequate technology. Staff them with four or five people who used to teach in the given-away school building who, together, have expertise in the basic skills and major fields of study. (Make sure they know enough about educating to wait until asked before sharing what they know.) Invite everyone from great-grandparents to pre-schoolers to come often, stay late, and do everything possible to encourage them to talk to each other. Put no one person or group in authority.

Then, give them all an assignment---to know their community as a community: particular people, together in a particular place, acting and interacting in particular ways, with particular problems,

needs, fears, aspirations, dreams, and hopes, all fitting together to form more than the sum of the parts. Encourage them to be creative---to organize their thinking, and tell their community's story in words, statistics, diagrams, even artistic productions.

The assignment will develop the skills and knowledge necessary for understanding not just themselves and immediate experience, but the wider community of which theirs is a part.

Allow no outside or higher level of authority to check attendance, require that particular subjects be taught, administer tests, keep scores, attach labels, demand accountability, or otherwise interfere with the operation of the centers.

That's it.

Giving that kind of responsibility to ordinary citizens is unacceptable to most of today's reformers, many of whom are hell-bent on super-standardizing schooling and nationalizing it. Notwithstanding the fact that the most influential of them think government should keep its hands off whatever they're personally involved in, when it comes to education, they're control freaks.

(The reasons for this ideological inconsistency bear investigation.)

There was a time when I'd have been on their side, in favor of just getting on with the job, and administratively imposing on schools what I thought were good ideas. Looking back, I think it was conversations with a neighbor that undermined that tendency of mine.

The neighbor was Rufo Lopez-Fresquet, Fidel Castro's first Minister of the Treasury, whose younger son was in my high school American history class. Rufo had left Cuba in a hurry when it became clear that Castro wasn't going to listen to him.

After we got acquainted, I suggested that maybe Cuban life under the American-supported dictator [Fulgencio Batista](#) wasn't the best preparation for the sort of flat-out democracy he favored. Maybe, I said, there needed to be some sort of transitional government to move the people gradually toward democracy.

He couldn't have disagreed more. If you want people to learn how to act responsibly, he insisted, you have to give them responsibility. Sure, they'll screw up. And then they'll screw up again. And again. But in the long run that's necessary if they're to grow in wisdom.

He caused me to pay better attention. Now, when I see a 10- or 12-year old kid in some poor, isolated part of the world taking responsibility for rearing younger brothers and sisters because the parents have died or been killed, it tells me Rufo was right.

When I witness a teacher (a rare one who hasn't yet drunk the test-prep Kool-Aid) challenge adolescents with a dilemma, an anomaly, an incongruity, a question with no clear answer, and listen as the kids become so involved they groan when the bell rings, it tells me Rufo was right.

When it comes to education, we're not putting our money where our mouths are. We give lip-service to democracy, but devote so little thought to what it takes to maintain one that we see nothing wrong with an educational system that's hierarchically organized, centrally controlled, and unabashedly authoritarian.

Worse, that authority is merely "legitimized" by our governing bodies. It's actually shaped by the bigger-than-governments corporate interests that have confiscated American democracy and hollowed it out.

That's not a promising foundation for a system of education. It's hard to see how it could turn out kids smart enough to save themselves and America.

Forget calls for a "rigorous curriculum," for national standards for school subjects, for non-stop testing, for developing "21st Century workplace skills," for elevating in importance science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), for "enhanced, data-driven decision making," for blah, blah, blah.

Wrong road. The first order of educational business is to understand our individual and collective selves. If we'll design an education that does that, the rest will take care of itself.

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Republished by TruthOut on 1/11/2100.