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How to do the right thing in a system that is wrong?

By Marion Brady

A summer evening. 1990. Perfect weather. My wife and I are with Hungarian friends, eating at a sidewalk café on a tree-lined street in Budapest.

They’re troubled. He’s a college professor, teaching math at two universities in the city. She’s a pediatrician. But life is hard. Professionals don’t necessarily fare well in Communist countries. His two paychecks don’t equal one good one, her salary is the same as that of a street cleaner, and they have three young daughters, one of whom is disabled.

But they’re not complaining about being poor. What they want to talk about is an ethical dilemma. The deep pockmarks stitched diagonally up the wall of a three-story building across the street from where we’re sitting — the signature of heavy machine gun fire during the failed 1956 revolt against Soviet occupation—relate to their problem.

The dilemma: They can’t get by without making use of the black market. Do they teach their daughters to be honest and maybe end up on the street, or do they condone dishonesty in order for the girls to have some semblance of a life?

Deciding what’s right in a system that’s wrong can be difficult.

The current thrust of education “reform” in the United States and much of the rest of the world presents educators with this dilemma.

The reform is wrong in so many ways it’s difficult to focus narrowly enough to mount a campaign in opposition. Federal legislation supporting the reform says, “Do as Congress says or you’re in big trouble. You’ll be labeled a failure, your school may be closed, and you may find yourself fired.”

Here’s [Albert Einstein, drawing on personal experience](#) to point out one of the many problems with test obsession: “One had to cram all this stuff into one’s mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problem distasteful to me for an entire year.”

And here’s a 12-year-old California [blogger](#): “Since the creation of the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’ in 2002, the education system has been producing young, mindless zombies.”

That's only one of many problems with the test-centered reforms initiated by the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and translated into policy by Congress. Professional organizations and individual teachers have long lists of those problems, but up against the media-enhanced power of corporate interests and federal officials, their concerns haven't broken through public ignorance and apathy.

The length of the lists may be counterproductive. By calling attention to many problems, no one of them gets enough attention for the general public to decide whether or not it rises to the level of unacceptability.

I propose narrowing the focus. Here's the problem I think deserves billboard-level attention: Kids can't be taught to think better using tests that can't measure how well they think.

The logic should be obvious. What gets tested gets taught. Complex thinking skills — skills essential to survival—can't be tested, so they don't get taught. That failure doesn't simply rise to the level of a problem. It's unethical.

We told our Hungarian friends that if we were in their position, we'd probably do what we had to do to survive, while teaching our kids why "the system" was so corrupt that it made cheating necessary.

But this is now, this is America, and the parallel problem is an education reform approach that's corrupting generations of minds.

What's to be done? Working teachers living paycheck to paycheck are in a poor position to resist. Others, safer from retaliation, organize citizen groups, sign petitions, make protest speeches, write books, articles, op-eds, and letters to editors and to the president, the secretary of education, and members of Congress.

But nothing happens. If those inside the Beltway are to hear the message that the present reforms are simplistic and reactionary, that they've all been tried before, that they're at odds with research and practical experience, that excellent programs have been pushed aside to accommodate endless reading and math drills, then the message will have to come from parents who love their kids enough to refuse to allow them to be short-changed by mind-limiting standardized tests.

Those parents will need support. They should get it from grandparents, neighbors, friends, school boards, civic and religious organizations, independent-minded liberal and conservative politicians — all who care about kids and our collective future.

Do the right thing, America. Protest. Stand up and stand against your state's annual orgy of standardized testing.