

*Washington Post*, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss

# Nine questions about ‘21st Century curriculum’

Posted November 28, 2012 at 7:30 am

By Marion Brady

Willie Sutton, asked why he robbed banks, is supposed to have replied, “Because that’s where the money is.”

Willie said those weren’t his words—that some newspaper reporter had put them in his mouth—but it makes a good story.

“That’s where the money is” is also a major reason for Wall Street’s growing interest in public education. We’re closing in on two-thirds of a trillion dollars a year being spent on schooling in America, most of it collected as taxes, and corporate interests want as much of that steady money as they can get.

Like who? Test manufacturers, publishers of textbooks and test prep materials, charter school chains, tutoring organizations, manufacturers of computers and other education-related hardware and software, operators of virtual schools, and the new “education management organizations”—all have their eyes on a share of the public education funding pie. Even foreign investors are being told there’s serious money to be made in American education.

Here’s an excerpt from a March 31, 2011, Harvard Business Review blog:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets . . .

Got that? No more tedious, costly attempts to cater to the idiosyncrasies of the 50 states or, worse yet, to school districts with ideas of their own about how their kids should be educated. With the Common Core State Standards in place, everything from promotional brochures to the pool of test items can be simplified and standardized, radically cutting costs and increasing profits.

Joanne Weiss, quoted above, thinks that’s a very good thing, and Weiss isn’t just some casual blogger. She’s U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s chief of staff.

In the well-engineered drive to privatize public education, the phrase “21<sup>st</sup> Century curriculum” plays a role similar to “New and Improved!” on boxes of laundry detergent. It doesn’t really mean anything, just has a vague, positive ring to it. The characteristics of a good curriculum haven’t changed since the word was invented, and they’re not going to change in the 21<sup>st</sup> or any other century unless human nature changes.

A school’s curriculum is its primary *raison d’être*. No matter anything else, if its curriculum is lousy, the education it provides will be lousy.

How can you tell if curricula pitched as “21<sup>st</sup> Century” are lousy? Here are a few easy-to-answer questions to ask:

- Does it have a clear, concrete, *overarching* aim consistent with societal values?
- Could most kids explain how every lesson connects to that aim?
- Does the curriculum not just respect but capitalize on learner differences?
- Does it progress smoothly through ever-higher levels of “idea” complexity?
- Does it require routine use of all thought processes?
- Is what’s taught immediately useful in dealing with life outside school?
- Does it get kids out of their seats and doing something they consider important?
- Does it reflect the recent switch from difficult to easy access to near-limitless information?
- Is what’s learned too complicated to be evaluated by machine?

A good curriculum will get a “Yes” response to all the questions, including some theoretical and philosophical ones not on the list.

The familiar, traditional general education curriculum in place in America’s schools and colleges gets an across-the board “No” for the nine questions.

Unfortunately, criticism of that curriculum makes almost nobody happy. The misnamed “education reformers” don’t like it because it doesn’t fit their insistence that what ails American education is simply a lack of rigor. Many educators don’t like it because it calls into question what they’ve always taken for granted. Bureaucrats don’t like it because maintaining the status quo is what they’re paid to do.

Once upon a time, teachers could close their classroom doors and work around the flawed curriculum. No more. That option is all but gone, shoved aside by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in a Common Core campaign financed in part by the Gates Foundation. By promoting adoption of the Common Core Standards, they’ve locked a 19<sup>th</sup> Century curriculum in place, and with corporately produced standardized tests, have made deviating from it all but impossible.

It grieves me—an unapologetic progressive educator—that the most organized opposition to the Common Core is coming from hard-right conservatives. I applaud their effort to keep control of what’s taught out of congressional and Department of Education hands, but I know from

firsthand experience that their answers to my nine questions are the same as the privatizers' answers, the same as shallow-thinking educators' answers, the same as the bureaucrats' answers:

“No.”

P.S. If you think you were well-educated, re-read the nine questions.

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