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Education reform: A primer for pundits and politicians

By Marion Brady

When, about 30 years ago, corporate interests began their highly organized, well-funded effort to privatize public education, you wouldn’t have read or heard about it. They didn’t want to trigger the debate that such a radical change in an important institution warranted.

If, like most pundits and politicians, you’ve supported that campaign, it’s likely you’ve been snookered. Here’s a quick overview of the snookering process.

The pitch

Talking Points: (a) Standardized testing proves America’s schools are poor. (b) Other countries are eating our lunch. (c) Teachers deserve most of the blame. (d) The lazy ones need to be forced out by performance evaluations. (e) The dumb ones need scripts to read or “canned standards” telling them exactly what to teach. (f) The experienced ones are too set in their ways to change and should be replaced by fresh Five-Week-Wonders from Teach for America. (Bonus: Replacing experienced teachers saves a ton of money.) (g) Public (“government”) schools are a step down the slippery slope to socialism.

Tactics

Education establishment resistance to privatization is inevitable, so (a) avoid it as long as possible by blurring the lines between “public” and “private.” (b) Push school choice, vouchers, tax write-offs, tax credits, school-business partnerships, profit-driven charter chains. (c) When resistance comes, crank up fear with the, “They’re eating our lunch!” message. (d) Contribute generously to all potential resisters—academic publications, professional organizations, unions, and school support groups such as PTA. (e) Create fake “think tanks,” give them impressive names, and have them do “research” supporting privatization. (f) Encourage investment in teacher-replacer technology—internet access, iPads, virtual schooling, MOOCS, etc. (e) Pressure state legislators to make life easier for profit-seeking charter chains by taking approval decisions away from local boards and giving them to easier-to-lobby state-level bureaucrats. (g) Elect the “right” people at all levels of government. (When they’re campaigning, have them keep their privatizing agenda quiet.)

Weapon

If you'll read the fine-print disclaimers on high-stakes standardized tests, you'll see how grossly they're being misused, but they're the key to privatization. The general public, easily impressed by numbers and mathematical razzle-dazzle, believes competition is the key to quality, so want quality quantified even though it can't be done. Machine-scored tests don't measure quality. They rank.

It's hard to rank unlike things so it's necessary to standardize. That's what the Common Core State Standards do. To get the job done quickly, Bill Gates picked up the tab, important politicians signed off on them, and teachers were handed them as a done deal.

The standards make testing and ranking a cinch. They also make making billions a cinch. Manufacturers can use the same questions for every state that has adopted the standards or facsimiles thereof.

If challenged, test fans often quote the late Dr. W. Edward Deming, the world-famous quality guru who showed Japanese companies how to build better stuff than anybody else. In his book, "The New Economics," Deming wrote, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it."

Here's the whole sentence as he wrote it: "It is wrong to suppose that if you can't measure it, you can't manage it — a costly myth."

Operating the weapon

What's turned standardized testing into a privatizing juggernaut are pass-fail "cut scores" set by politicians. Saying kids need to be challenged, they set the cut score high enough to fail many (sometimes most) kids. When the scores are published, they point to the high failure rate to "prove" public schools can't do the job and should be closed or privatized. Clever, huh?

The privatizing machinery is in place. Left alone, it'll gradually privatize most, but not all, public schools. Those that serve the poorest, the sickest, the handicapped, the most troubled, the most expensive to educate—those will stay in what's left of the public schools.

Weapon malfunction

Look at standardized tests from the kids' perspective. Test items (a) measure recall of secondhand, standardized, delivered information, or (b) require a skill to be demonstrated, or (c) reward an ability to second-guess whoever wrote the test item. Because kids didn't ask for the information, because the skill they're being asked to demonstrate rarely has immediate practical use, and because they don't give a tinker's dam what the test-item writer thinks, they have zero emotional investment in what's being tested.

As every real teacher knows, no emotional involvement means no real learning. Period. What makes standardized tests look like they work is learner emotion, but it's emotion that doesn't have anything to do with learning. The ovals get penciled in to avoid trouble, to please somebody, to get a grade, or to jump through a bureaucratic hoop to be eligible to jump through another bureaucratic hoop. When the pencil is laid down, what's tested, having no perceived value, automatically erases from memory.

Before you write...

If you want to avoid cranking out the usual amateurish drivel about standardized testing that appears in the op-eds, editorials, and syndicated columns of the mainstream media, ask yourself a few questions about the testing craze: (a) Should life-altering decisions hinge on the scores of commercially produced tests not open to public inspection? (b) How wise is it to only teach what machines can measure? (c) How fair is it to base any part of teacher pay on scores from tests that can't evaluate complex thought? (d) Are tests that have no "success in life" predictive power worth the damage they're doing?

[Here's a longer list of problems](#) you should think about before you write.

Perspective

America's schools have always struggled—an inevitable consequence, first, of a decision in 1893 to narrow and standardize the high school curriculum and emphasize college prep; second, from a powerful strain of individualism in our national character that eats away support for public institutions; third, from a really sorry system of institutional organization. Politicians, not educators, make education policy, basing it on the simplistic conventional wisdom that educating means "delivering information."

In fact, educating is the most complex and difficult of all professions. Done right, teaching is an attempt to help the young align their beliefs, values, and assumptions more closely with what's true and real, escape the bonds of ethnocentrism, explore the wonders and potential of humanness, and become skilled at using thought processes that make it possible to realize those aims.

Historically, out of the institution's dysfunctional organizational design came schools with lots of problems, but with one redeeming virtue. They were "loose." Teachers had enough autonomy to do their thing. So they did, and the kids that some of them coached brought America far more than its share of patents, scholarly papers, scientific advances, international awards, and honors.

Notwithstanding their serious problems, America's public schools were once the envy of the world. Now, educators around that world shake their heads in disbelief (or maybe cheer?) as we spend billions of dollars to standardize what once made America great—un-standardized thought.

A salvage operation is still (barely) possible, but not if politicians, prodded by pundits, continue to do what they've thus far steadfastly refused to do—listen to people who've

actually worked with real students in real classrooms, and did so long enough and thoughtfully enough to know something about teaching.

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Note: Marion Brady invites response, especially from those in positions of influence or authority who disagree with him. You can reach him here: mbrady2222@gmail.com.

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