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Educational Revolution

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Educational Reform Revolution

Peter Taubman

No one can doubt anymore that we are in the midst of the most massive transformation in public education since its creation. The question is whether there is anything we teachers can do to reclaim the conversation and turn back the on-going privatization and corporatization of public schools.

Given how far discussions of education have been pushed to the right; given the complicity of mainstream media in bashing teachers, unions and schools of education; given the assaults on the public sector; given the stigma attached to taxes and government; and given the acquiescence of so many educational organizations and leaders in so-called educational reform, it may be too late. I hope it isn't. But if we are to succeed, we must take more drastic action, and we must hold to a principle that until now has been given only lip service, a principle that, if truly embraced, would lead not to more educational de-forms but to educational revolution. What we must not do is rely on the usual strategies.

It is no longer enough to list the mind-numbing effects of high stakes tests or reveal how teachers' hard-won knowledge about kids, schools and curriculum has been replaced with a fanatical faith in the free market and the bottom line. Scholarly research, numerous studies, and reasoned argument have not prevailed over those who scream crisis, substitute test scores gaps for income gaps, and blame unions, teachers and non-charter public schools for the nation's ills. Nor have we halted the transformation by exposing the profit motive behind so many of the educational reforms. And although we must persevere, it's not enough to describe how these reforms have turned public education into a grim, wasteland littered with mediocre charter schools, a wasteland where teaching, at least in the hands of "innovators" like Doug Lemov, author of *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College*, resembles dog training, and curriculum and learning are reduced to test prep. These strategies are not working. We need to be more ruthless in our resistance.

We must start by calling out those educators and organizations that, however well-intentioned, have sold us out. That means acknowledging how the language and practices advocated by a great many teacher educators and education leaders, such as Arthur Levine, Les Sternberg, Deborah Ball, David Steiner, Lee Shulman, and John Bransford and organizations like the [Association of Colleges for Teacher Education](#) (AACTE) and the [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education](#) (NCATE), have paved the way for the corporatization of education.¹

¹ Arthur Levine is past president of Teachers College and author of *Educating School Teachers*, a scathing critique of teacher education programs. Les Sternberg, Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Carolina told the House of Representatives in 2005 that educators should be seeking more accountability not less. Deborah Ball, University of Michigan's Dean of Education, has emphasized the need to define a standard skill set beginning teachers must acquire before they are allowed to teach. David Steiner, the previous NY State Commissioner of Education, has been fond of telling audiences that schools of education needed to teach less theory, not more. Lee Shulman has been president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and of the American Educational Research Association. He has described teacher education as chaotic.

As I documented in *Teaching by Numbers*, educators and organizations such as these promoted the view that school administration and teaching should emulate business and medical models, that there was a “sure-fire” quantifiable way to teach, that teacher education, a purported “wild west” of irrelevant theories, needed more accountability, and that the new language of the learning sciences, which turned knowledge into information and study into performance outcomes, would lend an aura of scientific certainty to our work and thus make us professionals. Mesmerized by numerical data, technology, and the assumed efficiency of the boardroom, and believing accommodation would stave off privatization, these organization and individuals helped create the educational nightmare that is the present.

Pointing out such complicity, however, is not enough. We must, in our own places of work and in our professional lives, organize to resist “reforms” that turn teachers into bureaucrats, place us under surveillance, digitize students, and soft-soap the loss of jobs, tenure, extra-curricula programs and whole departments. We must reject the scripted curriculum and the data systems, whose sales line the pockets of CEOs. We must resist or sabotage accreditation efforts that operationalize teaching and curriculum, rendering them vulnerable to packaging and outsourcing. We must resign from professional organizations, such as NCTE and AERA, that show more interest in standards and outcomes than in the blight of poverty and discrimination and that refuse to take a public stance against the assaults on public education. And we must take to task our unions for not demanding attention be paid to the re-segregation of American schools. We need unions, but we don’t need unions that confuse political expediency with principle.

Above all, we must commit to one principle. In response to whatever mandate or critique comes next, we must silence it with the demand that all the nation’s children deserve equal educational opportunity. Not educational outcomes or national standards; these lead us back to tests and the educational de-forms we are experiencing. Not some new technological innovation or “best practice,” or more detailed assessment system; these distract us and render us expendable. We must demand equal educational opportunity. Equal educational opportunity. And that means that we should take a lesson from the very rich, so many of whom seem bent on destroying public education.

Let us demand that all our nation’s children be given the educational resources that Sasha and Malia Obama get at Sidwell Friends, that John Kerry, John McCain and George Bush received at their prep schools, and that the sons and daughters of the CEOs at Goldman Sachs receive at Hotchkiss and Lawrenceville Academy. The fact that all these schools are expensive should prompt skepticism of

John Bransford, a leading force in the learning sciences, has helped turn the language of teaching, curriculum and study into a language of behavior, cognitive skills and performance. All of these individuals, as well as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education have argued that the most important factor in a student’s success is the teacher, that teachers must be held accountable for student learning, defined as test scores, and that schools of education must be held accountable for their graduates’ successes in raising student scores.

claims that the level of school funding doesn't matter. This is clearly not what the rich and powerful believe when their own children's futures are at stake.

Don't all our nation's children deserve small classes like those at Horace Mann or Deerfield? Don't they all deserve a rich curriculum with AP courses and electives, fabulous extra-curricular programs with school newspapers, drama clubs, arts programs and sports teams, safe facilities, tutoring opportunities, and a strong college counseling program—and even, yes, test prep, not as a substitute for curriculum, but as an after-school program? Don't all our children deserve a college education that is fairly priced and offers what elite institutions, which ironically remain immune to demands for accountability, offer? Those who argue such an education is only for the gifted are mistaken: it is for those who can afford it. Even this radical change, however, would not guarantee academic success; zip codes, desire, and ability still matter. But it would certainly do more than the “reforms” advocated by those who plunder and lay waste the education of our nation's youth. It would not be educational reform. It would be educational revolution.