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What Education Policy Could Be

by Christopher H. Tienken
Academic Editor



A review of education reform policies reveals a shift from an input guarantee approach aimed at providing funds to level the playing field for all students to an output guarantee approach based on the expectation of achieving standardized results regardless of inputs. The shift reflects a belief that where a child starts his or her cognitive, social, and moral development has no bearing on where he or she might finish.

The No Child Left Behind Act, Common Core State Standards Initiative, national high-stakes standardized testing, teacher and administrator pay for performance based on test results, the proliferation of charter schools, and publically funded vouchers for private schools are all outgrowths of a policy philosophy built on the standardization of knowledge and performance outputs. Although little empirical evidence exists to demonstrate that output guarantee approaches result in positive lifelong benefits to children, these mandates continue to pelt public education with growing frequency. This commentary questions the current policy environment and contributes holistic ideas to the current reform conversation.

Reimagining Education

Scientific data and social justice principles have been shunned in the current policy environment, and these have been replaced with an escalating adoption

of ideology. The majority of the current high-profile policy proposals are fundamentally unscientific, non-child-centered, and overly simplistic in their approaches to meeting the needs of a complex nation with such pressing societal problems as inequities in income and opportunity. Those who make policy proposals based on scientific evidence seem to have their ideas suppressed or shunned.

Like Copernicus before them, some scientists that study education-related issues today have been excommunicated from the policy-making establishment. Just as in the early 1500s, science has been eschewed from the education policy discussions during the new millennium. Although ample evidence exists about what should be done to improve education for all children, that evidence threatens to topple the house of ideological cards built by the latest cadre of the self-proclaimed education saviors. But alas, the light of evidence-based practice cannot be shrouded by the darkness of ideology forever. Even Copernicus's discovery that the sun does not revolve around the Earth was eventually embraced.

Educators must disavow the current constraining visions of school reform put upon them by paternal nihilists that inhabit the corporate offices of education reform. Moreover, educators must use their educational imaginations (Eisner 1994) to light the way. Then perhaps educators could lead the discussion and eventually change the direction of



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policy instead of being subjected to it. Change has been effected that way in our not-so-distant past.

What if educators—the people trained and prepared professionally to care for, respect, and educate the minds and bodies of America’s children—created competing visions for what education policy could be? For those of you who have grown up professionally in the era of one-size-fits-all standards, you need to consider a world without them. Break the anti-intellectual chains and heed Plato’s advice to climb out of the cave. Ignore the pundits’ false claims of China’s and India’s education dominance. They are simply illusions developed by those in power to keep educators prisoners, locked away from their creativity. The stories of American public education being overtaken by some distant foreign power are simply rehashed versions from years ago when headlines about the educational exploits of the Soviet Union and Japan were used against the profession.

Educators do not have to accept the recycled dogma and worn-out slogans and ideas put forth by profiteers and misguided reformers, nor should they allow children to be subjected to them. I believe that in America we can do better.

The Policies We Need

Schools need a comprehensive set of broad child-centered policies, grounded in reality and based on evidence, which embrace differentiation of implementation and foster cognitive diversity. Of course, education policy alone cannot and should not be made to operate in a vacuum, as if nothing else but the teacher influences cognitive, social, and moral development. Educators and their professional associations need to propose comprehensive policies for improvement.

We educators should put forth ideas for social policies which recognize the great disparities that exist in this country. If out-of-school factors such as a child’s home environment, family income, access to comprehensive health care, stable and safe housing, consistent availability of healthy food, love, high-quality child care, prenatal care for mothers, and labor policy that promotes a living wage account for more than 50 percent (Sirin 2005) of a child’s ultimate achievement in school, these should be part of a comprehensive education reform policy.

It is appropriate for educators to say that we, alone, cannot overcome the debilitating effects that

poverty has on cognitive, social, and moral development. We no longer need to pretend that poverty and a broken social system do not matter. They matter greatly. Society has a responsibility and part to play. The knife of accountability cuts both ways. It is time for the larger society to contribute to the public education system by repairing the social system.

I believe that in this country we should develop and promote education policies that provide all children opportunities to develop critical and strategic thinking, creativity, socially conscious problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and persistence. Policies and practices should foster the cooperation, collaboration, and innovation needed to prepare children to be participating members of a global society. Think globally, but act locally through locally developed and controlled school districts.

We need policies that value cognitive diversity over cognitive conformity, creativity over imitation, and informed dissent over blind acceptance. Public school policy should provide a safe haven for children to be able to honor their culture, develop their individual talents to the greatest potential, and learn how to critically analyze and solve myriad issues faced by our society and our brothers and sisters around the globe. We should force open the gates of a quality education to all, not try to hoard, contain, and constrict learning for a chosen few. All children should be able to access opportunities that assist them to become cognitively nimble, socially adjusted, globally literate, and happy.

We Own the Ideas

We need not reinvent the policy wheel or grasp for straws to develop our ideas. A great deal of demonstrated knowledge already exists on how to move forward. The giants from our history, such as Francis Parker, John Dewey, Horace Mann, Harold Rugg, Boyd Bode, Ralph Tyler, Edward Thorndike, and Hilda Taba, to name just a few, provide us the historical support to move forward.

Large landmark studies support our ideas. The Eight-Year Study demonstrated that curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be an entirely locally developed project, diverse and nonstandardized, and still produce better results than the ideas being put forward today (Aikin 1942). The experiment demonstrated that the less standardized, more creative, locally developed and designed the



Foundation Announces Three New Scholarship Funds

Endowed scholarships reach far into the future to benefit KDP student educators indefinitely. Currently, the KDP Educational Foundation administers 77 scholarship funds—awarding more than \$42,000 this academic year in stipends ranging from \$1,000 to \$4,000. The Foundation is pleased to announce three new endowed funds were established in 2011 because of the exceptional commitment and extraordinary generosity of the following educators.



Emma and Frank Favazza

Dr. Antoinette Favazza, Professor at the University of Rhode Island, established the **Emma Elizabeth and Frank F. Favazza Scholarship** in honor of her parents and in recognition of the lasting impact teachers made in their lives. During the Depression, both her mother and father had their own studies interrupted. Overcoming these early hardships, they founded a company that grew to become one of Maryland's most successful contracting firms—truly exemplifying the American Dream. The Favazza Doctoral Scholarship is a fitting tribute to a couple whose solid values reflected the virtues of the Society—fidelity to humanity, science, service, and toil.



Kappa Gamma officers (from left): Kelly Teitel, Geri Blau, Dr. Lila Swell, Shannon Kranz, Lauren Mullaney

Kappa Gamma Chapter of Queens College—CUNY set an ambitious goal of establishing an endowed fund by KDP's 2011 Centennial to provide the chapter with an ongoing means of support for chapter initiatives, scholarships, and professional development opportunities. The chapter and its counselor, Dr. Lila Swell, are to be congratulated for exceeding their original goal by 20 percent—with a record-setting \$30,000 initial fund contribution.



Janette and James Rogers

Former KDP President Dr. Janette Rogers and her husband James established the **Janette and James Rogers Scholarship**. With parents who were teachers, Dr. Rogers' education roots run deep—epitomized by a career committed to students and community. Her extraordinary family lineage continues through the Rogers' endowed scholarship, which will indefinitely support generations of educators in their pursuit of learning.

Establishing a named endowed fund can be an expression of your commitment to the education profession and your legacy to future educators. Please contact the Educational Foundation, at foundation@kdp.org or 800.284.3167 for information.

Scholarship Application Deadline: April 27, 2012

Active KDP undergraduate, graduate, doctoral and practicing educator members are encouraged to apply for the 2012 scholarship awards at www.kdp.org/educationalfoundation/scholarships.php.

curricular programs (based on demonstrated research and theories of learning), the more opportunities students had to develop their talents . . . and they developed them better than students educated in high schools with one-size-fits-all curricular programs (the type being proffered by current reforms such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative and the American Diploma Project Network). Proposals based on pure ideology or faulty assumptions made by people who do not know the history or the research are not going to serve us well. Recent studies strengthen and support the efficacy of a diverse, decentralized, creative, problem-based curricula to provide students the skills they need for the future (Hmelo-Silver 2004; Wirkala and Kuhn 2011).

Results from other landmark studies also demonstrated that there is not "one best path" for students in high school, and standardized curricula sequences are not necessary to achieve superior results in elementary and high schools (e.g., Thorndike 1924; Jersild et al. 1941). We no longer need to accept a factory approach. The pioneers from our educational history demonstrated that it is not necessary.

Be Patient, But Do Not Wait

We can have great diversity of programs, guided by a paradigm developed from demonstrated philosophy, theory, research, and evidence-based practice. We have more than 100 years of research and practice that demonstrate how children learn best, how we should organize curriculum so more children learn more, and why local, democratic control outperforms an autocratic centralized bureaucracy in the long run. We need only listen to the whispers from the giants of our past to help inform our future.

Policies based on standardization of human development and outcomes never will prepare creative, innovative, socially conscious citizens of the world. They never have in the past, anywhere, and they will not now. Policies and practices that seek to homogenize children will only doom them to second-class citizenship in the global society. Expand your educational imagination and dream of things that could be . . . and should be. Use your voice to broaden the discussion and expand opportunities for all children. ■

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