

# How the Rhetoric of Failure Props Up Education Reform

By Dave Powell on April 13, 2016 8:59 AM | [1 Comment](#)



One of the hardest things about preparing young people to teach is telling them the truth about education and schooling without taking away their desire to teach. Take it from me: it gets harder every year. The students I teach who want to become teachers know all too well that testing has taken over, that the work of teachers is increasingly micromanaged by people who often don't really know how to do it, and that teachers don't get even half the respect they deserve.

And, yet, everything is their fault.

See, there's a fundamental assumption underlying every move we make in education reform these days. It is that we're failures—failures at educating kids, failures at educating teachers, failures, apparently, at all the things that matter when it comes to making the transition to twenty-first century living. And because we're failures, there must be accountability. People must be brought to heel. We're obviously better than this, but someone keeps letting us down.

It's a mindset that's elegant in its simplicity but, like many simple things, dangerously irresponsible. It started with the suggestion that students should be held to higher standards—until it was pointed out that it might be unfair to hold students who live in a society where economic resources and political power are unevenly distributed in the extreme, and where racism and sexism are an everyday part of people's lives, to "high standards" in school. It's hard to blame kids for their own failure under these circumstances.

So we looked at schools. That's what No Child Left Behind was all about: making sure that schools took their responsibility to educate kids seriously. Even if kids had challenges that came to school with them, schools could surely neutralize them. The idea was simply that people in some schools cared about kids and people in other schools didn't; all those other adults cared more about themselves. To rearrange those priorities, we needed to punish ineffective schools for their ineffectiveness. There needed to be a clear and replicable measure to separate the good schools from the bad ones, so we turned to standardized tests. Pass the tests and you must be doing right by the kids; fail them, and you're failing us. All of us.

And that, in turn, led us to teachers. Even if students had issues that came to school with them, surely good teachers could overcome them. Schools, after all, are led by teachers—they're the ones who have day-to-day interactions with kids, the ones who have the power to confer success or failure on their students. And we had proof that they matter: **Jaime Escalante** and **Joe Clark** and **John Keating** all showed that dedicated teachers can save even the most hopeless students from the terrible circumstances they had been placed in. We had proof that ex-Marines could reform the "**dangerous minds**" of kids and turn those kids into trusting, sensitive, intellectual citizens. We knew that dedicated young teachers could turn their ne'er-do-wells into "**Freedom Writers**"—the very term itself pregnant with symbolic double-meaning. There was abundant proof of the difference dedicated teachers could make in the lives of students, that poverty was not an excuse for low student achievement. All we had to do was turn on the TV to find it.

And this was a narrative that had legs. Who's going to argue with the idea that a good teacher is the one thing that makes the biggest difference for kids in school? This line is so wonderful because it works in two ways: it provides an opportunity to praise teaching while criticizing teachers at the same time. And, boy, is that convenient. Instead of facing up to our collective responsibility to create a society that is fair and just, and in which economic resources are at least distributed in a way that reduces poverty, this argument enabled us to say: it's not our fault. If only the schools did a better job then poverty wouldn't matter. In fact, if schools did a better job poverty would just disappear.

Everything unraveled from there. We could blame every possible cornerstone of the system for our educational malaise—that is, as long as we agreed there was an educational malaise. That's an important point. If there was no collective sense of failure, then the reforms of the last thirty years would never have been necessary. I could spend the next thousand words explaining how this movement was brought to life in the late 1970s and early '80s—a time of profound economic dislocation that only accelerated in the 1990s and later—but I'm betting you get the point: when things outside of school got bad, the choice was made to blame schools for it.

It doesn't have to be this way. Because they reflect the society they're in, schools are constantly, like society, in a state of change. This is the important point that people **lining up countries by their test scores** tend to overlook. I've got no problem comparing our system to Finland's or South Korea's or Canada's as long as we acknowledge that the cultures in which each of those countries' school systems exist are in many ways very different from ours. We can learn from

them, but they aren't exactly models we can just adapt to our situation as if they held the magical recipe for success.

And it's precisely because we're so convinced that public education is a failed enterprise that the prescriptions that come out of our comparisons with other countries are so unrealistic. The pervasive sense of failure distorts our ability to come up with solutions that would actually work for us. In our desperation proposed solutions like raising standards for entry into teaching by shutting down existing programs overlooks, for example, the enormous demand for teachers in a country where the law clearly states that all students, even those who are not native speakers of English or who have other special educational needs, have a right to public education. Yes, we should hold teachers to high standards; but we may have to define those standards a little differently here.

The point is that we don't have to use failure as an excuse to change. We can acknowledge the good in our system—believe it or not, there's plenty of it—and still focus on the things that aren't working without the siege mentality and without the endless self-loathing and flagellation of the people who do the heavy lifting every day in our schools. On top of that, we could make a choice to be more circumspect in our evaluation of both our schools and the schools that exist in other countries. Instead of focusing on what we do wrong, we could, if we wanted to, spend more time thinking about what we do right. Reformers are dependent on the notion that it's all gone to hell to convince the rest of us to go along with dramatic changes that, at least from my vantage point, don't seem to be working. I don't know about you but I'm sick of the rhetoric of failure. Isn't it time we tried something more hopeful for a change?