EDUCATION WEEK

How to Build a Progressive Education Movement

By David Bernstein

You've got to hand it to Michelle Rhee: She succeeded in building a movement around reforming the education system based on standardized tests. While those of us who are proponents of progressive education were busy speaking to ourselves, sending our kids to alternative schools, and basking in our anonymity, the "testers" (let's not call them "reformers") built ties to business and the political class, catapulting their movement into the mainstream and now into the dominant educational paradigm. If proponents of progressive education want to become a credible alternative to the education-testing movement, we need to do the hard work of building a robust movement and persuading mainstream America that there is another path forward.

Here are some possible guiding principles for building a politically viable progressive education movement:

Build a vision around what we are for, not what we are against.

Much of the criticism aimed at the current standardized-testing regime focuses on the evils of testing but fails to articulate an alternative vision for education, leaving the impression that proponents of progressive education favor a return to the status quo ante. A recent *Washington Post* **editorial** unfairly accused Superintendent Joshua P. Starr of Maryland's Montgomery County schools of "waging war on state tests, a stance that aligns him with the county's powerful teachers' unions." The *Post* editorial board is clueless about Starr's underlying educational philosophy, which, judging by his **book-club series** (*How Children Succeed* by Paul Tough; *Drive* by Daniel Pink; and *Mindset* by Carol Dweck), is very much in line with Tony Wagner's more progressive approach to imparting 21st-century skills. In other words, opposition to testing eclipsed Starr's views on what education should be about.

I recently checked out a Facebook page called "Dump Duncan," a self-described grassroots initiative which formed last year and seeks the removal of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The page calls on members to "help ensure the long-term survival of the greatest public education system on Earth," failing to recognize that the current system still requires drastic reform of a different variety. Even Diane Ravitch's recently announced group, **Network for Public Education**, seems much more

dedicated to opposing the education testing movement than it does articulating a compelling alternative vision.

While supporters of progressive education may be sympathetic to the group's aim, we cannot be seen as opposing high-stakes standardized tests because we want to preserve the old model of mediocre factory schools; rather, we should oppose Secretary Duncan and the Race to the Top initiative because testing locks in the factory school model and prevents more-innovative educational practices from emerging.

Stop dismissing the connection between education and career, and bashing business.

Some in the progressive education arena take exception with the notion that the function of school is to prepare kids for the working world. I fully concur that the education system should not view children as mere "human capital" and should educate the "whole child." But schools also serve the purpose of preparing children for their future professional lives and of providing the

—Jonathan Bouw

building blocks of a thriving economy. Those in our movement who insist education should be solely devoted to a child's intellectual and psychological development condemn the movement to the political margins. I sure hope they will enjoy bashing the testers for the next 20 years while children languish in a test-based education system.

Likewise, the progressive education movement should position itself as a friend, not an adversary, of business. Alfie Kohn, a luminary of progressive education, often harshly criticizes corporate motives, suggesting that business interests are at odds with the objectives of progressive education. Perhaps for the first time in history, however, the philosophy of progressive education is simpatico with our changing economy in its demand for innovation, critical thinking, and individuality.

> **"Much of the criticism aimed at the current standardized-testing regime focuses on the evils of testing but fails to articulate an alternative vision for education."**

Indeed, the economy is moving from one based on large industries to one based on mass entrepreneurship. With its emphasis on creativity and individual development, progressive education prepares kids for precisely such an economic reality. It's not that business leaders want schools to produce cogs for the industrial machine, it's that they don't realize that the testing movement will produce a less innovative workforce and make America less competitive. Let's educate them.

Don't oppose *all* school choice.

While a number of prominent voices in progressive education oppose all school choice, the movement itself should be agnostic on, if not guardedly supportive of, certain kinds of school choice, such as charter schools. Charter schools are, to be sure, no panacea, but neither are they the evil that some make them out to be. They are certainly not inherently at odds with progressive education. I'd like to see as many people innovating in education as possible. When such experiments fail, we should say so; when they succeed, we should recognize and learn from them. Moreover, opposing all school choice makes us look like we're wedded to the current lackluster system.

Come up with a captivating name for the movement.

"Progressive education" is the exact wrong term for progressive education, which smacks of a far-left-wing political agenda. For the movement to become a real alternative to the education testing movement, it must attract a broad cross section of the political spectrum. There's no reason that political conservatives shouldn't be part of the movement. Names, as well as ideas, matter. Please share your ideas for a name for the movement in the **comments section below**.

If we are successful in mainstreaming progressive education, perhaps our movement, rather than the education testing movement, will someday be slammed for being the standard bearer of "education reform." It would be a nice problem to have.

David Bernstein is the executive director of the David Project, a Boston-based nonprofit that works to educate high school and college students about Israel. The opinion expressed in this essay does not reflect the views of the project. Follow the author on Twitter: **@DavidLBernstein***.*