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Is the U.S. Becoming the Anti-Model of Education?

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on December 17, 2011 4:00 PM

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The other day I was on [Twitter](#) reading messages and blogs from educators from around the world and found a blog by Joe Bower who is an educator in Alberta, Canada. After reading some of Joe's posts, I realized that he and I share the same philosophy about grading, homework and many other areas of education. Many of us believe that education needs to change.

One of his posts stood out to me. It was a blog that was called "[United States: How Not to Reform](#)." It suggested that the current educational reform model in the United States is not worth replicating.

For decades, education was mostly teacher-centered. Although we have a long way to go to move away from a teacher-centered educational system, many teachers and administrators believe in student-centered education and are finding innovative and creative ways to meet that goal. Go to Twitter and get connected with thousands of educators who are joining the conversation.

One of the issues that we have in our educational system is that teachers are finding it hard to move to student-centered instructional practices because they are overly concerned about what will be on high stakes testing and it is easier to tell students what they need to know than it is to allow them to find what they need to know through inquiry-based learning. Although some educators only believe in lecture, which is not the best method for all learners, many are not testing the waters of inquiry-based learning because it is not presently within their comfort zone.

The reality is that this causes a vicious cycle in our present educational system because teachers are being force fed curriculum and testing and are force feeding their students. If we want our students to be active participants in their lives we must allow them to be active participants in our classrooms. If we allow them a voice they may use that voice to articulate to our state and national education departments how harmful our present testing dominated focus really is to their education.

When I first read Joe Bower's blog I was offended but unfortunately that only lasted a few seconds. The truth is that our state and federal education departments are making our educational system worse. We are seeing an increase in the number of students being pulled out of public school because parents want more academic freedom for their children, which many school cannot or will not offer during these dark times.

Dr. Sean C. Feeney and Dr. Carol C. Burris wrote an [open letter of concern](#) to the New York State Education Department about the unfairness of tying high stakes testing to teacher and administrator evaluation. The New York Principals, for which I am one of them, are asking for a more holistic and locally controlled measure of evaluation because there are too many outside factors that work against student performance on those tests.

Winnie Hu of the New York Times wrote an article recently stating that [longer standardized tests are planned](#). After seeing the resignation of David Abrams from the NY State Education Department (SED)

following his mass e-mail to the public school system indicating that the state tests would be longer, the New York Times article suggests that, although SED said they are looking at timeframes, we will see longer tests in elementary school. If this is true, this will have devastating effects on children.

Where are all the administrators?

Administrators set the tone for their schools. Many of us have sat at countless meetings where we discuss our failure to understand why we are moving in a direction that has an increase in high stakes testing when it seems as though high stakes testing is being used as a method to prove we are not successful.

As we all leave those meetings whether they are local or national, we walk back into our school systems and try to enforce the very rules that we no longer believe in. Not only is this system being built on the shoulders of tests harmful to students it is resulting in a form of educational malpractice. We are being forced to tell students with a variety of strengths that they are a 2 on a 4 point scale.

Over the past few years some state education departments have changed the language of what a 2 or a 3 is on high stakes testing. We now have low 2's and high 2's and low 3's and high 3's. They can change the language but the results are the same.

In the End

There is a great deal of research that is focusing on Finland and how progressive that Finnish schools are, and I highly respect their educational system. However, there is one clear distinction between Finland and the United States. Finland has an educational system that is supported by its government. The U.S. public school system does not share that luxury.

Provide us with the Common Core Curriculum and the adequate resources in order to meet the needs of our students. We will go deeper in a student-centered way to educate all of the students in our classroom. Provide our poverty stricken students with the resources they need so they can compete with their suburban school peers. Provide more equity to all school systems.

If our state and federal education departments really want to improve a "failing" school system they should pay attention to the research that states how harmful a focus on high stakes testing is to our students. Only then, can we truly move forward together.

Bower, Joe (2011). United States: How Not to Reform Education. For the Love of Learning: Blog. Retrieved December 12th, 2011.

Burris, Carol and Sean Feeney (2011). An Open Letter of Concern Regarding New York State's APPR Legislation for the Evaluation of Teachers and Principals. www.newyorkprincipals.org.

Hu, Winnie (2011) Longer Standardized Tests Are Planned, Displeasing Some School Leaders. The New York Times. December 9th, 2011.

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