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Ron Wolk's Vision for U.S. Schools

By Marc Tucker on October 22, 2015 6:39 AM

Readers of this blog will know that I also write a regular piece for the Center on International Education Benchmarking's monthly newsletter.

After my recent piece on [technology in the classroom](#), my friend Ron Wolk and I carried on a dialogue about it by e-mail. Ron, for those of you who don't know, was the creator of Education Week and its sister publications, which, in my view, should earn him an undying place of honor in the education pantheon. Though retired, his passion for his subject is undimmed. The core of his most recent e-mail in this exchange is printed below.

I am sharing it with you because I think it is an eloquent expression of a powerful vision that is distinctly American and very important, updated by the promise of the new technologies. I am not sharing it because I agree on all points. I would place more emphasis on a required curriculum with high common standards and common examinations set to those standards than Ron because I have seen the appalling consequences when teachers have different expectations for different kids. I am not as confident as Ron that the available technology can support the vision he describes. Nor am I as confident that kids, left to make their own choices, will pursue highly productive learning paths that will lead to a good general education and deep mastery of the core subjects in the curriculum. But there is much else here that I do agree with. Agree or not, this is, I think, a vision worth wrestling with.

Here is what Ron had to say:

My preference would be to redesign the system and its schools so it focuses on kids and their learning. The traditional schools "work" for maybe 20 percent of the students—the brightest and most highly motivated. I think, though, that they'd achieve even more in schools that personalized their education. We've always had a love affair with common standards, common curricula, distribution requirements, passing on all the accumulated knowledge of mankind to our kids. It's never worked for a sizable majority. The failure of the system to "light the light" and open their minds, is apparent every day in the ignorance and anti-intellectualism of way too many ordinary Americans.

I don't agree that real learning is hard. In fact, kids learn easily what they want to learn. What's really hard is trying to learn a lot of stuff out of context that seems to have no relevance or value to the student except that "he/she might need it one day." *EdWeek* had [a good story recently](#) about a National Science Foundation project to go back to original sources in teaching math. Teaching Pascal's Triangle in the abstract is torture and a waste of time for many, if not most, kids. But when they understand why Pascal came up with it, the problem he was trying to solve, the practicality of it, they have a context that helps engage them.

I am also not proposing that we leave every student to his/her own devices. They need structure and guidance and some skin in the game. The students in the Big Picture schools that I'm associated with are encouraged to find and pursue their passions. At the center of their quest are learning internships. They, along with their advisor, mentor and parents, formulate a personal curriculum connected to the internship. They set goals for the skills and content they are expected to learn. They are closely monitored and helped by their advisor. And they must demonstrate their learning as they progress—in public exhibitions, portfolios of their work. They are evaluated by their workplace mentors, their advisors, and their peers. Each advisor has 15 students and they stay together in an advisory for the entire four years. They become like a family and help each other in many ways.

One of the students I encountered in the first Met School class a decade ago said his goal was to become an assassin (he meant join the U.S. Army Special Forces). Four years later, he had matured and grown and went off to college to study to become a teacher.

Another wanted to be a secretary and arranged for her first internship to work in a doctor's office doing clerical stuff. She became intrigued by the work of the professional staff. Her subsequent internships were in a physical therapy group and a hospital emergency room. Since the Met doesn't offer traditional courses, they paid for her to take science courses at Brown in her junior and senior year because she wanted the science and needed it for her passion to become a physician. She got straight As. She enrolled in premed. I've since lost track of her. I could go on and on.

Most of these kids are the first in their families to graduate from high school, let alone go to college, so it's unreasonable to expect them to become rocket scientists. But most of them are doing well. Their kids and grandkids may well become physicians and lawyers (if they're crazy enough to want to).



Undoubtedly these students earn their degree with great gaps in their general knowledge. Some will not have read Shakespeare or Milton; most won't even be able to define a quadratic equation (nor can I). But they retain and use what they learn far better than most graduates of traditional schools do. I challenged the Rhode Island legislature in an op-ed to take the state's standardized tests. A student organization picked up the challenge and made a public issue of it. About 60 percent of the legislators failed the exam they require for a diploma. Talking to two of them a couple of months later, I mentioned that they didn't do so well. One shook his head sheepishly, then quickly said: "Hey, I learned that stuff 30 years ago and have forgotten most of it." I simply said "Duh!" But he didn't really get it.

I have problems with the Common Core and the associated exams, but I think they are the best standards we've had. All students in the primary/elementary years (ages 6-12) need to master the basic skills and should be exposed to science, literature, history, geography, and civics. (I would teach reading throughout and use it to introduce students to the major disciplines). So common standards and "common" curricular objectives make sense for those students. But beginning with the middle school grades, I believe students should be able to choose from a variety of pathways and standards should be tailored to the pathways. To me it makes no sense to require higher order math of all students. For those who plan careers in non-math/science fields, the higher order math is not necessary and a diversion; for students who do plan to pursue such careers, the requirements are not high enough.

We don't disagree on the importance of teachers. But I probably see their role as being somewhat different from the role you see. I see them first as advisors and guides rather than instructors who deliver content. Of course they need to know the discipline they specialize in, but more importantly they need to know how to engage and motivate kids to learn on their own because that is what they will need to do for the rest of their lives.

The system I would like to see would be built on a number of intertwined concepts: personalization, competency-based learning, performance assessments, out-of-school learning, multiple pathways. It would seek to prepare students to be productive workers, responsible citizens, and fulfilled and caring human beings. That may or may not mean college. The "college for all" mantra is counterproductive.

Our education system is essentially a huge, rule-bound, authoritarian bureaucracy. And that is not a proper environment for our children. I once sat in a second grade class in Florida. The kids sat on the floor in a semi-circle at the teacher's feet. When the class began, one overeager boy started waving his hand frantically. Unable to ignore him, the teacher said: "What is it, George?" He was ready to burst and began to describe being with his father over the weekend and seeing a rocket being launched. He had every other kid's full attention. The teacher interrupted, "Okay, George, but that is not we're talking about today," and proceeded to change the subject. What a missed opportunity. And I doubt she even saw the disappointment on so many faces.

—Ron Wolk

What do you think? Is this a vision to which you would subscribe? Is it realistic? What would it take to make it work?

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