

## Reforming Public Education: A Tragicomedy

by James Kauffman – September 27, 2010

*People who should know better have written or said things about education that are wildly off-base, stunningly incoherent, or mind-numbingly insipid. A lot of the blame for public education's mess has rightfully been heaped on educators. However, people in every walk of life, including school board members, legislators, business executives, journalists, and politicians too often disconnect their powers of reason when confronted by educational problems.*

Truly ridiculous statements about reforming schools have been made by generally intelligent people who happen to botch thinking about education. Too often, their silly statements are taken seriously, making matters worse. Some would-be reformers ignore what produces most learning—instruction. Others ignore basic mathematics—statistics. Some ignore both. Somehow they either didn't acquire critical thinking skills, or they fail to use them in thinking about education. Usually, we think the people who say ridiculous things about public education aren't very smart, and we assume they're not educators. We are wrong on both counts.

People who should know better have written or said things about education that are wildly off-base, stunningly incoherent, or mind-numbingly insipid. A lot of the blame for public education's mess has rightfully been heaped on educators. However, people in every walk of life, including school board members, legislators, business executives, journalists, and politicians too often disconnect their powers of reason when confronted by educational problems. This shouldn't surprise us. After all, Mark Twain observed the nonsense that people in positions of authority frequently spew and sometimes enact, and he found ways to make us laugh about it. In *Following the Equator* he wrote, "In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then He made School Boards." In *Letters From Hawaii* he wrote, "I have seen a number of legislatures, and there was a comfortable majority in each of them that knew just about enough to come in when it rained, and that was all." We need better thinkers on school boards and in legislatures.

True, we must improve American public education. We want all students to achieve more. But we can't make public schools better until we understand why they are so disappointing. Too many people Garrison Keillor calls "the grand poobah PhDs of education" have demanded mathematical impossibilities, embraced pompous postmodern pap, and otherwise given nonsense legitimacy it doesn't deserve. But the "grand poobah PhDs" aren't the only ones selling clap-trap. The moguls and other misguided folks who add their tragicomic suggestions don't direct their comments at what will actually make schools better—improved instruction. They might say we need better teachers without defining "better." People aren't *necessarily* better teachers because they're smarter, know their subject better, or have taken more courses. We need standardized tests, but good teaching isn't easily measured as "value added." "Better teacher" doesn't *necessarily* mean "higher average pupil gain score." Good instruction is defined by what a teacher *does*.

Consider some examples of misguided school reform proposals that have been taken seriously. On May 30, 2009, William Brock, Ray Marshall, and Marc Tucker published in *The Washington Post* ten suggestions for achieving "world class" schools: (1) set higher standards for teacher licensure, (2) recruit outstanding students to become teachers, (3) reward good schools, (4) hold teachers accountable, (5) replace current tests, (6) collect better information, (7) provide better training and technical assistance, (8) limit variation in per-pupil expenditures, (9) make social services available to poor children, and (10) offer high-quality early-childhood education. Good ideas, but these ten miss the mark, even if anyone can implement them. On January 2, 2010, Kevin Huffman published in *The Washington Post* his heartfelt opinions about how to reform education, including suggestions that we recruit talented teachers and fire bad ones, base policies on student achievement, and get parents to demand what's best for their children. He quotes a U.S. Senator from Colorado, who says that the education system must change, but he doesn't say how. Any change will do? Sorry, Kevin and Senator, with all due respect, we don't need just any kind of change. Unless it's the right change, we'll get nowhere.

Many suggestions for reforming schools aren't completely crazy. In fact, all of the things Brock and his coauthors and Huffman suggested are fine things to do, but they won't solve the problems of public education. They're funny, in a way, as well as tragic because they miss the most important thing—improving instruction. We can do all of the things many reformers suggest without paying much attention to instruction. And if we do, we'll fail every time. That's the primary reason the story of public education is a tragicomedy—people have paid closest attention to the wrong things.

Consider a few more examples. In *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*, edited by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Andrew J. Rotherham, and Charles R. Hokanson, Jr., and published by the Fordham Foundation in 2001, only one of the 15 chapters is about instruction. The others are about rules, compliance, state versus national responsibilities, accountability, choice, administrative structures, eligibility for services, and assigning children to categories. One out of 15 isn't a very good percentage. In fact, most people would say it's failing, and we might conclude that Finn et al. didn't do much rethinking that really matters. Or, consider this statement on reforming education published by business leaders through the National

Center on Education and the Economy in 1989: “The challenge is to provide *an elite education for everyone*” (italics in original). If a student had written that, we’d conclude that he or she doesn’t understand the meaning of the word “elite.” Unfortunately, we let things like these pass for good thinking or insightful writing. Nonsense remains nonsense, regardless of who wrote it.

Another reason for the failure of educational reform is the unwillingness to face up to the realities of basic statistics, to recognize the reality that no reform, including really good instruction, will eliminate what we know about statistical distributions, will make all children respond well to instruction, or will make the bottom quartile disappear. True, many student and teacher differences are important and irreducible. True, we can argue about the nature of measurement and observe that measures of things aren’t the things themselves (obviously, intelligence isn’t IQ). Measurement, math, and statistics are all human inventions, but they are important inventions, even for education, and quibbling about the philosophy of them instead of addressing their realities in educational reform invites the moniker “grand poobah PhD.”

Maybe the prize for statistical absurdity should go to *No Child Left Behind*, which set the goal of universal proficiency of students by 2014. That goal is a will-o’-the-wisp that anyone else who understands the most basic mathematical-statistical realities knows is impossible. It makes you think of Lake Wobegon. The year doesn’t matter because *that* goal can’t ever be achieved—it is like setting a goal for all children to become above average by... well, choose a date, because it doesn’t matter. In “The Failure of School Reform,” which appeared in *The Washington Post* on September 6, 2010, Robert J. Samuelson noted that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s suggestion that we should have “a great teacher in every classroom” is like suggesting that every college should have an all-American on its football team. But we routinely let people talk and write about educational reform as if statistical distributions or mathematical realities don’t matter.

One reason the “thinking” of so many earnest reformers is tragicomic when it’s taken seriously is that you can’t have all of the children (or teachers or any other group we measure) reaching any percentile higher than the first group any more than you can have all of the children (or teachers) above average. Improve average test scores? Yes. That’s possible. We must. Build policy on bad thinking about education? No. Won’t work.

How would I judge schools as successful or failing? How would I try to improve education? Those are fair questions. I wouldn’t use test scores for judging success. I wouldn’t rely on setting higher expectations to make education better, especially expectations based on fantasy. Here are the items at the top of my list for judging success and improving education: (1) effective instruction, (2) students’ engagement in productive activity, (3) homogeneous grouping for instruction, (4) positive emotional climate, (5) clear school-wide expectations, (6) positive support for desired behavior, (7) involvement of parents and communities. In my little paperback, *The Tragicomedy of Public Education*, I expand on these.

Good instruction has to come first. We know that some methods are good bets and others are bad bets for teaching most students. The carefully designed, scientifically field-tested instruction like that proposed by Siegfried Engelmann, Doug Carnine, and Barack Rosenshine is our best bet. Direct, systematic instruction is more effective than other approaches like “discovery learning” (essentially, letting kids find out for themselves) and a lot of the other popular but failed ideas about teaching. Go to [www.adihome.org/](http://www.adihome.org/) to find out more.

A long time ago, in *Newsday* for November 15, 1994, Billy Tashman said with reference to a large, government-sponsored field test of different instructional approaches: “The good news is that after 26 years, nearly a billion dollars, and mountains of data, we now know which are the most effective instructional tools. The bad news is that the education world couldn’t care less.” The same holds true today. The “education world” includes lots of people, not just educators. But shame on us, especially those of us who *are* educators!

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