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Director, Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science
Education, Stevens Institute of Technology

U.S. Schools Don't Fail at Test Performance, They Fail at Citizenship Development

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Schools in the U.S. are failing, but not in the way that advocates for test-driven accountability, charter schools, and vouchers claim. In fact, schools in the U.S. do a terrific job of preparing our young people to live in and accept the world as it is. The less-than-stellar average scores of U.S. students on international assessment measures are not the harbinger of coming socioeconomic and social doom. Instead, that dubious honor goes to our failure to educate young people who grow into citizens who challenge the prevailing inequality, racism, hatred and environmental degradation that continues to plague the lives of far too many people. That failure works well for the already privileged, but not so much for the rest of us. Sadly, our education system produces far too many citizens who view themselves as people who accept an inequitable status quo rather than as change agents.

A fact of political life is that many elected officials (and those running for office) speak to what they think voters want to hear. For some, word choice in political speech is about getting elected and this overriding goal trumps any social values. For others, obfuscating language is a means to promote policies they would prefer not to articulate openly. Lately, many politicians of all stripes feel compelled to couch their policy preferences in the context of widely disparate educational outcomes. They do so because they know people care about inequality. However, current education reform efforts -- endorsed by both Republicans and Democrats -- emphasize competition among teachers for pay bonuses, among schools for students, and among parents for entry into schools. Unfortunately, these policies are about the fairest and most effective way to orchestrate the competition to get ahead in an inequitable society. Our nation's great failure is that we have not been able to create an education system that develops citizens who have the values, creativity, will, and cognitive, social and emotional tools to demand something more likely to result in systemic change.

What can schools do?

The phrase college and career readiness has become ubiquitous in education debates, but as a slogan without significant transformational direction. Of course, students should leave K-12 education with the knowledge and skills to succeed in the next phase of their lives. Of course, students' experiences should open rather than restrict their choices and opportunities when they graduate. Of course, they should all graduate. Of course, young people need to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be successful in the world of work. Ignoring that would be an irresponsible abdication, especially for students whose parents already struggle to make a decent living. It's not that that these are misplaced goals. They are just insufficient.

We need an education system intentionally designed to engage students to understand their values and to learn how to become effective citizens. Which questions teachers ask or do not ask influences how their students understand the world and their role in it.

Some teachers ask: What happened in history? How does our government work? What do we know about the natural world? What did the author say or mean in that book? What is the answer to that mathematical problem? These are stasis-oriented questions that encourage students to think about how things function. They are important. They are just insufficient for citizen development or equitable education. They are questions that promote passively observing rather than engagement in making change, often leading to disengagement that undermines learning.

Other teachers ask: In the past, how have people worked together to improve the human condition in different societies? What has supported and thwarted those efforts? What features of governments support or impede peaceful resolution of conflicts? How do scientists make discoveries? How do engineers design solutions that improve people's lives? How do literature and the arts help us understand and value one another and our environment? How can mathematics be used to help make better decisions? What changes are you interested in investigating? These are change-oriented questions that affirm students' capacities and encourage them to imagine themselves as agents of improvement. These are engaging motivational questions. When student engage in such action-directed learning they can develop the values, confidence and mindset to make things better.

In a presidential campaign speech in 1968, Robert F. Kennedy called upon the nation to reject rather than accept war, racial division, and poverty. Paraphrasing, George Bernard Shaw, he said, "Some people see things as they are and say 'why?' I dream of things that never were and say, 'why not?'" He made that speech in the context of citizen movements for racial and social justice and against the war in Vietnam.

The opt-out movement has yet to grow into a broader movement for equitable, democratic education, nor is it yet part of a broader movement for economic and social justice. However, President Obama's announcement on limiting testing is evidence of the power of organized citizens. It's time to expand that influence to demand changes that will make a lasting difference in the lives of our children. One long-term demand is to insist that schools engage students so that they learn to imagine the world that could be and investigate how the interaction of values, beliefs and evidence influence public policy decisions that affect humanity. In the short run, citizens need to raise their voices for equitable funding, integrated schools, small class sizes, and support adequate teacher compensation, respect, and professional growth, autonomy, and responsibility.

Arthur H. Camins is the Director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ. He taught in elementary schools in Brooklyn and worked in administrative roles in New York City, Massachusetts, and Kentucky. His writing can be accessed at www.arthurcamins.com. He tweets at @arthurcamins

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