

## A call for President Obama to change course on education

By Arthur H. Camins , Updated: November 7, 2012

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With the election behind us, it is time for the Obama administration to step back from its education policy and assess whether its foundation is sound and supported by evidence. It is a moment to summon the courage to change course.

We have had wars on drugs, poverty and terrorism. Now, depending on perspective, we have a war either for or on education. Certainly, many educators feel under siege. Popular slogans like, “Whatever it takes,” sound like battle cries. This brings to mind the documentary film, “The Fog of War,” as a metaphor for education reform.

In the hopeful 1960s, the nation’s focus on poverty was undone by a president fearful of accusations of being weak on defense and soft on communism and trapped by unexamined cold war logic. Lyndon Johnson failed to heed President Eisenhower’s prescient warning to beware of the influence of the military industrial complex. As many presidents who succeeded him, Johnson permitted the defense industry to have undue influence in the making of foreign policy.

In the “Fog of War,” an aged and surprisingly reflective war architect, Robert McNamara, makes a compelling case that once the United States found itself enmeshed in war, an intellectual shroud clouded the ability of policy makers to see the evidence in front of them. Vietnam War-era policy makers understood North Vietnam as a tile in a row of falling dominoes that would lead to the worldwide communist domination. While it was readily apparent that their assumptions about the motivations of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were entirely mistaken, Johnson and his advisers could not recognize or admit that they were wrong. Nor could they summon the courage to change course. Such is the distorting power of unexamined ideology.

I think many of the powerful supporters of market-driven education reforms are caught in the fog of their self-made education war. In classic ends-justifies-means thinking, they dismiss the negative impact of over-testing on students learning and the injustice of using imprecise value-added modeling for teacher evaluation and dismissal.

During the Vietnam War many people used evidence to show that the United States government did not understand its declared “enemy” and that the war was counterproductive though Johnson, McNamara and those in the defense industry who profited from the war were not persuaded. Listening to McNamara’s telling of the tale, it is not clear whether their failure to change course was because no one inside

the decision circle was willing to challenge the conventional thinking, or because there was an unwillingness to admit defeat and cede power or influence to their perceived internal enemies. By the time McNamara voiced any doubts, the course of action was too deeply set.

Similarly, I have been trying to understand the persistence of education reformers, especially those in federal and state government, in the light of so much contrary, well-articulated evidence. I have been trying to understand how teachers who oppose charter schools and merit pay, or who make the case that schools alone can't undo the effects of poverty, have come to be defined by education reformers as the enemy – supporters of and apologists for the status quo. Somehow, educators who do not support the reformers' ill-conceived version of disruptive innovation, but who have proposed myriad significant improvement, have been cast as defenders of bad teachers who supposedly believe poverty is destiny. Reformers have become so enamored by their own ideology and so invested in their own course of action that they are unable to recognize the evidence that challenges their policies and unable to recognize the damage it is causing to students.

I conclude that, as with the Vietnam War, eventually some combination of unrelenting organized opposition and the weight of the failure of the policy itself will eventually bring the folly to an end... but not before inflicting considerable damage on students and their teachers. President Obama, what education legacy do you want to leave?

In a [recent interview](#) for NBC's "Education Nation" President Obama said, "You know, I'm a big proponent of charter schools, for example. I think that pay-for-performance makes sense in some situations." Later in the interview, he said, "What we have to do is combine creativity and evidence-based approaches. So let's not use ideology, let's figure out what works, and figure out how we scale it up."

I want to believe the president's statement about ideology. But, frankly, I am not reassured. What logic and evidence is behind his support for scaling-up charter schools, merit pay, or for sanctions that require the firing of administrators at struggling schools typically inhabited by poverty-stricken students? Mr. President, are you open to the possibility that maybe your assumptions are wrong?

Following are several big ideas behind current education reform. Each of them is either not supported by evidence or is inapplicable to education.

**Failing School Systems:** The popular myth is that K-12 education in the United States has not changed much for the last hundred years and that we have made only incremental improvements in outcomes. We certainly do not yet have the outcomes we want, but in reality, NAEP reading and math scores are [at their highest levels](#) as are graduation rates. In fact, many of the effective teaching strategies that lead to deeper learning and are common in high-scoring countries such as [Finland](#) are also found in many U.S. classrooms. Powerful professional learning strategies such as lesson study, common in Japan, have become more widespread in the United States. What limits the spread of these practices is not educator resistance, but insufficient funding and an overemphasis on test scores as the central outcome goal.

What separates education in the United States from so-called competitor counties is that on average, [socioeconomic status explains](#) far more of the variation in test scores

in the United States than in other industrialized countries. But, as many researchers have pointed out, it is not the presence of unions, tenure, or collective bargaining that explains that difference. A more plausible explanation is that the more successfully scoring countries have far more substantial social support systems to mediate the negative effects of poverty. A far stronger argument can be made that we need to change our focus — especially in struggling schools — from the drudgery of high consequence driven test-prep to engaging students to be critical thinkers and active investigators in meaningful subject matter. Or, even better, from spending millions on testing to spending millions on support services. In addition, the evidence is mounting that schools can also teach essential non-cognitive competencies, such as persistence, ethics, empathy and collaboration. Since the latter are not easily subject to measurement, the continued focus on testing narrow, more easily measured subject matter diverts important attention from their development.

**Disruptive Innovation:** Innovative companies such as Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Apple have rapidly revolutionized how we all communicate. Their success is not just the result of invention, but rather in designing the integration of multiple technical and process innovations, as well as successful marketing to the public. Their transformative power is measured not only in winning over customers from rivals, but in changing the entire landscape so that their rivals must change what they offer and how they operate in order to survive. The thinking of market-based reformers is that we need to make similar rapid and dramatic change in how we educate students. The need for dramatic improvement, especially for children from low-income families, is assailable. But, for every new private sector idea that was transformative, there were thousands generated that were not. In addition, not every idea that is transformative is necessarily good for society. For example, market-supported product and process innovations in the fast food industry have transformed how and what families eat. Consumers “choose” MacDonald’s. Is this a healthy desirable outcome? Ideas rise and fall, as do the fortunes of their developers and investors. This is, I think what reformers have in mind when they push for increasing the “market share” of charter schools that will need to compete for enrollees. Customers decide whether they want to buy an iPhone or a Blackberry. As a result, Apple stocks flourish and RIM’s plummet. For reformers, schools are just another market choice. However, is this the best way to decide on the form and content of schools for children in a democracy? What happens to kids when schools open and close? Instability in the restaurant marketplace may be acceptable, but disruption in schools and teachers is a disaster for students whose lives are already too chaotic.

There is no evidence in the United States or anywhere in the world that market-driven choice among competing charter schools is a successful systemic strategy to improve learning for all students — not anywhere! Arguably, the likely result of [charter school proliferation](#) is that some students will get to go quality schools, while many others will not. This is hardly transformative. It is a replication of what we have now. In addition, rather than mediating current geographic segregation patterns through more integrated schools, it will exacerbate racial and socioeconomic isolation.

**The Sword of Damocles:** In a [recent New York Times column](#), David Brooks argued that it was the absence of the proverbial sword hanging by a thread over the heads of teachers that explained presumed lack of innovation in schools. Is there evidence to support the notion that private sector innovation in product quality – not short-term

profit — is advanced by fear? Is there evidence that fear and competition will spur more effective teaching? If anything, the evidence suggests the opposite. There is no credible evidence to support the reformers' theory of action that merit pay and of the threat of firing of presumably low-performing teachers will drive systemic improvement. It is pure unsubstantiated ideology.

In his popular book, "Drive," [Daniel Pink summarizes](#) the research regarding motivation. Extrinsic rewards are only effective to improve performance for short-term, simplistic tasks. Performance and learning with respect to complex tasks (teaching, for example) is undermined by reward systems. In addition, research shows that once a threshold of "fair pay" is reached, rewards for performance provide no benefit and may be counterproductive. Arguably, the result of reward systems — especially with untrusted metrics — is ethical lapses. We have known all of this for a long time, yet the reformers keep insisting on it as policy in the name of innovation. This is yet another case in the fog of the education war in which ideology trumps evidence.

**Fire the Bottom 10 percent:** Another pillar of current education reform, made famous by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, is that annual firing of the lowest performing 10 percent of managers drives improvement. Presumably, this is what is behind the push to annually rank teachers across four or five normative performance categories. The charge is that tenure, inadequate teacher and principal evaluation systems, the absence of clear outcome-based performance metrics and lack of competition makes educators complacent about making needed change. By this way of thinking, the relatively low percentage of teacher firings and persistent poor student performance are *prima facie* evidence to support this strategy. This appears to be the justification for firing 50 percent of the teachers and the principal as a turn-around strategy in Title 1 schools. However, except with reference to anecdotal outliers, there is no evidence to support this idea.

In addition, firing as a systemic strategy fails the logic test. There is no substantial evidence that there are so many ineffective teachers or that this is the principle cause of low student performance. Unless it is inexplicably assumed that there is a pool of more effective teachers just waiting to be hired, replacement can only work for a minority of schools. GE might beat out Frigidaire for best refrigerator engineers, but that is only a winning strategy for GE's bottom line, not the consumers. Once again, applied to schools, this is unexamined ideology driving policy.

I hope it will not take decades to see our way out of the fog of the education war. I hope some inside government official will not wait as long as McNamara to speak up. However, reasoned argument is not enough. Without massive organized opposition these policies are unlikely to change.

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