The Washington Post Print

Key questions begging for answers about school reform

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: July 18, 2013

Here is a thoughtful piece about school reform and the march toward privatization of public education. It was written by Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. His writing can be accessed at http://www.arthurcamins.com/.

By Arthur Camins

The New York Times editorial board has been a staunch supporter of the trifecta of current reform policy: high-stakes testing, performance pay and closing public schools, while opening new charter schools. Now in this editorial it is hedging one of its bets, the overtesting of students. However, it is hard to put the genie back in the bottle. Neither Congress, nor the U.S. Department of Education appear ready to change course.

Opponents of currently dominant education policies have a problem that proponents do not. Proponents, supported by unlimited funds from several well-connected billionaires, have been able to influence local, state and national decision-makers with little open public debate even while many Americans oppose the current set of market-based ideas that are driving dramatic changes in education. Pockets of resistance are popping up around the country. Educators and researchers have exposed the unfairness, inaccuracy and instability of student test scores as a measure of teachers' expertise and primary determinant of employment status. But, for most citizens, the controversy surrounding these reforms is not yet a dominant issue in their busy lives. In fact, most parents are satisfied with their local schools. That is not surprising because for all the negative attention to international assessment comparisons, most middle-class students do OK. Policy arguments about economic competitiveness are distant from the daily lives of our children. And, for parents who struggle economically, the under-resourced, poorly performing schools their children attend is but one additional aspect of a very challenging life.

While the burden of school closings, expansion of charter schools, over-emphasis on testing and "no-excuses" compliance culture falls most heavily on poor communities, these shifts in education policy have broad implications for everyone. With widespread adoption of teacher evaluation systems linked to high-stakes assessments, the infection is spreading to all but the most privileged communities. Opponents need a compelling strategy to capture the attention, imagination and energy of large diverse audiences.

If we are to successfully counter the anti-democratic privatization movement, we need to pursue three strategies. First, educators and their unions need to seize the initiative so that we own the work of improving teaching, including establishing and embracing standards (not standardization) of effective professional practice. This work is beginning, but it is not well known. In their respective books, "Professional Capital" and "Getting Teacher Evaluation Right," Michael Fullan and Linda Darling-Hammond chronicle this work and highlight what can be done to bring it to scale. Second, we need to pose clear values choices. Third, to illuminate those choices we need to tell compelling stories that resonate with people across diverse audiences.

Sarah Carr does a fabulous job of putting a human face on the choices post-Katrina New Orleans' parents face in in her insightful book, "Hoping Against Hope." She tells the nuanced stories of teachers and parents from their personal perspectives. The parents Carr chronicles do not have the luxury of real alternatives, but rather constrained choices born of desperation and longing. Across a range of issues, they lack influence and are not organized politically. In the absence of informed empowered parent voices, we are left with self-appointed spokespeople for the poor — some of whom have figured out that under-resourced neighborhoods are the permeable membrane through which a market-based transformation of education can passed with little resistance.

In every area of public policy, the questions we ask frame the answers we get. The questions we ask tend to reflect our values and interests. Those who are first out of the gate to ask and get their questions noticed are able to frame and dominate the debate. Education is a case in point.

Empowered proponents assert:

The competitive edge of the United States is slipping, so we must improve our education system. Clearly, our current education system is broken, especially for the poor and underrepresented minorities. Boldly, they proclaim, "This is the civil rights issue of our time!"

And then, with the hook baited, they ask:

How can we limit the influence and collective bargaining power of teachers unions that have thwarted improvement?

How can we use student test scores to determine the value each teacher adds to student learning and use that information to fire the ineffective?

How can we reward the most talented teachers to drive improvement?

How can we use competition among schools to drive improvement?

How can we spend less of your tax dollars on public education?

Then to set the hook, they ask:

Shouldn't you (parents) have the choice- the freedom- to send your child to the best school, whether or not it is a charter schools or even a private school?

Brilliant marketing. There are implicit values-laden assumptions and behind each of these questions that, so far, opponents have not been able to successfully expose in ways that have mass countervailing appeal.

For example, the proponents of current education reform strategies love to promote the idea of "choice." So do I, but I mean something very different. In a democracy, choice implies real knowledge of alternatives. It also implies that one individual's freedom to does not diminish another's. In the United States, we have always struggled with the inherent tension between celebrating individual freedom and embracing collective responsibility. As Bill Clinton said in his speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, we also struggle with the choice between embracing the individualist value, "You're on your own" and the community value, "We're in this together." I still believe, optimistically, that when most Americans are cognizant of the practical and values implications of their choices, they will usually embrace community over selfishness. Unfortunately, the public rarely gets to participate in making policy choices, much less in the daylight of honesty. We need some sunshine.

Here are some questions I suggest that we pose in discussions with people with varying, if potentially overlapping, dispositions in relation to children and their schools:

To parents:

Are you feeling anxiety about which school your child will attend? If so, do you want a system in which schools compete to enroll your child? Do you want to compete against other parents for limited slots in a few good schools? Or, would you prefer that we all work together to improve every school for every child? Which is a better expenditure of limited funds, tests or social supports for the families of struggling students?

Since many are becoming more aware that there is no evidence that charter schools are a lever for improvement or innovation in all schools, this may be a useful way to frame the issue.

Would you prefer a system that motivates your children to succeed on tests or one that engages and inspires them to find areas of interest and passion? Which is more important to your child's future, following rules or learning to become a confident independent thinker?

Since there is no evidence that test preparation motives life long learning or critical thinking and no evidence that "no excuses" schools build leadership skills, maybe these questions will help frame parents' choices.

To Business Leaders:

For decades, business leaders have been saying that they want workers who are problem solvers, flexible thinkers and collaborators with a strong work ethic. Let's ask them:

Are children more likely to learn these skills if their main motivation is success on tests and their teachers are competing for merit bonuses or if they and their teachers practice these skills in their learning? Do you want workers who are only driven by bonus pay or workers who are spurred to excellence by self-motivation and teamwork? Are teachers and their students more likely to learn innovation in a compliance fear of failure culture or in a collaborative learning from failure culture? Given limited resources, which is a wiser investment, new teacher evaluation systems to reward the top and fire the bottom 10% of teachers or intensive sustained professional development and support for all current teachers?

To Progressive Policy Makers, Commentators and Concerned Citizens:

Few would disagree with this statement: Education should prepare young people for life, work and citizenship. Given the rapidity of technological change, most serious contributors to discussions about education policy also recognize that this also means thinking about who needs what knowledge and skills in the yet to be fully known world of our children's adulthood. Thomas Friedman argued in the June 30th New York Times Sunday Review that increased globalization and automation mean that "working hard and playing by the rules" are no longer enough to enter the middle class. Now, "you have to work harder, work smarter, bring more innovation to what ever job you do, retool yourself more often – and then you can be middle class."

Really? Has any economist made a credible case that all the current low-paying jobs will disappear if everyone is "retooled?"

So let's ask:

What role should public education play with respect to class, or socio-economic, mobility? Is it enough to increase the diversity of who gets to compete to enter the middle class? Is it enough to make the competition fairer? What role should education play in preparing all students to

participate in these policy debates? What is the best way to ensure that all children arrive in school ready to learn and receive the ongoing supports their need to stay engaged?

High unemployment, intense global competition, low socio-economic mobility, and shrinking government social services may provide an unfortunate, but opportune moment to make the point that fairer competition, while morally compelling, is a shallow insufficient goal for education.

Debates about the relative position of U.S. students in the international test sweepstakes abound.

We're behind the competition. / We're at all time highs.
Gaps have remained constant. / Gaps have narrowed.
Middle-class students do well. / Poor students do not.

It is important to sort through these issues, but this parsing excludes an essential measure. As a nation, we keep electing self-interested politicians who are most influenced by their campaign contributors and can't seem to operate a well-functioning democracy on behalf of the common good. Education fails not because students can't answer critical thinking test questions, but because as a nation we have not learned to operationalize critical thinking as citizens in a democracy. Shouldn't that be a major goal of education reform? The major players in current education debates, the president and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, along with foundations, such as Gates, Broad and Walton, won't ask these questions. The two major teachers unions, on the defensive, are not effectively posing these questions to the public either.

Education reformers reason that the market-driven forces that have made the United States a premier innovator in the world must be applied to improve education. I, and countless others, have pushed back against this reasoning. We've argued that monitoring and compliance regimes thwart rather than promote creativity and change. Citing evidence, we've countered that competition for students among schools has not been shown to drive overall improvement. We've pointed out that when parents compete for limited slots in higher performing schools it provides an unfair advantage to more educated and more stable families, strengthening instead of challenging the status quo. We argued that competition among schools for the most effective teachers doesn't improve the overall pool. There has been similar push back from psychometricians and education researchers regarding the consequential use of student assessments for hiring, firing and promotion decisions. So far, the education reformers have prevailed. Surely, the power of the billionaires and those that hope to profit form this agenda to influence the highest levels of decision making is one explanation. However, their dominance is also explained by the failure of opponents to powerfully connect with people and their daily concerns.