

The problem with 'whatever it takes to get the job done'

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: October 15 at 6:00 am

How many times have you heard “whatever it takes to get the job done” and worried about what it takes? Here’s a piece on how this relates to school reform, by Athur 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/>. This post represents the personal views of Mr. Camins and not that of the Stevens Institute of Technology.

By Arthur H. Camins

I wish I could ignore Education Secretary Arne Duncan and his fellow self-proclaimed education reformers. I wish I could devote my energy to working on things that will improve education without taking time to defend the very idea of public education. I wish I could stop criticizing.

Maybe it was the insanity of the government shutdown or Duncan’s recent [“Beyond the Beltway Bubble”](#) speech about the “state of education in America” that set me off. It all pulls me back in. In his speech, the secretary casts himself as the pragmatist, besieged on both sides by extremist ideologues, “so supremely confident in their perspective that they have stopped listening to people with a different viewpoint.” He casts himself as the courageous middle-of-the-road guy willing to do “whatever it takes” to get the job done.

I admit to being reflexively suspicious of people in decision-making positions who claim to be non-ideological. In reality, every decision represents a choice and all choices are influenced by ideas, whether or not they are conscious or articulated. So, these neutrality claims are either lacking in self-awareness or are disingenuous. Ideas matter. Ideas lead to theories of action. And theories of action guide policy.

The U.S. Department of Education has purview over billions of dollars. It proposes to Congress and the President how to spend those funds. It can choose to spend greater or lesser amounts to improve teaching by funding merit pay or instead by investing in collegial professional development and pre-service teacher development. It can choose to invest more or less in consequential assessments or instead to develop teacher expertise in daily formative assessment. It can choose to invest more or less in charter school expansion or instead incentivize more integrated schools. It can choose to give more or less priority to competition or instead focus on collaboration as an improvement strategy. In each case a choice gets made about what the decision-maker *thinks* will work.

I emphasize *thinks* because while we have certainly made substantial progress over the last several decades, there are still no easy answers. Educational inequity remains stubbornly persistent in funding and outcomes. Some choices are better supported by evidence than others. Different choices have different potential outcomes. Policy choices are mediated by different values and beliefs. For example, tea party supporters appear to believe in an “everyone is on their own” philosophy and therefore oppose all federal intervention and tend to accept resultant inequity. Others believe in collective responsibility and therefore believe that state and federal governments should play a role in mediating inequity. The president and secretary of education appear to believe that teachers and schools will be motivated to do their best through competition and rewards. Many critics believe that collaboration and trust are more effective motivators.

These choices are not neutral. They are based on ideas, values and beliefs. They lead to different outcomes. Increasing the number of charter schools means that parents compete for available placements for their children. This tends to give privilege to the already advantaged, increasing racial and socioeconomic isolation. [Merit pay tends](#) to increase competition and decrease collaboration. Consequential testing tends to narrow the breadth of instruction.

In his speech, Secretary Duncan chronicled stories of great things happening around the country, implying two things: First, he is in touch with what is happening and his critics are not. Second, his policies are somehow responsible for improvements. Both of these assertions lack humility, to say the least. Teachers and schools accomplished great feats in difficult circumstances before and during the current administration and they will continue to do so after it is gone. It is what they do. Some of the wonderful things are supported by federal funds and some are done in spite, or in the absence, of such funds. I am always encouraged by stories of terrific teaching and learning. However, I hear far too many stories about the negative consequences of current education policies.

The Secretary’s speech implied that there were three choices: Oppose, as the Tea Party does, all federal intervention and support; support the current reform direction; or support the status quo. He implied that positions regarding education policy fall along a linear left-to-right continuum in which he represents the reasonable middle. A more accurate representation might be a triangle.

Each of these three vertices represents a different belief about inequity. The individualists accept inequity as an essential fact of life not subject to federal mediation. The competition group, to which Secretary Duncan belongs, abhors inequity, but they have become cynical about systemic solutions and are therefore content to settle for “escape from poverty” for some. The collaboration group (of which I am a proud member) refuses to accept inequity as inevitable. These critics of current education reform have proposed a host of viable alternative strategies, as they have for decades, advocating for integrated schools; equitable funding; universal preschool; large-scale, long-term investment in teacher development; robust induction and support systems; a fully-balanced curriculum; full-funding to meet the needs of special education students; small-class size; wrap-around services for children and their families; attention to students’ social and emotional needs; daily formative assessment; collaborative school culture; low-cost access to higher education, just to name a few. These approaches

have never been tried in concert or systemically with enough resources and time to prove their full value.

“Whatever it takes,” is a dangerous philosophy because it tends to justify “collateral damage” in the guise of doing good things for children. It excuses increased segregation wrought by school choice policies. It excuses flawed metrics in teacher evaluation. It excuses the disruptions caused by open and closing of schools. It excuses decreased instructional time for science, social studies and the arts. It avoids exploration of meaningful debate about ideas and evidence. It dismisses all of these consequences with the glib phrase, “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” as if there were no alternative strategies available for improvement. It is, I think, a calculated avoidance strategy that develops when leaders feel under siege and run out of ways to deflect valid criticism. In the end it is a profoundly undemocratic stance.

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