

The problem with our 'first in the world' education obsession

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: February 17, 2013

Though it is well known that the social, emotional and academic health of children are linked, education policy gives short shrift to the first two. Here's a look at this issue from Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the [Stevens Institute of Technology](#) in Hoboken, NJ.

By Arthur H. Camins

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama framed a challenge for educational improvement:

These initiatives in manufacturing, energy, infrastructure, and housing will help entrepreneurs and small business owners expand and create new jobs. But none of it will matter unless we also equip our citizens with the skills and training to fill those jobs Let's also make sure that a high school diploma puts our kids on a path to a good job.

With the economy still struggling to get out of recession, the career readiness functions of education loom large. For individuals, landing satisfactory employment in a time of scarcity means every job seeker wants a leg up. Similarly, corporations and nations seek competitive advantage. In this context, the current intense focus on measurable academic knowledge and skills, competition for merit pay among teachers and competition with charter schools for students is appealing to many.

But, unfortunately, scarcity tends to focus us all on short-term needs and self, rather than on the long-term and community. In this competitive environment important roles for schooling, such as preparation for citizenship and personal and social development, get less consideration. In addition, attention to non-academic contributors to learning that are not easily measured is often diminished.

In fact, characteristics such as persistence, ability to listen to and consider multiple perspectives, flexible thinking and empathy contribute powerfully to both academic and job success. However, rewards and sanctions that are limited to academic progress undermine its advancement by diverting teachers from work on these significant contributing dimensions of success.

The U.S. Department of Education has used the economic downturn to drive a marketplace-based educational agenda in which test scores, merit pay and charter schools figure prominently. States and districts, desperate for funds, quickly agreed to these requirements in

the Race-to-the-Top and Title I School Improvement Grants. Based on the same principles, private foundations have used their economic power to sway elections, sponsor and influence the content of administrative leadership training programs and fund the opening of charter schools that draw students and funds away from regular public schools.

How to build public support for a longer-term, more broadly focused education reform agenda is very challenging. The December shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut may be a tragic historic moment that provides insight into the value of the social and emotional dimensions of children's school experience. We may never know what complex set of factors led a young man to commit such unfathomable violence against innocent children. But we do know on a deep emotional level that children's safety, their sense of belonging and value as members of their communities are of paramount importance.

Many, maybe with some sensitivity in mind to the recent demeaning of teachers and their profession, have appropriately called attention to the heroism and selflessness of Newtown's educators. However, this may also be an occasion for public reflection about whether our economic anxiety has caused us to get our educational priorities far out of balance.

Every one of us has a story for which this point has resonance. While I have few academic memories of second grade, I have several emotional ones. I remember that in the days before school prayer was outlawed, as a Jew I was still required to recite the Lord's Prayer and that I felt isolated and not valued. I remember the teacher talking about phonics, having no clue what she was talking about, thinking that everyone else did, and not having any means to ask. I remember having the sense that the teacher did not like me. In contrast, my sixth grade teacher stands out in my recollections for having taken a special interest in me, expressing confidence in my learning capability and challenging me. I remember him fondly even though he made me memorize the first several pages of the dictionary as a punishment for talking too much. I remember that this difference was a pivotal moment for me, both emotionally and academically. The markers that are left with me are all about how I was treated. I think we all have stories such as these.

Student's social, emotional and academic well-being are inextricably interdependent and deeply intertwined within the chemistry, structure and development of the brain. We know this from research, but we all also know it from personal experience. Despite this knowledge, these affective components of effective education are severely under-emphasized in education policy. We need to draw upon these everyday experiences to describe a new storyline, a counter narrative to Race to the Top for what needs to be done to improve education for all children.

With the recent release of new international assessment data from TIMSS and PIRLS there was a flurry of discussion about the relative standing of the United States. Our national self-efficacy appears to rest upon whether we are *first in the world*. That is a shallow and insufficient goal for a great nation.

We need to aspire to be first in the world in caring for our most vulnerable, whether it is young children, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, or the physically or mentally ill. We also need to give far more attention to the ways in which our lack of attention the social and emotional health undermines academic success.

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