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Voices in Education

Marlene Schommer, Wichita State University

Veteran leaders of education, as well as some new leaders, were directly asked by the author to respond to the following two questions. Their Reaction and Impact estimates are summarized below. The "leader" is identified at the end of the responses.

1. a. What are the two most critical issues in K - 12 education that should be addressed in the next five years?

b. Why do you think they are the most critical?

"In educational research, the greatest crisis we have is our current ignoring of intelligence (or g). Especially this is true for school learning from k to 12th grade. Ignoring intelligence, we are suppressing the idea of readiness. We are collapsing tracking and ability grouping, and programs for the gifted and retarded. Pretending that intelligence does not exist changes not one thing about its underlying importance and explanatory power."

Ellis B. Page
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

the logical next step of a national curriculum, and the erosion of support for teacher professional abilities. It is unfortunate that the Clinton agenda has merely extended the Bush agenda. The knee-jerk response to lower standardized test scores, unflattering international comparisons, and a "newly discovered" ignorant public is to impose standards without examining the substance of the claims of educational shortcomings."

Murry R. Nelson
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

"Continued inequality in schools and the notion of the standards as panacea in education."

"The biggest societal problems we face are those stemming from inequalities, and schools are reflective of these societal shortcomings. Certainly there are blatant shortcomings in most urban schools regarding basic equipment, curricular innovation and adequate facilities. Vouchers have been trumpeted as a solution to these problems, but in actuality are only advantageous for middle or upper class parents and students. Though city schools may in some instances have more per pupil expenditures, that money is not being spent on teaching and learning so much as on administration and compliance.

Money is clearly the key to eradicating inequalities in schools, but money well spent. In addition, there must be changes/demands that poorer students economically (disproportionately students of color) are not consigned to poorer teachers and lower expectations. Teacher-led curricular change cannot only go on in suburban schools. Urban teachers need support and training to shape programs for their students. These needed innovations require financial, community and administrative support, yet these are being undermined by the other current panacea—the national standards movement. There are few positives that can outweigh the negatives of this—the money, time and effort expended,

"In my opinion, the two most pressing problems we face in education today are directly related to one another. Many teachers lack a clear and appropriate vision of the meaning of academic success in their classrooms because of a lack of preparation with respect to the important achievement targets. And for this and other reasons, we are a national faculty that is unable to develop or implement quality assessments of student achievement in our classrooms on a day-to-day basis. As a result, instruction is carried out in the absence of dependable information about student needs and communication about student achievement often arises from inaccurate assessments of that achievement. We are a national faculty, administrative staff and policy-setting team unschooled in the basic principles of sound assessments, and students suffer great harm as a direct result of this huge gap in our collective professional competence."

Richard J. Stiggins, Director
Assessment Training Institute
Portland, Oregon

"Two important issues are high-stakes testing and inequalities in opportunity to learn. Testing concerns me for a number of reasons: restricted paper-and-pencil measures that are heavily biased toward linguistic and logical performance; imposition of measures from outside the classroom; and,

perhaps worst of all, the widespread belief among teachers that their own judgments about student performance are less trustworthy than test results. As regards inequalities, the disparity in per-pupil expenditures between most large, urban districts and most small, suburban ones is shocking. Jonathan Kozol calls this phenomenon 'rigging the game.'"

Ruth Garner
Washington State University
Vancouver, Washington

"The most critical issue is turning schooling into education at any level and in any culture, however segmented."

"Because creativity is the quality which will facilitate the ongoing transmutation of consciousness from conformity into developed self-awareness."

David Tiedeman
Vista, California

"The two most critical issues facing educators are implementing student-centered instruction and giving students access to new technologies, regardless of whether they attend large urban schools, or small well-financed suburban ones. Most technology is not value-neutral, and like other tools of educators (e.g., activities, curricula, and teaching environments) can elicit hot emotions. Hot emotions toward technology, for instance, may be the initial gatekeeper of change in educational environments. For those teachers who believe technology is desirable, that belief can be an inducement to try new teaching strategies, but for those who have negative beliefs, teachers may avoid even cursory engagement of technology."

Mark Gillingham
Washington State University
Vancouver, Washington

"Two factors impede all educational reform efforts. First, many parents have abdicated their responsibility for oversight of their children's education. Thus, children are often loners in an educational system that cannot express the love, concern, and direction that only parents can provide. This is not the fault of the educational system; governmental bureaucracies are not established to impart personal love, concern, or direction; but to provide a fairly homogeneous service to a diverse population. It is the fault of parents; it is parents who must reclaim an educational vision as a mandatory aspect of rearing children. Parents can and—if any reform is to be successful—must assume more responsibility for taking what schools can provide and ensuring that the results are maximized in their children's best interests.

The second critical issue that must be addressed is nested within the first. That is, even if parents assume

greater responsibility for the education of their children, their actions will lack efficacy if they must be embedded in the current educational system. Thus, a critical issue for reform over the next five years is the ability of the educational system to reform itself. That may be an unreasonable outcome to expect, given the constraints within which teachers must currently practice. The stifling of creativity through the frowning upon risk, the overwhelming burdens of bureaucratic regulations, the constraining context of unionization, the propensity of bureaucracies to serve their own interests first; all of these elements work against the current system being able to induce many students to high accomplishment, much less everyone to excellence.

There are emerging models that aspire to mitigate these influences; the innovative vision of the Edison Project schools comes to mind as one example. For real educational reform—not cosmetic reform—to take place, this kind of vision must catch the attention of teachers, administrators, and parents on a broad scale."

Gregory J. Cizek
The University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio

"Developing interprofessional support systems for students in our schools. Evidence abounds that support provided to young people by traditional families is becoming more the exception than the rule. Violence at home, economic deprivation, contact with drug users, unsafe neighborhoods, gang-related activity, and nutritional problems challenge increasing numbers of children. When these young people come to school, they bring with them problems going well beyond the service capacity of traditionally trained school professionals. It is critical that the notion of the full social service school move beyond glitzy discussions at national professional meetings to a model that is widely implemented. Absent a sea change in the daunting array of social problems facing young people today, tomorrow's learners must be provided with opportunities to experience education in a setting that attends, at once, to physical health, mental health, personal safety, and traditional learning needs."

"The middle class must be convinced that public schools are serving its children well. Over a decade of negative press regarding the quality of the nation's schools has begun to undermine the traditional confidence of the middle class in public education as the bridge to a "better life" for its daughters and sons. Unless this trend is reversed, broad-based political support for public education may erode . . . an eventuality certain to reduce funding levels and to result in poorer school quality than we have today. In time, the public schools could end up providing highly mediocre services to children of those families too poor to opt out of the public system. This would be a terrible blow for a system of public schools that, historically, has both educated large

numbers of people well and served as a useful "social glue" that has bonded Americans, regardless of social class, in a common set of shared experiences."

David G. Armstrong
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

"While there is much rote learning in schools throughout the world, in some countries I find great emphasis on problem solving, applications of principles, analytical skills, and creativity. Such higher mental processes are emphasized because it is believed that they enable students to relate their learning to the many problems encountered in day-to-day living. These abilities, which are retained and used long after the individual has forgotten the specifics of the subject-matter taught in the schools, are regarded as essential characteristics needed to continue learning and to cope with a rapidly changing world. Some also believe that higher mental processes are important because they make learning exciting.

In these countries, subjects are taught as methods of inquiry into the nature of science, mathematics, the arts, and the social sciences. These subjects are taught as much for the ways of thinking they represent as for their traditional content. Much of this learning makes use of observations, reflections on observations, experimentation with phenomena, and the use of firsthand data and daily experiences as well as primary printed sources. All of this is reflected in the materials of instruction, the learning and teaching processes used, the questions and problems used in quizzes, formative testing, and final summative evaluation.

In sharp contrast to these teaching methods, teachers in the U.S. use textbooks that rarely pose real problems. The textbooks emphasize specific content to be remembered, and give students little opportunity to discover underlying concepts and principles, and even less opportunity to attack real problems in their environment.

I believe that the higher mental processes should be taught as early as the first grade, where ideas can be related to day-to-day situations in the lives of the children. Even at that level, the higher mental processes can make learning exciting, constantly new, even playful."

Benjamin Bloom
The University of Chicago

Integrated Curriculum

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