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Thursday, March 13, 2008

Washington and Lee's new 3L year

The hot news in the legal blogosphere is that Washington and Lee is overhauling its third year: instead of academic courses, the entire thing will be experiential learning. This will, according to the WSJ Law Blog, include practicing keeping track of billing hours.

Let me first say congratulations to W&L for taking a big experimental step with their educational program -- it takes guts to implement something like this, and hopefully they display the same guts over the years to keep with it and really try to make it work.

That said, while the heart is in the right place on this, I'm not sure that it is going to work out for them. It strikes me that experiential learning should be incorporate all the way through. Two years of classroom instruction and then a year of, what, basically apprenticeship? All this really does is push what used to be the first year in private practice back into the law schools. That's fine, I guess, if you're trying to make the law firms happy, but in the end, you're still just throwing the students into the "actual practice" portion of things with no real preparation beforehand.

The approach I'd want to take would be more integrated. In the first year, you take Legal Research and Writing, where you're really learning the nuts and bolts of, well, legal research and writing. But that first year is also filled with the usual doctrinal classes, partially to learn doctrine, but more importantly, to learn the way lawyers talk and think about things, so that you can actually fill those lovely briefs you're learning about in LR&W with substantive, correct-sounding material. None of this is radical. In fact, none of this is a change at all from what's already done.

The key, I think, is in the later years, when there ought to be requirements that some not insubstantial portion of your credits should be of the clinical/internship/externship/etc., i.e. experiential, variety. Furthermore, upper-level classes should include semi-experiential components. That is, don't just teach for 40 hours and then make the students write an exam; instead have them file short memos on various topics throughout the semester. Don't just do your silly, unexamined version of Socratic teaching. Set up sessions where students make meaningful contributions, like through oral arguments or perhaps presentations of material.

This kind of system requires a couple of things: a willingness on the part of the professor to really engage in teaching (but see Jeff Harrison's blog on the unlikeliness that this will happen); and small classes. There were 121 people in my Evidence class. That doesn't excuse the multiple-choice exam at the end of the semester, but it does excuse not having 3-5 writing assignments throughout the semester. Regardless of your dedication to teaching, grading 600 assignments, even if you limit those to one page apiece, is a ton of work.

The fact that this model law school will require smaller classes will balance, from the law teacher's perspective, the fact that fewer doctrinal classes will be taught (because of the clinics/internships requirement). Thus the faculty size will likely need to remain about the same. What will not remain the same, however, is cost. Building clinical programs, i.e. offering free legal services, isn't cheap. It's a lot cheaper to lecture 120 students about Evidence than it is to pay court costs and things like that for indigent clients in all these new clinics that will be starting. Another issue is the big gap between (relatively) rural and urban law schools. Carbondale just doesn't have the number of people who need legal service as New York City. Of course, given the number of schools in New York, that doesn't address the right question -- the question is whether there are enough people in Carbondale who need Southern Illinois' legal services to justify opening three or four new clinics and expanding the already existing ones to accommodate the fact that now, every student will have to do n credits of that kind of work.

To reiterate, however: all of these difficulties will always exist for any law school that wants to update its curriculum to be more useful, to give students the kind of experiential learning opportunities that forward-thinking educators realize are necessary. Thus it is a real credit to W&L's faculty and administration that they are willing to step up and try to make something new work.

UPDATE: Here's the post about the topic at PrawfsBlawg.

UPDATE 2: Here's Law School Innovation's post.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education, Law, Law School at 12:36

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Friday, May 4, 2007

One size fits none

Secretary Spellings says that a one-size fits all standardized test isn't going to be developed for colleges. So why do we tolerate these things for lower schools, then?

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 15:13

Tuesday, October 31. 2006

The Columbia halo

Observation of the day: the area around Yeshiva University's Wilf Campus up here in northern Manhattan is basically a ghetto. Those people who know Washington Heights won't be surprised. Those people familiar with the area immediately surrounding Columbia University, however, might be: while Columbia is certainly in the heart of Harlem, there's this halo around it of shops and restaurants that would be completely out of place but for the university. Yeshiva has no such halo, which I found surprising.

Perhaps, though, it's actually Columbia that's the exception. Is there a halo around U.S.C.? Around U. Chicago?

That's just to name two schools that are notoriously in the midst of, essentially, ghettos. I'm sure there are more, but I'd be curious to find out whether they have the "Columbia halo."

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 21:26

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

A math problem

Somebody managed to get to this blog by using the following search: "juan gave two thirds of his baseball card collection to his best friend marcus. he gave one half of the cards he had left to his brother. finally he gave one half of the cards he had left to his sister. he had 25 cards left. how many cards did juan have originally in his collection?" First, that's pretty amazing. Second, let's figure this out, since I am, after all, a former high-school math teacher.

The easiest way is probably to work backwards. If he's got 25 now, and he gave half to his sister, he must have had $25 \times 2 = 50$ before he gave to his sister. And if he had 50 before he gave to his brother, he must have had $50 \times 2 = 100$ before he gave to his brother. And if he had 100 after he gave $\frac{2}{3}$ to Marcus, then he must have had $100 \times \frac{3}{2} = 300/2 = 150$ before he gave to Marcus.

So to check: $150 \times \frac{2}{3} = 300 / 3 = 100 \times \frac{1}{2} = 50 \times \frac{1}{2} = 25$, as he's supposed to have. So he had 150 when he started.

EDIT: I'm stupid. If Juan gave $\frac{2}{3}$ of his collection to Marcus, then he retained $\frac{1}{3}$. Thus if he had 100 after giving $\frac{2}{3}$ to Marcus, he actually had $100 \times 3 = 300$ before giving to Marcus. Thus the correct answer is 300, and I'm an idiot. Thanks to the rather charitable commenter who pointed this mistake out.

Technorati: Math, Word problems, Baseball cards.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 10:14

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Tuesday, February 28, 2006

Cracking that marrow

For those of you interested in my experiences as a teacher in a Bronx public high school, here's an Onion story about Teach for America that's highly amusing.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 07:04

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Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Merit slush funds for teachers

A guest-blogger at Eduwonk wonders whether there are other things to offer "meritorious teachers" instead of just pay increases, and suggests a sort of "slush fund" reward that would give teachers money to spend on their classrooms.

I'm not sure how serious (s)he is being, but the idea that meritorious teachers should get money to improve their classrooms and their schools (like the idea of teachers banding together to hire a social worker) and "bad" teachers shouldn't is ridiculous. Utterly insane. What kind of logic is it that sends the scarce resources a system has to the places where they're least needed?

Merit pay is a bad idea on its own, simply because the idea of rewarding teachers for test scores is a horrible one. I've said it before and I'll say it again: these little incremental fixes (like merit pay, or smaller schools, or buses to the suburbs) people keep wanting to implement aren't going to get the job done. Education needs to be completely re-imagined and have its purposes re-investigated before anything's ever going to get fixed.

As long as we're focused on the idea that a student's vocabulary quiz is all that matters, education isn't going to work all that well.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 16:55

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Thursday, September 29, 2005

Sharpton with the UFT

Al Sharpton showed up at a meeting earlier today to show his support for the teachers in their battle with the city for a contract (since it appears more and more that Bloomberg's earlier "imminent" talk was the usual political rhetoric). A choice quote: "I came (here) today to make it clear to this mayor and this chancellor that if we have to strike this year, the communities of color and the teachers will be together to get what is right in the city of New York." And another: "Let the teachers teach in freedom schools, in churches if it comes to that. This is no bluff." (The quotes come from an e-mail from the UFT and will likely show up in newspapers and such tomorrow.)

The question is how seriously the idea of "freedom schools" can be taken and, more importantly, whether Sharpton really does speak for the "communities of color." He certainly has considerable power within the African American community, which is a large part of the city (26.6% of the population, by 2000 census), but what about the huge number of Latinos? Asians? Everyone else? Does the average (say) Iranian family listen to Al Sharpton? Dominican? Korean?

I guess the idea is that Sharpton is hooked in with the leaders of those smaller communities, and that those leaders speak to the members of those communities more directly than he does, but that he still can claim their support. Just as with Bloomberg's intimations of a contract coming soon, though, these are just words until proven otherwise.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Education at 21:05

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Friday, July 15, 2005

Law blog

I've joined the blog of my Hampshire friend Brady, Non Compos Mentis. We're both going to law school in the fall, so the idea is to compare and contrast our experiences on the blog. Check it out!

Posted by jason in Education, Personal, The Blog at 14:38

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Thursday, June 30, 2005

Neat newspaper site

Courtesy of Chris Lehmann's blog, here's a really neat site that shows the current front page of newspapers all over the world. Awesome!

Posted by jason in [Computer](#), [Education](#), [News](#), [Reading](#) at 14:37

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Thursday, March 3, 2005

More education (sorry, baseball fans)

My old friend Julio posted a comment to my last entry. I responded to part of it there, but I thought I'd put some thoughts and responses up on the main section here, as well, for those who don't descend to comment-land.

First, One of the key issues in education today that has been put on the back burner, is tracking. Many of the issues we see in high schools today is students that have been tracked at early grade levels and are left with a lack of motivation to excel, since in their minds they are "stuck" taking certain courses. There are definitely issues with tracking that I see within my school. As I mentioned, due to tracking on a macro (city-wide) level, we don't have that many strong kids in the first place, and now the strong ones we do have are being placed in different classes from the other ones.

I happen to have drawn one of the weakest ninth grade classes this year (I think; it's not really official). However, since it was apparently based only on reading level, I do have some kids whose mathematics ability is quite good. That said, it's an incredibly tough class to manage because many of them gave up on school and being able to do well a long time ago, just as Julio mentions. The kids in there who are failing run the gamut: there's the thug archetype; the immature kids who, less than not caring, just don't yet realize the importance of school; the socially-awkward kids who are trying to gain acceptance and neglecting work in the process; and then there are the kids who don't really fit any of these but just don't have the mathematical ability to succeed in high school.

With few real peer role models in class, there's nothing really driving these kids toward any level of success.

Now, I do believe in the necessity of tracking to some degree. Having every kid in a high school in the same math class isn't good for the kids who want to be doing calculus while their peers are still struggling to master geometry. In addition, it's tough on teachers, not just to try to create lessons that meet the variety of needs their kids have, but also, as I alluded to before, in management. When kids are bored, they become problems. When you add problems to a class that already has kids who would be problems in almost any setting, it's a recipe for disaster.

That said, there's a difference between leveling and tracking. When you track somebody, they can never get off that track. When you put them in rooms that are a little bit level-homogenous and give them the opportunity to work to the next level, that's not so onerous. Sure, you lose the benefits that heterogenous classes provide (the aforementioned peer role models, for example), but it allows teachers to not have to worry about meeting five or six different levels of need within one class.

This sounds like common sense, but there are plenty of places where being in a certain science or math or English class in the freshman year dooms the student to never be able to get to Advanced Placement or honors classes later on. Some children bloom late and tracking does that group a great disservice.

Julio also mentions What educators both in K-12 and higher education are faced with today is standards-based education, one of the most controversial methods to educate youth. Adding to the pot, the fact that schools are struggling financially, doesn't make the situation any better. Now, I hadn't ever thought about strict standards causing issues in higher education the way they do in K-12, but, as I consider my teacher education program at Lehman College, I realize that Julio is, of course, dead on. My current education class (essentially a teaching methods course for 11th-12th grade math) revolves around the graphing calculator and how to teach pre-calculus and calculus using it. On the first day of class, the professor explained the evolution of the course: it had formerly been a simple methods class, not necessarily focusing on technology more than any other class. Lehman, however, wants to have and maintain NCATE accreditation because it supposedly indicates that "the Unit's Programs in Teacher Education meet the highest national standards." In order to get this accreditation, Lehman needed to institute a greater focus on technology, so they re-arranged how this course was taught to satisfy the accreditation group.

That Lehman is forced to use technology in its classrooms is not a bad thing, of course. The problem is that the school has to follow what appear to be rather rigid rules (another example is that the syllabi in every one of my education classes has looked exactly the same) and structure its program precisely as NCATE tells it to. There's great potential here for stifling of creativity, which is precisely the same problem we find in the K-12 public schools. It's hard to come up with new, creative ways to teach when you are being told exactly the model of instruction to use, exactly the timing the various components of your lesson must use, and so on. (Thankfully, my school backs off of us a lot; we're still teaching the same curriculum as everyone else in the city, and on the same pace, but the infamous Workshop Model is great

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de-emphasized in favor of finding whatever method or methods work best in any given lesson or unit. There are other schools in my building where the teachers are not so lucky to be able to develop their own methods, though.)

If innovation and creativity can't be used in the classroom, whether at the K-12 or higher-ed level, the country's education system is going to fall into greater disarray than ever. There can't be a lack of oversight, of course, and teachers have to be held accountable (though not in the usual way, by examining the test scores of their students), but let's bring this back to baseball. A general manager often has great say over what goes on in his organization. He doesn't control the budget, but he controls almost everything else. He is, like Billy Beane, like Branch Rickey, allowed to innovate in order to make his team better. If his innovations just end up being wheels spun uselessly, he loses his job. If his innovations work, or if he is able to realize when things aren't working and fix them, he keeps his job.

If I'm the general manager of my classrooms, then I'm essentially Brian Cashman, of the Yankees, at this point. Cashman is, it seems, a GM in name only. George Steinbrenner seems to be calling a lot of the shots. When he wants a big-name pitcher, regardless of the cost, Cashman has to get it done. When someone on high decides that I'm supposed to teach the slope-intercept form of a line to kids who still count on their fingers, I have to get it done.

Posted by jason in Education at 15:56

Sunday, February 27, 2005

A rare education post

This is about the nation's high schools being broken and not challenging enough. As someone who's teaching high school, though, I'm going to pass the buck. Instead of all the focus on what we're not teaching high school kids, how about some focus on what they're learning in middle and elementary school to prepare them for high school? High school can't prepare kids for college if those kids don't have the proper foundation when they get to high school.

Now, I come from a very particular background on this: the kids in my school are unselected, in a sense. Had they done better in middle school, they might have gotten in to high schools with tougher admissions requirements. That's not to say that we don't have smart kids, because we do have some students who should go on and be very successful in college and life beyond that. What we don't have is enough of those kids, and what the city doesn't have is enough of those kids.

I think Bill Gates is right about something: the system might need to be torn down and rebuilt from the beginning. My professor this summer was adamant, and somewhat convincing, in his belief that the nation's mandatory education system grew out of a need to keep kids out of the labor force, for economic reasons. This meant that schools were essentially babysitters, time-occupiers to keep kids doing something semi-productive while the parents were free to have jobs. Supposing this is true, perhaps the way school works ought to be re-thought from the perspective that everybody actually needs an education. Even supposing it isn't true, if our schools aren't working, we can't be afraid of radical change.

What kind of radical change? Look around at various alternative schools in the country: small classes with mixed ages; curricula driven by skills and abilities, rather than by rote knowledge; less textbooks, more hands-on work; more art and music, particularly with respect to appreciation of those subjects; cross- or inter-disciplinary work; meaningful, real-world questions and problems in classes, rather than knowledge-based exercises and ridiculous hypotheticals; etc.

Some of these ideas are slowly gaining traction in the mainstream educational world (though they're often poorly implemented because they try to compromise with the old ideals rather than realizing that the old ideals ought to be completely replaced), but not enough of them and not quickly enough.

My path from traditional public-school student to non-traditional private college student to traditional public-school teacher has disillusioned me in some ways about the educational system, but I do have some hope. I do think things can be changed. They can't be changed effectively from the front lines, the teachers, not with the top-down systems being implemented, but there are places where change can be effected.

Posted by jason in Education at 18:58

Tuesday, April 13, 2004

Tracking

Chris Lehmann asks the questions I've been agonizing over myself for quite some time. Namely, how good or evil is tracking kids into different levels in high school classes?

The progressive education ideal, that Chris seems to believe in, and I think I do to, is that tracking is not such a hot idea. The basic criticism is that it hurts the kids tracked low more than it helps the kids tracked high, and I think I agree with that to a certain degree.

In my own personal case, teaching in my current school, it's not even an issue, though. The kids are already tracked, just by being placed in this high school. New York's public school system is tiered into an incredible number of levels. I couldn't even begin to know how many, really. There's the standard top of the list, Stuyvesant and its sister schools. After that, things get hazy. There are alternative schools, charter schools, and schools with varying levels of ability to choose their students.

That last link is to my school, which is certainly going to be near the bottom of any hierarchical list of schools kids might want to go to in the city. It's a mini-school, which has plenty of advantages, but it's not like there's a lot of choice in that regard for kids in my region: all of the big high schools are breaking down into small ones. The kids we get are the ones books about urban education are written about: they read and do math at 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade levels; English is a struggle; they have difficult home situations. And what do they get for their struggles? A school full of Teaching Fellows, people who've never taught a day in their lives and have no education experience, when what they need are the best teachers, the ones with experience and confidence in methods that work, whether traditionally progressive or not. (NB: I'm a Fellow myself, so don't take this as me bashing the program or the members of it.)

In what I'd consider a "normal" school (one that has kids of all ability and performance levels, not just the kids who can't get into the good schools), even if there were tracking, there would be peer role models in the school. No, they wouldn't be in classes together, and that's a problem, but schools like mine and many others don't even have the option of tracking. We have heterogenous populations in our classrooms, but it doesn't mean anything, because they're all struggling.

This isn't literally true, because I have some kids who, comparatively, are very good at math, and learn quickly. But those kids and the kids who aren't as good as them know the reality of the situation just as well as the teachers do: the smart kids in this school would be only a little above average in a truly heterogenous (with regard to NYC's entire population) school. That has to be depressing to them, and you'd think they last thing the school system would want to foist on these kids is another reason to be depressed. They know the realities of where the housing projects where they live. They've seen how few of the people around them have moved up in the world or "gotten out of the ghetto," to use the old movie cliché. That school is just a continuation of the life around them, rather than an escape from it, might be the biggest problem urban schools face.

Posted by jason in Education at 11:27

Friday, April 9, 2004

Where's the time?

Chris Lehmann asks how teachers can make a little life for themselves. It's a question I haven't adequately answered for myself, either. I can't remember the last time I finished a book (though that's more due to reading way too many magazines than anything else), I rarely get the chance to blog as often as I like (it being spring break makes this week the exception), and so on.

I can force myself to chill out at home, instead of spending time on school stuff, but then I get behind on school stuff, or I do a sloppier job with it. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad if I actually liked the work, if I was truly enjoying my teaching. I can't honestly say that I am, though, so the time spent feels like a waste. On the other hand, time spent not doing teacher stuff makes me feel guilty for slacking off.

One of the problems is that I can't know whether my current situation, with a tough, new school, grad school on top of that, and this being my first year, is what's making things so hard, or whether it's teaching in general that I don't really like. I don't want to spend five years to find out, either.

And of course, this post ends on a far different note than it started.

Posted by jason in Education at 13:08

Wednesday, February 18, 2004

Affirmative Action in Rhode Island

The New York Times has this cute article about a College Republicans group that's stirring up controversy by offering a "white heritage" scholarship.

The group's founder says he created the scholarship (which has, not surprisingly, since received interest and money from around the country) as a critique of scholarships for minorities (usually specific minorities) only.

My first, and the obvious, response was that the sheltered white kid needed a lesson, as I received when I went to college, in the realities of American education for non-whites. A less reactionary reaction: to be a conservative on most college campuses these days is to be pretty brave. I had a little experience with seeing conservative groups start springing up at Hampshire toward the end of my time there, so I'm a bit sympathetic toward people who want to step out and create some debate rather than just quietly ignore the jackbooted liberalism that permeates academia. You have to applaud the student, then, for being a leader, for espousing his views, in spite of popular criticism.

Then I reached the final lines:

On campus, some of Mr. Mattera's critics have pointed out that he received a \$5,000 Sallie Mae Fund scholarship for Hispanic students.

"You should practice what you preach," said Maria Ahmed, 20, president of the university's Multicultural Student Union.

You can't really blame the kid for taking money when someone offered, I guess, but it does smack of hypocrisy. If he really is against affirmative action, and doesn't believe that minorities need an extra push here and there to reach a more equitable place in society, then wouldn't he have to take a moral stand against that scholarship?

The writer, Elissa Gootman, doesn't say whether she asked Mattera about this scholarship. Leaving the article at the end there with that little statement feels kind of sloppy. Did she ask Mattera about the money? What did he say? Did he refuse to comment?

We're left in a situation where all we can do is speculate. Perhaps he's only recently come to the conclusion that affirmative action is wrong, and he accepted the scholarship before a moral stand ever entered his mind. Or perhaps it's juicier. Maybe he really did accept the money while at the same time, in his own head at least, decrying the institutions that allowed him to receive the money in the first place. Maybe that's why we're left hanging at the end. Did Gootman's editor decide that (s)he didn't want the piece to turn into a huge trashing of Mattera, and thus cut the juicy interview material to keep the article relatively civil?

Or maybe the New York Times writers and editors get sloppy just like everyone else does.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:21

Wednesday, January 28, 2004

Portfolios and passing -- A study in stupidity

From almost a week ago, in the Times, comes the story that some schools that were allowed to keep their "portfolio requirements" are now, because of a technicality, being rated as "failing schools" under the current accountability laws.

It's really just another example of the ridiculous state of education today. Paul Krugman recently referred to Bush's No Child Left Behind laws as a "sick joke." One of the things that interested me about the article was that the whole mess began because the schools wanted to keep their portfolio assessment methods of determining who graduates rather than submit to state testing. Unfortunately, the state declined to permit this, and the mess described in the article occurred.

I'd love to implement portfolio-type assessment in my classes. The problem is that it's essentially impossible given the nature of the curriculum that has to be taught, the pace it must be taught at, and the apparent philosophies of the administration. If I could teach these kids at the pace they need to be taught at and teach them the material they need to be taught (i.e. addition and multiplication for the finger counters instead of how to graph parabolas), then maybe it could happen.

These are the reasons I consider law school more strongly every day.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:18

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Thursday, August 14, 2003

Affirmative action

Amitai Etzioni has this note about where students at America's most selective colleges come from, in terms of socioeconomic levels of their families.

I don't want to be represented as anti-black or anti-Latino or anything, but Etzioni makes a good point: these schools are not making the effort to help break the cycle of poverty. If they make affirmative-action-style decisions based on socioeconomic level rather than ethnicity, the (sad) fact is that they'll get more ethnic diversity as a side effect.

Of course, it can't lie entirely with the universities, either. Large portions of the poor populations of this country are simply not prepared to go to college. To ask Harvard to admit some kid because (s)he is poor isn't really fair to Harvard if that kid has had a typical crappy public school experience. (S)He probably doesn't know how to write very well, is way behind in math, has no study skills, and so on. Why? Because their parents couldn't afford private schools and tutors and living in nice suburban neighborhoods where the schools are just as good as private schools.

On the other hand, there are kids who can succeed in college but aren't getting noticed by the Yales of the world because of how much money they have and what schools they go to. Admissions officials at the selective schools don't visit poor schools, and you can't really blame them: they can't waste time and money when they might find one kid who they could bring into their school. Compare that to visiting Exeter, where their job is not to find kids who can go to Yale, but to convince kids that Yale is the place for them.

Even if a kid gets through all the hurdles of growing up poor and decides to apply to Yale, they're at a disadvantage for a couple reasons: first, their test scores probably aren't as high as applicants who have the same true qualifications but more money; second, a nice GPA at some school the admissions office has never heard of doesn't impress as much as a nice GPA at Andover; third, extracurriculars are harder to come by when you go to the kinds of schools that are common in the Bronx. The schools don't have the money to fund as many sports and clubs, and even if they did, many of these kids can't stick around after school: they have to go home and take care of younger siblings or other family members because their parent works and they can't afford day-care.

I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how to fix it. More money is necessary, because the facilities at many schools are simply unacceptable. More caring on the part of society at large is necessary, because otherwise the money either won't be there or will go to waste. More commitment to actually making a difference in the country by the big-time schools is necessary, because the Ivies sitting back on their laurels and taking kids from Andover and sending them on to businesses to follow their daddies isn't going to change anything.

Maybe these schools should be forced to take kids who aren't as prepared as their richer competitors. After all, if you want to justifiably wear the crown that says, "#1 School" on it, you've got to earn it by actually proving that you can educate anyone who walks through your doors, not by taking the same old kids and teaching them the same old ways and then quoting how much money they make through the old boys network.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:19

Thursday, August 7, 2003

The fight over the new curriculum

There's a lot to talk about in this article in the New York Times about the implementation of the new literacy curriculum in the city (called Ramp Up to Literacy).

First, there's the issue of older teachers resisting the curriculum. Really, it's the same old story, and I've experienced a little bit of it myself. The teachers who've been around forever, regardless of whether they're effective teachers or not, think that their way is the only way, and resist change, particularly when that change promotes "liberal" educational ideals like constructivism or democratic classroom management.

"Some older teachers were constantly raising their hands," said one newly hired English teacher, "arguing about policies of the Department of Education, attacking the trainers."

In the one training I've been to so far, I saw some of this. A teacher sitting next to me complained about how we were going to teach this curriculum when kids couldn't even add, or multiply, or whatever. A teacher on the other side challenged the presenter, asking what her experience in schools was. Their basic problem with her, as far as I could tell, was that she was being positive. She was essentially saying, "If you go through this program and help kids succeed in it, they will do well," while the older teachers had a lot harder time being positive.

I shouldn't be too hard on older teachers, because they've seen a lot. They've got good reasons for being burnt out. At the same time, if they're burnt out to the point where they're not helping the kids anymore, they have to go. Yes, we have a teacher shortage, but more important than that, we have a good-teacher shortage.

Backing off a little, I don't necessarily think that kicking teachers out is the best answer. New York has implemented a sabbatical program, but teachers can only get a year once they've been in for ten years. Ten years is a long time, particularly in schools in the Bronx, or in parts of Brooklyn or Queens. Huge percentages of teachers burn out after just a couple years. Does that mean teachers should be eligible for sabbatical after just two years? No, I don't think so. But how about five, instead of ten? I think sabbatical is set up as a reward system: "Teach ten years and you get a year off!" when the whole point is supposed to be that you get to basically recuperate and refresh yourself and come back raring to go.

As I alluded to above, New York City teachers seem to get offended when people from Rhode Island and Kentucky come in and try to tell them that certain things will work with their students because they did in Rhode Island.

The old teachers have a point: the following quote illustrates that point very well:

One instructor, Zinovia Canale, an English teacher in Newport, R.I., admitted that she knew little about the New York City schools. Nevertheless, she expressed confidence that the Ramp Up program would work in New York. "I know very little about the structure here," Ms. Canale said. "But I do believe that the kids are the same. There are just more of them here than in Rhode Island."

Canale and people like her are clueless.

First, that she knows "little about the New York City schools" is ridiculous. How can a program hire people to implement their curriculum who don't know anything about where it is being implemented? Shouldn't they at least make the teachers study the structure of the schools, study the demographics of the student population, things like that? To claim that the kids in Newport, Rhode Island are the same as the kids here in New York is patently ridiculous.

From the fairly awesome U.S. Census site come a few statistics about Newport County:

Black / African-American percentage 3.7% Hispanic / Latino origin 2.8% Foreign-born persons 4.9% Language other than English spoken at home 8.6% Median household income \$50,448

I won't even quote the percentages for the first four categories for the Bronx. You know and I know it's not even close. How about that last category? What's the median household income for Bronx County? \$27,611. A little over half of Newport's. So what's the point? The point is that, despite what Canale says above, the kids in these two locations are

emphatically not the same.

Unfortunately, I don't know enough about Ramp Up to talk about the educational philosophy behind it. I will give the creators of the program the benefit of the doubt, though, and say that they probably tried to create a curriculum that in its skeleton form would work for everyone, regardless of race, class, or location. The question is how strict or how skeletal the curriculum they've laid out is. If it's as strict as the summer-school program I saw, then NYC schools could be in trouble. Curriculum planners have to give teachers leeway, especially when those planners are in Rhode Island and the next group of teachers is in the Bronx. If the program is as skeletal as I hope it is, though, and basically says, "Here are the kinds of things we think need to happen, but you figure out the best way to make them happen," then I think we'll be in a lot better shape.

The final issue is of the ridiculous rush the Department of Education is putting on to get these trainings to take place. Things are extremely disorganized, as usual, and teachers and principals are finding out at the last moment when they'll have to go to training, where it'll be, etc. Wrong information is being handed out, and all the other shenanigans that usually happen in the DoE/BoE are happening again. I was told to expect this, and so I do. Before I became a teacher, though, I had no idea that things were this bad on an organizational level. The more the public finds out about these things (i.e. the more these kinds of stories are written in big newspapers), the more pressure there might be to clean things up.

Klein and Bloomberg have tried to do that with their streamlining of the system or whatever they did this summer, and it's hard to judge the results already, especially since that reorganization causes problems all its own, which just escalate, but one has to wonder whether any change is really going to be effected. I'm a little pessimistic about that, but I certainly don't know what to do to fix it. Maybe instead of hiring lawyers and educators to run the school system, we should be hiring CEO's.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:16

Special education fight in the City

The New York Times has this article about Eva Moskowitz, the New York City Council's Education Committee chairwoman, saying that the reforms to special education as part of the educational system overhaul are too extreme.

The idea of the reforms is to put more of the emphasis in the schools, rather than at district offices, and that is no different on the special education side of things. Moskowitz says, however, that too few principals have enough special education experience to be fairly held so accountable for their programs. She also notes that, while in theory, the principals would have assistant principals that would focus on special education, the reality is that there is not enough money to do this.

Personally, I could go back and forth on this. I think it is important to let the people on the front lines make as many decisions as possible, and thus be held as accountable as possible. On the other hand, as Moskowitz says, those front line people often don't have the necessary training, and there isn't enough money to hire lots and lots of new administrators who all do have the training. I think I'm ever so slightly inclined to agree with Moskowitz in this case, that perhaps Joel Klein and Mike Bloomberg were a little hasty in their restructuring.

However, Moskowitz then said something I disagree with:

Ms. Moskowitz said that special needs students should be identified as early as possible. "I believe that we should be identifying children at the age of 3," she said. "We can't wait till the fourth-grade test to find out that children can't read."

While it's true that we can't wait until fourth grade to find out a kid can't read, to be testing and trying to identify kids at three years old seems premature. We have far too many diagnoses of ADD/ADHD and other disabilities as it is; I wouldn't want to see what would happen to the special education roll-call if we started adding kids to the list who tested into the program at three.

If nothing else, it smacks of tracking, which, while we do it in the United States, we don't do it as extremely as it's done in much of the rest of the world, where it's essentially decided what kind of job you'll be getting to work in, or even before, high school. I'd rather not push what tracking we do have even further down the line, deciding that this three year old can go to college in the future, while that one is going to have to be a typist at best.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:14

Thursday, July 31, 2003

I'm embarrassed

I'm embarrassed that I use a text editor that carries the same name as Florida's governor. That's a messed up state. I'm still unclear on exactly what New York's promotion policies are, but I hope they're not as extreme as Florida's. I fear they might.

The basic idea is that Florida uses standardized testing as the only measure of whether a student should be promoted. Now, suppose I agree with the tests, and suppose I say that they are good measures of students' abilities and that they shouldn't move on unless they can do well on them. Even if I believed that, this law would be ludicrous, because students have to score in the 51st percentile or better to be promoted.

Yes, you read that right. Students now have to be above average just to be deemed good enough to move on. What kind of sense does that make? Gregg Easterbrook is a fan of pointing out grade inflation at well known colleges (Harvard, I'm looking at you), noting that these are places where everyone is above average (which, if we're looking at the nation, then sure, but how can everyone be above average when compared to their peers [other Harvard students]?). Well, Florida now requires that everyone be above average. There's some faulty math going on.

One interesting quote:

In Florida's push to get every child reading by third grade, politicians have ignored the scientific studies on retention, which overwhelmingly conclude that students held back suffer academically, dropping out at a higher rate.

I will presume that these studies tried to eliminate the bias inherent in this kind of study, namely that students who are held back for academic reasons are precisely the type who might drop out anyway, regardless of whether they're held back or not. Some children just aren't very bright, and some children are sabotaged by poor parenting and poor early education. Does repeating the sixth grade make a difference in whether those children finish school or not? It makes sense that it would, but I wonder how you eliminate that variable. I guess by just comparing students with similar performance where some were held back and others were not. But that begs the question of why the latter group was not held back. Perhaps they were promoted for the same reasons that they eventually pushed on and graduated, whatever those reasons happened to be.

I'm not disbelieving, per se, so much as I am expressing curiosity about the evidence these papers the article refers to present.

Posted by jason in Education at 00:12