

“Race to the Top” – or “Something Closer to the Heart”?

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I was inspired by Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency. When I read *The Audacity of Hope*, I was convinced that he was a genuine visionary, one who might lead us beyond the stale ideologies of our time. I thought my colleagues in the Vermont independence movement were a little too cynical to dismiss him as yet another, more slickly packaged, builder of empire. Sadly, except for a few history-jarring moments, such as his speech in Cairo, I’m coming to believe that their cynicism is justified. Nothing has driven this home to me more than the imperial educational policy that he and his technocrat Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, have unleashed on American youth. They call it “Race to the Top.”

The damage this approach will do to genuine learning and children’s lives is contained in its very name. To conceive education as a “race”—a competition forcing schools, teachers, and students to contend for some sort of victory—is to poison the inherent human striving for understanding and meaning. Defined as a competitive race, education is not a collaborative art of mentoring and nurturing the young, but a frenzied scramble to succeed according to some external measure of success—to reach some goal line established by those in authority. While “No Child Left Behind” was a dishonest, deceptive term for a similarly draconian policy, at least we can embrace its literal meaning, which is the polar opposite of “Race to the Top,” as the goal of a truly decent and democratic education.

“Race to the Top” essentially consists of the federal government dangling \$4 billion in front of the states and awarding it to those that conform to national curriculum standards and link teacher pay to student achievement as indicated by standardized test scores. States are expected to promote charter schools as well (semi-autonomous, publicly funded experiments, which Vermont does not yet have), but these too will be assessed according to quantitative measures. The fundamental problem with all this is the abstract, clinically objective, and externally imposed definition of good education at the root of the policy. Teachers and schools are considered to be successful if students score well on tests. Period. The actual quality of their knowledge and understanding, and the moral, emotional, and cultural meanings of what young people experience in schools, are irrelevant and disregarded. Education is defined as mechanical academic performance, diminishing the possibility of providing a meaningful journey toward ethical maturity and democratic citizenship.

President Obama, like his disreputable predecessor, justifies the national takeover of schooling by asserting that educational success will enable young people to survive in a competitive global economy. High standards qualify students for rewarding jobs. This argument exploits—indeed, deepens—every parent’s anxiety about their children’s livelihoods, and our society’s (spotty) commitment to equality of opportunity. Without

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standards, it is claimed, young people will struggle in life, and the poor and marginalized will struggle the most. Surely we don't want that. But we need to deconstruct this argument. We need to ask, as Wendell Berry once did, *what are people for?*, and the question that should follow from it: *what are schools for?* Standardization endorses the ruthlessness and rootlessness of the global corporate system, and insists that young people dutifully play their roles as producers and consumers to keep the system functioning. Standardization rewards robotic learning, not creativity or imagination or critical thinking or self-awareness or moral judgment or compassion or wisdom or loyalty to community or place. Is this what people, and education, are for—to run an endless race to survive in a global corporate game that, by the way, is inherently rigged to favor the wealthy and powerful elites who control it?

There is a fundamentally different way to define education, success, and the purpose of a life well-lived. As Berry and many others have described it, it is the way of authentic human encounter, collaboration, and fellowship, not the way of empire. It is the way of community, stewardship of place, and human scale. It is the way of decentralized power and authority, of partnership, not domination. In recent decades, in response to an increasingly technocratic and authoritarian system of schooling, many thousands of educators and parents have sought to practice this understanding by starting alternative schools or turning to homeschooling. Young people thrive in these learning environments, and come out brimming with self-confidence, multiple competencies, and a strong sense of purpose. They consistently prove that abstract, rigidly imposed standards are not necessary for equipping youth with essential life skills.

A few years ago, an idealistic teacher named Tal Birdsey started such a school for young adolescents in Ripton, Vermont, called North Branch School. He tells its story, with delightful wit and penetrating insight, in his inspiring new book *A Room for Learning*. We see how an authentic teacher builds a caring, loving community of learners. Every page, every incident and observation Birdsey relates, is a gentle but firm repudiation of technocratic schooling. “The first parents gravitated to the school,” he tells us, because

something entirely different could be made. . . [C]urrent political debates about accountability or state funding fell far short of meaningful discourse about the education of children. These parents, no matter their income, education, or political views, were seeking education that involved something closer to the heart. In particular, they seemed to want something more creative and free. . . in contradistinction to schools tethered to right, standards-based approaches or school officials bombarded with federal mandates to test (pp. 31-2).

A Room for Learning shows exactly what “something closer to the heart” looks like in education. Birdsey sees each of his students as whole persons, with their own challenges, inclinations, learning styles, quirks and insecurities. Most of them have been “wounded by school” (as Kirsten Olson systematically documents in her recent book by that title); they are afraid of ridicule and rejection, suspicious of adults who judge them

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and peers who band together in cliques to exercise power. They are reluctant to open themselves to others, to test their own limits or pursue their deepest dreams. Birdsey tells how he created a safe, nurturing space in which these young teens could find and test their best, authentic selves. “I asked them to embrace the personal pronoun *I* so that we might come closer to what was sacred inside of them. Those truths—*their* truths—would bring us closer to what mattered” (p. 59). Ultimately, what really matters to Birdsey and his students is a community where everyone feels cared for, a community rooted in love. *This*, not triumph in the corporate race, is what people are for.

Educational policies based on standardization, authoritarian control, and competition for abstract goals only support the continuation of empire. People don’t much matter—systems do. Education dictated by corporate and political elites is oblivious to the lived reality of children and youths struggling to define themselves and find their place in the world. “Race to the Top,” like “No Child Left Behind,” and every other federal educational mandate, imposes a brutal efficiency on schooling that has no place for visionary educators, like Birdsey, who honor the essential personhood of their students.

One vital goal of Vermont independence is an educational culture that respects and encourages learning on a human scale, that supports caring and loving communities of learning. National educational policy is one more reason why we need to challenge the burgeoning power of the American empire. Because Vermonters value genuine democracy, treasure individuality, and hold as precious the local land and community, we ought to decline the federal government’s inducements to participate in any “race to the top.”

References

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Also visit www.northbranchschool.org .