

Putting Our Kids First: Reform and Choice in Education

On March 13, 1997, Dr. Howard Fuller, Director of Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning and former Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, addressed a Pioneer Institute Forum about the need for urban school reform. In particular, he spoke of the need for parents to have a greater voice in where and how their children are educated. He pointed to alternatives such as vouchers and charter schools as a means of giving power to poor children and their parents.

I take my philosophy of education from Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, who comments that there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education functions either as an instrument used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, and bring conformity to it, or as an instrument for the practice of freedom: the means by which men and women learn to deal critically and creatively with reality to participate in the transformation of their world. I believe education should be about the latter. The mission of schooling is not simply to prepare people for a job. When I was superintendent of the Milwaukee schools, people often asked me, "What is it that you want for your kids?" I considered all 100,000 of them to be "my kids," and I wanted four very simple things for them.

First, I wanted all of them who planned to go into a post secondary experience, be that a four-year college or a two-year college or whatever it was, to be able to do so without spending their first year in remedial education.

Second, I wanted those young people who went directly into the workplace to have the skills and attitudes necessary to get at least an entry level job that provided a pathway to a living wage for themselves and their families. I understood and believed that irrespective of which direction they chose, they needed the same rigorous preparation.

Third, I wanted a significant number of our kids, if not all of them, to have an entrepreneurial spirit. I wanted them to move away from the idea that when you graduate, you have to look for someone who will provide you with a job. We need to develop an attitude that says, "Some of you are going to have to go out and create jobs, create wealth."

Fourth, I wanted my kids to engage in the practice of freedom. If we are going to prepare children to engage in this practice of freedom, we must fundamentally and radically change the way that we approach learning.

Our educational systems are essentially set up to meet the needs and protect the interests of those of us who work in the systems, not the needs and interests of the children and families we are supposed to serve. For the sake of our children, we must change. Change is an ever present reality, but many of us resist it. Or we support change as long as it does not affect us. But if we agree that we need school reform, there are some fundamental alterations of our practices, policies and procedures that will have to happen. Simply tinkering around at the edges will never make change happen.

This change is difficult. It is gut wrenching. But it has to happen. Our kids need more than reform, they need and deserve a revolution. They need a radical transformation in our thinking and our practice. As we look to the 21st century, we have to develop ways that our kids can, as Lewis Perelman stated in his book *School's Out*, "learn anything, anytime, anyplace.": Our curriculum, our funding mechanisms, our teaching and learning processes, and our structures must prepare kids for that type of future.

A significant paradigm shift is critical if we are to move out of this industrial age model to confront the knowledge and learning age. What is necessary to make possible this transformation of learning? First, we need to quit talking about school systems, and talk about systems of learning opportunities. I envision home schools, public/private partnerships, charter schools, innovative schools from within the existing system, cyber schools, multi-site learning environments. We have to explode the existing paradigms. We have to understand that the boundaries we have set up for where and how learning takes place no longer operate in the modern world.

No matter what the learning environments are, there are some core issues that are important. Let me first deal with the question of expectations. We must have the highest expectations for all of our children. Kids will not reach for the sky if we point to the ground. In talking about expectations, we have to confront the issues of race and class. There are those amongst us who take the view that if kids are poor or non-white,

there is only so much that can be expected of them. People who believe this are fundamentally supporting a view that does not accept the possibility of our poorest children achieving greatness.

In America today, it does make a difference what your color is, what your gender is, and what your relative level of economic independence is. If you are poor in America, it is a harder road than if you have money. If you are black in America, or Hispanic in America, it does make a difference. Should that be used as an excuse not to excel? No. To get where we need to be, however, we need to recognize the role race plays in our expectations for kids.

Second, we need to be sure that the people teaching our children love and respect them. A book called *Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson talks about the fable of the frog and the princess. Everyone knows the fable of how the princess kisses the frog, and turns the frog into a prince. It is about the role of love in creating the conditions for transformation. Williamson's argument is that if you do not love people, you cannot understand them. If you cannot understand them, you cannot reach them. And if you cannot reach them, there is no way that you can teach them. People who do not care deeply about our children and respect where they come from have no business teaching them. Love allows you to correct kids when they are speaking English incorrectly. Love allows you to say, "I am not accepting mediocrity." Love allows you to demand that they do their work, and not to pass them if they do not.

Third, every one of our kids ought to be exposed to a rigorous curriculum. A lot of educators today know that they are supposed to genuflect at the altar of the idea that all children can learn. But ask the next question, "Can all children take algebra?" and you start getting the "wells" and the "buts." As the superintendent in Milwaukee, after much debate, I decided that all ninth graders had to take algebra. You would have thought that I had declared war. The reaction was "Oh, my God! All these kids are going to fail." The interesting thing is that we all know algebra is a gate-keeping course. If you do not have algebra, you do not go to college. Algebra is deeper than just math, it is about problem solving and discipline. It is about learning. I remember something a principal said in a speech when the same issue came up: "You are flunking kids in this math that does not mean anything. So, if you going to flunk them, flunk them in algebra. At least while they are in algebra, they may pick up something." So not only did I declare that all the ninth graders had to take algebra, I eliminated all those other courses like Math for Life, and Math for Counting at the Supermarket, that everyone can pass, but that mean nothing in terms of what a child's future is going to be. All kids ought to face a rigorous curriculum of English, math, science, and foreign languages. Our level of expectation has to be clear.

We also need to address the fact that America does not just belong to white people. America belongs to all of the people who participated in the development of this society. Any research you ever read will tell you that kids need to see themselves in the learning process. This issue is not about the superiority of white people or black people or brown people, it is about the inclusion of all of these people in the process of learning.

I recently spent a week teaching ninth and tenth graders, because at some point people like me who run around the country talking about reform need to deal with some kids. I had five classes for a week and the theme was civil rights. On the first day, I started with a matching test. I had CORE, SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, and Urban League on one side, and Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, H. Rap Brown, and Martin Luther King on the other side. The point was to match the name with the organization. On another section I had Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks to be matched with a list of events. To make a long story short, these kids knew three black people: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Michael Jordan. This is criminal.

Let me tell you something worse. They called the state superintendent of public instruction in Wisconsin, and gave him a phone quiz. He was asked to identify Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. DuBois. He had never heard of any of them. His comment? "I'm embarrassed. But, you know, black children ought to know something about their history." He needs to know something about our history. This is not just important for black people and for Hispanic people, it is important for all of us.

Fundamentally, we have to approach the delivery of instruction. We have to learn to teach in all the ways that kids know how to learn. The question we need to ask kids is not "How intelligent are you?" The question is "How are you intelligent?" All of our children have intelligence. The question is how do we reach them? Mortimer Adler in the *Paideia Proposal* said, "There are no unteachable children. There are only adults who have not yet figured out how to reach them." We have to be able to deliver instruction in a whole myriad of ways. It can be connected in terms of real life problem solving, but you cannot engage in real life problem solving if you cannot read.

The two by four by six by nine by twelve paradigm that we have is bankrupt. The notion that all learning takes place based upon what is found between the two covers of a textbook, that it can be done within the four walls of a classroom with six evenly spaced periods throughout the day, and that in nine months and twelve years you are educated, is bankrupt.

We have to lay out time to develop people. One of the biggest jokes in America is what we call "in service" for teachers, or professional development. If businesses trained their employees like we train teachers in America, they would be bankrupt. We do not provide time or resources on a consistent continual basis to have teachers learn how to do things differently. We cannot expect people to improve their performance, or come up with new ideas, without the wherewithal to change.

Consider this: A school has 30 teachers. There is an exciting program somewhere in Utah, and two teachers get to go. The other 28 teachers know that two have left because either there are substitutes or they have to take an additional class. The two teachers go off to Utah and learn something phenomenal. They come back all excited, but they are unable to spread any of this new information to their colleagues, because there is no time and no resources. No matter how excited they were in Utah, something invariably goes wrong after they return to the classroom. Since there is nobody in the room to help when it goes wrong, what do they do? They go back to what they know, even though it does not work, because at least they know it. We call this "in service."

We bank time so we can have a faculty meeting on Friday to be creative. After dealing with our kids all week, we can all get together after school on Friday. That is the best time to be creative? Or how about on Saturday, because teachers don't have any other life? Or Sunday? Let's have pizza over at one of their houses, and we can figure out how to be more effective teachers. I am telling you it will never happen. A book called *The Learning Gap* compares Japanese teachers to American teachers. Japanese teachers are in school longer than American teachers but they teach less, because they know you have to provide time on a day-to-day basis for people to improve their practice.

Another big issue is accountability. There will be no change without a system of accountability. Education writer Chester Finn says that there are three parts to accountability: standards, information on whether or not you are meeting those standards, and consequences. There is no system of accountability where there are no consequences if the standards are not met. Everybody gets paid whether the kids learn or not. We have schools where everybody knows that if you put your child in that school, very little is going to happen with your child. But every year we put kids back there, and nothing happens to anybody. Except to those kids.

In a report called "First Things First: What Americans Expect from Public Schools," by the Public Agenda, parents were asked what they wanted out of public schools. They said, "We want safety, order, discipline, and effective teaching of basic skills." Many educators think that parents do not know what they are talking about, but parents know exactly what they are talking about. They are right. We need to make sure that all kids know how to read and write. They need to know math. They need to know how to think. They need to know how to speak. For example, I have no problems with a student saying, "Yo," but that cannot be the whole sentence. There has to be something that comes after "Yo," and it cannot be "You know what I mean."

Parents know that their children need fundamental skills, but there are other skills required in today's world as well. You have to be able to work with others. You have to be able to use appropriate technology. We have to convince parents that learning is not sequential. You can connect basic skills and higher order thinking. For example, you could engage in math tables and use calculators simultaneously, but we have to take the time to explain this to parents. We should not ignore them and announce that because they are not part of the profession, they do not know what they are talking about.

My final point is this: without a transfer of power, change is not going to happen deep enough and fast enough to deal with our kids. What do I mean by transfer of power? I support vouchers for low income parents. It is one of the ingredients that has to be there. We talk about choice in America as if it does not exist, as if it were some new thing. But everyone knows that if you have money in America, you are already making choices. People with money make choices for their kids everyday. Witness who lives in American cities.

The issue is not whether or not we can have choice. The issue is who else can have it? When the president and the first lady got to D.C. they made a clear decision about what they were going to do with their daughter, Chelsea, and it was not to send her to the D.C. public schools. I am not criticizing them. All I am saying is, "Mr. President, give poor parents the same ability that you have to make decisions for their children, who they care about as much as you care about yours." We have teachers who teach in the