

American Education

A former Jesuit high school teacher shares his plan for fixing it

by Terence K. McAteer

While our lives seem to be moving at warp speed through massive societal changes and technological advances, our current educational system remains stuck in an agrarian-based school calendar and a bell passing system modeled after the industrial workplace. Even though the knowledge base has grown exponentially and the skill sets needed to be an effective employee have vastly changed, the school year still remains 180 days (the same number of days since the 1950's), and, for the most part, instruction is still driven by paper and pencil.

School reform seems to be a discussion that is taking place from the White House to the water cooler. Everyone has their fix on improving schools: from abolishing tenure, to creating a voucher system, to getting “back to basics,” or to President Obama’s “Race to the Top” agenda. Education has become our common American cultural bond and we all, therefore, have an opinion on how to “fix” it.

All of these fixes are certainly valid, but having spent a career in helping to reform public and private schools, urban and rural throughout California, one thing is clear: that the “fix” is neither quick nor easy. Those that profess vouchers as the solution to our educational morass, while a valid topic in limited situations, need to meet me at my Watts (Los Angeles) Charter School to experience abject poverty, gang boundaries, and dysfunctional families to realize that the vouchers’ one-size-fits-all scenario is farcical.

Many believe teacher tenure is the root of all evil and that abolishing it will greatly enhance education. Certainly tenure is an antiquated system that protects some teachers, but as in any work-



The author talking to a group of freshmen students about career choices at a local high school in Inyo County, Calif.

place, a vast majority of teachers are hard working, devoted individuals who truly care about our youth. Furthermore, most good teachers don’t like tenure as it denigrates the profession.

Some are relying on leadership from Washington or state capitals to set high academic benchmarks such as Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” or Obama’s “Race to the Top” legislation as a hopeful cure. These may be nice sound bites, but in reality the federal government provides less than three percent of school funding and a one-size-fits-all game

plan never works. In fact, one simple reform to alleviate bureaucracy could be abolishing the U.S. Department of Education and stopping the federal gravy train coupled with its bureaucracy, as the Constitution states that the education of our youth should be left to both state and local entities.

This leads me to some real life research-based reforms that are transformational but need some leadership and moxie to implement. By the end of these questions and answers, in my opinion, we will have a new form of

education that is student-centered and produces students who are prepared for the workforce of the 21st Century.

Is having an agrarian-based calendar that provides nearly three months of summer vacation what's educationally best for our youth?

No. Research shows that students lose nearly one-third of what they learned the previous year over summer vacation. A much more effective research-based calendar is the 6-1 calendar: six weeks of instruction with one week of vacation. Furthermore, a 6-1 calendar would provide 210 days of learning. As our "what you need to know" knowledge base continues to grow, as teachers try to cram more into less time, as the two-parent working family has become the norm, the boredom of summer vacation has become a wasteful experience for most youth.

Is having a seven-period high school day punctuated by passing bells what's educationally best for our youth?

Classroom instruction must shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-led instruction where the teacher becomes the mentor and the students are empowered through team project learning. Lecture and student regurgitation is found to be quite ineffective in knowledge retention, as most learning is tactile—hands-on. Students must be challenged by the teacher to seek solutions through the use of various technological sources and present their group findings using a variety of mediums that parallels the modern workplace.

Is going to college what's educationally best for our youth?

Societal pressure has set many a student and family up for perceived "failure." Students are led to believe that college is the only track available for success and that not attending college denotes failure. Parents are mortgaging their lives to provide a college education for their child when many youth should not be attending a university. High schools unfortunately have become one-size-fits-all while studies show that most students

should be provided multiple tracks to help find success.

Over 60 percent of students who graduate from high school matriculate into college, but less than ten percent actually receive a bachelor's degree. If high school is a training ground for college and less than ten percent finish college, then what did we train the other 90 percent to do? During this college frenzy of the past few decades, we as a nation have bankrupted our vocational skills training. Voc. Ed, now called School-to-Career training, must be revitalized so that junior and senior year in high school is skills-based learning for a majority of youth. Following the German model, students learn skills in the classroom that are reinforced through workplace mentoring, which is a natural transition for many youth. We need to get realistic as a nation and steer many youth into School-to-Career occupations so that most of our youth can find meaningful success and graduate into the workplace with transferable skills.

What can be done to transform our urban schools so that educationally they are doing their best for our youth?

Besides breaking our urban districts into smaller, more competitive districts, reform must occur at the school site. Most urban schools are just too large. As research shows, a 1,200 to 1,500 student high school is optimum for course offerings, providing career tracks, and, most importantly, student/adult interaction. Schools with 3,500 students have become impersonal factories for adolescent youth who need adult interaction and adult leadership during these critical years. Urban schools of 3,500 must be physically cut into three smaller units. Furthermore, we must attract the best and brightest of our teaching and administrative corps into the urban schools through the use of financial incentives. Our best have left for private schools and suburban schools and, like combat pay, we must pay more upfront because the price of an urban dropout to society is far higher than the cost of a top-notch teacher.

Finally, we must get tough with par-

ents and legally demand their involvement in their child's education. Many urban schools have become high cost babysitting services due to the fact that parents have lost control of their youth and have been uninvolved in their child's education. We need to put some teeth in our lax truancy laws and in our discipline laws so that urban schools are safe, exciting institutions of learning where students want to attend and parents are involved in assisting the learning process.

Finally, how can we better finance education?

In order to remain a technological and business hub, Americans must refocus their energies back into education by demanding many of the reforms I previously noted along with placing education as a funding priority. Most states have placed education as just another public service, along with roads, social services, and prisons. I can assure you that what is currently spent on public school students per year is a far better investment than the \$47,000 per inmate per year that states are spending.

If we keep limping along at the current pace without some meaningful, out-of-the-box reforms, we will quickly digress into a third world economy with one-third of our society being high school dropouts, ten percent as college educated, and half of our high school graduates matriculating into the workforce without any marketable skills. We are far past Band-Aids and quick fixes. The how, when, and who of this educational reform movement is unclear, but what is clear is that the time is now. **C**

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