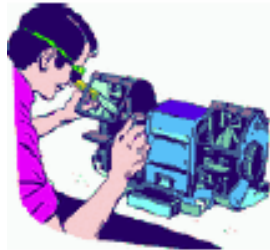


Transforming Education Step Two— A Fundamental Shift of Perception

Last week, a family member was “channel surfing” and settled on a show about restoring/rebuilding old cars. It probably wasn’t something I would have chosen, but I do enjoy watching people build things from scratch. At one point, the mechanic was painstakingly boring out a piston to increase the air intake to the newly installed turbo-charger. He’d remove an infinitesimal bit of metal, then measure with the precision of a Swiss watchmaker. He repeated the process again and again until he was satisfied.

As I watched both his meticulous work and the obvious enjoyment he got from achieving the perfect measurement, several things crossed my mind.



I found myself wondering how this gentleman, who was being paid an impressive amount of money for his skill and expertise, would have fared on one of the “high-stakes” exit exams required for high school graduation in many U.S. schools. Would he have selected the correct date for the Council of Trent? Would he have been able to “distinguish between a metaphor and a simile”? Would he have correctly identified the factors leading to Japanese feudal society? For that matter, would he have been able to name the person who discovered the scientific principle explaining why the diameter of that piston was so important?

If we believe what we are told, one’s score on such exams predicts how “successful” one will be. Is it possible that our mechanic friend only chose his profession because he didn’t have the mental wherewithal to be ‘successful’ in a more demanding field? If so, he sure lucked out because, for that one job, he was earning as much as many teachers make in a year!

That led me to wonder how many of the people who write the standards and benchmarks driving education in the U.S. would fare if asked to adjust the airflow in that engine. How many of the politicians who demand that every student “know and be able to do” everything in those endless lists of standards and benchmarks fixes his or her own car...or sews his or her own clothes...or cans his or her own vegetables...or...well, you get the idea.

What might standards look like if they were written by people who *choose* to be mechanics, store clerks, truck drivers, carpenters, cooks, or any of the hundreds of vital roles in society? Roles that are largely ignored in the official curriculum of public schools.

While our leaders mouth platitudes about ‘Leaving No Child Behind’ and providing equal educational opportunity for all regardless of race, culture, or socioeconomic status, I’d suggest that many of them rest easy in their belief that some (namely people like them) are...and will always be... “more equal than others.”

They demand that schools and teachers provide all students with “equal” opportunity, regardless of cultural values, genetic makeup, emotional and psychological needs, or interests. At the same time, they continue to promote policies that have historically been used to maintain the status quo and assessments that are biased toward people who learn only in certain ways.

A recent article in a major educational publication supported the present standards as necessary to ensure that as many students as possible “know” what they need to know to get into college/university—in other words to pass the ACT or SAT and achieve the grade point average that institutions of higher education require for admission. The author



flatly stated that depriving every student of this opportunity was patently unfair because a university degree insured a higher income level and standard of

living. That all sounds very noble, but it still assumes that all students (and their parents) share the same definition of success.

Even if one did share the goal, when the bottom dropped out of the technology market, we suddenly found PhDs in computer engineering working as stock clerks at WalMart! Perhaps it's time to reevaluate the argument that he who has the most years in school or the most graduation certificates wins!

What if every student bought into the extremely limited and culturally biased definition of “success” that accompanies many of the standards documents? What if every student aced every test in every “academic” subject and went on to pursue the “American Dream”—as defined by the small segment of

society that sets itself up as arbiter of the success or failure of others?

What if every student accepted the elitist myth that blue-collar jobs, farming, becoming an artist or musician, or working in service industries are not what anyone would really “want” to do, but rather signs that they “couldn't cut it” in truly “successful” fields of endeavor?

On the one hand, we tell students that they can do or be anything they want if they are willing to work for it. But on the other, there is a clear message about what the educational elite consider really important—what jobs are really more valuable and confer the aura of success. “What do you mean, you want to be a plumber? Wouldn't you rather be a civil engineer?”

In this month's article, we'll examine the question of why there is so much talk about equal educational opportunities for all and about developing the potential of individual students, but so little real movement in that direction.

Honors Night

I don't know whether other countries have this tradition, but in the U.S., May is the month in which many high schools hold their “honors” assemblies. In this long awaited culmination of the school year, school officials recognize the achievements of individual students. In my own teaching experience, the program began with an “inspirational” speech, followed by numerous “secondary” awards—community awards, service awards, perfect attendance...

Then came the “minor” departmental awards—Art, Music, Industrial Education, Foreign Language, Office Occupations, Food Service, and Special Education. These “secondary” awards praised students for the

creativity and technique of their artistic or musical talent, for their outstanding ability to design and build a piece of furniture, for hours of selfless volunteer work, for 'good character,' or for spearheading an important community project.

Those awards were followed by the chairpersons of the "major" academic departments—Math, Science, English, and Social Studies—who singled out their outstanding students, more often than not for their high scores on Advanced Placement or college entrance exams.

Tension built as the assembly moved toward the "really important" honors—the reading of the names of students with perfect GPAs, the winner of the 4-year full tuition college scholarship sponsored by a local business, and the announcement of the salutatorian and valedictorian of the graduating class.

Warms the heart, doesn't it—recognizing the accomplishments and hard work of students? But I would suggest that the tradition of "honors assemblies" could be the poster child for the elitist perceptions that make "equal opportunity" in public education little more than high-sounding, vote-getting buzzwords. Talk about a pecking order!

The very clear message epitomized in such assemblies is that, regardless of the effort you've put into your education, regardless of the depth of your character, your talent and ability in art, music, creative writing, woodworking, office administration, mechanics, foreign language, etc., you will always be considered "second class" compared to students who took nothing but honors academic classes and achieved A's in all of them. Lip service might be paid to your abilities and potential contribution to society, but don't ever expect to be recognized on a par with

those people who had perfect GPAs in school.

While I'm certainly not putting down academic ability, I've known too many students whose high grade point averages were little more than an indicator that they were good at playing the school game. They were good at memorizing. They were good at producing what the teacher wanted. They were good at taking tests. Whether they had any depth or substance of character, whether they contributed in any way to their school or community, whether they were capable of creative or original thought was unimportant. In the eyes of academia, the GPA is the final arbiter of a student's 'success'—and the standard of comparison for the 'success,' or lack thereof, of every other student, regardless of their effort and ability.

School officials always seemed disappointed that more students didn't attend "honors night." Personally, I think they were pretty bright. Only a masochist puts himself in the position of being reminded that no matter how hard you worked, it would never be enough.

Values of the "ruling class"

Despite the high-sounding words about the "equality" of all and government of, by, and for the people, a "ruling class" still exists in this country. And it is their values that shape public education. Largely because of the commitment of time and money now required to run for public office, we rarely see farmers, nurses, mechanics, teachers, or store clerks elected to Congress. And many others are simply not drawn to politics as a profession. While there are certainly exceptions, many members of Congress come from privileged backgrounds. Often, we see generations of the same families moving into

similar government positions, bearing a striking resemblance to the hereditary aristocracies of old.

As for the “common” people, they seem largely content to let the “ruling class” deal with the rest of the world and get on about their daily lives—unless the decisions of politicians begin to affect them personally.

One sign of the separation between the lives of many of our representatives and the lives of the people they represent is apparent in the number of Congressional members who send their children to private schools rather than public ones. About 10% of students in the U.S. attend private schools (including church-affiliated schools). Nearly 50% of our Senators and Representatives send their children to private schools. I’m sure that many of the “common” folk would do the same if they could afford to. Who wouldn’t choose to send their child to the best and most effective school available, be it public or private?

Many of those in power seem honestly puzzled that public schools, which are mandated to accept and educate all students on a tax-dependent budget, can’t achieve the same quality of education that their own children receive in private schools. And of course, they measure that quality of education in terms of test scores and grades in traditionally “academic” subjects because those are the things that brought them their “success,” and the things they expect for their own children.

Most public school teachers could give them a dozen reasons why public education looks much different than private education. But one reason that many overlook is the historical basis for public education in the U.S. I would guess that the vast majority of educa-

tors are unaware that “equal opportunity” was never a goal of that education. This topic was discussed in the article on the Factory Metaphor, but here’s a brief reminder.

Elwood Cubberley—extremely influential in shaping American schools in the early 1900s—put it bluntly.

“Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life.”

Lest you think he was being critical of that process, here is another quote from the same man.

“We should give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal and that our society is devoid of classes. The employee tends to remain an employee; the wage earner tends to remain a wage earner... One bright child may easily be worth more to the National Life than thousands of those of low mentality.”¹

The “bright children” of Cubberley’s time didn’t attend public schools because those schools were never intended to provide the kind of encouragement and stimulating environment needed to develop beyond the “literacy” expected of docile and obedient citizens who would provide the goods and services necessary for society.



William Torrey Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1900, was influential in standardizing schools.

“Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom.” Harris brags that this is no accident, but the “result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual.”²

Certainly, times have changed. Schools now offer many demanding and stimulating courses, and the achievements of “bright children” are held up as evidence of the school’s effectiveness. But in too many cases, those courses are designed for students whose learning styles and abilities favor traditional academic learning. Even as we tout high expectations for all, students who don’t shine in traditional academic classes are relegated to ‘average’ or ‘remedial’ classes where the same material is watered down and the students are neither expected to, nor given the opportunity to, engage in the stimulating and challenging work needed to develop their unique abilities and strengths.

While many of our government officials may honestly believe that they are passing laws that will improve the lives of all students, they are instead strengthening the lockstep system originally designed to keep people in their place and provide them with sufficient knowledge to fill the needs of society without thinking too deeply about the nature of that society.

In such a system, individual needs are simply not the issue. Students are expected to adapt to schools and their purposes. There is no consideration of how schools can adapt to the needs and growth of students. As one contemporary commentator puts it, public

education teaches students how to make money...for someone else!

I know that sounds harsh, but it’s part of the historical record. One wonders how much we’ve really changed when today’s standards documents contain words such as,

“...our students need to meet these standards in order for them to be well prepared for careers in the 21st century, and in order for our state and country to have suitable employees in the 21st century.”³

Notice that nothing is said about student growth and development beyond ‘being prepared’ for work...pardon me, “careers.” And having a pool of “suitable employees” is apparently of far greater importance than having students who are prepared for life!

I’m sure there are those of you who point with pride to the students who graduate from our public schools at the top of their class and go on to prestigious universities and well-paying professions. But isn’t that a perfect example of the kind of bias fostered in the educational community? What are those same schools doing for the students who don’t *want* to follow that path—who don’t need one more “certificate” before creating the lives they choose? And as the curriculum narrows in response to standards, some are beginning to wonder whether even high school serves them.

There was a time when, to be an educated person, one was expected to have a broad knowledge of the arts and sciences, history, languages, and philosophy. Today, the bias toward “core academics” is so strong that subjects such as the arts and foreign languages are now being dropped in favor of more reading, math, science, and test prepa-

ration classes. “Practical” courses, such as office occupations, food science, consumer and industrial education, always relegated to the role of “electives” and viewed as the option for “less capable” students, are fighting for their lives in many schools.

Let me make myself clear. I am not suggesting that all students are not capable of learning science, math, or any of the other traditional academic disciplines. But is there any less value in learning to read, to calculate, and to apply scientific principles in subjects outside those labeled reading, math, and science? In fact, wouldn't it be better to actually know how to *use* concepts in addition to “possessing” them? Apparently not!

What I am suggesting is that the way many academic courses are taught is incompatible with the way many students learn. A student is labeled “less capable” simply because he or she has a learning style different from those historically labeled “bright children.” Talents or abilities that do not manifest themselves as correctly filled bubbles on test scoring sheets are barely acknowledged. And by comparison, the unique talents and abilities of these students are never seen as important as getting top grades in traditional academic classes.

I've always found it difficult to understand how educators can, with a straight face, cater to a system that demands that all students acquire the same body of knowledge presented in essentially the same way at the same age. Apparently, it's O.K. for adults to have strengths and weaknesses, but one is accused of “bigotry” if one suggests that all students can't learn all subjects with the same degree of proficiency at the same age.

I once had a neighbor who is one of the world's leading experts on the Theory of Special Relativity. He came running over one day in a state of

panic. His septic system had backed up into his toilet and he had no idea what to do. We

laugh at something like that, but isn't it evidence that even the most brilliant mind in one area may not function as effectively in another?



At a conference, I was talking to two university professors—she taught literature and he taught math. They were bragging about the “system” they had worked out, clearly proud of their strategy. She edited all of his academic papers (because, by his own admission, he was terrible at grammar). He did all her accounting (because, by her own admission, she “didn't have a mind” for math.)

Some people criticize such anecdotal arguments—“Well yes, but those are the exceptions.” Are they? I would challenge those critics to give me contrary anecdotes—stories about individuals whose interests, abilities, and ways of processing information *in all 14 different disciplines identified “essential” in standards documents* are equally strong.

Are you equally capable of understanding and applying the arts, behavioral studies, civics, economics, foreign language, geography, health, history, language arts, math, science, as well as the array of “practical” knowledge one needs each day? If it's true that, to be successful, one must attain all the benchmarks in all the content areas, would the folks writing those benchmarks be willing to take the 5th grade tests in ALL those subjects.

Have you ever come to understand something later in life that confounded you when you were younger? Does this make you “less capable”? Or is it part of the growth process for every human being?

Even as educators acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses, they bow to those who insist that it is not only fair, but essential that all students “know and be able to do” all 4000+ standards and benchmarks in 14 different subjects at the same age.

Worse, the proliferation of required content with no increase in available time makes it almost impossible to differentiate the way in which that content is “covered.” Therefore, if listening, reading, and doing worksheets aren’t major components of a student’s mode of learning, what chance do they have? Promoting this incarnation of standards as a way to give ‘equal opportunity’ to all students is a sham. The opportunity is there only for those whose values and mental processes are similar to those who set the standards.

Proponents of this process might accuse me of having low expectations, but I insist that the opposite is true. I firmly believe that teachers should have the highest expectations for all students—just not the same expectations for all. Equating high expectations for all students with the same expectations for all students is the fatal flaw in this process. It flies in the face of everything we know about learning and individual differences.

And speaking of “less capable” students, is 1/3 of society really “remedial” as the percentages in our schools would suggest? Remedial what? Statistically, if you insist on identifying the middle third of a population as “average”, another 1/3 would have to be below average and the final 1/3 above average. But what’s the point unless we are look-

ing for excuses to maintain the status quo? The basis for division into above average, average, and below average depends on how one compares to a “norm” that is biased toward a particular type of student.

What if that “norm” were based on the ability to solve real-life problems? Or on artistic ability, musical ability, or the ability to create and/or build? Or on the ability to plan and carry out community projects? Or the ability to deal with a variety of people pleasantly and efficiently? Wouldn’t the infamous Bell Curve be populated in different ways in each case? The present norm reflects values arising from the Cold War and Sputnik, with a nod toward the “knowledge society.” It would have been much different during the Renaissance!



The definition of “success” and the compensation paid for various types of work are other manifestations of those values. But again, why do we feel the need to compare students against a particular norm? Why is our system set up so that the abilities and unique contributions of each individual so necessary to our society are not equally valued?

What’s the Alternative?

I suppose one could give in to paranoia and suggest that it’s all a big government plot to keep the populace under control. After all, what would happen if people who grew our food, took care of our sick, or kept our infrastructure operating smoothly started thinking that they were as important to society as professionals? Hmmm. But no, I’m not really looking under rocks for evidence of plots.

However, the alternative may be just as frightening—that people are totally unaware of the extent to which the very nature of public schools and the choices made in terms of required curriculum and assessment shapes the population. Much of our present education entails judging individuals based on a single standard of excellence. That standard is set by a particular segment of society who assume that everyone defines “the good life” in the same way—or if not, that they should!

The present catch phrase in education—Leave No Child Behind—is a perfect example of those values. It implies that there is a “place” where all children should be at a given moment in their development—defined by those who decide what it means to be ‘culturally literate.’ Teachers are ordered to see to it that every student reaches that place, *even if it isn't where they want to go, or where their parents or culture want them to go, or where their talents and abilities lead them.*

I'm not downplaying those students traditionally identified as “gifted” or suggesting that they not be given every opportunity to develop their own talents. Indeed, I'd argue that we may also be shortchanging them by pushing them into classes that deliver more and more content at the expense of thinking. An expert on the gifted once stated that there is a greater range of differences among individual students we label as “gifted” than there is between gifted and so-called remedial students. Yet, too often, our method of educating these students is basically pushing more and more advanced material at them at a faster and faster rate.

Everyone is “Gifted”

If we truly want “equal opportunity” for students, we must redefine what it means

to be successful. We must eliminate the single, basis for that judgment and broaden our perceptions to include, and enable us to perceive, the unique “giftedness” of every student.

Rather than focusing on the failure of students to attain an externally defined standard of success in a fixed amount of time, we must begin to focus on the strengths and abilities of each individual and what schools can provide to help them reach their maximum potential. And we must begin to appreciate and value the contributions of all members of society rather than “ranking” them in terms of importance or prestige. A Utopian dream? Perhaps. But couldn't we at least make the attempt?

Nothing in the present structure of public education supports those goals. Buildings are designed for conformity and efficiency rather than flexibility. Curriculum is predefined and prepackaged. Students spend their years in school as part of one group or another. Assessments are standardized. And beneath it all—out of awareness, but ultimately driving the process—is the historical tradition of public education with its fundamental goal of maintaining the status quo.

We need look at only one reform effort to see how difficult a task we have before us. Volumes have been written on differentiation of instruction, and the importance of recognizing and adapting to individual differences in learning. Few would deny its importance and we know how to do it, yet how much of an effect has it had on day-today practice in schools?

I would suggest that it has had so little effect because many teachers do not truly perceive students as individuals. There is nothing in the history or structure of a traditional public

school that encourages them to do so, or that supports them in that effort. Efforts made by teachers to create truly differentiated learning are quickly overwhelmed by the lack of facilities and materials, pressures to “cover” material to be assessed, as well as the bias toward group instruction and assessment and the present accountability mandates.

Without a fundamental change of perception, how can there be meaningful change in this area? The good news is that it does not need to be system-wide. It does not have to be, nor is it likely to be “top-down.” However, it does need to be school-wide because, without the support system, the burden falls back on the teacher trying to swim against the current. This is the task—the path to real transformation—finding ways to truly “perceive” students as individuals and to shape the educational process accordingly.

What Do We Value?

In truth, not everyone agrees that public education should be about the growth and development of individual students. In a recent study of the role of teachers in supporting reforms, Mary M. Kennedy of Michigan State University discusses the factors that mediate against fundamental change in education.

“One reason disparities may occur between teachers and reformers is that everyone, including teachers and reformers, holds multiple and sometimes conflicting ideals for our schools. As a society, we want our youngsters to learn particular content, but we also want them to be nurtured, to be developed into good citizens, and to be motivated to participate productively in society. We want teachers to be role models for

moral and ethical behavior and to create positive climates for learning in their classrooms, but we also want them to be efficient and goal-oriented. We believe all students deserve equal treatment and resources, but sometimes we think particular students should receive more. We are divided on whether children should be controlled by external rules with consequences or whether, instead, they should be taught to regulate themselves. We want to socialize students to accommodate the prevailing cultural norms, yet we want them to be critical thinkers; we want to cultivate cooperation, yet enable them to compete in later life, and so forth. These different ideas wax and wane in their social popularity, and strain the education system.”⁴

Kennedy cites common reform ideals that pull teachers in different directions.

1. We need more Rigorous and Important Content Dissension is found even among those who support this ideal. What is “important content?” Who makes that decision? There are those who “want students to learn important disciplinary ideas rather than lists of facts and figures.” Proponents of this type of “important content” include professional organizations, such as AAAS and NCTM. Organizations such as these are often influential in determining the content of science and mathematics standards. But while those standards may include the “big ideas,” the benchmarks that have shifted from being “examples” to *being* the curriculum have moved the focus back to “small chunk” and easily testable “facts and figures.”

3. We need to make knowledge

accessible to all students The third reform ideal reflects a commitment to making school knowledge accessible to the full range of students attending American schools, not just those who are gifted or who are college bound. It's interesting that the following words were written in 1969!

*"The older form of education—transmitting facts and rules of thumb, and issuing a lifetime certificate of professional competence—has no validity in a world where social goals, communication patterns, and even scientific theories are changing constantly."*⁵

Sadly, this "older form of education" is still thriving 35 years later.

Despite legislation, such as Head Start and ESEA, and despite the money thrown at the problem of "equal opportunity," the fundamental matrix that values the acquisition of traditional "knowledge" above all other capacities and mediates against students who learn in non-traditional ways remains largely unchanged.

Getting Rid of Either-Or

The disagreements among reformers are yet another indication of the "one size fits all" group-think search for solutions. Rather than perceiving each of these different ideals as having merit within a given context, reformers waste time and money trying to convince everyone that their way is 'best.' Rather than recognizing that all students require both meaningful content and engagement appropriate to their current stage of development for learning to take place, and working to build a repertoire of strategies that will provide those requirements, reformers engage in fruitless arguments about

what "all students" should know and be able to do.

Arguing the relative merits of various theories of education is, in my view, like arguing which flower in a botanical garden is the most beautiful or fragrant; which instrument in an orchestra is most important; which is the most useful tool in a toolbox; or which artist was the greatest of all time. Rather than wasting time trying to decide which is "best," wouldn't it be more useful to assess each theory in terms of its usefulness in different contexts? Under what circumstances might its implementation be the most effective? In what contexts is it not particularly useful? Which ideas might be more useful in those contexts?

I'm not condemning any of the reform ideals or trying to convince anyone that one is better than another. Nor am I trying to provide "an answer" to the ills of education. What I am attempting to do is offer new ways of looking at the issues and new questions that might lead to different, and hopefully more effective, strategies.

I certainly don't believe that teachers in our schools are deliberately trying to maintain the status quo or push an elitist agenda. But deliberate or not, do we really want a "shared culture" that permits only one measure of success? There is a difference between wanting all of a nation's citizens to have an equal opportunity to succeed on their own terms, and narrowly defining what that success will mean and/or characterizing it as filling specific roles in society. There is a difference between setting fundamental standards of literacy and "essential knowledge" agreed upon by all segments of society, and creating standards that only students with particular skills and interests can achieve.

Socialization into a culture and/or society is an accepted function of education. The frightening part of the present system of public education is how few people recognize the values it promotes and the messages it sends to those who don't "live up" to those values. Sadly, many have bought into the myth that only acceptance into a prestigious university can prepare a student for future success.

Jump Starting the Process

How can we begin to overcome the weight of tradition and presuppositions that inhibit us from creating true transformation in education? One way might be to set ourselves a task that removes us from that environment. Some of the following suggestions were included in a previous article about involving the community in school transformation.

What if the entire staff of a school—custodial staff, office personnel, counselors, teachers, administrators, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, etc. met with community members, students, and parents representing all segments of the community. A "moderator" explains that the purpose of the meetings is to create a more responsive and effective educational system. But the method will not include discussing what currently exists. Instead, their goal would be to design one or more "learning environments" for a colony on a distant planet.

Initially, the discussion might be limited to a couple of questions, such as "How will the people in this colony learn, grow, develop..." and "What, if any, formal structures might be needed to enable and enhance learning opportunities? What role does the smooth functioning of the colony play in making these decisions?"

Notice that the word "people" rather than "children" is used here. Also notice that there's no mention of "school." The minute you say that word, people are immediately drawn into a whole body of perceptions.

One of the tasks of leadership is to push the discussion beyond the limitations and expectations of the present system. Don't even begin with the assumption that a formal system is necessary. Participants should be encouraged to think about and possibly incorporate ideas about how learning takes place outside of formal education.

The ground rules would be much like the rules of brainstorming...no ideas are too bizarre and no one is permitted to say, "But..." or "You can't..." or "We've never..." In other words, no prior experience with what education is like or has been like or "should" be like is permitted to act as a blueprint for, or limitation on, the new system. To minimize limitations on thinking, in the initial phases of discussion, money should be considered a non-issue.

Participants could begin their discussions in small groups. Each group would have representatives from each of the interest groups. From experience, I can tell you that, at first, ideas are likely to be very familiar...boxy buildings, classes, books, subject areas. These are assumptions—artifacts of what is and has been—and it's incumbent on the moderator of each group to push the discussion beyond those artifacts. Once participants realize that they truly aren't bound by convention, the floodgates open. And many of the ideas will be not only original, but educationally sound by any measure of current research.

As groups share their ideas with one another, even more ideas will emerge. And that's the whole point. The purpose of this exercise is to 1.) get people out of the rut they're in when they think about learning; 2.) give members of the group the opportunity to learn about the concerns and values of others; and 3.) generate fresh ideas on which one can build.

This won't work if only the teachers and administrators meet. Let's face it—they are the most inbred—the ones most influenced by convention and they require more “objective” eyes to open them up to alternatives.

I'm sure there are many other ways in which educators can break free of the mindset of traditional education and create a system where equal opportunity for all students is more than a catch phrase in a politician's campaign. If we do not begin that journey, we can expect decades more of the same piecemeal and ineffective reforms of which we have grown so weary. And we must take the responsibility for more generations of students who are disenfranchised and marginalized because their talents lie outside the “norm.”

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A Cautionary Tale

Author Unknown

Once upon a time, the animals decided they must do something heroic to meet the problem of a "new world," so they organized a school. They adopted an activity curriculum consisting of running, climbing, swimming, and flying, and to make it easier to administer, all the animals took all the courses.



The duck was excellent in swimming, better in fact than his instructor, and made passing grades in flying, but he was poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to stay after school and also drop swimming to practice running. This was kept up until his web feet were badly worn and he was only average in swimming. But average was acceptable in school, and nobody worried about that except the duck.

The rabbit started at the top of the class in running, but had a nervous breakdown because of so much makeup work in swimming.



The squirrel was excellent in climbing until he developed frustration in the flying class where his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the treetop down. He also developed charley horses from over-exertion and then got a "C" in climbing and a "D" in running.

The eagle was a problem child and was disciplined severely. In the climbing class he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there.



At the end of the year, an abnormal eel that could swim exceedingly well, and also run, climb and fly a little had the highest average and was valedictorian.

The prairie dogs stayed out of school and fought the tax levy because the administration would not add digging and burrowing to the curriculum. They apprenticed their child to a badger and later joined the groundhogs and gophers to start a successful private school.

