

K-12 Education Reform and Unlearned Lessons From Magnet Schools

by Donald Earl Collins – February 15, 2013

A comparison of key points around the current brand of K-12 education reform -- high-stakes testing and using this as the primary measure for teacher effectiveness -- and magnet schools as a major reform effort of the 1970s and 1980s. Reformers and educators simply have not taken any time to learn lessons from this earlier period of reform and have thus failed to apply those lessons to the current reform regime.

WHAT WE HAVEN'T LEARNED:

With so much emphasis on high-stakes testing to show that teachers are effectively narrowing the achievement gap between students of color and White students, educators and policy makers have amputated everything else from schooling. Not that our schools were wonderful before this latest turn in K-12 education reform began in the late-1980s. Now, though, teachers are reduced to test-teachers and lab leaders, students to lab experiments and curricula to simple rubrics, a hospital menu for intensive care patients.

We can talk about Common Core State Standards, annual or near-annual state exams, Race to the Top and so many seemingly wonderful innovations. But the resulting transfer of school district, state and federal funds for K-12 education to test development and assessment has left holes in most school budgets. Our schools cannot afford to prepare nutritious lunches, to provide PE more than once a week, full-fledged art and music programs, or even foreign language instruction.

There's so much that we could learn from the previous era of education reform, specifically the magnet schools of the 1970s and 1980s in suburban and urban communities. Why magnet schools? Because in the post-Civil Rights era, this was our *first* set of efforts to close the racial achievement gap and foster school integration in schools *not* south of the Mason-Dixon line. Encouraging affluent Whites to remain engaged in urban and suburban public schools through magnet programs was a critical component in increasing student diversity in otherwise predominantly Black and Latino school districts. Creating a high-bar curriculum was also a crucial part of making magnet programs a viable alternative in a world of White flight from diverse school districts.

Of course, we as educators have yet to seriously and comprehensively weigh what worked and what was unsuccessful in the magnet schools brand of education reform. We've assumed that there's nothing we can glean from magnet schools and magnet programs of the Generation X era because they come out of a different historical context. We somehow had the idea that because magnet programs promoted ability grouping or tracking and were a product of efforts to comply with desegregation orders, that there's nothing salvageable for our teacher-accountability-through-test-scores times. But alas, there are a number of lessons we should've learned by now, as we're in the process of repeating in the early twenty-first century the same mistakes education reformers made in the 1970s and 1980s.

FOUR IMPORTANT LESSONS WE NEED TO LEARN

1. NEW EFFORTS AT K-12 REFORM CONSUME RESOURCES

Like the magnet school programs of a generation or so ago, high-stakes testing and teaching effectiveness reform draw financial resources from school districts, state education departments and even the US Department of Education. In this current climate of reform, though, we're talking tens of billions of dollars toward contracts for test development companies, educational testing consultants, and instructional designers who have geared curriculum reform to align with the new state and school district level assessments.

The resulting holes in school budgets at the state and school district levels have led to the eradication of a number of K-12 programs or significant cuts in those programs. It's not just that schools only offer a day or two of physical education, or no longer have a music or art program, or have a part-time teacher covering five elementary schools to provide additional science activities. Some of the poorest school districts consistently lay off teachers or cannot afford to keep veteran teachers on staff. The quality of the breakfast and lunch programs in even the most affluent of school districts has declined significantly in the past decade. Many a school district simply no longer provides textbooks for their students in the classroom or to take home, as teachers are making copies of lessons and assignments for students from their one textbook. This is the result of over a decade of No Child Left Behind and a generation of preaching testing as a panacea for closing any perceived racial achievement gap.

2. LEADERS OF K-12 EDUCATION REFORM EXPECTED FAR MORE FROM THEIR REMEDIES THAN THEY COULD POSSIBLY ACHIEVE

With magnet programs, reform leaders wanted to desegregate schools by creating a curriculum and atmosphere of academic excellence, one that would encourage enough affluent White families to keep their high-potential kids in a mostly Black or Latino school or school district. These programs had much success in creating an atmosphere of academic excellence, but often failed in

creating substantial racial integration, even within the magnet programs themselves, much less school districts as a whole. This was mostly because of the tracking and selection process that was a significant part of magnet programs, one that severely disadvantaged low-income students and Black students.

Today's reform leaders want to use high-stakes testing as the basis for building a curriculum -- Common Core Standards -- for evaluating teacher performance and effectiveness, as well as the means for closing the achievement gap between White students and students of color. These so-called reformers are attempting to do more with testing than advocates of magnet school programs could have possibly done in their own reform efforts thirty years ago. This is too much to expect from any set of K-12 reforms, even if one accepts the unlikely premise that high-stakes testing is *the* way to achieve lasting positive changes in public education.

3. THE EMPHASIS ON ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE CAN COME AT THE COST OF SOCIAL AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT FOR THE STUDENTS INVOLVED

Magnet schools and their teachers devoted so much time to accelerated learning -- particularly in STEM fields -- that students spent far less time on the arts and music, on developing critical thinking skills or creative writing. The anecdotal evidence also shows that magnet programs did not do as well, in terms of socialization, in preparing their high-potential students for life outside of school or for college. Administrators, teachers and school boards often avoided addressing issues involving race and socioeconomic differences and conflict - the elephant in the magnet program room, so to speak. This avoidance left students in these programs fending for themselves with little to no guidance from adults in their social development on race and class, even though issues of racial and socioeconomic inequality were in front of them every day.

So much is the same with the current direction of K-12 reform. With such a high concentration on testing and making teachers accountable for student test scores, everything else has become a secondary concern. Reading chapter books, writing book reports, field trips to learn about American Indians, Greek gods or star constellations all become peripheral when compared to teaching the test, even cheating in preparing students for these tests. The lesson that students of this era will learn will be that K-12 education was never about them and their journey to adulthood, but about teachers unions, testing companies, and foundations holding school districts accountable.

4. DESPITE THE FLAWS IN K-12 REFORM, THERE ARE SUCCESS STORIES, SOME THAT WE CAN REPLICATE, AND SOME THAT RESIST REPLICATION

Magnet programs from Pasadena, California to Mount Vernon, New York have been documented for their success or have won awards over the years. Hundreds of thousands of students served by such programs -- particularly low-income students and students of color -- parlayed this experience into access to college, especially elite universities; this despite the flaws built into magnet programs.

But that doesn't mean that these successes outweigh their flaws, or that we can replicate these success stories. After all, magnet programs came out of the specific historical and social context of the post-Civil Rights 1970s and early 1980s. Our thinking around academic excellence and diversity has changed -- mostly for the better -- over the past forty years.

With high-stakes testing and teacher effectiveness, there will be some success stories, despite evidence of cheating in school districts like Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington, DC, indeed, all over the country. One school or school district's rising test scores mean little in terms of overall K-12 reform, though. Even if we knew five years from now that most school districts would show a significant closing of the achievement gap, rising test scores, and teachers more effective in the classroom as a result, what would that really mean? Would low-income students be more prepared for college? Would more students of color apply for college, take AP courses in high school, take algebra in eighth grade? Even when measuring for success, we have no idea of the implications or the possibility of replication.

WHAT WE SORT OF ALREADY KNOW:

Testing and tying test scores to teacher performance (or even student performance) does not create an atmosphere for learning, academic success or college preparation. It merely creates a profit motive for test designers, psychometricians, curriculum specialists, and the private firms that state departments of education pay to design these tests and measures. This regime gives private foundations a basis on which to be a significant player in a conversation that grants them easy measures for a mirage kind of success. It is truly a shame when we as educators refuse to look at past successes and attempt to build on them, instead of reinventing the wheel and declaring it new.

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