

Salvaging the American Dream: Public School Education

By Lou Thompson, Orange County School Board District 1 Member (Reprinted with permission of Lou Thompson)

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As a member of the Orange County School Board for the past two years, I have made it my mission to follow closely the commentary in the media and educational journals concerning the state of public school education in America and what can be done to improve it.

For the most part, the media in particular, presents a rather depressing picture of student performance in our public schools, particularly when compared with other developed nations. Typically, Finland leads the developed nations in student performance in math and science while the United States ranks 23rd in the same disciplines. We fall behind most European and Asian countries with whom we compete economically. Yet, we are still considered to be the most innovative country of all when it comes to advances in science and technology attracting foreign students who have come here to study in our universities and remain here to become part of our society in academia, business and industry.

So, what makes Finland such a standout in world rankings of student academic performance? Foremost is the fact that teaching is a highly respected profession. Only one in 10 applicants is accepted into Finland's university-level teacher preparation programs. All Finnish teachers have masters degrees or above and are relatively well compensated. The U.S. has seven times the turnover rate among our teachers as Finland, often over pay issues.

One fact that gets repeated in the media, without explanation, is that our female teachers today are coming from the lower third academically of women in their graduating classes. In the 1970s, they ranked in the top third. In a recent CNN special "Restoring the American Dream: Fixing Education," moderator Fareed Zakaria pointed out that teaching was one of the few professions that women could look toward in the 70s, whereas today, women have the option of going into any profession they choose, particularly where compensation is above what we now pay teachers. In fact, there are more women in the U.S. earning masters degrees and PhDs than men. And, we see the same trend among the professions of law and medicine.

Moreover, Finland is a more homogeneous society ethnically and socio-economically than the U.S. Only 4 percent of Finnish students come from families below the poverty level, whereas in the U.S. the percentage is above 20 percent. Among the 5,211 Orange County students, 31 percent are in families where the household income is below the poverty level. Additionally, in Orange County and nationally, our public schools are far more diverse than schools in Finland and many of the other developed countries that rank above us in student performance. Experience shows that socio-economic factors are key determinants in student academic performance.

No Child Left Behind Act - Taking Teaching out of Teachers

The current state of public education is also defined by the reality that we have taken teaching out of teachers. The 10-year old No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, has relegated teachers to "teaching to tests" designed to measure student performance goals that have been mandated by the states. In Virginia, these goals are called the Standards of Learning (SOL). This focus disrupts what teachers are trained to do - develop creative thinking among their students. Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education at New York University and a historian of education champions this approach. Ravitch once served as Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H. W. Bush. In a recent speech, Ravitch acknowledged that she supported the NCLB Act when it was passed under President George W. Bush and Congress. Today, she has reversed her thinking and now believes the NCLB emphasis on standardized testing is largely to blame for the decline in U.S. public school education.

In her speech addressing policies stemming from the NCLB Act, Professor Ravitch repeatedly asks the question, "Whose children are being left behind with these policies?" She decries the cutbacks in funding for the arts in order to focus on math and science saying this has resulted in the lack of opportunity to develop creativity among school children that can be accomplished by being engaged in the arts.

Orange County School Board members had the opportunity to hear Professor Ravitch speak two years ago at the Virginia State School Boards Association annual conference. The conference took place shortly after she wrote her most recent book "The Death and Life of the Great American School System:

How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.” Since that time, she says she has become even more convinced that the NCLB Act must be scrapped.

The act mandates that all students achieve proficiency in math and reading by 2014, or their schools would be declared by the federal government as "failing." When the federally mandated pass rates were raised in 2011 to 86 percent in English and 85 percent in math, only 38 percent of Virginia's schools met the standards. We can be proud of the fact that 62 percent of Orange County's schools met the standards, and that the rest of our schools were not far behind. Still, it is troubling to see how the federal mandates are causing good schools to be incorrectly labeled as "failures." Fortunately, recent actions by the Obama administration and both Houses of the U.S. Congress indicate a coming shift in the federal mood. The U.S. Department of Education has invited states to submit waivers from some of the most flawed requirements of NCLB. The Virginia Department of Education currently is considering a waiver request that may establish more reasonable requirements.

Other School Reform Solutions

What are other solutions that are being proposed to deal with improving public school education in America? One of the most prominent is that of charter schools to replace failing schools, particularly those in the inner cities. New York City has adopted 142 charter schools to replace failing public schools. These still are public schools but privately managed. Ravitch points out that only one in five charter schools show better results than traditional schools but two of five show worse performance. Yet, last year, the U.S. Department of Education held out a \$4-billion carrot, called "Race to the Top" (RTTT) to states that came up with the most innovative programs to improve their schools. Most of the \$4 billion went to four states that relied heavily on charter schools.

Virginia did not even compete for the RTTT funding. Why? Most of the schools in the state are in largely rural districts where charter schools don't work. A private management firm can apply to create a charter school, limit its enrollment by selection or lottery, but it is still a public school. The school system and the taxpayers still provide administrative services, school buses and other support for the benefit of a limited number of students.

The well known Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been a strong supporter of charter schools, but listening to Mr. Gates on the CNN special program, he focused on the importance of high quality teachers and their role in engaging their students using an individualized approach based on the students' needs and interests. The New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristoff wrote last week that a new study by economists at Harvard and Columbia demonstrates that a strong fourth-grade teacher "is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to each year's students, just in the extra income they will earn over a lifetime.

Conversely, a poor teacher has the same effect as a pupil missing 40 percent of the school year. Zakaria also interviewed former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michele Rhee. She currently manages her own foundation, StudentsFirst, that promotes school reform. As chancellor, she was a strong proponent of paying bonuses to outstanding teachers, particularly young teachers who she believed were often more innovative than those with more longevity and earning power.

Teacher and Administrator Accountability

One of the initiatives the Orange County School Board has adopted is a more consistent, rigorous, reliable and fair system of accountability that ties student achievement to the evaluations of teachers, education specialists, principals, instructional directors and the superintendent. We hope to address serious deficiencies associated with our teacher pay scales competitiveness when compared with our neighboring and cohort school divisions.

We still have a ways to go, particularly given that our teachers have gone for three years without a pay raise. I can't say enough about the contributions of our dedicated teachers who have gone above and beyond the call of duty working individually with their students to achieve fully accredited schools status. But, dedication only goes so far, and last year we saw the impact of being surrounded by school districts that pay more than Orange County.

The Role of Parents

Lastly, I want to turn to the role of parents or guardians in the lives of school children. Jamie Vollmer is an award-winning advocate for increasing success in public schools who has spent 20 years working with educators, business leaders and community groups across the U.S. and Canada. In his new book

"Schools Cannot Do It Alone," Vollmer emphasizes the pivotal role that parents play in the success of their children in school.

As a parent, my five sons and daughters from my first marriage were all educated in Fairfax County public schools. My sixth child attended Grymes Memorial School through fifth grade and went to Prospect Heights Middle School and Orange County High School. She will graduate from Longwood University in May and then head on to graduate school. My youngest child currently attends Prospect Heights. Ten of my school-age grandchildren are enrolled in public schools in Richmond and Jacksonville, FL. All of my children and grandchildren have enjoyed excellent educational experiences in all of their grade schools - both public and private. My experience has convinced me that parents must make a true commitment to prepare their children with the necessary social and learning skills to be successful.

Too many parents look to the schools to be surrogate parents both in educating and disciplining their children. Some parents put their kids on pedestals - they can do no wrong. Others want their kids to consider them as best friends and in doing so, they don't always draw the necessary disciplinary lines. It is not the job of teachers to replace parents in raising children.

What's The Future?

(1) The ideal objective would be to get the federal government, to the extent possible, out of public school education and transfer much of that role to the state departments of education. We've seen what happens when the federal government issues one-size-fits-all mandates, particularly when those mandates are focused on urban schools. (2) We need to do a better job of forming a strong alliance between parents, teachers and the community to support our public schools. (3) We need to give our teachers the opportunity to do what they do best - fostering creativity among our students. If we can accomplish these goals, we can go a long ways toward restoring the American dream of a high quality public school education.