

*Education Reform:
A Journalist's Perspective*
Jack Kadden

Thanks so much for inviting me to Juniata College. I must confess that when I first learned I was coming here, I looked up Juniata on the Web and in a couple of college guides, and I was very impressed with what I found.

Today I want to talk about some of the big issues in education, but I want to preface my remarks by saying that I am neither a social scientist nor an educator. My perspective is that of a journalist, a professional observer. My views on education are a result of thinking about what is going on in that world and gauging what is really important from a national perspective – and what might be of interest to readers of the *New York Times*.

I consider myself very fortunate, because when I became Deputy Education Editor at the *Times* three years ago, the world of education was going through one of the biggest transformations in decades. On the national level, the “No Child Left Behind Act” had just been adopted, and the federal government was involving itself

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in education in a way it never had before, imposing the most stringent accountability standards in history. In New York City, meanwhile, Mayor Michael Bloomberg had just gained control of the largest school system in the nation; a system with 1,200 schools, 1.1 million students, and 10,000 teachers.

Without a Board of Education to answer to, he was determined to take the school system apart and put it back together again, changing everything from the curriculum to the size of the bureaucracy to the lunch menus. At the same time, elite colleges around the country were seeing annual student costs exceed \$40,000 a year for the first time, while funding for public colleges was dropping rapidly as states struggled with budget crises. And the world of higher education was awaiting a critical Supreme Court ruling on whether and how colleges could use race as a factor in their admissions decisions. These were all huge, vitally important stories, and it has been enormously exciting to be involved with them.

In my view, however, the No. 1 story for any journalist covering education has been *No Child Left Behind*, because it affects every child in every state and because even now, almost four years since it was passed, we still have only the vaguest idea of how it is affecting our schools and our country.

The goals of the law are highly laudable, which explains why it passed with bipartisan support, making unlikely allies of President Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy. Simply put, the law set out to insure that every child, rich or poor, black or white, was being taught by a qualified teacher, and that his or her school was making steady progress every year toward the goal of having 100 percent of students performing at grade level in reading and math by the year 2014. Nobody could argue with that goal. Nor could anyone challenge the underlying ambition to end what is known as “the achievement gap” – the dramatic difference in educational performance between black and white students. Or, as President Bush often put it, “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

Unfortunately, in my view, the primary vehicle for achieving that laudable goal was high-stakes testing. And that has been highly problematic. Under the law, each state was allowed to pick its own tests and set its own standards, but once it did so, each school had to demonstrate that it was making adequate yearly progress. Not only the school as a whole had to demonstrate improvement,

but every category of student within the school, as broken down by grade, economic level, ethnicity, and disability. In other words, you wouldn't be meeting federal standards if all the white children in a school were making progress, but the black children weren't, or if the special education students weren't meeting standards. Failure to show such progress would mean sanctions, which would get tougher over time. In the end, a failing school could be shut down.

Now, it's fair to ask, what's wrong with that? If a school isn't doing its job, why not send the kids somewhere else. The law allows for that. If your child is attending a school that fails to make adequate yearly progress for three years in a row, you have the right under the law to request a transfer to a better school. But here's the problem. If you're in a suburb where most of the schools are good, transferring from a mediocre school to a better one is an option, though it would undoubtedly pose some bureaucratic and logistical challenges. But if you're in a struggling urban school system, like Chicago, Philadelphia, New York or Los Angeles, there are very few good schools to transfer to. Initially, most cities just threw up their hands and ignored that requirement. New York was the only big city that made a good faith effort to comply, but this year it got a waiver from the federal government for that very reason – there weren't enough places to send the more than 200,000 elementary school students who were eligible for transfer.

An even bigger problem, however, is this – merely setting high standards doesn't mean that schools are any better equipped to do their job. And, merely passing a test doesn't mean you've mastered the skills you need to learn. Which brings me to a very powerful story that appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* in July of 2003 by one of the reporters I work with, Diana Jean Schemo. Diana, who is fiercely tenacious, set out to examine "The Texas Miracle," the great strides that schools in Texas had made under then-Governor George W. Bush. She focused on Houston, which in 2002 was named the best urban school district in the nation and won a \$1 million prize from the Broad Foundation. Texas, and Houston in particular, were the models for No Child Left Behind. At the time, the conventional wisdom was that, whether you liked him or not, George Bush had made the schools in Texas a lot better.

What Diana found is a painful illustration of how focusing on numbers and high stakes testing can distort reality. First, Diana fol-

lowed the lead of some local reporters in documenting that Houston, under Superintendent Rod Paige, who went on to become President Bush's first education secretary, had been cooking the books on dropout rates. Houston claimed that only 1.5 percent of its high school students dropped out. If it were true, that would be an astonishing achievement, since most urban school systems have dropout rates that approach fifty percent. But it wasn't true. Principals were routinely saying that students who had dropped out had merely transferred to another school or moved out of the district. When state officials took a closer look, they determined that Houston's dropout figures were grossly understated and they ordered the city to correct its reporting. Most experts estimated the true dropout rate at close to fifty percent.

But Diana found something even more fascinating. In Houston, students were given two kinds of standardized tests: the Stanford Achievement test that is given across the country and that was used in Houston strictly for diagnostic purposes, and the Texas state test, by which schools and school districts were judged. These results also determined what kinds of raises and bonuses principals and teachers would get. Through a database analysis, Diana found that while the state test showed that schools were improving steadily and that the achievement gap was closing, the Stanford test presented a very different picture. On the Stanford test, the achievement gap was actually growing and test scores were flat. Using the Stanford test as a measure, Houston's schools were doing better than some urban school systems, but they were no better than the Los Angeles schools – and they were far from miraculous. Diana concluded and eventually state officials in Texas agreed that the state test was simply too easy, and not an accurate way to judge students' progress. They have since adopted a much harder test, and the results are more in line with what we see in other states.

In subsequent reporting, Diana found that when kids were prevented from taking the state test because they got to school late, were absent or had some kind of handicap, the vast majority of them were kids who had done poorly on the Stanford test and thus might bring down averages on the state test. Another *Times* reporter, Sam Dillon, reported that Houston also fudged the numbers on violence in the schools, failing to list on state reports more than 2,300 assaults over four years that were reported by the dis-

trict's own police force. In perhaps the most dramatic example, a disabled 17-year-old was shoved into a boys' bathroom in her wheelchair, dragged to the floor and raped. Her attacker was sentenced to twenty years in prison, but Houston did not report that crime to state education officials as required by law.

After each of these stories ran, by the way, Houston officials excoriated the *Times*. But since then, the superintendent has retired, and the new superintendent has promised to make sure that the data that principals provide will be accurate and reliable – even if it isn't positive.

Now, my point is not that the Houston schools are bad, or that school administrators there are dishonest. It is that when you hang everything on the numbers, you risk having school officials focus on achieving better numbers, rather than on educating kids better. As a corollary, because of the sanctions imposed under No Child Left Behind, a number of states that have very high standards, like Michigan, for example, have considered lowering them so their schools aren't penalized. Clearly, this is not what the authors of the law intended.

I am convinced that this country faces no greater challenge than improving its urban schools. It is scandalous that my kids, living in a middle-class suburb in Connecticut, got a superb education, while children living a few miles away in Bridgeport were getting a third-rate education. Just the other day, a colleague of mine argued that when the *Times* prints test scores for various schools, the results are far more about demographics than the quality of education a particular district is providing. I'm not ashamed to admit that I don't have the answer, other than finding dedicated principals and teachers who are passionate about helping kids. And I don't know how you legislate that.

Under intense pressure from the states, the federal government is taking a more relaxed attitude toward enforcing some of the more onerous requirements of No Child Left Behind, like the requirement that teachers have degrees in every subject they teach, which is nearly impossible in rural districts. Democrats in Congress argue, however, that the biggest reason No Child Left Behind isn't showing better results is that the Republican Congress never fully funded it with the \$80 billion a year the law authorized. Republicans respond that they have increased spending on high

poverty schools by forty-two percent, from \$8.8 billion in 2001 to \$12.3 billion in 2004. Whichever side you take politically, clearly one of the big issues is resources.

The courts in New York recently concluded that New York City students have been shortchanged under state funding rules for years, and a court has ordered that an additional \$6 billion a year be spent on the city schools, which would increase spending by more than forty percent. That would allow for smaller classes, better facilities, and more competitive salaries for teachers – who almost always can make more money by teaching in a suburban school.

There is a school of thought in Washington that urban schools are so bad that the only solution is to create competition for them in the form of charter schools – and, ultimately, vouchers. From the studies I've read, the jury is still out on charter schools. Some are terrific and could be models for the public schools, but others have been failures, and government data found that, on average, kids in charter schools perform no better on standardized tests than their counterparts in public schools.

We recently ran a story about Dayton, Ohio, which offers a cautionary tale. Dayton has become the charter school Mecca of the United States. Twenty-six percent of public school students in Dayton now attend charter schools, the highest percentage in the country. Charters drain more than \$40 million a year in state aid from the public school system, and ten more charters have been approved for next year. Even staunch supporters of charter schools fear things have gotten out of hand, and they're asking the legislature to put a moratorium on new charters.

So, where does this leave us? I honestly believe that we are making strides in education. Whatever its flaws, No Child Left Behind has forced local school districts to re-examine their programs, particularly in the cities, and to strive to do better by students in poor neighborhoods who have been ignored in the past. The new accountability standards also mean we will improve the methods by which we judge schools' performance. So far, nobody has found the formula for turning around urban schools. And I suspect there is no such formula. It will take more money, smaller classes, better principals and more dedicated teachers. But in big cities around the country, like New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, the effort has begun.

