

EDUCATIONAL REFORM OR MERE REPLACEMENT SCHOOLS?

By Ronald E. Johnson, Ph.D.

Educational reform has been characterized by such efforts as team teaching, collaborative learning, cramming for tests, open classrooms, single gender schools, four day weeks and computer technology programs for recovering at-risk youth trapped in underperforming public schools. No Child Left Behind ushered in a cadre of pressures to reduce leaver percentages, raise attendance rates, increase academic competencies and entice highly qualified teachers. During the past decade, school choice has entered the arena as a viable option. However, after visiting more than 50 public schools, half a dozen private schools and numerous juvenile correctional facilities, and conducting interviews with dozens of home school families in Arizona, Indiana, New Mexico and Texas during the past two years, I am persuaded that the presence of creative entrepreneurs and innovative educators who establish academic alternatives to failing public schools is not necessarily enhancing educational reform or providing better educational choices.

Thousands of youth are choosing to abandon the entire educational arena rather than endure current educational alternatives or reform efforts. Even though more than 3700 charter schools are operating in America and several million youth are engaged in home and private schools, the issue of educational reform is still up for debate. **A flurry of transfer episodes among students is not evidence of educational reform.** More teenagers are leaving public schools as drop outs than the combination of school-age children involved in charters, home and private schools. In spite of so-called reform programs, status quo public schools and many schools of choice have basically remained un-reformed for four decades. The difference today is that millions of children have exercised the choice to leave the system, rather than exercise patience while officials experiment with educational reform in America's public schools.

Some students transfer to private schools in hope of a better education. And many actually get a better academic program. Ironically, if schools of choice are measured only or primarily by data associated with state accountability criteria for status quo public schools (academic assessment scores, attendance, adequate yearly progress), then schools of choice are not necessarily different or better than regular public schools. **Schools of choice often operate with the same kind of facilities, similar textbooks, equally qualified teachers, and identical calendars and daily schedules.** Perhaps that is significant with the 13% of charters nationwide which are rated as "unacceptable." Moreover, the number of disciplinary alternative programs is increasing, but they experience as high as 80% recidivism rates. **We can conclude that many alternatives schools operate on par with failing public schools: status quo replicated.**

Some legislators, educators and public leaders confuse educational reform with the establishment and operation of academic alternatives to regular public schools. However, if reformed or alternative schools are based on the same style of classrooms, similar textbooks, and equally certified teachers, the only real difference is facility location, staff personality and/or vision of the administration in schools of choice.

Does that establish educational reform or simply constitute a different image and location of status quo education? Students who transfer from standard public schools to alternative schools of choice improve only when the schools of choice address personal and academic issues which were also prevalent in the regular public schools, but were not adequately addressed by teachers.

The word, “reform” means “to make better or improve by removal of faults, to correct or improve one’s own character or habits.” Two significant terms are included: removal of faults and correction of character or habits. Educators have assumed that schools fail because of lack of funding, poor facilities or ill-prepared staff. Those are legitimate factors to be considered. However, new facilities, more funding and different faculty may only perpetuate institutional failure and procrastination of educational reform because of **the erroneous limited perception that the purpose of school is to prepare youth for a career or college. That, moreover, is probably a basic reason educational reform is not occurring in spite of the growth of so-called alternatives to public schools. Schools fail because their primary focus is faulty.**

Assessments, accountability and academic messages will not uncton school reform until educators reform their perspective and purpose for schools. Contemporary focus is to prepare students for either a blue collar career or college (and hopefully a white collar career) that will provide financial security through old age. **Any school, whether regular or alternative, that operates with such a narrow focus needs not reform, but replacement!**

That is essentially what is happening in the school choice movement. Sadly, regular public schools are being replaced with like kind rather than being reformed. Perhaps one of the reasons that replacement is taking place rather than reform is that the replacements are not a whole lot different than status quo schools, which see little reason to change their focus. (Why change focus when the replacements are basically replicas of status quo? Just demand more money for aides, materials, and room decorations.)

Ironically, some “replacement schools” are experiencing identifiable positive differences in their product: academic scores are at least equal with public schools, incarceration rates are lower, violence is less frequent, and college performance is equal to or better than regular public schools. Researchers can legitimately tout high college performance among home school students, however, such data does not include home school children whose parents withdraw their children from public school primarily to avoid accountability for frequent truancy or misconduct. Those students do not perform well in society, and seldom attend post-high school programs.

Moreover, some “replacement schools” inherit old buildings, hire uncertified teachers, and use dog-eared textbooks...and still outperform the local public schools from which students transferred to the “replacement” charter, home, contract or private schools. The “replacement” schools are housed in similar facilities, use similar textbooks and operate on similar calendars and daily schedules. The difference is faculty and some variations in procedures and focus.

However, most “replacement” schools are usually the “same” with the added components of character training, discipline, Judeo-Christian concepts, high expectations and/or more rigorous academic accountability...components parents deserve and demand! Those components do effectuate a measurable improvement over status quo schools. But those measurable differences alone do not constitute educational reform.

Remember our previous definition of reform: ”to make better and to change habits and character.” Those terms suggest that true educational reform necessitates inculcation of a greater component than similar schedules, hardback textbooks, technology, facilities, and highly-qualified teachers. The entire purpose or point of academic focus must also be reformed.

The reason some home school and private, religious-based schools produce good citizens, employable people, and competent college students is because such schools are not merely “replacement schools”: **they add the component of focus on life purpose.** Good schools (real reformed schools of choice) are those which focus not only on preparing graduates for careers or college, but for life. Such schools have discovered that teenagers want answers to three basic questions: “Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?” *The Purpose Driven Life* rocketed to the best seller list because it hit a vital nerve among the population that was struggling with issues beyond good grades, high attendance, diplomas and secure employment through old age. People want to know why they exist. **They want answers to the question, “Is this all there is to life: preparing for a job?”** They want and deserve an education that provides more than academics that prepare for state assessments and long term employment. **Educational reform measured by “replacement schools“ will continue to fall short of making education better as long as most schools fail to focus on educational opportunities that shape character and habits...to prepare students for life, not just careers. #**

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