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Fwd: He said they could not make schools worse

1 message

Jason Bauer <jbauer@panaschools.com> Mon, Jul 15, 2019 at 8:02 AM
To: Nicole Blodgett <nblodgett@panaschools.com>

August Board Meeting

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He said they could not make schools worse

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

[NOTE: There has been no change in the status of the 68 bills we are tracking. The governor has received them all for his review, and has signed six.]

It's been 20 years, just about now, since that strange 1999 interview. It was in Chicago. I'd been granted exactly one hour to talk with a man who had never attended a public school in his life, whose children also had never been enrolled in a public school, and yet he'd become *chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education*.

How did that happen? (With your right hand, rub your thumb back and forth against the tips of your index and middle fingers a few times.) Right. Super-rich Ronald Gidwitz had invested $22,000 the year before in the gubernatorial campaign of George Ryan. Then in April, Ryan appointed Gidwitz to the SBE position.

On the day I met with him, Gidwitz was all excited - but not about talking with me. He'd just returned from the Lone Star State where he had conferred with the governor there about the "Texas Miracle" that he'd heard so much about. Tests were aligned to the kids' lessons, so teachers could be held "accountable," he said.

What if the kids learn only the answers to test questions? Well, Gidwitz said, at least that's something, maybe it's enough. But it's so experimental, I said. There's more than two million kids in Illinois schools; what if this is wrong? "Public schools are so broken," Gidwitz assured me, "*there's nothing we could do to make them worse*."

Actually, education "reform" was already under way at that time. Gov. Jim Edgar and State Farm CEO Ed Rust had been to the Achieve, Inc., conference in Atlanta at

which state governors and business leaders (no educators were invited) were told about state standards and assessments and educator "accountability."

The "voluntary" standards were codified in 1997. (There was a fight over the science standards. A senator from Palatine prevailed, so we had to call it "change over time," not "evolution.") The tests linked to the standards *had consequences and were mandatory*. Still, they claimed to have created no "state curriculum."

How did it all work out? Well, the Texas Miracle was found to be "more hat than cattle". But that didn't stop the Texas governor from imposing it on the whole country (as the No Child Left Behind Act) after he became president. There's still a residue of politics in the issue, but few folks brag these days about NCLB.

Updates: George Ryan served his time and is now a prisons expert. Rod Blagojevich "got a raw deal," he told the news media. Ron Gidwitz is now Ambassador to Belgium; apparently he continues to purchase appointments from Republicans who win elections to executive branch offices. George W. Bush's true talent has emerged.

What about the promise not to make it worse? Credible voices say roiling American education - which began in 1983 and is just now easing up - damaged the system severely, changed teaching in ways that have harmed learning, and actually widened the "achievement gap" that the perpetrators claimed they wanted to close.

This article in The Atlantic describes how shifting the focus *away from knowledge* and toward skills made learning to read more difficult. Reading improvement been a central goal of education "reform" - and a frustration through the years for advocates of the test-and-punish-teachers model of reform.

The article's author, journalist Natalie Wexler, has written the top release in Amazon's "Curricula" book category, entitled *The Knowledge Gap: The hidden cause of America's broken education system....* She draws heavily from psychologist Daniel Willingham's conclusion that knowledge is key to learning to read.

Are Wexler and Willingham right about this? Perhaps. They seem credible. Their cause-effect linkage seems sound. Their evidence of the failure of the "reform" model seems accurate. The states' lying about all their children being academically "above average" (like in Lake Wobegone) is thoroughly documented.

Couldn't make it worse? Gidwitz sure was wrong about that. Hope he's not hatching any schemes to "improve" the lives of the citizens of Belgium.

One more link back to The Atlantic: The article is a confession, really, a stream of remorse from a wealthy venture capitalist who got blinded by the promise of what he calls "educationism," a belief system whose central tenet is that, if the schools could just get everything right, *all social ills would fade away*.

As Nick Hanauer tells it: "All told, I have devoted countless hours and millions of dollars to the simple idea that if we improved our schools - if we modernized our curricula and our teaching methods, substantially increased school funding, rooted out bad teachers, and opened enough charter schools - American children, especially those in low-income and working-class communities, would start learning again. Graduation rates and wages would increase, poverty and inequality would decrease, and public commitment to democracy would be restored."

After "decades of organizing and giving" to this flawed system, Hanauer has repented:

"What I've realized, decades late, is that educationism is tragically misguided. American workers are struggling in large part because they are underpaid - and they are underpaid because 40 years of trickle-down policies have rigged the economy in favor of wealthy people like me." [Hanauer provided that link.]

He quotes economist Lawrence Mishel on how "poverty creates obstacles" to learning that schools cannot compensate for, and on "children who frequently change schools due to poor housing; have little help with homework; have few role models of success; have

more exposure to lead and asbestos; have untreated vision, ear, dental, or other health problems; ... and live in a chaotic and frequently unsafe environment."

I find Hanauer's recent realization convicing. Why? Because it agrees with my view, of course. From the start of ISNS, since 1995, I've written often that schools are a "window to their community." To improve learning, improve community conditions that affect the children. I did not originate this idea. Teachers told me.

Educationism is a flawed attempt at *social progress on the cheap*. Many wealth elites (perhaps most of them) bought into it because, if it would work, they could keep soaring economically - but with a lighter burden of guilt for the way the economy is rigged for their benefit and to the detriment of most Americans.

Four decades. Takes you back to 1980. What happened back then to facilitate a rigged economy? Oh, yes, the election of an Illinois native as president. The graduated federal income tax had a top rate of 70% when Ronald Reagan took office. He was so likable he was able to get it cut to 39%. Federal policy was hamstrung.

Federal debt as since soared while Reagan's party has whittled away at federal involvement in healthcare, social services of all kinds, regulation of predatory financial institutions (no, wait, Bill Clinton ruined that) and a whole range of programs to help working men and women to survive tough economic transitions.

Schools have a role to play, of course. They should be supported and then allowed to play their role without interference. Fact is, public schools are still very highly rated by the folks whose opinions mean the most, parents of the children they serve. This is in spite of the corporate sector meddling.

Moving on now to another stressful social issue, observe that 2019 means that Brown v. the Board of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine - and required integration of public school by whatever means are necessary - has been the law for 65 years.

The Education Trust has posted an exceptional special edition episode of its "Extraordinary Districts" series, a podcast entitled: "Segregation, Integration and the Milford Eleven." It tells the story of a court case that happened in the state of Deleware, a case later seen to have a *profound influence* on Brown v. the Board.

I won't tell you the whole story. You should access it. But I will say that it represented an unusual victory for those who were not afraid to point out that *separate was not equal.* And the story is *told in the voices of the people* who played the dramatic roles - including the reprehensible, profiteering "outside agitator."

Yes, an investment of time is required. The audio is about 55 minutes long. But you'll be glad you listened. It sets the scene for, makes far more intelligible, the final court drama that contributed to the decline in American cities, the sprawl of the suburbs, and helped cause the term "good schools" to mean, for many, "white schools."

Separate but equal applied to more than just schools, of course. In fact, its instantiation in law resulted from a case that had nothing to do with schools. Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) was a losing challenge to segregated passenger train cars. It was applied to all manner of public accommodations until the 1960s.

Perhaps nothing created more racial tension than swimming facilities. That's where the Chicago race riot started in 1919, after all. Here's an article that begins with a photo of a Florida motel manager *throwing acid into a pool* where "white and African American integrationists" had gone for a swim.

And this *was in 1964,* well within the memory of citizens today.

In 1962, the municipal swimming pool at Cairo, Illinois, was converted into a whites-only private club to avoid allowing black residents to swim in it. Blacks were still barred from even entering the park where the East St. Louis swimming facility was located in 1961, when I graduated from "East Side High" and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force (more than a decade after the military was integrated by order of President Harry S Truman).

Integration, worked very well in the military, where orders are orders. Integrating the schools was a far more complicated and emotional challenge. It took many years for many communities to even marginally honor the judicial mandates. And, over time, regression set in. Segregation is again quite common.

Every ten years the concern is raised: How can we get an accurate census count? It's coming up again, even as the census documents that are to be delivered to every household and individual residing in the United States have been sent to the printers. Accurate counts are another politically divisive issue.

As you know, the Trump Administration has advocated putting a "citizenship" question in the census questionnaire. The noisy rhetoric and libelous twittering seems to have failed, but the headlines have achieved Trump's goal to reduce the willingness of immigrants - even legal ones - to respond to the survey.

Gov. JB Pritzker announced that Illinois would lose $120 million in federal funding per year, $1.2 billion for the decade, for each percentage point by which the state's population is under-counted. The citizenship question frightens immigrants who believe the federal government looking for ways to deport them.

Pritzker has allocated $29 million for a "census outreach" program, to inform and encourage census survey responses. All areas of the state - not just those with large numbers of immigrant residents - would suffer losses as a result of a census under-count, so a successful outreach effort is in everyone's interest.

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