

Beware of School “Reformers”

Beware of School "Reformers"

By Alfie Kohn

"If we taught babies to talk as most skills are taught in school, they would memorize lists of sounds in a predetermined order and practice them alone in a closet."

— Linda Darling-Hammond

Political progressives are in short supply on the president-elect's list of cabinet nominees. When he turns his attention to the Department of Education, what are the chances he will choose someone who is educationally progressive?

In fact, just such an individual is said to be in the running, and, perhaps for that very reason, has been singled out for scorn in editorials in the *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune* as well as in a *New York Times* column by David Brooks and a *New Republic* article — all published almost simultaneously in early December. The thrust of these articles, using eerily similar language, is that we must reject the "forces of the status quo" which are "allied with the teachers' unions" and choose someone who represents "serious education reform."

To decode how that last word is being used here, recall its meaning in the context of welfare (under Clinton) or environmental laws (under Reagan and Bush). For Republicans, education "reform" typically includes support for vouchers and other forms of privatization. But groups with names like Democrats for Education Reform—along with many mainstream publications—are disconcertingly allied with conservatives in just about every other respect. To be a school "reformer" is to support:

- * a heavy reliance on fill-in-the-bubble standardized tests to evaluate students and schools, generally in place of more authentic forms of assessment;
- * the imposition of prescriptive, top-down teaching standards and curriculum mandates;
- * a disproportionate emphasis on rote learning—memorizing facts and practicing skills—particularly for poor kids;
- * a behaviorist model of motivation in which rewards (notably money) and punishments are used on teachers and students to compel compliance or raise test scores;
- * a corporate sensibility and an economic rationale for schooling, the point being to prepare children to "compete" as future employees; and
- * charter schools, many of which are run by for-profit companies.

Notice that these features are already pervasive, which means "reform" actually signals more of the same—or, perhaps, intensification of the status quo with variations like one-size-fits-all *national* curriculum standards or longer school days (or years). Almost never questioned, meanwhile, are the core elements of traditional schooling, such as lectures, worksheets, quizzes, grades, homework, punitive discipline, and competition. That would require real reform, which of course is off the table.

Sadly, all but one of the people reportedly being considered for Secretary of Education (SOE) are reformers only in this Orwellian sense of the word. The exception is Linda Darling-Hammond, a former teacher, expert on teacher quality, and professor of education at Stanford. The favored contenders include assorted governors and two corporate-style school chiefs: Arne Duncan, whose all-too-apt title is "chief executive officer" of Chicago Public Schools, and his counterpart in New York City, former CEO and high-powered lawyer Joel Klein.

Duncan, a basketball buddy of Obama's, has been called a "budding hero in the education business" by Bush's former SOE Rod Paige. Just as the test-crazy nightmare of Paige's Houston served as a national model (when it should have been a cautionary tale) in 2001, so Duncan would bring to Washington an agenda based on "Renaissance 2010," which Chicago education activist Michael Klonsky describes as a blend of "more standardized testing, closing neighborhood schools, militarization, and the privatization of school management." Even before NCLB, Duncan boasted, "Chicago took the initiative to hold students accountable to annual state assessments" and to get "back to basics with our curriculum, aligning it to the state academic standards all the way down to optional daily lesson plans."

Duncan's philosophy is shared by Klein, who is despised by educators and parents in his district perhaps more than any superintendent in the nation (see Lynnell Hancock, "School's Out," *The Nation*, July 9, 2007). In a survey of 62,000 NYC teachers this past summer, roughly 80 percent disapproved of his approach. Indeed, talk of his candidacy has prompted three separate anti-Klein petitions that rapidly collected thousands of signatures. One, at StopJoelKlein.org, describes his administration as "a public relations exercise camouflaging the systematic elimination of parental involvement; an obsessively test-driven culture; a growing atmosphere of fear, disillusionment, and intimidation experienced by professionals; and a flagrant manipulation of school data." (The only current petition I know of to promote an SOE candidate is one for Darling-Hammond, at www.petitiononline.com/2Hammond/petition.html.)

Both Duncan and Klein pride themselves on new programs that pay students for higher grades or scores. Both champion the practice of forcing low-scoring students to repeat a grade — a strategy that research overwhelmingly finds counterproductive. Coincidentally, Darling-Hammond wrote about just such campaigns against "social promotion" in New York and Chicago, pointing out that politicians keep trotting out the same failed get-tough strategies "with no sense of irony or institutional memory." In that same 2001 essay, she also showed how earlier experiments with high-stakes testing have mostly served to increase the dropout rate.

Klein and Duncan, along with the virulently anti-progressive D.C. school chancellor Michelle Rhee, are celebrated by politicians and pundits. Darling-Hammond, meanwhile, tends to be the choice of people who understand how children actually learn. Consider her wry comment that introduces this article: It's literally impossible to imagine a comparable insight coming from any of the spreadsheet-oriented, pump-up-the-scores "reformers" (or, for that matter, from any previous SOE). Darling-Hammond knows how all the talk of "rigor" and "raising the bar" has produced a sterile, scripted curriculum that has been imposed disproportionately on children of color. Her viewpoint, in short,

is that of an educator, not a corporate manager.

Imagine—an educator running the Department of Education.

Copyright © 2008 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author's name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. Please write to the address indicated on the Contact Us page.

www.alfiekohn.org – © Alfie Kohn