

Standardized Education Serves Nobody

By Jennifer J. Ross, Ed.D.

Florida's next Senate president and House speaker are worlds apart on education philosophy. "(Jim) King wants to improve standards in public schools; (Johnnie) Byrd is a strong proponent of vouchers," Democrat Capitol bureau chief Nancy Cook Lauer described the mismatched Republicans on Feb 17.

Meanwhile, organized teachers march for salary increases and Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, among others, wants specific class sizes written into the state constitution. So many ways to replace the diverse with the standard, the individual with the collective.

There's nothing standard about learning or human development. Standardization ignores the cognitive sciences. It ignores revolutionary technology. It ignores sleep and memory research, and Daniel Pink's evidence that we're becoming a "Free Agent Nation," and chunks of our Bill of Rights and post-Sept. 11 yearnings for home and hearth.

And almost spitefully, it ignores the boom in charter and magnet schools, part-time and dual enrollment, resource centers, cyber-schooling, home-schooling and unschooling. In short, it ignores everything that families choose one child at a time instead of marching on the Capitol to demand.

Must the public impose decisions on everybody's children, or could public schools respect each family's autonomy more as public libraries do, instead of being so darned "standard"?

Here's a stumper: Is group learning possible without individual learning? In January, authors for Arizona State University's education policy unit reported that union schools show slightly improved test scores for "standard" students. But unionism harms students at the top and bottom more than it helps those in the middle.

"Disadvantaged children are disproportionately represented among the lowest-achieving students, and may be among those least served by unionism," wrote the researchers. It is classic tragedy, this banding together to help the least standard students, only to harm them instead.

So standard process is one flawed answer, but standard product can be just as tragic. When choice advocates challenge public education to include individual learning options, but use test score comparisons to judge each program's success, they twist personal choice into just another standard dead end.

Harvard psychiatry professor Robert Stickgold discussed sleep and learning on National Public Radio's "The Diane Rehm Show" last month. Asked if cramming before an exam was more effective than a good night's sleep, he said the answer depends on which you want: to possess the knowledge for your own lifetime, or to get a high test score and remember nothing three days later. Guess which answer standard schooling rewards?

Many enlightened parents, teachers, politicians and business people understand that each child is an individual, not a number to be crunched or a blank disk to be burned, wiped and re-burned.

Nine out of 10 parents were publicly schooled. If they are unfit as adults to direct the education of their own children, then public schooling should hang its collective head and change its ways - not cement its collective failures into the constitution.

Remember, public education belongs to and affects each of us individually. Families whose children learn on the computer, at church or at home, or who fail to learn at all, remain members of the "public" as much as any PTA member or union operative. Each of us is responsible for what public education is, and what it may become.

Even though preferences are predictable in the aggregate, individual choice in learning fosters the

eccentric, the diverse, the personally satisfying instead of the standard. It matches talents to achievement much more effectively. Success in today's most complex human enterprises (politics and parenting included) depends upon individual effort and initiative, not compulsory standardization.

Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner suggests in "The Disciplined Mind" that the entire K-12 curriculum should reflect a personal exploration of "the good, the true, and the beautiful." He believes our global future will depend on public education that is deep and intensely human, not broad and standardized.

In Leon County, district administrators Phyllis Porter and Jim Croteau quietly nudge public school educators to respect and support individual parents and to work - when invited - as members of a crack resource team for each child's benefit.

It is time to recognize that the parent is in control, not the government. Public education can help parents exercise the responsibility constitutionally reserved for them as private citizens. Public education can acknowledge real human diversity and serve it, rather than ignoring it or trying to legislate it out of existence.

And we all can demand that all our professional players stop dressing up in the same old uniforms to play the same old game.

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