

Afterword: Storming the Educational Barricades

By Evans Clinchy

As Robert Fried and the contributors to this special edition make clear, the time has arrived for all of us to rise up and come to the rescue of our American system of public education from its domination by the current regime of “accountability” based on high-stakes standardized testing.

And “all of us” means just that. While we in the educational profession — and especially those of us in schools and colleges of education and our professional unions and organizations — should play the leading role here, we need to build a coalition of parents, teachers, school and central office administrators, school board members and all concerned citizens, public officials and political leaders.

The aim of such a coalition would be to launch a new educational civil rights movement aimed at restoring control of our public schools to the democratic citizen constituency that has historically been its rightful possessor. Through this process, we will restore the profession of education to its legitimate position in the

intellectual life of this country and allow the passionate teaching and inspired learning that the contributors speak of to flourish, rather than try to survive on the margins of standardized testing.

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A number of the contributors to this issue describe the educational horrors of the present authoritarian, undemocratic assault on our traditional system of public schooling: the imposition on all students, all

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parents, all teachers, all schools and school systems of a narrow, arbitrary, academic orthodoxy of rigid instructional “standards” cruelly enforced by “high stakes” standardized testing, an imposition that effectively subverts so many of our attempts to assist children and young people to develop themselves as passionate seekers of truth, independent thinkers, and responsible citizens of a truly democratic society.

Although this assault has been in progress now for at least the past 25 to 30 years, it has reached its most overt and destructive form with the Bush administration’s 2001 “No Child Left Behind” legislation. The regimen of high-stakes testing effectively puts our public schools in the intellectual and educational straitjacket described by the contributors here, a structure that undermines the ability of idealistic teachers to make their students’ zest for learning the highest priority of their teaching. It not only restricts our students (and their parents) to a single approach to schooling but effectively de-professionalizes education and renders our schools and colleges of education largely irrelevant.

How can our scholars of education, our teachers of teachers, and the thousands of professional educators who serve America’s youth in our public schools exercise their professional judgment on how to help diverse children learn how to learn well, if they are told at every step of the way what specific bits of information every student must acquire and how we must teach it to them? How can educators and citizens discourse about the kind of schooling they believe is best, if the system allows for no for genuine educational diversity or parental choice in the matter of testing? What happens to the power of teachers as role-models of lifelong learning, once students see them as mere pawns in the game of cranking up a school’s test score ratings?

The democratic rationale for the local control of public schooling — what is to be taught, who is to teach it and how the results are to be assessed — was eloquently set forth in a majority decision by U.S. Supreme Court in 1973:

In an era that has witnessed a consistent trend toward centralization of the functions of government, local sharing of responsibility for public education has survived . . . [T]hat local control is not only vital to continued public support of the schools, but it is of overriding importance from an educational standpoint as well. . . . Each locality is free to tailor local programs to local needs. Pluralism also affords some opportunity for experimentation, innovation and a healthy competition for educational excellence. No area of social concern stands to profit more from a multiplicity of viewpoints and from a diversity of approaches than does public education.¹

I would hope that readers of this issue come away with the feelings that have been reaffirmed within me after reading these essays; namely, that there are people out there, in the universities and colleges and throughout our public school classrooms, who are struggling to help education remain a profession of people dedicated to passionate learning and teaching. Let us find ways to support them, to

champion their efforts, and, by a joining together of thoughtful people, to remove the chains that bind them and their students to a repressive, alien, simplistic and anti-intellectual view of what we mean by “accountability” in education. Let’s bring “civil rights” back to the classroom.²

Notes

¹ San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, U.S. Supreme Court, 411 U.S. 1 (1973).

² For a more detailed argument for and description of such a civil rights movement, see *The Rights of All Our Children: A Plea for Action* by Evans Clinchy, 2002, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.