

Student Learning and Teachers' Performance in America

The National Education Association Flunks a Crucial Test

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The New York Times coverage of the recent National Education Association (N.E.A.) convention focused on the inconsequential, while paying little notice to what harbored fundamental significance. It aimed its spotlight and lingered on what it referred to as a shift in position: "... the nation's largest teachers' union on Monday affirmed for the first time that evidence of student learning must be considered in the evaluations of school teachers around the country." (The New York Times, July 5, 2011).

In fact, there was little in the way of concessions by N.E.A. on this point, as The New York Times article itself conceded: "But blunting the policy's potential impact, the union also made clear that it continued to oppose the use of existing standardized test scores to judge teachers..." And the Times added that the N.E.A. went on to insist that only those tests that have been shown to be "developmentally appropriate, scientifically valid and reliable for the purpose of measuring both student learning and a teacher's performance" should be used. This qualification eliminates almost, if not all, conventional tests.

The N.E.A. is right to be cautious about basing teacher evaluations and the fate of teachers on the test scores of their students, as the Obama administration has been single-mindedly promoting. We know that students' standardized test scores are correlated above all with their economic standing. As Joe Nocera recently pointed out in an op-ed New York Times article (April 25, 2011): "Going back to the famous Coleman report in the 1960s, social scientists have contended — and unquestionably proved — that students' socioeconomic backgrounds vastly outweigh what goes on in the school as factors in determining how much they learn."

With the growing inequalities in wealth in the U.S., where money is increasingly concentrated at the top while the working people and poor are losing ground, it becomes even more irrational and even criminal to hold teachers responsible for low test scores. But the Obama administration, which is dominated by the interests of those at the top, is studiously ignoring this point.

The bigger problem with all tests, however, is that they rest on subjective values regarding which skills are important and which are not. Tests that place an emphasis on the ability to regurgitate random information rest on one set of values. Tests that encourage critical thinking and the challenging of basic assumptions rest on a different set of values. The problem with standardized tests is that they do not allow students to challenge the significance, relevance or clarity of the questions being asked them on these tests. The framework of the standardized test does not allow for the give and take that can transpire

between a teacher and a challenging student. In other words, these tests rule out one of the most important educational skills a student can acquire: the ability to challenge the test-giver. They instead reflect the kind of values employers often prize at a workplace: willingness to follow directions —no matter how unethical or irrational — without raising troubling questions.

And this takes us back to the N.E.A. convention. The most significant step taken with a vote of almost 2 to 1 — and the point that should have been the major focus of The New York Times article — was the decision to endorse Barack Obama for his election run in 2012. Did two-thirds of the teachers at the N.E.A. convention suddenly lose their critical thinking faculties simultaneously? Did they really feel compelled to accept the conventional political framework where they must always endorse either a Democrat or Republican, choosing the lesser of two evils?

Without doubt, the Obama administration has been the bane of public education. Its emphasis on standardized tests as the determining factor in evaluating teachers throws rationality and critical thinking aside by ignoring the scientific data that proves student test scores do not provide a simple correlation with a teacher's abilities. The Obama administration's avid promotion of charter schools has actually lowered the quality of education, if one uses the criterion that the administration loves most: standardized test scores. And when a charter school replaces a traditional public school, the teachers' union is de facto eliminated, which is often the hidden motive behind the charter school campaign. Teachers' unions are what stand between teachers and slave wages, which is what many in the corporate world would prefer. And the unions protect senior teachers with higher salaries from being replaced by new, lower paid teachers who are just beginning their careers. Cash-strapped schools often take advantage of this practice if there is no union to stop it.

With someone like Arne Duncan as Obama's Secretary of Education promoting all these policies and operating as a kind of a role model to students and teachers alike while creating an environment that is hostile to any real learning, it is nothing short of a miracle that eager students and teachers are still exercising their critical thinking skills at all. As long as the N.E.A. as well as organized labor in general remain tied to the corporate-dominated Democratic Party, public education will deteriorate, critical thinking will be undermined, wages will remain low, and the working class will continue to suffer a decline.

But there is an alternative. Organized labor has the resources to pursue its own political agenda where it defends the interests of all working people in the face of this current historic corporate attack. As a start, it could mobilize working people in massive demonstrations to demand that the politicians respond to the needs of the majority of Americans: full funding for public education and social services, no cuts but a stronger Social Security and Medicare, a massive federal job creation program, and raising taxes on Wall Street and the rich in order to fund these programs. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka has already called for a strong independent labor movement. Massive demonstrations could be a first step in this direction, because working people will be standing up for themselves, not sitting back and relying on the politicians. But the logic of this first step will then lead to a second step: the creation of a labor party whose goal would be the defense and promotion of the interests of all working people.

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