
No One Ever Said It Would Be Easy

A Response to Parish and Aquila

BY KIM MARSHALL

Mr. Marshall, the principal of an inner-city elementary school, points out that looking at student learning is the key to boosting our least-advantaged students.

I AM AN inner-city principal who embraces Jeff Howard's radical assertion that virtually all children can meet rigorous standards for high school graduation. I am painfully aware that many children, especially those born into poverty, are not achieving at levels that will give them a decent life in the 21st century. And I share with Ralph Parish and Frank Aquila the sense that schools fail to change the pattern of inequality of their entering students. In fact, as they progress through most of our schools, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

But to make schools the social equalizers they are purported to be, what would Parish and Aquila have us do? The five challenges they accurately describe are of Everest-like proportions, but they have provided us with the educational equivalent of a windbreaker and a pair of sneakers with which to get to the summit.

• Few Americans believe that all children *can* learn at high levels. Most believe that children are born (as Jeff Howard puts

it) very smart, sorta smart, and kinda dumb. Most educators doubt that it is possible to change this basic endowment no matter how effective a learning experience they provide. By and large, teachers work hard, get unequal results (with some students not making it), and do not see that as a reflection on their work.

• Even fewer teachers believe that all children *should* learn at high levels. There is a deep-seated attitude that students get the grades they deserve. Many teachers just teach, test, and move on to the next unit.

• Most teachers want to be left alone to "do my work." Typically, teaching goes on in isolation from colleagues, and the best teachers often resemble what Grant Wiggins calls "self-employed entrepreneurs" who don't spend much time thinking about the impact they might have collectively on students over time.

• Most principals are inundated with discipline problems and paperwork. They spend little time in classrooms and even less time in meaningful dialogues with teachers about student learning. Most principals (and central administrators) are silent on the issue of the inequitable distribution of student outcomes, and they utterly fail to function as transformational educational leaders.

• Adversarial relationships pervade many schools. With contractual provisions confining teachers' work and administrators' power, it is very difficult to get everyone working together to improve student outcomes — let alone trying to make the distribution of those outcomes more equitable.

These are the very challenges that the Mather School staff and I have wrestled with over the last nine years. We have made some progress in raising our expectations,

fostering teamwork among grade-level colleagues, getting past us-versus-them thinking on union work rules, and talking more about teaching and learning.¹ But the pace has been much too slow. We are only now beginning to move effectively on issues of student outcomes and the systematic improvement of teaching. If I had told the mother of a Mather School student in 1987, "Sorry, but it will be nine years before the school is really effective," she would have slapped my face and marched her child right out of the building.

What advice could I have given myself as a new principal in 1987 to have gotten where we are today much more quickly? Parish and Aquila have few specific insights to offer. For starters, they don't tell us how to bring about the sea change involved in getting a staff to believe that virtually all children *can* and *should* learn at high levels. It's not enough to write a powerful mission statement and post "All Children Can Learn" signs all over the place. It's not enough to bring in a program like Reading Recovery that shows that even high-risk first-graders can be taught to read on a level with their peers. And it's not enough to support the professional development of veteran teachers and hire bright and energetic new teachers. All of this is necessary, but not sufficient. The issue of expectations must be addressed directly in a systematic and brutally honest exercise in staff training, like the four-day Efficacy workshop that our staff went through last spring. Now we have a common vocabulary about high expectations, and we can develop our skill in demanding more of our students.

On the issue of teamwork, teachers can be lured out of their isolation behind closed doors only if there is the time, the train-

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danger other values they hold dear." Even a cursory review of history, anthropology, and the substantial literature on change should suggest to the authors that they are repeating old truths in superficial ways rather than presenting any new insights. The sun does indeed rise in the East.

Second, I am irritated by the authors' bad history and complete lack of data. Let me take one of the most flagrant of many examples. We are told that the current "change programs" for "school renewal," associated with Henry Levin, TheodoreSizer, James Comer, and John Goodlad, are "almost exactly like" those of the 1970s and that current efforts are beginning to "die ignoble deaths." Speaking for the Center for Educational Renewal (co-directed by John Goodlad), let me assure the authors and *Kappan* readers that the Center addresses matters of the simultaneous renewal of schools and the education of educators and does so in ways that are hardly "exactly like" the 1970s programs the authors so casually cite. Reports of our demise are premature, given these major efforts and the establishment of centers of pedagogy at the 34 colleges and universities and the more than 100 school dis-

tricts linked in the Center's National Network for Educational Renewal. To the best of our knowledge, the authors have not visited any of the sites in the National Network, nor did they talk with us. Bad history, bad methodology.

Third, the authors misrepresent what is generally recognized as the "social reproduction" framework. They claim that this framework can be recognized by code words such as "decline of the family" and "test score declines." An astonishing claim! I know of nowhere in the social reproduction literature that such "code words" apply.

Fourth, I am irritated by statements such as "Even when national priorities were clearly stated and significant funding for reform was made available, America's urban schools remained essentially unchanged." Of course they remained unchanged, if you buy the authors' claim that nothing can be changed. But where are the data that suggest that national priorities were ever clearly stated? And on what basis do they say that "significant funding" was ever made available, let alone used in relevant ways?

Fifth, I am irritated by the authors' cavalier approach to the future. Things are in-

capable of being changed because of unconsciously observed cultural rules that are known only to a select few. But the authors are nonetheless optimistic: all of a sudden, major cultural change is not only possible, but its "time has come." We're about to enter the 21st century; I suppose the authors believe that that is as good a reason as any to say that what we haven't done for three decades (apparently the authors' historical horizon) we will now do because "it's time." Again, no data and no historical analysis. But there is just that one major contradiction in the larger argument: the world does not change, and it never has; now it is going to.

Finally, I am irritated because the authors are talking about matters that are — and certainly should be — of great importance. Tracking, equity, diversity, social class, and the purpose of schools are issues that need to be addressed in fundamental ways. The authors are willing to raise these issues, and certainly they are to be applauded for doing so. But they fail to address these issues in any serious way. Their good intentions are obscured by a mass of contradictions, bad history, and faulty analysis.

Let me move to what offends me. I am offended by the authors' smugness and implied superiority. We are told that we have a bunch of educators out there who are unconsciously doing what they can to protect their turf, as they root and grub in some sort of Hobbesian world. Despite leaving an astonishing trail of bad history and bad methodology, the authors claim that they have somehow transcended this barely sentient existence. They alone understand the deeper meaning of social life; they alone can discriminate between illusion and reality. They claim to be conscious of what remains hidden to the rest of us. They're right up there with Socrates, I suppose, while the rest of us remain in Plato's Cave.

Let me close by reminding the authors that not all change is good. It just may be that some people are not unconscious of what they are about and have their own good reasons for opposing the changes proposed by transformatively enlightened outside change agents. If I were in a school that was being hit on by such agents — especially by those who think they know the rules that unconsciously govern my professional and personal life — I would probably be one of those in steadfast opposition. **K**



"I wouldn't worry about it. It's not that abnormal for students in surroundings that are new to exhibit shyness . . . especially when it runs in the family."