

## IS CURRENT “EDUCATIONAL REFORM” A FRAUD?

David S. Martin, President, non-profit North American Feuerstein Alliance

Throughout the United States today, we see significant conversation in the public media—newspapers, television, internet—about the need for reform in America’s educational system, particularly the public educational system. These conversations focus on several themes:

1. Many plans are being floated by governmental entities, including federal, state, and local levels. A large proportion of these plans, in one form or another, is focused on teacher evaluation and some type of usage of student-test scores as a key element of that evaluation process.
2. Another continuing movement is school re-organization, in which school districts are closing some schools, reconstituting other schools, and requiring teachers to re-apply for their positions.
3. A related movement is the continuing establishment of special schools such as charter schools and magnet schools as means of solving educational ills, with a concomitant leaving-behind of children whose families are not assertive enough to seek placement in these specialized schools.
4. Still another is the involvement of the Teach for America program—in which newly-graduated college students sign on for a period such as a three-year commitment to teach in the schools, before they move on to their “real” careers.
5. And of course, in spite of the removal of some of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Law in certain states, we still have a national obsession with student test results as a result of legislation that is still in force at both federal and state levels.
6. Across much of this conversation is some form of demonizing the teacher, to the point where we should not be surprised that young people today look askance at the career of teaching—a career which is honorable and self-sacrificing but also potentially richly rewarding in its opportunity to make a true difference in the lives of young learners. Many of the proposed plans also advocate the abolition of the tenure system, which has historically enabled teachers to avoid capricious or arbitrary removal. But most unfortunately, many young people will now start to shy away from this now shaky career.

None of these trends, however, represent honest educational reform—they are only **structural** and **organizational** and are focused on manipulation of staffing patterns. Some writers have suggested that the actual not-so-hidden agenda of some of the above list is the abolition of teacher organizations entirely, as part of a national (somewhat hidden) campaign to eliminate the power of unions to force salaries needed by hard-working individuals, so that somehow states can balance their pressured budgets by having “broken” the unions. These approaches, then, may constitute a fraudulent view of reform because they are superficial and not substantive.

What, then, would be true educational reform?

A. First, an educational reform needs to be based on **curriculum and instruction**—what and how we teach, and not on the external structures of schooling and schools. Yet very little attention is being paid publicly to the what-and-how of teaching—the very substance of what occurs within classrooms. Part of the explanation for this vacuum is the mandated testing programs which give teachers very little choice

of what and how to teach, for fear of their school's rating and their own job security as teachers. Curriculum reform, it seems, has taken a back seat in the movement and is being largely ignored.

B. Second, an educational reform needs to be based on making the absolute **best use of existing teacher talent** through well-conceived and in-depth **professional development**. It is not necessary to fire whole cadres of teachers and require them to re-apply for their jobs; it is always possible to help good teachers to become better teachers, thus saving the agony of firing and re-hiring and the displacement of human beings who have been respected in their local communities.

C. Third, educational reform needs to involve **parents** as well as teachers; where are the parents in demanding meaningful educational reform? Parents must play a cooperative role in whatever true reforms are adopted.

Thus, let us re-examine the "large picture"; the student achievement gap has numerous roots, such as:

- Student socio-economic background—poverty has a persisting relationship to achievement
- Lack of parental involvement
- English as a second language
- Increases in the diagnoses of various learning disabilities.

All of these challenges result in achievement gaps, but those gaps are clearly not addressed in any deep and lasting way by the superficial and sometimes draconian remedies being discussed at this time.

On the other hand, a significant educational reform is indeed available, but has been largely ignored. The approach addresses the **HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING STRATEGIES** which underlie the entire curriculum – strategies which, if not mastered, consign students to memorizing facts in the short-term without long-term retention or the ability to see the vital cross-connections in all knowledge as well as applications to the workplace and to social and family life. Strategies such as **comparing, categorizing, organizing, analyzing**, and much more, clearly cut across all subject matter. In order to effect this reform, which has been shown empirically in numerous other countries to make statistically significant positive differences in academic achievement.

The methodology for accomplishing this acquisition is found in at least one well-tested program\*, but which also requires **significant professional development with existing teachers** because it is a special way of teaching. In recent media coverage of school reform initiatives, it has been reported that at least one for-profit company has been forming contracts with school districts to carry out the new teacher evaluation processes; some contracts are worth in the millions of dollars. How much better would be an approach that takes that funding and instead focuses it on the professional development of current teachers—an expenditure which would undoubtedly yield positive results for years to come.

Thus, the adoption, training, and implementation of a **cognitive-education program** such as this one would constitute true educational reform because it is both curricular and based on professional

development. Changes effected in this way are deep and sustainable, as shown by previous implementations of such programs in the past.

Without a re-focus by policymakers and school leaders, as well as the general public, on true reform of this nature, we will leave our schools with not only a loss of tried-and-true teachers but also with many reorganization initiatives that fail to address the underlying needs of children. Let us set aside the superficial approaches and proceed to meaningful and lasting reform; we call upon leaders and policymakers to stop ignoring the honest and successful fundamentally **cognitive approaches** to the changes that we need.

---

\*An outstanding example is the **Instrumental Enrichment Program**, developed by the Israeli psychologist, Reuven Feuerstein, which has been used in more than 70 countries and has been the subject of more than 1000 research studies, showing its effectiveness in promoting learning-how-to-learn with a great variety of student populations. For more information, review the website [www.thinkingconnections.org](http://www.thinkingconnections.org).