

## **School Reform in the Biden Presidency: Flipping Our Thinking**

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The confirmation of Connecticut Education Commissioner Miquel Cardona as U.S. Secretary would start a new and welcome day for education in our nation. As an educator dedicated to ensuring all children have a meaningful education that prepares them for sustaining and enhancing our democratic republic, he has a chance to reset our national focus. Unfortunately, he inherits a history of educational reform that has been well meaning but unsuccessful. Past federal efforts such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have had minimal effect on student achievement especially in reducing the achievement gap among low income, racially marginalized, and dual language students. Meanwhile, increased stress and pressure on students and educators has resulted in a range of challenges from student depression to teacher turnover. Albert Einstein is credited with saying “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same results.” We must heed his words, recognize our failures, and have the political will to reset our path forward.

The two of us have more than 9 decades of collective experience as researchers, policy advisors, and advocates for public schools. We feel that no matter how you interpret it, the “evidence based” school improvement requirements of NCLB and ESSA have focused only on improving commercial standardized test scores. This is turning our schools into tedious memorization and worksheet factories and betraying our students, especially at schools that serve low income and racially marginalized students. It is time to examine alternatives to a system that thinks drill-and-practice pedagogy and a test prep mentality will improve schools while it instead is turning them into punitive, dreary, and unhappy places for our young people.

Is it possible to make enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning—what we call the three “3 Es”—the predominant mission of American Education? We believe so. We must be realistic about the stranglehold that the standards promoters, text-book companies, and the testing industry have on our schools we can deemphasize their importance and focus on meaningful education where students are engaged in their learning and teachers are freed to inspire and support that engagement. We need a willingness not just to think outside the box, but to throw the box out the window, and build a new box without a lid.

How do we start building this box? We can start by small but effective steps to *infuse* enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning into the required curriculum. The first thing we can do is to identify, support and reward the still-optimistic teachers who are willing to learn skills that focus on the 3 Es. We must trust and empower our teachers who know our students best to lead the way. Effective school change has always been a bottom-up rather than top-down process.

The first skill for teachers to learn is how to use observation and student completed self-assessment instruments that identify strength and student interest areas. With this knowledge they should experiment with practices allowing students to select books in a high interest area rather than depending on basal readers and required textbooks. Asking open-ended questions about required curricular topics provides a compass for infusing interesting engagement activities into the prescribed curriculum. “What are some things about the Great Depression that you would like to learn about?” The Music? Movies? Fashions? Photographs, Cartoons? Popular fiction? Imagine the interesting research, creativity, and thinking skills that can result from infusing these choices into this unit of instruction. These are the skills that control access to opportunity and advancement in today’s rapidly changing and highly competitive job market.

There was a time when the scarcity of resources and limits on teachers’ time made interest-based searches unrealistic; however, the Internet has made such information just a few clicks away. The second skill for teachers to master is how to quickly find highly engaging enrichment resources. With the unlimited resources on the internet teachers have access to a world of exciting activities. They can do a virtual

dissection and preservation of their own mummy when studying about Ancient Egypt, they can design and build their own roller coaster as a science project, or take virtual field trips to presidential libraries, museums, or recording studios in Hollywood.

Perhaps unintentionally, the pedagogy of prescription has withheld from students, particularly low-income children, exactly the kinds of thinking skills needed to succeed in today's higher education and our growing global economy. The word, "perhaps" is used because we don't think there is a clandestine conspiracy on the parts of policy makers and the textbook/testing industries to keep low-income children poorly educated, thereby limiting access to higher education and economic mobility. But make no mistake, neglect, mismanagement, and a lack of courage to challenge unsuccessful practices is the equivalent of a *bona fide* conspiracy.

Since failed approaches have continued to produce dismal results, perhaps it is time to examine a counter-intuitive approach that is the polar opposite of the pedagogy that Pavlov used to train his dogs! Accountability for the truly educated mind in today's knowledge-driven economy should attend to the thinking and executive function skills and creative problem solving that drive growth in our economy, culture, and employability.

These are the student engagement-oriented skills that grow young minds, promote genuine enthusiasm for learning; and, as research has shown, increase achievement. We need leaders at all levels to be courageous enough to provide all students with a more highly enriched diet—the diet that characterizes learning in the nation's very best public and private schools. This is not to say that we should abandon a strong curriculum that focuses on basic competencies, nor should we forget to demand accountability data. We need to move the focus away from memorizing content and test preparation toward the thinking skills listed above; and we need accountability procedures—not just tests—that show how well students are learning to *apply* their thinking to authentic problem-solving situations.

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