

*Educating for Human Greatness:
An Alternative to No Child Left Behind*



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By Lynn Stoddard

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(Editor's Note: For several years the Sutherland Institute has articulated the need for systemic reforms in Utah's public education system. The following short essay by long-time Utah public school teacher and administrator, Lynn Stoddard, is one example of a systemic reform we can embrace. It addresses the purpose of public education and concludes that public education should focus on serving children and society – that as we constructively assist the one, we constructively build the future of the other. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, “standardization” is a pedagogical evil and relic of an inhumane factory system for teaching children. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* only exacerbates this fundamental error. This essay is right on target if we truly care about the future of our children and one public institution we have entrusted to their care. Inasmuch as the essay sets forth a framework for substantive changes to our public education system, we urge readers to copy and use it for discussion.)

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

(Robert Frost's famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” is a fitting metaphor for what needs to happen in public education today. We may be on the wrong road. A long time ago, C.S. Lewis wrote these pithy words,

We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road. There is nothing progressive about being pig-headed and refusing to admit a mistake.

Why have all the government-imposed reforms since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) failed to make an appreciable difference in public education? Have we made a mistake? Do we need to do an about-face and take a different road? There is another reform road that holds promise for improving our system of public education, but we must first understand the system we have and why it spawns artificial changes like No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

The Popular Road of Counterfeit Reform

Our culture believes *student achievement in curriculum* is the main goal and purpose of public education. Achievement based upon a standardized curriculum has become a false goal, an end in and of itself. All top-down, government-imposed “reforms” are based on this belief. Student achievement in an obsolete curriculum is what we always fall back on and futilely try to measure. This keeps students learning for the wrong reasons – to pass tests and get high grades. These extrinsic motivators often result in shallow,

temporary knowledge. A student can graduate from high school with a high grade-point average, even be valedictorian, and still not know very much because s/he gained knowledge for grades, rather than for deep understanding.

Of course reading, writing and arithmetic are important skills to have, but when they are taught as ends in and of themselves, they are often taught as isolated skills, out of context, and disconnected from real life. Now, as mandated by our state's acceptance of federal dollars through NCLB, all students are expected to read "at grade level," by a certain year. Experienced, professional teachers will tell you there is no such thing as "grade-level" reading. In any grade there is such a wide span of reading abilities that most students fall either above or below an artificial mark for "grade-level."

Many students develop an aversion to learning when achievement in curriculum is the main goal. John Locke, the great English philosopher, said it best –

This much for learning to read, which let him never be driven to. Cheat him into it if you can, but make it not a business for him. 'Tis better it be a year later before he can read than that he should this way get an aversion to learning.

The Utah State Core Curriculum, the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students (UPASS) accountability system, and the Reading First program of NCLB, all make curriculum a "business" and effectively prevent teachers from performing as true mentors and professionals. Teachers are slaves to the required curriculum, scripted teaching and state testing, all of which cause many students to develop an "aversion to learning."

The current system of education, based on student achievement in curriculum as the main goal, is staunchly defended by school board members, legislators and others who control the system. The "reforms" are artificial and do not result in significant changes because they are designed to perpetuate an obsolete system. The NCLB federal law, scheduled for reauthorization this year, expects everyone to stay the course on the wrong road.

"The Road Less Traveled" of Genuine Reform

There are other, more proven and productive ways of looking at the purposes of public education. After interviewing thousands of parents over several years, the teachers at two local Utah schools in Davis County discovered a different reform path. The approach consists of a major mission, three main goals, and six principles to guide improvements. The approach has been refined for 25 years to become a framework for effective change. It has been published in book form, *Educating for Human Greatness*, of which a 12-page booklet, *School Reform from the Bottom Up*, is a condensation.¹ It covers everything the 1100-page NCLB tries to do, but without the resistance and destruction of morale that is fostered by the federal law. Here is the framework in a nutshell:

Its Mission, the Purpose of Education

Develop great human beings to be contributors – not burdens – to society.

Its Major Goals, Three Dimensions of Human Greatness

1. **Identity:** Help students discover who they are, their amazing potential, and develop their unique talents, gifts and abilities to form a vision of personal worth as contributors to society.

2. **Inquiry:** Expand curiosity, help students learn how to ask powerful questions and how and where to search for truth.
3. **Interaction:** Help students form healthy relationships and develop their powers of expression and thoughtful, caring communication.
(Imagination and integrity are two goals that could be added, but are generally considered to be part of the first three – imagination a part of inquiry and integrity a part of identity.)

Its Principles, to Guide Improvement Efforts

Principle #1: We must value and nurture *positive human diversity*. We must cherish every person as a unique individual with unlimited potential. This is the opposite of standardization.

Principle #2: We must draw out human potential and help students find and develop their innate genius.

Principle #3: We must respect the autonomy of learning and help children individually to actuate willpower, freedom and discipline.

Principle #4: We must invite inquiry and help students magnify their natural curiosity to discover life around them.

Principle #5: We must support professionalism in teachers, setting high expectations, but seeing teaching as a gift, not as an instrument to inflict standardized learning; and seeing curriculum as an obedient servant, not as an inflexible master.

Principle #6: We must unite for greatness as an education community – parents, teachers, and community leaders - working together to help children grow into positive contributors to society.

When parents, teachers and community leaders focus on the true purpose of public education, curriculum becomes a *tool* – not a goal – to help students grow in greatness. Making curriculum a tool changes the dynamics of the teaching-learning process. When teachers are in charge of curriculum, not slaves to it, they become energized to use their skills and creativity to meet the needs of an endless variety of youngsters. Quality and less-than-professional teachers are soon identified.

By Their Fruits...or Being Able to Tell an Apple from an Orange

The Davis County teachers' research found that when parents and teachers unite to help students develop their own powers of inquiry – when they focus on nurturing wonder and curiosity about the exciting world, and to ask powerful questions – students learn reading, writing and arithmetic as a natural process, and according to each child's unique timetable. One result of this process is the “Great Brain Project” which invites each student to choose a topic to study in depth to become a specialist,” “expert,” “mastermind,” or “genius” through individual research. The project shows that relevant knowledge attained from personal inquiry is deeper and more enduring than assigned or required learning. When students engage in self-selected home *study*, rather than teacher-assigned home *work*, they learn much more.

With a focus on developing student identity, parents and teachers shift away from trying to standardize students toward valuing and nurturing *positive human diversity*. This “phd principle” calls for helping each child discover and develop his or her innate talents and gifts and to form a vision of becoming a valuable contributor to the world. This principle allows us to see every child as having unlimited potential - teachers focus primarily on magnifying assets, not solely on correcting deficits as does the traditional factory system of

American education.

It's not easy to change a cultural mind-set about the purpose of public education – not easy to leave “the beaten path.” But schools that are taking “the road less traveled” are discovering several benefits:

First, teachers are regarded as professionals on a level with lawyers and physicians, not as slaves to deliver a state-imposed curriculum. They work with and for parents to decide what curriculum is best to develop the talents, gifts, interests and abilities of each student. Poor teachers, who need a canned curriculum, are soon weeded out.

Second, parents and teachers unite to help students grow in identity, inquiry, and interaction (along with imagination and integrity), the main attributes of society's positive contributors. They assess student growth in these attributes.

Third, this framework erases the “achievement gap” because each child is helped to excel in what s/he is good at. This focus on developing assets helps students want to overcome any deficiencies. The motto, “Every Child Will Excel,” leads us in a better direction.

Fourth, through parental and teacher guidance, students develop deep understanding and enduring knowledge while learning how to ask and find answers to their own questions. Reading and math skills are learned at each child's own pace as a process of personal inquiry, not as dreary drills.

Fifth, bullying, cliques, and delinquencies are diminished as students learn how to communicate with and care for one another—even as their educational needs are met.

Sixth, students develop a strong desire to become valuable contributors to society. They unburden the system and reduce the jail population.

With the pending reauthorization of NCLB this year we have come to a fork in the road. We can either take the beaten path, with student achievement in curriculum as the main goal, or take "the road less traveled" and help students become truly and uniquely educated, as valuable contributors to society. What we decide now will make all the difference.

Lynn Stoddard, now retired, spent 36 years in Utah public schools as both a teacher and principal. He writes and lectures on the urgent need to design a new system of public education based on ancient wisdom and modern research.

¹ Both of these references can be obtained by contacting Lynn Stoddard at lstrd@yahoo.com.