

Dropout Nation

Three Thoughts on Education This Week: The Endless Thoughtless Pursuits of the One Silver Bullet

July 25, 2011 [No Comments](#) by RiShawn Biddle



There's No One Solution: One of the constant complaints of Dropout Nation's editors is about the pursuit among school reformers of the one silver bullet for overhauling American public education. Despite evidence that the complexity of the nation's education crisis requires an array of solutions — including strong curriculum standards and robust consequential accountability, the overhaul of teacher quality, revamp of curriculum and standards, expanding school choice, improving school data systems and giving parents their rightful decision-making roles in education — far too many reformers are busy touting and flacking their one grand solution and [dismiss](#) others that, in their minds, don't further their own.



Certainly the underlying reasons for this are clear: All of these solutions are competing for political support and philanthropic capital. But in the process, the flaws of the one silver bullet remain apparent and clear; the advocate ends up losing credibility as a thoughtful advocate for overhauling American public education.

Earlier this month, Dropout Nation made clear the consequences of the silver bullet in its [criticism](#) of the school choice-and-competition-is-the-only-solution approach of the Cato Institute's education gang (and the argument that accountability and the No Child Left Behind Act hasn't worked). This time around, we have the folks over at Core Knowledge, who have taken curriculum-is-the-solution approach of the folks at Core Knowledge, whose otherwise laudable effort to improve the nation's woeful reading curricula is often overshadowed by the penchant of its advocates to dismiss other reforms.

Besides touting Sol Stern's piece on the success of one New York City public school's implementation of Core Knowledge, the organization's spokesman, Robert Pondiscio [took](#) fellow school reform advocate Whitney Tilson to task for supposedly lacking any understanding of what happens in classrooms. Of course, it isn't so much about Tilson's awareness of what happens in classrooms that is at the heart of Pondiscio's attempt at whacking his proverbial knuckles; given Tilson's admirable work in education reform (including spending some time in classes), Pondiscio knows that Tilson likely has greater awareness of what is happening than even some teachers. It is that Tilson and other reformers are focusing more attention on fixing other systemic problems within American public education than on curricula, and that they wrongly treat reading as a skill. What Pondiscio thinks they should do is ignore other systemic reforms and tout his silver bullet: A national curriculum with Core Knowledge at its heart. Wrote Pondiscio: "There is a reason why I focus on curriculum as a reform lever: it is because of my earnest belief that the dominant, content-free standard form of literacy instruction we give to kids — most particularly low-income kids — is the No. 1 problem."

Certainly Pondiscio is right that the lack of rigorous curriculum is one of the most-important culprits in the nation's education crisis. The fact that poor and minority children are often shunted onto academic tracks that deny them rigorous college-preparatory curricula — even in the Fairfax County district near **Dropout Nation's** headquarters — is one of the greatest obstacles to systemic reform.

But, as usual, he and his fellow-travelers [forget](#) that curricula doesn't exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by a series of underlying standards, goals and beliefs, either set down by governments, school operators or communities. They are taught by teachers who must have the subject-matter competency, strong instructional skills, entrepreneurial drive and care for the lives of children needed to be good instructors. The underlying rigor

(including teacher and curriculum evaluation) must be reinforced by strong, thoughtful principals and superintendents. And parents must have the knowledge needed to understand what a high-quality curricula should look like, what kids should know by a specific grade, and the ability to choose high-quality options for their kids.

Curricula divorced from standards is ineffective and will cause systemic problems up and down the line (including frustrating efforts to evaluate teachers and the most-important matter of all — ensuring every child learns). Curricula taught by lousy teachers equals opportunities wasted to improve student learning. Quality of curricula doesn't matter if principals and superintendents don't have the strong leadership capacity and the tools (especially in the form of data on student achievement over time) needed to create nurturing cultures of high expectations that embrace John Taylor Gatto's mantra that nearly all children are geniuses instead of being all worthless. And if parents aren't well-informed about what high-quality curricula and schools should look like, and not given the ability to make smart choices, then there is limited ability to ensure that such curricula is the norm and not the exception.

High-quality curricula, in and of itself, is no silver bullet. Nor does curricula deal with other matters such as how do children acquire knowledge, or learn how to [memorize](#) so they can synthesize and build upon knowledge. Most ed schools don't teach any of this now. And curriculum developers — including Core Knowledge — ignores this issue altogether. Somehow, the curricula-as-silver-bullet crowd expect that kids will magically pick up all this background knowledge and also learn how to read — and seemingly forget all the elements needed for kids to successfully learn. Which gets to this reality: Even if you provide teachers with all that they need — including high-quality curricula, strong school leaders and data — teachers will still have to figure out some things on their own. It is why it is important to improve the recruiting of aspiring teachers and overhaul how they are trained so they can succeed whether conditions are optimal or not.

Meanwhile Pondiscio and company forget this reality: Literacy is both a skill and the most-crucial element in learning. Sure, just focusing on literacy as a skill that involves a little coaching is off-target. As the Harlem Link Charter School has shown in its own work, building up the literacy of children must be a critical element that informs all parts of learning. At the same time, arguing that reading is not a skill is also ridiculous; there are skill elements that are involved in successful reading.

Let's be clear: The need for rigorous, college-preparatory curricula with strong content is as critical an element in reforming American public education as advancing standards and accountability, overhauling teacher quality, expanding school choice, bolstering Parent Power, improving school leadership and building robust data systems. But, as each of these solutions alone won't solve the education crisis, neither will just focusing on curricula. It's time for all reformers, including Pondiscio and the rest of the Core Knowledge crowd, to stop this silver bullet gamesmanship and push for all systemic solutions.

Update: Pondiscio responds, complaining that his name was misspelled, that the piece essentially misinterpreted his position and the assessment of his positions are all fantasy. For the misspelling, I apologize and that is corrected. As for the latter: Pondiscio has a penchant for arguing for positions, then crying foul and claiming it's not so when called on the carpet for them, which is hard to pull off when your polemicism is all over the Web. Unlike Pondiscio — who can't stand by his own views and is behaving dishonestly — I stand by what I have written.

What Bill Gates May Wrought in Education Philanthropy: Two years ago, your editor [detailed](#) the successes and failures of the school reform efforts undertaken by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This weekend's Wall Street Journal [interview](#) with the foundation's namesake about those school reform efforts once again hit upon one of the most-salient points I had made: That private-sector donations to public school districts and efforts at influencing policy won't be enough to continue the overhaul of American public education.

But even if philanthropy isn't enough, it doesn't mean that reform-minded donors can't be successful in pushing the agenda. In fact, contrary to some of the arguments Jay P. Greene [posits](#) today on his eponymous blog, the Gates Foundation, along with other donors, have actually been successful in building the public case for reform. And philanthropists can do more if they take these approaches.

One possibility for philanthropists and the corporate sector can be seen in the Gates Foundation's [effort](#) in Charlotte to bolster support for continuing the school reform efforts begun under Peter Gorman, its outgoing superintendent. Given that Gates Foundation has been particularly successful on the national level in amplifying the messaging of school reformers in policymaking and media circles, local philanthropists can take those lessons and apply them to the local and state levels. Gates Foundation and other philanthropists should also look at [building stronger ties](#) with grassroots activists, a major chink in the armor of the school reform movement (especially among the Beltway crowd). Working with outfits such as the Connecticut Parents Union (on whose advisory board your **Dropout Nation** editor serves) — including helping them build financial and communications capacity — would further advance school reform efforts.

The second possibility may lie in going back to the future. The most-successful school reform efforts undertaken by philanthropists have not been ones that attempted to focus on school district bureaucracies, but on expanding opportunities for high-quality education for children and families. Sears, Roebuck & Co. mastermind Julius Rosenwald did this during the first half of the 20th century when his foundation built schools for black children in the segregated American South, while the Walton Family Foundation has found similar success in its advancement of charter schools and school choice. Thanks to moves in states to allow for voucher-like tax credit plans, companies can offer poor and minority families new opportunities to escape the worst American public education has to offer. Through their foundation arms, they can also start private and charter schools; the Fisher family who founded retail giant Gap Inc., has shown the way with its funding of the KIPP chain or charters.

In its own support of Salman Khan's eponymous online learning and tutoring initiative, Gates may actually succeed in building up [DIY education](#), giving parents, teachers and communities the tools they need to start their own schools. Such donations in this arena would do plenty to further weaken the influence of NEA and AFT affiliates, and also expand school choice for the families who need it most.

Hardly Worth Saving: Your editor has little to say about the anti-school reform bellyaching rally that is being called Save Our Schools other than it won't be much of anything. Considering the lack of political and public relations traction gained by NEA and AFT affiliates and their allies after the rallies they held against governors such as Scott Walker inside statehouses, the rally is just a waste of time.

More importantly, the underlying reasons why they are conducting this protest rally have less to do with overhauling American public education so that all children can succeed, than with preserving a system of teacher compensation that have contributed to the education crisis. This includes preserving seniority-based privileges that fail to reward good-to-great teachers for high-quality work in improving student achievement, and keeping reverse seniority layoffs which end up putting instructors with less seniority on the streets regardless of their performance while keeping veterans (including laggards) on the payroll. Essentially, they are perfectly happy with layoffs so long as they aren't the ones facing the axe.

While these folks do their marching and sloganeering, the rest of us can do something more productive. If you are in D.C., you can volunteer for the [Grassroots Education Project](#)

's reading tutoring work at Harriett Tubman Elementary School (I helped out last year). There are also tutoring and school beautification efforts going on all over the country.