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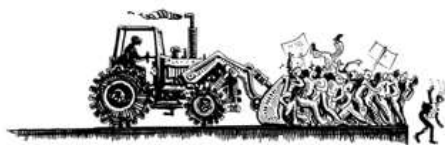
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Leaving Parents Behind

By **RiShawn Biddle** on 11.9.09 @ 6:08AM

When it comes to governors, mayors and even pundits, the school reform movement has no difficulty selling them on its formula of standardized tests, stricter accountability measures, mayoral control of school districts and expansion of school choice.

This can be seen in President Barack Obama's move to dedicate \$4.3 billion Race to the Top initiative, efforts by governors in North Carolina and Massachusetts to take control of school agencies, the effort by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett to add control of the city's school district to his portfolio, and even columns bashing teachers unions and supporting federal activism by Nicholas Kristof, the *New York Times'* resident center-leftist and David Brooks, Kristof's (slightly) more conservative colleague.

But school reformers have a long way to go where it counts: Addressing the interests of America's parents, who actually choose the schools to which they entrust their children, and helping them pick the best schools for their children in the first place.

At the moment, school reformers aren't considering situations such as that of the middle-class black couple in East Ridge, Tenn., just outside of Chattanooga, now deciding where to send their four-year-old son once he reaches kindergarten. They are skipping the schools offered by the local school district, Hamilton County Schools, for a private school option, but not because of the district's academic performance. Instead, it's because they don't want their son, who currently attends a nearly-all-white preschool, to continue being the only black male in his school.

School reformers aren't talking to the concerns of the middle class white family in Indianapolis, who are pulling out their 15-year-old daughter out of Lawrence North High School. The high school's unenviable position on the state's academic watch list is less concerning for them than their efforts to help her kick a meth habit. She may end up attending Hope Academy, a charter school run by a local drug rehab center, where she can address her addiction and keep up her grades all at the same time.

Often, the movement isn't even addressing the questions of the parent such as the stepfather in Roosevelt, N.Y., just outside of New

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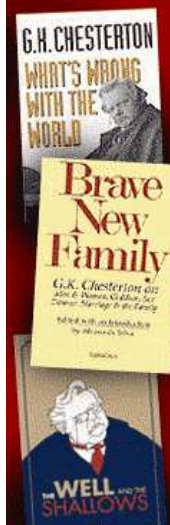
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York City, who is solely focused on the kind of academic rigor on which the school reform movement focuses. Finding out the education statistics he needs for finding his stepdaughter a school proves difficult as he has to scour through the New York State Education Department's cumbersome Web site.

It isn't that parents aren't slowly realizing that they can't simply find a good school for their child just by buying a home in tony suburbs such as Chevy Chase, Md. or Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. Forty-nine percent of parents surveyed by Phi Delta Kappan and the Gallup Organization in their annual survey rate their local schools "C" or lower, a rating that has been fairly consistent for the past five years.

The growth of the charter school movement, which now educates 1.4 million children in locales as different from one another as Washington, D.C. and tiny Thibodaux, La., also marks the desire among parents for expansive school options. The popularity of homeschooling among middle-class black families, the development of tutoring programs such as Washington Post Co.'s Kaplan unit, and the passage of laws authorizing private school tax credits in states such as Arizona, shows that school quality is no longer just the concern of urban single mothers or Fundamentalist Christian fathers.

But the concerns of parents have never simply been focused on just academic rigor. Social climbing, boosting careers, seeking values- or religious-based instruction, even exposing their children to diverse culture, is as much a concern, if not more so. The consequences of modern life -- more-immediate diagnosis of autism and mental illnesses, earlier onsets of substance abuse, the development of the modern two-income household -- means that families are looking to schools to assist in addressing those issues. And for parents just concerned with academic performance, the need for easily-accessible, well-analyzed information on schools is paramount.

And yet school reformers, like those in the public education establishment, fail to take the needs or desires of parents to heart. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act has succeeded in providing more information on the woeful quality of America's schools. But save for a few private-sector efforts, school reformers have done little to advance the availability, accessibility or even the understandability of data.

Concedes Frederick Hess, the American Enterprise Institute's resident education reform guru: "[School reformers] suffer from a common shortcoming-excessive faith in prescience and a failure to foster the conditions that can yield breakthrough advances."

The movement's various activist groups fail to look beyond their own particular formulas. Supporters of school turnaround efforts, for example, fail to see that reorganizations are as unlikely to succeed as similar efforts in Corporate America. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation learned this all too well in this decade when it spent \$2 billion on breaking up high schools into smaller college-oriented schools (more on this is detailed in an upcoming report I've written in Foundation Watch).

The penchant of reformers to focus on inside-the-Beltway debates

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and actions at state capitals often means they aren't taking a look at how to actually drive change in communities. Typical is a recent debate between Andy Smarick of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Neil McCluskey, the Cato Institute's resident school choice activist over "the proper federal role in education." Not one word of the discussion involves one of the most-important concerns for two-income households: The need for longer school days that will help them in their work-life balance.

If anything, school reformers need to look outside of Foggy Bottom and away from their theories. Instead, they should rip a page from successful entrepreneurs and address the needs of parents at the grassroots level. And they need not look far. Former teachers Michael Feinberg and Dave Levin figured out how to address the concerns of urban parents by founding the KIPP chain of charter schools, while Rock the Vote cofounder Steve Barr did the same with L.A.'s Green Dot schools. In New York City, Geoffrey Canada did the same when he transformed a collection of childcare centers into the educational village known as the Harlem Children's Zone.

Such focus on the needs of parents and their children are more likely to enlist their gratitude.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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RiShawn Biddle *the editor of [Dropout Nation](#), is co-author of A Byte at the Apple: Rethinking Education Data for the Post-NCLB Era.*

COMMENTS

Appleby | 11.9.09 @ 6:36AM

Or they could simply re-read BRAVE NEW WORLD and see exactly the kind of school system that would further the cause of Dear Leader -- 24/7 Hatcheries with little voices murmuring slogans under the pillows teaching Elementary Class Consciousness, Sex Education and *Ending is Better than Mending*, making sure the kids spout the slogans and sing the songs. And that, meanwhile, leave parents free to *do their thing* and perhaps check out the children for the weekend to play with them and show them off, then check them back in while they resume their Work Life Balance and somebody else will feed, clothe, educate, medicate, indoctrinate, entertain, transport, marry, jail and bury the kids for them.

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Northern Rebel | 11.9.09 @ 9:05AM

I am a parent who had to teach my youngest (now 24, and in college) how to read, because the New Britain Ct. schools were teaching something called "whole language", instead of phonics.

Apparently, whole language lessons consist of telling a kid, "This word is truck. Remember that it says truck, when you see it."

What no child left behind means is, no teacher's union left behind. As in "whole language", remember this when you see it!

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Ryan | 11.9.09 @ 9:53AM

The problem when I see the word "longer school days," I interpret it as "day care." It's probably one of the big problems in the modern home - both parents gone, and leaving the responsibility to raising their kids to schools and - unfortunately - the "social skills" of their peers.

Two-person incomes are VASTLY overrated in our country. Seriously - how much does it cost for daycare, instant meals, convenience, cars, etc, that result when another person in a family has a job?

I'm not a big "attachment parenting," and I'm NOT against women in the workforce.

What I AM advocating is a second look at a lifestyle. What ever happened to parental sacrifice? What ever happened to knowing your child? What's better - raising a child yourself, or paying for it to be done by someone else?

It's one of the problems with materialism - read "consumerism" - in the USA right now. Kids not being raised by who is supposed to be responsible for them. Keep out of debt, save your money, don't spend on what you can't afford, turn off the TV, and stay the heck home with your kids so you know who the heck they are.

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