
OPINION

Gist's naive plan to fix RI's schools

Commissioner Gist came to Coventry High School on Tuesday to talk to district teachers and answer questions they had about RIDE's policies on teacher evaluations and certification. To her credit, she opened up the floor from the beginning and allowed follow-up questions to her answers. Predictably, the only question she cut off and dismissed publically was my question. What topic did I broach that she singled out as the only one not requiring her elaboration? I simply asked: How will outside factors that impact student growth and performance, such as poverty, be considered when determining teacher ratings?

David Berliner, a renowned scholar in the field of education, referred to the socioeconomic factors within our country as the gorrilla in the classroom that nobody is willing to talk about. A recent article in the Texas Tribune reports on university Professor Michael Marder's analysis of SAT data and its correlation to poverty. As with many scholars before him, Marder has irrefutably pointed out the overwhelming effect poverty has upon student performance and success. As far back as the 1960s, during the era of the Civil Rights Act, the issue of poverty in the schools was extensively researched and published in the Coleman Report. This famous report came to the conclusion that socioeconomic status has a greater effect on student performance than a child's school experience (Think about it: If you try to grow a plant without proper nutrients or fertilizer in its soil, the plant won't grow much, if at all, no matter how much you water it.) Since this report, there have been many concurring studies, such as Professor Marder's findings, that have come to the same conclusion: The most effective education reform would strive to fix the problem of poverty in this nation. Recently, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers published a report by Tom Sgouros called, *The Shape of the Starting Line*, highlighting these previously and firmly established conclusions as they relate to Rhode Island's schools. Unfortunately, most reformers at the helm, like Commissioner Gist, conveniently ignore this, as this endeavor would take more effort, money, and political will than the ill-conceived punitive educational policies, like turn around models and teacher firings that are so popular today.

On Tuesday, I provided an analogy in my question to Deborah Gist comparing the doctor-patient relationship to that of the teacher and his or her students. She dismissed the analogy and question. Consider, for example, that if the most esteemed and learned doctor's patients went home from their appointments and ate a box of Twinkies and smoked two packs of cigarettes each day, it wouldn't matter what advice the physician gave. The patients' health would deteriorate. Should the doctor be fired? Similarly, if the most talented educator's students didn't eat breakfast before coming to school and didn't have parents that enforced and helped them with their homework, it would also diminish the effect the teacher might have upon his or her students. Yet, Commissioner Gist and those in charge of our current reform ignore this dilemma.

Instead, reformers should look to nations like Finland as an example of how to tackle this issue. Finland is a top performer in international test comparisons, yet this Nordic country doesn't test its children every year. Finland has a shorter school day, it provides more time for recess, and it mandates more arts and crafts. Teachers in Finland are paid more and are respected in their society. Imagine that! Most importantly, Finland's child poverty rate is 4.4%, whereas one in five children in the U.S. grows up indigent. In addition, Finland has a nationalized health care system, more social programs for its citizens, and a unionized teacher workforce.

This is not to say that we can't improve what we do in the classroom, but that we need to understand the limitations and complexity of what educating a child truly entails. We should require that teachers go through a rigorous college certification program and should be held accountable for what they do in their classrooms. A rich curriculum and consistent standards that were backed up and implemented through adequate funding would certainly improve students' classroom performance; however, we need to consistently remind ourselves that this is but one factor of the process in educating our children.

Rather than waiting for Superman, as Oprah, Bill Gates and other very influential non-educators would have us do, we should wait for Super Society in this country. Until we actually have and succeed in our war on poverty, teachers, under the Gist Reform Plan, will now be fired or lose their certification due to factors outside their control. In the meantime, eat a Twinkie or smoke a pack of cigarettes if you will, at least your doctor won't lose his or her job because of you or your society's negligence.

Ted Mitchell is a coordinator and social studies teacher at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School of Coventry.