One Principal Left Behind

Ah, retirement! The time to sit and write, read those books that have been piling up, catch up on correspondence, and visit new places and favorite old haunts—things I thought I’d do after I reached the age of full Social Security. But it didn’t happen exactly as I expected; I came to “that time” before my time.

So, I ask myself, what’s wrong with stepping down a few years early? And I answer: A whole lot, if you’ve made your decision based upon something that is doing harm to children. These are the children in whom you’ve invested decades of your life, children who will shape your coming golden years. And you are quitting on them!

These days I spend far too much time worrying about those children, knowing that I am not there to ease their stress and answer their questions. The big question goes something like this: “I don’t do very well on these tests we have to take, and last year they kept me from going on to fifth grade. I don’t know why I even go to school anymore. I’m just going to fail again. What’s the use?” And I respond by doing the very same thing—I dropped out!

Those children and I reached the same conclusion. Their question and mine were promulgated by the same phenomenon: a federal law that was driven by people other than educators, a law that applies a one-size-fits-all educational philosophy, a law that uses one measure to determine success or failure for our young people, a law that flies in the face of all the pedagogy that I learned and applied throughout my career. A law that, in my opinion, will provide our nation with an unenlightened worker class that might possibly compete with the overseas workers doing outsourced work.

That law required me to refocus my role as principal, from instructional leader to cheerleader for the “scientific” prepackaged, teacher-proof curricula designed to raise the scores. I saw that raising the scores in reading and math was what was important. All of a sudden, the discussion centered on where we would find more time to teach those subjects, and what other areas we must limit that we once thought were important parts of a well-rounded, child-centered curriculum.

A few years ago, I was encouraged by an article in Phi Delta Kappan in which Stanley Pogrow described a school model of a successful school environment: teaching students “at an appropriate level,” developing higher order thinking skills, encouraging participation in drama and music. He discussed common sense and what was good for children within both constructionist and behaviorist philosophies—and not one mention of adequate yearly progress or state assessments. Maybe there is hope. I sent this article to all the administrators I knew who were still working.

A Shifting Culture

Children don’t come to school all at the same level. It used to be that we took them from where they were and built upon their needs so they would be successful. Now, they all need to be at the same place at the same point in time, so they will be “ready” for the test. I saw children cry, throw up (you still have to send that test in to the state assessment folks, in a plastic bag), refuse to come to school. I saw their parents dragging them in the door. I saw the fear of failure in their eyes. I felt saddened by that look, and by what others said was my own fear of failure and the failure of my faculty. The principals—and many others—are retiring not because of a fear of failure with regard to No Child Left Behind, but rather the fear of not being able to provide a well-rounded education for the children they serve.

So, five years after retirement, I am still pondering my own decision and the fate of the children I left behind. I am not alone. I see my own peers making that decision as soon as they are eligible. They tell me, “It’s good you got out when you could; it’s not getting any better.” They talk as if retirement were similar to being released from prison. They might be right, under the No Child Left Behind regime—now in the guise of Race to the Top.

My concern with regard to my decision and the decisions of my peers contemplating retirement is that this shifting culture leaves the students of our country with fewer advocates. Recess will continue to be replaced by test-prep time. If the trend continues, we will indeed end up with a privatized, nationalized curriculum with corresponding national assessments.

Would my having not retired change this forecast? If I’d stayed a few more years, would I have been able to make a difference? Probably not. The new guard seems to be well indoctrinated in the high-stakes, narrowed-down school culture.

Given what I have observed, I believe my decision to retire early was a good one; however, in hindsight I would have been more active in getting sound pedagogical research to politicians and business leaders as they are not making sound decisions for our children. My advice to those faced with top-down policy: Do your research and get political. If you find yourself preaching to your own small choir, retire.