

Annual Forum October 7, 2004

PK - 3: A Strategy to End the Need for Social Promotion and Improve Academic Achievement

2004 Annual Forum Transcript

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Introduction: Points of Tension and Contention

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RACHEL JONES: Thank you so much, Ruby, for your introduction. I have to tell you, though, that your timing is a little off. You called me a senior journalist and my birthday was Sunday, so I've got some issues going on there. Bear with me here as I get through those.

As I think about participating in these forums - and, first of all, I want to thank you for this opportunity - I always appreciate being able to immerse myself in these issues and to really think about what the important angles and aspects of them are. So it's as much of a benefit for me as it could be for those in the audience.

As I think about this particular issue, and that is PK-3 education, I'm always looking at it through the lens of a journalist. At any of these kinds of meetings I bring that lens to the table, and I do have to constantly keep that lens on and keep it finely tuned. And that means when I think of the particular issue of this forum, I'm asking myself, what's the news in PK-3 education? What are the points of tension or contention when we talk about PK-3?

Now, fortunately, there are some fairly easy answers to many questions in the PK-3 realm. No educational issue is more prominent or high profile today than the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act. As you all know it was intended as a framework to expedite school reform by instituting high standards and accountability for students and teachers. It was also intended to improve literacy and teacher quality and to move limited English speaking students to English fluency among many other goals.

Now you've also all heard the criticisms of Bush's legislation, which I think can be summed up by a few sentiments. One being that the No Child Left Behind Act would be wonderful if it were fully funded, and if every child learned exactly the same way, and if every child had the maximum level of educational exposure and stimulation before they entered kindergarten, and, perhaps, if every child lived in a parallel universe far, far away from Washington D.C., where this legislation has engendered so much political bickering and frustration. Now of course we all know it sounds appealing to suggest that all students should receive an equal and challenging education, however, educators in classrooms across America are the ones left to grapple with this.

What do we do about the very real problems of children who have reached a particular point in their education and find challenges that they cannot surmount based on the fact that they did not receive exposure to educational stimulation and nurturing at a very young age? Would improving teacher quality solve the problem? These are questions that we are still in the process of grappling with.

And then, of course, there are the other hot educational issues like those that Ruby mentioned - social promotion being right at the top of the list, and of course retention - and the strategies to try to deal with some of these challenges. And, as she mentioned, it's appropriate that this forum is being held in New York because Mayor Blumberg made headlines when he wanted to expand his social promotion policy past the third grade to the fifth grade. Even those that may not care for the mayor's politics, I'm sure, have a grasp of understanding his motivation. Surveys have shown that a majority of teachers when polled will say that they promoted a student to the next grade even though they knew that that student was not ready. And when New York's policy was first announced some observers objected and said that as many as 15,000 students could be held back. Estimates now show that the reality is perhaps a fifth of that number.

But research shows that social promotion does not increase student participation or increase learning ability. In fact, social promotion increases the possibility that that student will eventually drop out of school. These practices tend to ignore the reasons that children have difficulties in school in the first place, such as immaturity, lack of school readiness, lack of a rich curriculum and instructional practices that support high achievement in students, reliance on unproven theories about how children learn, and low expectations for student achievement and an overall lack of engagement in the educational process.

Earlier this week, while I was preparing for this forum, I came across a story on a wire service that underscored the need for a major realignment in our educational priorities in this country. Just this past Tuesday the Government Accounting Office released a report that concluded that unreliable test scores and other shaky data might be causing some states to wrongly penalize some schools under the federal law. The story stated that the report went on to say that measuring achievement with inaccurate data is likely to lead to poor measures of school progress. This means that education officials and parents are making decisions about educational options on the basis of faulty information.

Now the list of educational issues is long, but I point to some of these as a way to get us into a discussion with my colleagues on the stage here because it seems to me that what is missing is a genuine concerted effort to realign our priorities towards making sure that children are supported and nurtured long before they have to take that standardized test in the third grade.

I thought presenting just a few of those topics would serve as a good foundation for us as I introduce my colleagues before they make their presentations about early childhood education. It seems to me that each of our presenters today understands the enormous opportunity that exists when young minds are exposed to the kind of developmental nurturing those quality educational experiences can provide them. They've embraced the idea that all children can learn if they're given the best possible opportunities to achieve. This achievement is possible if young children are approached as individuals and curricula, instruction and teacher preparation is designed to identify students who need extra help early on and accommodate students who are high achievers and provide those who need extra help with the support that they need. Perhaps many of these raging educational debates could be resolved by keeping the child in mind as opposed to the legislation and the other issues.

So I want to start by introducing our panelists, who will each make a presentation, and then we'll engage in a discussion about their presentations and the programs that they are running. I believe there's tremendous insight to be gained from listening to each of their presentations.