Getting the Right Principals

I just finished reading “The Accidental Principal” by Frederick Hess and Andrew Kelly (Features, Summer 2005), with great interest and agreement. I have been in public education for 33 years, 4 of them as an adjunct professor in education administration. When I’d had all I could take of exactly what Hess and Kelly described in their article, I quit. I felt there were better ways to affect the system.

It had become painfully clear that teacher colleges were more concerned with covering everything required by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) than with preparing good school administrators. Many times I saw the great frustration of other professors who were interrupting good learning to “cover” NCATE standards.

It’s exactly what I see in all our schools, where administrators are more concerned with jumping through all the hoops than with educating kids. Perhaps it’s time to admit that central planning isn’t working any better in education than it did in the Soviet Union.

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Unflagged and Unequal

When the College Board stopped flagging the SAT scores of students who took the tests with accommodations (most commonly, extended time) in 2004, it instituted a tightened eligibility process to offset the new stigma-free advantage.

In his examination of the 2003 and 2004 SAT I results, both flagged and unflagged (“Unflagged SATs,” Features, Summer 2005), Samuel J. Abrams found that the eligibility process became a hidden advantage for students whose parents and schools were more skilled at meeting tightened eligibility requirements—documentation from therapists and psychologists—than families “less savvy and less financially endowed.”

Indeed, the increase in the scores of students with accommodations in the District of Columbia is dramatic, and Abrams attributes the anomaly to the division between extremes of wealth within the District. But he is not quite correct. The extremes are there, but they are within the entire metropolitan area, including the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. Many of the students living in these richer areas attend private schools in D.C. and contribute to the high scores in the city.

More significantly, on these schools’ college counseling web pages there are links to the College Board’s “site for students with disabilities” as well as other disability sources. The web site of Georgetown Day School has a four-page Learning Disabilities section that includes a detailed list of the categories of professionals who can diagnose LD and ADHD.

By contrast, many of the public high schools don’t even have web sites.

Unflagging the scores in 2004 tilted the playing field to the advantage of parents most skilled at working the system; the high number of flagged scores in 2003 suggests that the College Board saw stigma where sophisticated parents saw advantage. The stiffened eligibility process increased their advantage at the expense of the less skilled, when it created a de facto double standard.

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Mel Levine’s Brain

It is unfortunate that Dr. Daniel Willingham took a rather superficial view of our work in reviewing Dr. Mel Levine’s most recent popular press books for his article “Mind over Matter” (Check the Facts, Spring 2005). Both books, A Mind at a Time and The Myth of Laziness, were intended to describe Dr. Levine’s neurodevelopmental framework for a general audience and provide examples from his clinical cases; they were not intended to describe the research base on which Dr. Levine’s neurodevelopmental framework is founded.

Those who read Dr. Levine’s entire body of work carefully will find that it is rooted in rigorous scientific research as well as sound clinical judgment and experience. Dr. Levine has developed and refined an accurate and usable framework of the mind and its functions. His 1992 book, Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders,
correspondence

Daniel Willingham replies:
Harman suggests that Levine’s popular press books are reader-friendly versions of a much more substantial scientific theory. That is a misrepresentation; Levine’s “scientific” work is not better supported than his popular books. As I noted in my article, I called the All Kinds of Minds Institute specifically to ask for more research-oriented publications and was directed to (among others) Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders, to which Harman refers (although I read the 1999 second edition, not the first edition she mentions). I pointed out that these works do indeed have more references to the scientific literature, but only for well-accepted ideas (which I did not criticize), and none for the particular views Levine espouses (which I did). The second edition also happens to be the source of Levine’s complete misinterpretation of research by Richard McKee and Larry Squire that I discussed.

Harman’s second point is that cognitive psychologists might view the mind differently than clinicians. It is not clear to me how that point absolves clinicians from providing data to support their views, particularly when their views conflict with existing data.

Finally, Harman notes that several small studies have found that the Schools Attuned program “has a positive effect on student and teacher outcomes.” She might have added that these studies have not undergone expert peer review, nor do they compare Schools Attuned with competitor methods. To the extent that they show student effects, they show that Schools Attuned is better than nothing. I applaud the interest All Kinds of Minds has taken in evaluating the program, but I dispute that existing research has shown much of anything, least of all that the program is ready for statewide support.

Charter School Melee

Ted Sizer and Michael Petrilli illustrate what makes education policy such an interesting field (“Identity Crisis,” Forum, Summer 2005). The fellow writing for the “right” (Petrilli) argues for state involvement, while the fellow representing the “left” (Sizer) objects to a strong exercise of federal power.

It’s a compelling discussion that avoids two of the more frustrating positions in debates about these issues: testing is all that matters or there are not actually serious problems in American education.

But even this debate seems to obscure the potential for reasonable compromise. Sizer is right about the possible excesses of No Child Left Behind—style accountability, though it’s worth noting that these issues predate the law. However, is Petrilli’s

was written for a more academic audience and includes citations of the research, theory, and clinical experience on which his framework is based. Dr. Levine’s theoretical framework is based on existing research from across a variety of scientific and academic disciplines as well as the convergence of clinical evidence and experience. Some of Dr. Willingham’s misunderstanding may be the inevitable result of the wide gap that often separates clinical studies and frontline experience from research in a field like cognitive psychology. In addition, different disciplines that study learning vary significantly in their terminology and conceptual models.

At All Kinds of Minds [a research organization established by Dr. Levine] our continual goal is to use our theoretical framework to help those who have an immediate need: the students who struggle to learn and the parents, teachers, and clinicians who strive to help them achieve success in school and in life. Many critical clinical problems have not been rigorously researched. Nevertheless, they need to be addressed vigorously using the best possible judgment by educators and clinicians. To date, the feedback we have received from thousands of teachers and parents is that our programs make a dramatic difference in their lives.

The All Kinds of Minds Institute is committed to rigorous, high-quality research. Over the past three years, All Kinds of Minds has made a multi-million-dollar investment in building our research infrastructure and fielding three national independent research studies. In addition, several small-scale independent studies have already found that the Schools Attuned program has a positive impact on student and teacher outcomes. In the coming years we will continue to solicit input from the scientific, clinical, and education communities to inform the further development of our programs. We invite the academic research community to study our framework and programs thoroughly. We will carefully vet and incorporate all appropriate emerging research into our theoretical framework and programs.

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plea for basic literacy and numeracy standards too much to ask? And, even in practice, is it really at odds with the rich notion of education that Sizer has long championed and in fact not something of a predicate for it?

The problem with the direction Sizer wants is that, for a variety of reasons, good intentions and localized accountability have proved an insufficient guarantee of equity for underserved students. In many walks of life, people are held accountable to external standards. Is education really so exceptional among American endeavors that it needs no such outside accountability?

Within both the traditional public and charter sectors there are schools that serve niche populations and do not lend themselves to the mainstream accountability system. However, these schools are a minority. Instead of arguing whether charter schools should be included in No Child Left Behind, a more fruitful question is how to ensure that state accountability schemes allow enough flexibility for boutique programs within the public system while not opening up loopholes that low-quality schools can slip through. That’s a key issue for Congress to consider during the next reauthorization of No Child.

Apart from giving new start-ups an initial period of time to establish themselves, it is appropriate to hold the average charter school, serving similar students, to the same standards as other public schools in that community. If those standards are overly prescriptive or otherwise unreasonable, that’s an issue for all schools, not a reason to carve out exceptions for charters. Rhetorically, charter foes consistently fail to note that charters are public schools; charter proponents should not substantively make the same omission.

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The Inequity of Adequacy

Much appreciated is Joe Williams’s excellent account of the fiscal-equity juggernaut that has rolled through New York State (“The Legal Cash Machine,” Features, Summer 2005). The depressing results that are sure to follow from this ill-advised lawsuit will be equally unwelcome.

The tragedy of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) lawsuit is that it has resulted in mindless simplification of all debate surrounding education. By making more spending the only path to better results, we forgo the more important discussions of how, for instance, better pedagogy might improve outcomes, or how better management can direct more money to classrooms by creating transportation and procurement efficiencies.

The promise of what seems to be unlimited funds on the horizon has also created a “we can have it all” mentality. We can pay teachers more and also have more teachers (even though the number of qualified teachers in the job pool is a very finite commodity). We can build new schoolhouses rather than more efficiently use the ones we already have. We can increase available technology regardless of the capacity of the schools, their staff, and their students to absorb it. The sky is the limit. Don’t worry. The new money will be here soon.

As recounted by Mr. Williams, the lawsuit began during a period when city schools were indeed being shortchanged in the allocation of state funds. But the shortchanging of the city by about $400 per student 15 years ago is ancient history. Both the state’s and the city’s share of education funding in New York City have skyrocketed. Education outcomes are still mixed.

Finally, in New York City, as Williams made clear, the drumbeat continues for the State of New York to assume the full $5.6 billion annual school funding increase. But few in Gotham seem to realize that beyond the sphere of economic influence and affluence of the city is a world of dire economic crisis: boarded-up strip malls lining the upstate highways and byways and devastated cities with crippled economies, unable to support their own schools, much less subsidize ours. At the same time, these are the districts that are already eyeing the CFE lawsuit as a model for their own fiscal ambitions. All will discover that there is no pot of gold buried outside Albany.

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