Effecting Change in a Politically Charged Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Reform is a recurring theme in American public education. From Hoarce Mann and the Common School Era (Cremin, 1951) to the Progressive Era with John Dewey (Callahan, 1962), education has been the focus of multiple reform movements. Fast forward to the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the current reform movement – the age of accountability. This reform is like the others with both supporters and critics. However, now technology plays an integral role in the reform movement. For the first time, social media is being used to inform and mobilize the public into action.

History

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a document entitled "A Nation at Risk". While there are those who debated the accuracy of the data and the conclusions shared, it became a rally call for the corporations and politicians who wished to 'reform' education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). High stakes testing became a required part of public education in 2001 when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law and replaced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The NCLB required that each state test its third through eighth grade students to determine their level of proficiency in reading and math. Each state was able to establish its own test to determine the levels of proficiency students would be expected to master at each grade level. For students who did not reach the proper level of proficiency there would be serious and even severe consequences. Each state designated a grade level, usually third or fourth grade, in which a student would have to rank at proficient or above or face retention (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Most states also required that high school students pass a reading and math test in order to graduate. At the school level, various subgroups of students based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and special needs had to show "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) or the school would lose money and possibly be shut down. With the movement into Common Core, the tests became more rigorous and testing even more wide spread. Students often begin some form of high stakes testing in kindergarten and the tests now include other subject areas like Science and Economics.

Teachers do not believe high stakes testing is the best way to measure student performance. In a survey of more than 40,000 public school teachers completed by Scholastic in conjunction with Bill and Melinda Gates, only 27 percent felt that state required tests were vital in determining student achievement. On the other hand, 92 percent of the teachers felt that the best way to assess student achievement was through classroom assessments (Spring, 2011). Parents are also concerned about the testing obsession and its negative impact upon their children (Berliner & Glass, 1995).

Yet it seems the educators have very little to do with current education policy. About the time "A Nation at Risk" was released, education policies were becoming more focused on "excellence, accountability, and choice … The ideologies of both the business community and the Religious Right led them

to believe … that since schools are a part of government, they are automatically defined as part of the problem" (Fowler, 2014, p. 9). In today's society, foundations and think tanks exert a tremendous amount of influence upon education policy and the media. When parents and the general public are asked about their local schools, fewer than 20 percent would give their schools a D or an F and 51 percent would give their local schools an A or B. However, those same parents would rank public schools as a whole much lower with 25 percent handing out Ds and Fs and only 19 percent would give the public school system an A or B (Spring, 2011). Parents know about their own schools, they know about the good things that are happening in their community schools on a regular basis. But the media impacts the public's overall opinion of the nation's pubic schools and it appears the impact is negative.

According to Diane Ravitch,

The "reform" movement is really a "corporate reform" movement, funded to a large degree by major foundations, Wall Street hedge fund managers, entrepreneurs, and the U. S. Department of Education. The movement is determined to cut cost and maximize competition among schools and among teachers (2014, p. 19).

The current reform movement is all about running schools like businesses and using data (student standardized test scores) to determine the schools' success rates. Education policies are not being made by educators, who have little, if any, input or voice. Instead, the people promoting the corporate reform movement, by and large, have very little education experience except for having gone to school. Yet, they are the ones designing educational policies that have significant and far reaching impact on the American public school system (Berliner & Glass, 1995; McDermott, Robertson, Jensen, & Smith, 2015; Spring, 2011).

EXAMINING TWO MOVEMENTS

In the early 2000s many education groups were decrying the rising number and increasing complexity of high stakes tests and began encouraging parents to allow their children to "opt out" of high stakes tests. These groups include but are not limited to The Network for Public Education, The Coalition for Better Education, Fair Test, Save Our Schools (SOS), and Fund Education Now. However, like thousands of teachers, Peggy Robertson was frustrated with the inaction. What Robertson did, however, was quite different than most dissatisfied teachers. She voiced her frustration online via different List servs – and met others, like her, who wanted to do more (McDermott et all, 2015). After being involved in a SOS march in Washington, D.C., Robertson reached out to Ceresta Smith, Morna McDermott, Tim Slekar, Shaun Johnson, and Laurie Murphy. Robertson wanted to create a Facebook group that would promote "opting out" of high stakes tests. The group agreed to work together toward this end and the Facebook site was launched that month. "Within 48 hours, we had 500 members," (McDermott et all, 2015, p. 23). They named the site United Opt Out. So exactly what does it mean to "opt out"? It means, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, **"**to choose not to participate in something —often used with of <opted out of the project>" (2015).

Robertson understood the power of social media. But in order to harness the power, she knew the group would need a catchy slogan and a way to share basic information with other educators and parents. Although other education groups were against high stakes testing and talked about "opting out", there

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