

The Tribune

INSIGHT

The stories behind the news

Re-examining our failing education system - Part 4**BY RALPH MASSEY**

If the Bahamas is to end the scourge of academic underachievement in its

public schools, a number of factors must be taken into account.

First, the Department of Education must change how it reports its overall performance.

Up until recently the Department confined its reporting to the BGCSE exam results and then with a “single-letter-grade” for all schools...public and private...and for all 26 subjects. The score for almost two decades ranged between “D+” and “D-”; and the “single-letter-grade” was never treated as “Good News” in the media or by the nation’s employers.

The problem is that academic under-achievement is far greater in the Public Schools; and that reality...although readily apparent to employers, parents and taxpayers alike...was being concealed behind the “single-letter-grade”.

If the Department had reported the BGCSE scores for the Public Schools only, then the grade in all subjects would have ranged between a “D-” and an “F” and not between “D+” and “D-”. Furthermore, reporting the English and Math grades would have enlarged this disturbing picture.

However, it ceased making the “single-letter-grade” report on the grounds that it was misleading. **YES!** It was misleading. **BUT..**with this action it lost a valid and necessary measure of the Department’s overall performance.

It must face the reality of its past...acknowledge it...dramatize it...and earn credibility. Otherwise today’s Administration...in my view at least...will appear as part of the problem rather than solution.

For this reason the Department should start using a creditable benchmark for judging its future performance. This could be the BGCSE public school data for all subjects and for English and Math. It should start with a new 10-year plan that would show this data for the last 10 - 15 years.

Second...any effective program to end the scourge of academic underachievement and illiteracy is likely to elicit an immediate and powerful opposition.

This is what is happening across America. Madison Wisconsin right now is on the “Tipping Point” of change; New York City and New Jersey are rapidly approaching that point; and Washington D,C., unfortunately, crossed it and now may be in retreat because of an effective union-managed political counter attack.

But...many, many school districts are turning toward the Harlem Children’s Zone (“HCZ”) and the Knowledge Is Power Program (“KIPP”) school templates presented in the “Waiting For Superman” documentary; and they are applying them to their districts. For instance, there appear to be three such districts in the state of Florida alone.

The first section of article is a short report given to the Minister of Education and his Permanent Secretary, exactly as delivered by the author but without the dialogue that ensued. Section II is the author’s logical extension of this short report.

The Bahamas needs a commanding educational and political vision that will carry the country through a brutal political storm that accompanies reform in order to reach the promised land. That promised land is the cure of the scourge.

Third...A New Vision would entail either -

a.) The transfer of the Harlem Children's Zone and KIPP school templates to the Bahamas with their "U. S. Inner-City" learning software, teaching techniques, training and some experienced personnel.

OR

b.) A more modest effort...based perhaps on the ideas of Dr. Alvis Glaze, a pioneer in education reform from Ontario, Canada, who contends that the Canadian approach, a system that produced huge gains in Ontario, would be more effective in the Bahamas.

Both alternatives have the same objective...a new critical investment in the nation's human capital that would help the country avoid the social, political and economic disaster that surely will come with the status quo.

In any event the Department should examine the alternatives first-hand and the final results of this effort should be a new 10-year plan.

Part II - The HCZ

With Majority Rule the Government made a huge initial and continuing effort to educate Bahamian youth. It long ago achieved the 2015 United Nation's Millennium objective, "all children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling".

Although this objective is still touted by the UN, it is now recognized that it failed to consider either the "quality" of teaching instruction or the impact of culture on a society's values as related to learning. Unfortunately, as in a large part of the United States, the path followed in the Bahamas has produced the **Scourge**...

Unacceptable academic under-achievement, illiteracy, near permanent learning impairment and reduced life-time earnings.

The remedy that school districts in the U.S. are choosing is to change the culture of the classroom and the community. Fundamentally, this is what the HCZ does within its 100 square blocks of Harlem and KIPP with its 122 schools.

It is what the Bahamas has to do; and using the HCZ and KIPP templates is a huge task of planning and execution whose out-of-pocket costs will be significant...but certainly a fraction of the planed hotel investment on West Bay or the new COB library and sports stadium.

Reality in a Popular Democracy. Virtually all economists agree with -

Gary S Becker, the 1992 Nobel Laureate, "Large increases in education and training have accompanied major advances in technological knowledge in all countries that have achieved significant growth." Or with...

Julian L Simon (*The Ultimate Resource 2*), "Minds matter economically as much as, or more than, hands or mouths. Progress is limited largely by the availability of trained workers."

However, in popular democracies politicians live for the next election. In this world fresh investments in physical capital produce the greatest immediate return at the ballot box; in stark

contrast, education reform produces no comparable immediate electoral benefit. In the case of the Bahamas, a political storm will confront any threat to the employment-for-life benefit that teachers presently enjoy.

However, at this time a New Vision may gain the political support it so richly deserves if Nassau could join hands with a strategic U.S. city to exchange ideas and find ways to import and adapt the New Vision to end the scourge.

Part II - Alternative b.

Dr. Alvis Glaze (as described by Paco Nunez in the Tribune's Insight Section on March 14, 2011) claimed that her approach to education reform is more likely to work in the Bahamas than those of Geoffrey Canada.

She first lists all the ways that her approach is similar to his; and then she identifies her major difference.

- According to the article, Geoffrey Canada identifies bad teachers as those "who could care less about their students" and are "virtually impossible to get rid of".
- She contends that good teachers have both "Good Will" and the "Tools"; while bad teachers lack the "Tools". They need support, positive reinforcement and retooling.

This is a grossly simplistic statement and suggests that she overlooks significant landmark works such as -

- The documentary on the New Jersey Department of Education, *The Cartel*, that describes and illustrates how the Department and politicians collude systematically for their gain at the expense of student academic achievement and the state's finances.
- The monumental 1996 Progress Report "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement" published by the University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.
- The testimony of Eric A Hanushek in the "Waiting for Superman" documentary that is derived from his 2010 Research Paper "The Economic Value of Higher Teacher Quality."

In fact, the message of Dr. Glaze sounds strangely like the policies touted by the U.S. National Education Association: teacher merit pay based on what students actually learn is "messy" and undesirable; smaller classes are better; strive for "teacher excellence with equity...raise the bar for all"; and change from within.

One message is clear...the Bahamas does not need to separate teachers for poor performance. This suggests that Dr. Glaze may have been telling the Department of Education exactly what it wanted to hear.

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