

MORE BAND-AIDS FROM PERDUE & CO.

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Two recent political statements about education have been reported without being subjected to the critical scrutiny that they need desperately.

The first was the education section of Gov. Perdue's State of the State Address, in which he called for increases in teacher salary, bestowing on all teachers 100-dollar classroom gift cards, reducing class size, recruiting stronger principals, and providing school completion counselors in every high school.

I do not doubt the governor's good intentions or his sincerity, but I am aghast at the pointlessness of his program. If he had wanted to write a parody of proposals for school improvement, he could not have done it better.

The defects of the proposals should be manifest.

To keep teacher salaries fair, to move wages toward appropriate compensation for professionals, is laudable in the abstract. However, without making the curriculum that they deliver more rigorous and without elevating the standards for teacher competence in academic subject matter to truly professional levels, it is simply pouring good money after bad.

The classroom gift cards represent myopically misplaced largesse (or, to be more neologically precise, *étroitesse*). On the one hand, schools should be funded adequately and early enough to provide basic classroom supplies from day one of the school year. On the other hand, as any teacher can testify, parents and students have cultivated an indifference to preparation for school that would have been unthinkable decades ago. Many high school students, for example, show up for school in designer jeans carrying high-tech cell phones but without pencils, pens, and notebooks, and this continues through the year. Surely, anyone not in a condition of direst poverty can afford (the) basic school supplies (that a student needs). Yet, frequently they do not purchase them. The state government should not compensate for its own fiscal irresponsibility or for familial educational irresponsibility with a token measure that only perpetuates the negative attitudes that make such a measure seem necessary.

Reduction of class size, as I have said before in this column, is less important than changing both the curriculum and public attitudes.

Principals are important. Stronger principals certainly would be efficacious. However, where will we find them? We will recruit them from the same pool of candidates that we currently use. Until college departments of education become rigorous arenas for the best and brightest instead of the worst and dullest, such a pool will remain shallow in every sense of the word.

Finally, graduation completion counselors are of questionable value. In a good system, they are unnecessary. (In a bad system—and I have seen this during my teaching career—the practical effect of such coaches is poisonous. Most of them tend not to be even as qualified as current teachers. And too often their “coaching” takes the form of badgering teachers to pass students who do not deserve to pass so as to create a statistical improvement without substance. There is only one honest way to increase graduation rates: elevate student competence through curriculum reform and high performance standards delivered by academically competent teachers.)

Gov. Perdue wants to *do* right by education, but he needs advisors to help him to know what *is* right.

Shortly after the governor's speech, Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, with the enthusiastic support of Schools Superintendent Kathy Cox, proposed a program of grants (seed money, as it were) to encourage the increase of charter schools within the current system. He is even urging entire school districts to transform entirely into confederations of semi-autonomous charter schools. His goal is to improve student educational achievement in Georgia by increasing local control of schools.

It will not work. It will produce neither the needed systemic reform nor the equity that such reform should ensure. It is the kind of cosmetic band-aid that contemporary officials and educators keep applying to our public schools because they refuse to authorize the radical comprehensive surgery that is the system's only hope for meaningful survival.

To be fair, scattered charter schools within the current system can—and many do—provide a *better* education than their standard counterparts do. This is simply damning them with faint praise. No school today—charter or other—provides the kind of optimal education that once made our public schools exemplary training grounds for lifelong learning and informed democratic citizenship.

If we want to have public schools that provide both high quality education and equity of opportunity, charter schools are not the best way. Nor is increased local control. We need a more 'global' solution.

If we want both quality and equity, we need to make “tough choices,” not administer surface patches.

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