

THE COLORADO FORUM

WASHINGTON D. C.

MARCH 2 AND 3, 1988

EDUCATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD VISITATIONS IN WASHINGTON D. C. -- MARCH 2, 1988

The members of the FORUM visited two early childhood education programs while in Washington. The visitations were planned and coordinated by Bill Simons, President of the Washington Teachers Union, Local 6 of the American Federation of Teachers.

The first visit was to Shaw Junior High School where a private, non-profit program to promote comprehensive child day care was located. This program at Shaw is for children ages 2 to 5 and is one of fourteen such preschool centers in Washington, all of which are funded through the National Child Day Care Association (NCDCA) which was established in 1964. NCDCA is funded by several sources -- among them Head Start, local public funds, private grants and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Mattie Jackson, the Department of Human Services's Project Director for NCDCA, and Fannie Bailey, the Director of the Shaw Center program, were on hand to lead the tour of the Shaw facility and to answer questions. As is true for the Head Start program at Clayton College here in Denver, Mattie and Fannie both emphasized that the key for success is found in NCDCA's comprehensive approach to child care. The program provides not only an educational role, but also gives access to health, nutrition and social services. It is a requirement that the parents of these children must work or be in job training. Fees vary according to the ability to pay, ranging anywhere from 0 to \$75 a week. Mattie noted that the program costs about \$3200 a year per child. The preschool centers are open all year from 7:30 a. m. to 6:00 p. m. A 4 to 1 student to teacher ratio is adhered to.

The second visit of the morning was to Takoma Elementary School -- an open space, neighborhood school for grades K-8. Unlike the program at Shaw, the early childhood program at Takoma was part of the District of Columbia's public school program. The principal, Peggy Wines, divided the FORUM into two groups for classroom visitations to both the pre-kindergarten (four year olds) and the kindergarten (five year olds) classroom areas.

Peggy informed the group that Takoma students come from the immediate neighborhood which she described as a "middleclass, working community". Both the pre-kindergarten and the kindergarten are full day programs. There is also an afterschool program for any students in the school whose parents will pay the \$35 a month fee for the

extended hours. Approximately forty of the sixty children enrolled in kindergarten were previously enrolled in the pre-kindergarten program at Takoma. There is also a nursery school program in the building for two and three year olds which, because of the time frame, the FORUM was unable to observe.

Overall the visitations to both Shaw and Takoma were very worthwhile and stimulating for those who were able to attend. Any report made here does little justice in describing the actual first-hand experience of looking into the eyes and hearts of these young children.

MEETING WITH ALBERT SHANKER -- MARCH 2, 1988

Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, spent an hour with the FORUM reviewing his perceptions of the state of public education in the United States today. He acknowledged and applauded the FORUM's interest in early childhood education, noting that there is substantial evidence which documents that such an investment pays off.

Shanker choose to share with the FORUM some of his concerns about the structure of public schools as well as the methods we use within this structure to educate kids. He noted that most of the educational reports on public education are now out and although most educators dislike the negatives, the fact is, the actual state of our public schools is even worse than the studies show.

The National Public Education Assessment Report tested all the 17 1/2 year olds in public schools. (In reality only 75 percent of that population was tested because 25 percent of that age group have already dropped out.) Shanker illustrated three examples of test questions and results, one in each of the following areas: (1) writing, (2) reading and (3) arithmetic.

Writing -- each student had to write a letter to the principal of his/her school with the purpose to persuade the principal to change a school policy or regulation. Result -- only 20 percent could give one or two reasons that might convince the principal to change a regulation.

Reading -- each student had to read a bus or train schedule and determine how they could travel from Philadelphia to Washington D. C. and arrive at a specified time. Result -- 4.9 percent of the students could do it correctly. (If you eliminate the Black and Hispanic students, then 5.9 percent were successful.)

Arithmetic -- each student was given five or six fractions and had to place them in order from smallest to largest. Result -- 12 percent of those tested were able to correctly order the fractions.

The conclusion of the assessment is that we are educating about 15 to 20 percent of our kids to a modest level of day to day competencies.

Shanker noted that thinking which focuses on educational reform needs to relate to where we are in regard to where the system is working. To push for longer school days and more homework, etc., is "kind of silly". One possible hypothesis is "God only makes 15 to 20 percent of us capable". Another might be "there are too many distractions in the world today". The hypothesis Shanker chooses to believe is "the basic process we have in school today is fundamentally wrong". Instead of helping kids, we are actually hurting them.

The one thing we do have going is the desire to learn on the part of the student. Shanker emphasizes "once that is gone -- forget it!" Education is an active process in which the kids want to engage. We need to look at the ways our schools get the kids to think they are "dumb" and can't compete.

We can explain the results of the National Assessment as a failure of the process resulting from the institutions we have created. The traditional process we have created in our schools emphasizes two learning modes: (1) reading it and (2) listening to someone else talk for five hours a day. The students who make it are the ones who can sit, listen and read.

Shanker emphasized that our "annual basis of organization" is a major flaw of the process. We structure the school year to begin in August or September and then put the whole "batch" of kids in at one time. Are all kids the same age when they begin school? Is there a difference between the readiness of a five and a half year old and a six year old? Statistics show that an overwhelming number of drop-outs are the ones with the later birthdate.

Kids learn early that they are dumb or weak. The class structure which requires performance in front of 20 or 30 of your peers can cause much humiliation. Is there a way of organizing a school so that the kid doesn't have to be in competition with his/her classmates?

Looking at our secondary schools from a student's point of view -- it is difficult to have a different task (class) and a different boss (teacher) every 45 minutes. Can we change our system so that we view the student as a worker instead of some "inanimate object"?

Shanker offered the FORUM an example of how a school might be organized in a different form, but emphasized at the same time that "education has never gone through the process of changing as an institution".

Shanker's example was a German school in Cologne. The school is urban, has ethnic differences, is comprised mainly of students other schools previously tracked in the middle and slow tracks and has an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students. The school encompasses grade 5 through the age of 19. Kids come into the school in the 5th grade and are divided into groups of 100 and each group is assigned to 8 teachers. These teachers will stay with their assigned group until they are 19 years old and

graduate. There will be no substitute teachers. Structure for the group is in the hands of the 8 teachers -- anything the teacher "botches up" the teachers must live with. There are no lectures -- kids are given assignments in small groups with the emphasis on creative answers -- not necessarily the right answers. Kids must work together, not against each other. The process turns a bureaucracy into what is a "moral community". This particular school has been in existence for 17 years. It teaches inquisitiveness, responsibility and provides accountability (group teaching puts pressure on each teacher to perform).

Shanker thinks that the approach used by the Secretary of Education, Bill Bennett, in which he tells the public -- "Here is all you have to do -- one, two, three", fosters an attitude which creates "public antagonism". When looking at the problem "How do we educate everybody?", we need to avoid "super optimistic nonsense". We need to admit that the problem is difficult -- that it is tough! Comparing this thought to doctors and medicine, Shanker used the analogy that doctors don't pretend that a cure for cancer is a simple matter. So why should educators understate the difficulty of obtaining an optimal education for all kids. Many European countries place students into tracts of ability and then forget about the "dumb" ones.

Shanker summarized by restating that we need to change what doesn't work, we need to preserve experimental programs that do work and we need to convince people that the problem is a tough problem with no simple answers.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES WITH AL SHANKER:

BILL COORS: What about specialization of teachers? Isn't there a difference in the skills of a 5th grade teacher and a high school teacher?

SHANKER: Yes, to a degree. Specialization creates de-humanization. If we give teachers the choice to work under such a system, some won't be able to do it. Over a time period attitudes will change. Specialization is a trade off. A team of 8 teachers could still have areas of special focus.

GEORGE MARTIN: Your example empowers the teacher. What about empowering the students and the parents?

SHANKER: We are empowering the students within the small group process. The parents and the community can be involved daily in the classroom. The German school has three administrators who have to teach nine hours a week. Each administrator heads a team, which includes both parents and teachers, for the purpose of developing curriculum.

WALT KOEBEL: Looking at the assessment tests like the reading of railroad time tables, if this test were given 10 - 20 - 30 years ago, how would the results have changed?

SHANKER: They would have been worse. In 1941, 20 percent of all kids graduated from high school. 1953 was the first year in which over 50 percent of all kids graduated. The consequences for not graduating from high school are tougher today. If we gave the test to the 21-25 age group, about 25 percent could pass. We spend over \$300 billion a year on education -- we ought to be getting our dollars' worth.

BILL LORING: How is higher level math like trigonometry taught in the German school?

SHANKER: Within the group like everything else. A lot of what we do in math is proving someone else's theorems. At Harvard, they are studying what concepts are the hardest to teach and are finding that computers can provide the visual imagery necessary to help students understand certain geometrical concepts and as a result the students can begin to apply their own concepts relative to what they already understand. There is a problem with math in that the teacher has an immediate answer for the student but the process is never explored. Within the small group the kids can discover the process.

BILL LORING: Do all the students engage in the same curriculum?

SHANKER: No. Under German law, all college bound students have a separate program during their last two years of school.

FRED DRESSLER: Why aren't we seeing changes in this country in areas where this type of system could be acceptable?

SHANKER: It will take time. The system would take more than two or three years to crossover past traditions. We do have some creative programs (you could count them on one hand) such as the one in Dade County (Miami, Florida), or others in Pittsburgh, Rochester, Toledo and Hammond, Indiana.

HARRY LEWIS: What is your organization doing to try to effect change?

SHANKER: The AFT Quest Conference is putting together a package (within the next four months) on how the public and private sectors can create a more productive system. The AFT is now holding more conferences than conventions. We won't get a change in the school system unless you can change the measuring system. Until we can measure something that is worthwhile no teacher will teach something that is worthwhile! We need to be measuring areas such as essay writing, critical thinking and reasoning. All we measure and teach now is nothing more than "pieces of information". We need to measure and teach "creativity and imagination".

MEETING WITH LINUS WRIGHT/ UNDERSECRETARY OF EDUCATION/ MARCH 3, 1988

Under Secretary Wright commended the FORUM for its interest and effort in education noting that it was exactly this type of effort from the private sector (coming to Washington and providing visability) which could bring the desired results.

Wright listed four broad reasons why we are not providing an adequate education to our nation's youth -- poverty, language, social problems (drugs, alcohol, divorce and overall lack of respect for authority) and accountability. These problems are reflected by our high illiteracy rate (the United States ranks 49th out of 153 countries with 40 million illiterate), our drug problems and the fact that we spend \$40 million a year to re-educate and retrain high school graduates. We spend \$309 billion a year on education in this country.

Do we change attitudes or do we restructure? Do we need more business involvement, more local reforms or a national system? Our greatest hope is through interest groups like the COLORADO FORUM. The FORUM can effect change because it has both an understanding and an investment. Wright gave the following three reasons why business groups such as the FORUM should get involved in the area of public education: (1) it can result in a literate and trained workforce, (2) better trained communities provide businesses with better resources and (3) the country as a whole can gain a better competitive edge.

Wright shared his belief that the public sectors have not been good managers over the years. The most effective institutions have always been the ones based on "volunteer" support.

While considering public education, Wright emphasized that both ends of the age spectrum needed our focus. He concluded that we can't afford not to invest in public education or, in his words, "We will eliminate the middle class of society."

(Information note. During the past two decades, Wright was a school administrator in Houston and until his appointment last Summer to the Under Secretary's position was the Superintendent of one of the Nation's largest school systems, Dallas, TX.)