

WHERE WE STAND ON THE RUSH TO INCLUSION

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U.S. education is in trouble and there are a lot of reasons for it. One of them is the tendency of American education to be moved -- massively moved -- by fads and by ideologies. We can think back to the 1950s when I started teaching and something swept the country called the New Math. The overwhelming majority of teachers said it doesn't work; the kids don't get it; we don't get it. But it took 25 to 30 years before there was recognition of its weaknesses and a movement away from it. And New Math is not the only example of this phenomenon.

If we think of a field like medicine, we see that in the medical and pharmaceutical worlds, there are all sorts of cautions taken before new medicine is placed on the market. When something is discovered and you read about it in the newspapers, you know that you can't go out the next day and buy it at the drugstore because it has to be thoroughly tested before it becomes available. You know that there will be many additional experiments before this new remedy is marketed. When it finally becomes available, there

are always all sorts of warnings attached.

Unfortunately, in education we tend to operate in a such way that one or two or a handful of people or advocacy groups grab on to some new idea, present it as a panacea, and "sell" it to an educational community that is hungry for answers. And once a fad is adopted, it takes a long, long period of time after the damage is done to undo it.

Now we have a rush towards something called inclusion. We don't know what the long-term effects are. We have had mainstreaming for more than 15 years, but in mainstreaming disabled students' progress was always being monitored by special education teachers. Inclusion was tried in only a few small places and immediately was viewed as the panacea, the only moral answer, the only way to educate students with disabilities. In addition, some people now claim that anybody who's against inclusion is immoral, a new segregationist, or antieducation. That kind of rhetoric is quite effective in shutting off discussion. There may be a lot of people who are intimidated or afraid to say anything, even though they don't like what's happening.

The inclusion that is being advocated is the placement of all students with disabilities into general education classrooms without regard to the nature or severity of the students' disabilities, without regard to their ability to behave and function appropriately in a regular classroom, without regard to the educational benefits they derive, and without regard to the impact that that inclusion has on the other students in the class.

In other words, it's basically a view that this is the right thing to do, and it's the right thing under all circumstances. And there is a tremendous push on the part of some U.S. government officials, state boards of education, and a number of advocacy groups to implement that brand of inclusion.

Before we go any further with our discussion of inclusion, it's important to start with what schools are about. Schools have three functions: the development of knowledge and skills, the development of adults who are economically viable, and the development of social and interpersonal relations. Looked at another way, there are intellectual benefits, there are economic benefits, and there are political and social benefits in terms of developing the ability to function within a democracy. The argument on the part of the full inclusionists rests on the social benefits of education. Some have even stated that they don't care if other children don't learn to read and write, if they have learned to "get along."

Any new policy in American education that will affect what students learn and their interpersonal and social development should not be implemented hastily and certainly should not be implemented before there is full discussion and scrutiny of the issues. New programs should not be implemented without some periods of experimentation where we have an opportunity to see and judge the effects of actual implementation.

Large numbers of books are written about well-intentioned programs, things that the government tried to do in the '50s and

'60s and '70s that didn't work out quite the way they were supposed to. I think many of these programs were worthwhile, even if they had some unintended consequences. But the fact is that we now know that we often get something that's quite different from what was envisioned in the first place. And, therefore, it's important to engage in some trial, some experimentation, before deciding that everybody has to do it in this particular way.

There is no doubt that every child, regardless of abilities, disabilities, problems, or status, has a right to a free public education. But that does not mean that any particular child has a right to a particular placement in a particular class or a particular school.

I believe that large numbers of students who are now separated in special education could undoubtedly be included and integrated in regular classrooms. I believe that it would be profitable for many students with disabilities and for the rest of the class if many disabled students not now being educated in regular classrooms were placed there. Therefore, I agree with those who say that we probably have too many youngsters separated out and many who could be integrated. Many of our members who are very concerned about this movement toward inclusion feel that way, too.

The AFT's position is not a movement to label and to separate and to create two systems. It is a position that says that we cannot make blanket decisions about every student. We cannot say that all students should be in regular classrooms whatever their disability, whatever their ability to function in a classroom and

profit from it, and whatever the impact on the other youngsters.

We offer an alternative to the full inclusionists' point of view, and that alternative is that placement ought to depend on those very things. It ought to depend on the nature of the disability. It ought to depend on the ability of that child to function within a regular classroom. It ought to depend upon the impact of such a placement on that child and on all the other children.

In other words, we are staying away from ideology, away from the notion that the same thing fits all kids, that all kids have to be treated the same even though they're different. We need to treat youngsters in terms of what's best for them and not according to some ideological theory.

In each case, we need to ask what is the impact of a particular placement on the child who has a disability, and we also have to ask what is the impact on all the others in the class. We are especially concerned with children who are very emotionally disturbed and with children who are medically fragile and need medical attention throughout the day. Very little good is done by including children in a regular class if the entire academic mission of that class, the entire focus, becomes "How do we adjust to this child?" When the teacher and the paraprofessional and everybody else in the class focus on how to handle one particular child, what is the effect on the rest of the class?

If parents see that their kids are not getting out of school what they're supposed to be getting, that the entire class is

focused on adjusting to one very disruptive child or on a child whose many medical needs must be met by the teacher, those parents are going to start pressing for vouchers. They're going to start pressing for the privatization of education, and instead of a public school system which includes many children of many different races, religions, nationalities, we're going to end up with highly separated and segregated schools. So that in the name of inclusion, we may end up getting the most separated and segregated school system that we can possibly have in this country. That is one of the central dangers of this movement.

One argument for inclusion is a civil rights argument. But this is based on a faulty analogy. Once upon a time, we used to segregate black youngsters and send them to separate schools. The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that even if you tried to provide equal facilities in those schools, separate can never be equal. The view in the full inclusion movement is that once you separate kids out, you label them, and there is a stigma attached to the label. Therefore, the argument goes, a judgment that was true for black youngsters during the period of segregation is also true for youngsters today who suffer from some disability. Therefore, it follows, we must end all separation.

The problem with the analogy is that it's not very accurate. Black youngsters were being kept out for one reason, because they were black, because of the color of their skin. There is the same range of learning abilities among black youngsters as among white youngsters, and the black students were kept out for a reason that

was totally irrelevant and totally racist. It was race and not their ability to function within normal classrooms that kept them out. But if a youngster is kept out of the classroom because that youngster needs instruction in Braille or if a youngster is kept out of a classroom because his or her medical problems are not likely to be attended to in a regular classroom, we have something that's very different.

In one case, youngsters were separated out for a reason that was totally irrelevant to their education. As a matter of fact, it was destructive of their education. In another case, youngsters are being separated out because of special needs and special problems that they have. Two very, very different motivations and two very, very different attitudes.

We are saying that some children need separate classrooms not to harm them or because anyone desires that the youngsters be separated, but to meet their different and special educational needs. If a youngster is constantly violent and constantly noisy and disruptive, so the class can't function when that youngster is there, we need to separate that youngster out so that he or she can learn and so that the rest of the class can function.

I see no basis for the civil rights analogy. Black youngsters then were so eager to learn that, when the civil rights movement reached its height, they were willing to risk a great deal walking through lines of hostile people protected by troops, they were so eager to learn. This is very different from a youngster who is yelling and screaming and fighting and throwing things. The analogy

just does not stand.

I would very strongly suggest that the way we should behave as educators and the way we should behave as individuals would be very much the way a caring and intelligent parent would act. What was very interesting about my appearance on a number of radio shows on this issue was that a number of parents who called in and talked about the fact that they had four or five children and they were very, very different. And parents who had an extremely disturbed youngster who was violent would not insist that that youngster be at all the other activities with all the other children. One youngster might be taking piano lessons; another might be athletically inclined; a third might be doing something else. Many of these parents were very concerned that one of the youngsters would disturb and disrupt and destroy the work of the other youngsters. It seems to me that the same kind of judgment that an intelligent parent would exercise ought to be exercised by all of us as a society.

Not very long ago, a film came out called "Educating Peter." I saw it last year at the AFT QUEST Conference [July, 1993, Washington, DC] where we had a session on this issue. It is a very moving film, which was really put together to be an argument in favor of inclusion. What the film did not tell you was that inclusion there was really done right. That is, the teacher involved was given time off and given special training. There were additional personnel assigned to the class. All of the supports that are frequently missing were there.

But as I watched that film, I saw that Peter was very unpredictable and very disruptive, and on occasion violent. At the end of the film, he was less disruptive and able to relate to the teacher and the other youngsters a little bit more. The other youngsters had learned to accept him and live with him, and my heart went out. It is a tear-jerker and you see that something very good was accomplished there because the kids were a little closer together. My emotional reactions were the same as everybody else who watched the film.

But I had another reaction, too. I wondered whether the youngsters in that class had spent a whole year in adjusting to how to live with Peter and whether they did any reading, whether they did any writing, whether they did any mathematics, whether they did any history, whether they did any geography. And it seems to me that it's a terrible shame that we don't ask that question. Is the only function of the schools to get kids to learn to live with each other? Would we be satisfied if that's what we did and if all the youngsters came out not knowing any of the things that they're supposed to learn academically? Will any of them, disabled or non-disabled, be able to function as adults?

We now have legislation, Goals 2000, that President Clinton is supporting and the governors are supporting. We have an National Educational Goals Panel. We have an attempt to lift the nation very quickly from a low level of performance to a high level of performance. There's great doubt as to whether we can do it, because it will be very difficult. We need coordination of three

levels of government. We need substantial retraining of teachers. We need different attitudes on the part of students towards their work.

Do we really believe that we can simultaneously accomplish that mission and at the same time do something that no other country in the world has ever done? Do we really believe that we can take youngsters with very, very severe disabilities and, at the same time we're trying to get world-class education, include youngsters who need extensive medical attention and youngsters who are extremely disturbed and deal with all of their problems?

The advocates hope that by mixing all children, children with disabilities will gain the respect of children who are not disabled. I think the underlying motive is undeniably excellent -- we're all going to be living together as adults; we're going to be working together as adults; and therefore, if we can live with each other as much as possible as youngsters in school, that will be the beginning of learning to live and work with each other as grownups. But if extremely disturbed, violent youngsters are put in the regular classrooms, do we really think that the other youngsters are going to learn respect -- or are they going to learn contempt? Are they going to develop hostility? This rush to inclusion has created a situation where placements of students with disabilities are being made incorrectly in many cases. Because this is so, we may develop exactly the opposite values that we say that we want to develop.

One of the reasons for the push to inclusion is that taking

youngsters with special needs out of small classrooms, not giving them special teachers, psychologists, social workers, therapists and other professionals, and including them with everybody else saves money. And during a period of time like this when school budgets are under attack, many of these youngsters are likely to lose their special help when they are placed in regular classrooms. Part of the thrust of the inclusion movement is saving money.

Some school districts see that special education is more expensive and reason that if they could push all disabled youngsters into regular education, they can squeeze some of the money out of their special education budgets and have special education go away. In theory, youngsters with special problems who are integrated into a regular class are supposed to have special services follow them. But given the financial situation of our states and school districts, and given the fact that the federal government has never met its commitment to fund its share of education for the disabled, does anybody really believe that the large amount of money that's necessary to provide these services in individual classrooms is going to be made available?

What we are doing here is very difficult to do. There are other organizations out there. There are people in those organizations who have thought the same thoughts and felt the same things and had the same experiences and had letters and telephone calls from teachers and from parents and from administrators and from different constituents. Many have made public statements about their concerns. But it didn't seem that anyone who is

pushing this movement would listen. In this climate, the AFT could not sit back and remain silent. We have joined them.

I want to conclude by saying that I think that we can turn this around. There are many, many advocacy groups in the special education field who are unhappy and uneasy with this policy. In the radio shows that I was on, there were parents whose youngsters were included who said they agreed with us because they weren't sure that their kids would be able to adjust, and they wanted the option of being able to move their kids back if it didn't work out. They liked the idea that they could try this out and if it worked, of course, they wanted it that way. But they didn't want it that way as a matter of policy. And they didn't want it that way as a matter of ideology.

I have a copy of a letter that appeared in the Eugene, Oregon newspaper called The Register-Guard. It's a short letter, but it's one that really shows that somebody out there understands the issues and the politics of it very clearly. The headline is "Challenge and Inclusion." The letter says, "Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, spoke the unspeakable when he suggested that not all special needs children should be fully mainstreamed or included in the regular classroom. The inclusion movement is both politically correct, namely satisfying the liberals, and cost-effective, namely satisfying the conservatives. By challenging it, Shanker has guaranteed himself attacks from both camps.

"I applaud his willingness to accept such attacks. I hope his

comments will remind us that placement of special needs students should be based not on political correctness or economic expediency, but on careful consideration of the physical, emotional, educational and social welfare of all the students involved. I have taught special needs students in special programs for 28 years. My goal and the goal of every special needs teacher I have known has always been to help students develop those skills, behaviors and attitudes that would allow them to return to and succeed in the regular classroom, or upon leaving school, to succeed on the job and in their personal lives.

"Every special needs teacher I've ever known is dedicated to each student's placement in the least restrictive appropriate educational setting. However, in this era of cutbacks, special needs programs are being dismantled and special needs students are being included in regular classes. Classes that are increasing in size by five to ten students and wherein teacher's aides are being eliminated as further cost-saving measures. Certainly the inclusion movement is politically correct and certainly it's cost-effective. But please don't try to tell me it's good for the kids."

That's our view.