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Why education reforms fail

By Marion Brady

In 1983, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education published a 43-page report titled, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, a hair-on-fire document warning that other countries were out-educating us. If our schools didn't improve, other countries would eat our lunch.

From the report's Introduction: "...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

In the forty years since *A Nation at Risk* was published, billions of public and private dollars have been spent on education "reforms." Leaders of business and industry, heads of foundations and think tanks, state and federal politicians have weighed in, backing school choice, high-stakes testing, teacher pay based on learner progress, vouchers, Common Core State Standards, charters, Race to the Top, public funding of private and religious schools and other sneaky privatizing strategies.

Education reformers have given it their best shot, and the academic performance needle stays stuck on "mediocre."

The reason competition-based reform initiatives fail isn't complicated. Notwithstanding the important role competition plays in sports, marketing, politics and other familiar matters, in education, competition is counterproductive. What drives *effective* schooling isn't competition but deeper human needs—the need to understand, to make sense of experience, to solve problems, to know how or why something works, to satisfy curiosity, to "know" one's self, to prepare the young for an unknown future—those are deep needs.

Focus on competition and deep needs don't get met. Focus on deep needs and academic performance will take off, but the education establishment has never considered that to be its mission. What schedules most of the secondary school day are the math, science, language arts and social studies courses of the "core curriculum" adopted by America's high schools in 1894.

That's a problem. The core's disconnected stand-alone subjects started dumbing America down when it was adopted, and as problems created by environmental, technological, demographic and social change pile up, the core grows increasingly dysfunctional. Healthy social institutions improve over time as generations "stand on the shoulders" of preceding generations, discarding failures and building on successes, and that hasn't happened at the secondary level of schooling.

Dozens of nationally and internationally known and respected experts in the arts and sciences have said the core curriculum fails. Decades ago, studies by the Association of American Colleges and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching gave the core a failing grade, but it remains in place as America's young inherit a future more challenging than any in human history.

I've no reason to think the words of a 97-year-old will carry any more weight than they did in the years when my thoughts on education appeared regularly in the Orlando Sentinel, but I feel compelled to repeat: *Traditional schooling fails primarily because its disconnected subjects are isolated from reality, which—as Leonardo da Vinci insisted—is systemically related and integrated.* Kids pretend to learn by stuffing information into short-term memory just long enough to stay out of trouble.

Proper schooling helps adolescents lift into consciousness the easily understood sense-making *relating* process and put it to useful work, doing in a couple of hours a day what the core curriculum can't do at all—create thinkers. That happens because traditional schooling emphasizes a single thought process—*recalling* textbook text and teacher talk. The knowledge-creating *relating* process requires them to hypothesize, infer, correlate, extrapolate, imagine, predict, generalize, synthesize and so on—use the dozens of thought processes not taught because they're too complex to be evaluated by machine-scored standardized tests.