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# EDUCATIONAL REFORM: A SUPERINTENDENT'S VIEW

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**R**ecent issues of education periodicals contain numerous articles pertaining to the “reform movement.” Defining reform is challenging, but there appears to be consensus among educators and the public that educational reform is essential.

Significant legislation affecting education has been enacted in Texas in the last decade, but one would question an assumption that the legislation has resulted in quality educational reform. Perhaps the most significant “reform” legislation in recent years is the mandate for site-based decision making (SBDM). Of all the reforms, this concept presents a great challenge and yet a great opportunity for gifted education.

Contributors to this publication were to comment on the question of how reform can work for or against gifted students. My first observation is that “reform” which would adversely affect students should not be called reform. Reform should enhance the educational opportunities for all students.

A critical element for public school educators to address when planning or implementing reform is to ensure that all student populations will benefit educationally. Changes made in the name of reform which result in less opportunities for any student population group should be resisted. As an example, if heterogeneous grouping is the only pattern used on campus and this pattern results in less opportunities and few, if any, programs and activities appropriate for gifted students, then school leaders must speak up and oppose such efforts.

The responsibility for giving final approval to a

SBDM plan rests with a school district’s Board of Trustees. Therefore, questions pertaining to which decisions are central, campus, or shared should be defined and included in the district’s plan. Although some will disagree, it is my belief that in these early implementation stages of SBDM, those decisions which could have a significant impact on special programs (gifted, bilingual, special education, etc.) should remain at the central administration level. In future years, site teams will gain more information and have a greater awareness of the needs of students enrolled in these special programs. Such initiatives as results-based monitoring (RBM) currently being piloted by the Texas Education Agency should result in campus personnel gaining new insights and knowledge of programs for students in special programs.

Stories of gifted programs being eliminated at the campus level under the mistaken assumption that the only acceptable grouping pattern in the public schools is heterogeneous grouping are at best disappointing and at the worst tragic. Grouping should be based on student needs! Dr. Lionel (Skip) Menoj, Texas Commissioner of Education, has addressed the issue of homogeneous vs. heterogeneous grouping: “It is not a question of one being the right way and the other being the wrong way. It is a question of developing a program that meets the needs of students in a particular area.”

There should be no conflicts between **quality** educational reform and programs for the gifted. Whatever barriers exist between proponents of reform and advocates for the gifted must be confronted and eliminated.

Persons in leadership positions should remain vig-

ilant and forceful in ensuring that quality programs for students in special programs, including programs for the gifted, are retained and improved. But, it is also essential that advocates for the gifted not assume a position of opposing reform. We desperately need major reform of public education in this state and in the nation.

Parents should play a strategic role in advocating programs for those children identified as gifted. Parents can serve on SBDM committees or, if not serving as a member of the committee, they can serve as resource persons. Parents can provide testimonials about gifted programs which are



Charles Patterson, Killeen ISD, and Richard Benjamin, Fort Worth ISD, look on as June Cox, 1979 TAGT President, speaks at the 1983 conference

making a positive difference in the lives of their children.

Additionally, parents can network with advocates who are involved in other programs which promote opportunities for special needs students. For too long, advocates for gifted programs have been perceived as interested only in programs for the gifted. Collaborative efforts can change this perception.

Advocates of gifted programs should be seeking the “common ground” by identifying ways that educational reforms and education for the gifted can be in harmony.

Recently, I had the opportunity to participate in a symposium entitled “Gifted Education and School Reform: Making the Connection.” This promising venture was sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children in association with the Aspen/WYE Institute in Queenstown, Maryland. The stated goal for the symposium was as follows:

The symposium will combine individuals involved in serving gifted students with colleagues in general education, government, and business in an extensive and careful

examination of policy and practice related to meeting the needs of gifted and talented students in the context of school reform.

As a concluding activity, the participants in this symposium identified some “common ground” between advocates of reform and advocates for the gifted. Some of the areas of agreement could be useful to educators in Texas as they address the challenges of reform and restructuring:

1. The “status quo” in education is unacceptable.
2. Supporters of reform, advocates for the gifted, and society in general all desire improvement in public school education.
3. All school programs and activities should be student centered and address individual student needs.
4. Professional development opportunities for educators are essential.
5. Diversity must be honored.
6. An international community of learners must be created.
7. We must collaborate and communicate.

It would be useful if educators would focus on areas of agreement and lessen the rhetoric on areas of disagreement. Meeting the needs of all students must be our focus and our mission. Commissioner Menoj, in public statements and in print, has appropriately identified one of the “non-negotiables” in developing a system of education for the future:

The first [“non-negotiable”] is the student. The student is non-negotiable because it is our job as educators in this state and in the public schools to educate all the youngsters. That doesn’t mean shoot for the middle and ignore an those at the top or the bottom. Or shoot at the bottom and ignore the others. What it means is to educate all the youngsters in a manner that meets their needs.

All students deserve our best thinking, our best efforts, and our highest degree of professionalism. A growing number of persons in this state are attacking and attempting to undermine public education. Their agendas are subtle, creative, and deceptive. Therefore, educators must find ways to link together as advocates for all students and as advocates for public education. The children are crying to us—are we listening?

## REFERENCE

Texas Education Agency. (1992, Fall/Winter). A dialogue with the Commissioner of Education. *Update of Gifted Education: Educational Reform Issues*, 2, 6.

**Charles Patterson, Ph.D.**, TAGT President in 1982, served as Superintendent in Killeen ISD from 1988 to 2004. An elementary school in Killeen ISD is named for Patterson, who spent his professional life advocating for kids, including those from military families and the gifted. He has held many national leadership roles, has been the recipient of many honors, and has represented education in Texas with ethics, passion, and dedication.