

THE LAST WORD

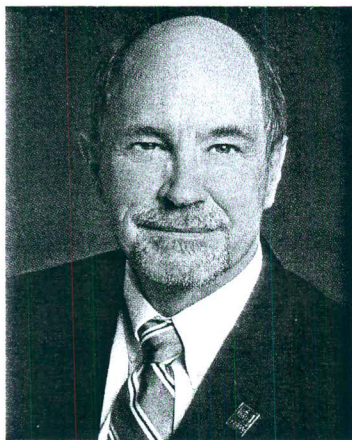
Thomas J. Gentzel

Debunking the 'reform' agenda

No human enterprise is perfect, and we all are capable of improving. That's especially true when an institution faces continuing challenges and new demands. Such is the case with public education, which has undergone many transformations since it was established.

We often forget that, during most of our nation's history, public schools were expected to provide basic instruction to all students while preparing some to move on to higher education and the professions. This system of sorting worked well when family-supporting jobs in factories and mills were plentiful. Today, lower-skilled jobs are hard to find, let alone capable of sustaining a middle-class existence.

Now, public schools are expected to do something never before asked of them: educate *all* students to a very high level. This, of course, is a good and necessary development if our nation is to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Remarkably, America's public education system has responded to these heightened expectations in ways that once would have seemed nearly impossible. Our commitment to educating every child is unparalleled, as is our effort to help each one reach his or her potential.



No other country in the world even pretends to do what Americans demand of our education system. Perhaps, not surprisingly, we spend more time focusing on what remains to be done and less on what already has been accomplished. That's not altogether a bad thing, since it has the effect of pushing educators to continue to improve. Yet, it has had some serious negative consequences, too.

Some critics of public education have relentlessly assailed the institution for failing to educate all children at the levels now expected. Here, we must pause to acknowledge that, despite dramatic gains in student achievement we have witnessed in most places, some schools have not performed nearly as well as they should. These pockets of deficiency are a source of real concern, since they often exist in communities with the greatest challenges, generally.

We should have a candid conversation about how to address these issues, and we must work to ensure that every public school in America, regardless of zip code, is an excellent school. We should do these things but—instead in the current education policy debate—children in these struggling schools have become pawns in a larger effort coordi-

nated by some well-funded interests with an agenda of their own. Many of these “reformers” have pushed hard—and often effectively—for solutions that are either untested or have demonstrated only limited success.

How else to explain the drive to create as many charter schools as possible, despite clear evidence that most do not outperform traditional public schools (and in fact, many fare much worse)? Although advocates of tuition vouchers and tax credits argue these measures could provide options for children “trapped” in poorly performing schools, they acknowledge their proposals would help only a small percentage of such students, and they have virtually nothing to say about what should be done for the many who would remain in those schools.

I believe some proponents of the school choice agenda are sincere in their belief that competition will help all schools to be better. Unfortunately, those people are not driving this debate. To be blunt, certain interests that stand to make a lot of money are the ones most actively promoting the privatization agenda. If they were sincerely interested in ensuring that every child in America had access to a great public school where they live, they would be supporting early childhood education, mentoring programs for new teachers, and other investments that have been demonstrated to be effective. That they so steadfastly refuse to do so speaks volumes about what they really want—and that has a lot more to do with them and their own bottom lines than it does with children receiving a great education. ■

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