

A couple Thanksgivings ago, I wrote one of those way-too-long essays that combined two barely related concepts: Not Why This. Just Why Not That. And then I forgot about the work entirely, which is too bad, because each of the two barely related concepts is pretty interesting. Then today I thought hey, I'm short essays this month. Why not split the two barely related concepts into two barely related posts?

I remembered this part of the essay when I read Henry Harpending's suggestion that welfare payments be made to the father, not the mother. I haven't really considered the proposal on merits, but the post reminded me of how severely modern nations restrict their range when in public policy debates.

I find

I gave a brief history of education reform since 1965 or so in The Fallacy at the Heart of All Reform, which doesn't get nearly as much attention as it should, and so I shall quote myself:

So here we are. Schools are stuck with the outcome of two different waves of political reform—first, the progressive mandates designed to enforce surface “equality” of their dreams, then the reforms mandated by conservatives to make the surface equality a reality, which they knew was impossible but would give them a tool to break progressives and, more importantly, unions.

From the schools' point of view, all these mandates, progressive or “reform” are alike in one key sense: they are bent on imposing political and ideological mandates that haven't the slightest link to educational validity.

I've written before of my perplexity on this point: Why has there been no organized effort to resist or repeal the legislation and court decisions that buttress progressive reforms?

Very occasionally, accountability folk tentatively advocate reforms that teachers would support, like administrative support for strict discipline and tracking. But they also routinely ignore the fact that restrictions on discipline and tracking weren't generated by public schools, but rather mandates imposed by courts and lawsuits.

For example, in late 2013, Andy Smarick briefly picked up the tracking gauntlet, which was the first time I'd seen a reformer mention tracking in years. But hilariously, he blamed Americans, saying it was our commitment to equality that was misplaced. This is not only absurd, it was flatly inaccurate. Americans were sued out of tracking. Perhaps someone clued Smarick in, because he's gone on to some other cause.

Meanwhile, even the mere mention of support for tracking led another reformer to roundly denounce tracking which can “condemn these high-potential, low-performing students into lower classes...sadly, these “tracks” frequently become castes from which it is all but impossible to escape.”

A couple years ago Checker Finn announced that private schools were being replaced by charters, as if we should celebrate the increased costs incurred by parents who might otherwise fork out money to educate Junior at a Catholic school. Just recently, Fordham tentatively suggested that districts band together to educate severely disabled students, and a decade ago, it cheered the reauthorization of IDEA without ever challenging it. A decade ago, Fordham actually cheered the fact that IDEA was reauthorized, despite knowing the non-existent returns we've gotten on the billions we've spent in sped funding over the years.

With nonsense like this, who needs progressives pushing for social justice?

Whenever I ask why the right, broadly speaking, has abandoned the field to expensive federal intrusion, someone responds, usually in a sepulchral voice, “Conservatives have given up. Regular people have given up. The game is lost.”

At the time I first wrote this, conservatives were busily pushing voter ID and reviling the mainstream press for claiming the knockout game is a myth. Today, they are outraged at the attacks on the police after Ferguson, Baltimore, and Cleveland. Many are celebrating the appeals court's refusal to lift the injunction on Obama's blatant disregard for legal immigration niceties. So clearly, it's okay to oppose liberal objectives, even on racially sensitive issues. Unless it's education.

In twenty years, the modern reform movement has certainly achieved results, but not public buy-in. They get legislative victories occasionally, but polls routinely show lukewarm support at best for their main objectives. The public likes public schools. Where's the political opportunism, the craven catering to

public whim? It's very irritating.

This absence of catering requires explanation. No one—not progressive educators, not reformers, are catering to public opinion. It makes sense that progressives would push social justice. But the reform movement began with Republicans, originally, and opposing progressive *aims* would make sense. That is, reformers agree with progressives that everyone should achieve equally, that all kids deserve opportunity, that failure to deliver equal results means teachers are failing. They just disagree about the delivery and the reason.

The reform movement itself makes sense. Funded mostly by billionaires or well-funded advocacy organizations on the right because they bought into the early rhetoric: teachers were stupid, unions were to blame, a few simple steps would show America how much of their tax dollars were being wasted due to wrongheaded policy. Billionaires, regardless of their politics, are not a group, I'm thinking, that would be open to the idea that public education is doing a good job, that teachers aren't incompetent. They'd much rather think of schools as broken government systems desperately in need of some good business sense. And of course, where you have billionaires eager to spend money, you have think tanks and lobbyists five times more eager to spend it for them.

So that explains billionaires and the reform agenda, but it doesn't explain Republicans as a whole. Why aren't Republicans pushing back on the reform agenda, which implicitly adopts the same progressive objectives of equity, access, and equal results? The Common Core debate we're now seeing on the right isn't even about the ludicrously unrealistic standards, but federal control.

The only reason that makes sense is that teachers give their money to the other guys. Teacher unions pour millions into the Democrat coffers. So I guess the thinking from the Republican point of view is why invite media castigation and endless legal battles on disparate impact, why piss off the extremely activist parents of disabled children, when the alternative is attacking and hopefully obliterating a major source of Democrat money? Once they kill the unions they can focus on actually improving public education. And so the culling of teachers for special opprobrium, for job features that apply to all government workers, particularly those relative bastions of Republican support, cops and firefighters.

I don't see anything nefarious in this approach. I'm fine with, you know, whatever. It's fine to want to stop union money from going all Dem. It's fine to want to end unions, if that's your bag. I am not criticizing the goal or the desire to spend money to achieve a goal. If you're a reformer insulted by my conclusion that you're tailoring your message to please the moneymen, or a Republican angry that I doubt the purity of your motives, well, remember, I'm trying to figure out an interpretation of your stated objectives that doesn't make you an idiot. At least naked opportunism and a political agenda makes you deviously dishonest.

So the groups that would logically push for ending or at least curtailing the progressive overreaches, the absurd mandates that hurt public education, are funded by people who, for various reasons, aren't interested in kicking them over, and the political party most likely to push back sees a big pile of Democrat money. That's my current take as to the puzzling absence of pushback on public education mandates and expectations.

Whatever the motives, the current reform agenda will only make things worse by delegitimizing and ultimately destroying the public school's still-essential role as community resource, and increasing both direct and indirect costs at the same time. No, thank you.

Of course, my consistent rejection of reform means I support the status quo, imposed upon us by progressives. Yes. Not happily, and only as an alternative to reform goals. Remember, progressives aren't deviously dishonest, in my paradigm. They're idiots. No offense, progressives. But you didn't need donors to cater to; you all had an entire academic infrastructure supporting your reforms, and a whole bunch of lawyers happy to sue for equal access, disparate impact, and a host of other millstones you hoisted around public education's neck. And you did all this on purpose.

So here we are, billions wasted on ideas that most people understand won't ever work. And no one openly challenges the modern mandates of public education.