

Choking the Life Out of Classrooms



A Letter to the President

Sylvia Bruni

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Dearest President,

What an awesome opportunity this is to write a letter to our next U.S. President, to send you an absolutely frank and personal message about public education in Texas - a state in crisis, as far as I am concerned. This letter is an account about what I have learned throughout a career that has spanned almost 40 years, half of them directly in my own classroom and the other half working with the greater community of youngsters and their parents, teachers, and principals. This message is drawn from my experiences working with Texas educators and students, whose lives are now being more and more colored and shaped by an accountability system that is fast becoming the end rather than the means to better teaching and learning.

Mr. President, I tell friends that I was an "accidental" teacher. In the 1960s, I was a college girl, the proverbial first generation in my family to go to college, and, quite frankly, my career goals were pretty simple. I majored in English because I loved to read and in Spanish because I loved Mexico, and I was certain I was going to marry a Mexican and go on to live in that gorgeous and vibrant country.

Well my plans took a 180 degree turn when I met and fell in love with a local boy. I did what all good girls did in those days: I became a teacher. My life, my value system, and my view of the world were forever defined and enriched by that turn of events. The 17 years I spent in my senior English classroom introduced me to the wonderful talents and capacity for discovery that my students brought to the classroom.

Classrooms can be magical places, offering teachers and their students limitless opportunities to discover worlds of knowledge. Even more important, they are microcosms of the real world, where exploration and discovery occur, rich discussions and arguments take place, and good citizenship habits are shaped. Similarly, classrooms can be joyous and exhilarating places. That was what my classroom was for me and I believe, for my students, as well, during all those 17 years of teaching.

The next 22 years have also defined me, but this collective experience has been a more sobering one. I left the public schools and spent seven years working with our local university. Here is where I began to discover seriously troubling realities. I learned that almost 50 percent of our Webb county residents over the age of 25 had no high school degree. I learned that 47 percent of this population had a literacy level of one, meaning that they are unable to enter background information on a social security card application or locate eligibility information from a table of employee benefits.

I discovered that our local university, an upper-level institution, was having great difficulty with its junior-level students, who could not cope with college-level courses. Equally troubling,

our community college had enormous numbers of its students failing its entrance exams, forcing these same students to enroll in remedial reading, writing and math courses. Years later, I would realize that the very same students whom I had been teaching in my senior English high school class had been the survivors and that 50 percent of their brothers and sisters had dropped out - fallen somewhere by the way side sometime around their ninth-grade year.

Ten years ago, I came back to another public school system in my hometown, and here is where the story comes full circle. Just as I had discovered the vast potential and capacity that characterized my senior English students in my early teaching years, so have I now realized how seriously we have crippled that potential and capacity in these subsequent 20 years.

I came back to a public school system to find it gripped by a testing mandate that is choking the life out of our classrooms. That rich and stimulating curriculum that I had access to 20 years ago might still be on the books, but teachers now have little opportunity to tap into it. For example, those extended hands-on learning projects that made the Medieval and Renaissance literary periods come alive for my students are rarely, if ever, the rule today.

My students *lived* their curriculum and experienced the universal nature of good literature as they researched and sketched architectural renderings, composed original musical scores, and created portraits of haunting medieval figures. Through these types of hands-on experiences, they discovered that good literature was timeless in its relevancy to the everyday world that surrounded them. It was the most valuable and effective way of teaching and learning, especially for many of my students, who had come to my classroom table poor in their own worldly experiences. The hands-on learning activities that I had the time to lead them into helped them make the relevant connections that are essential for creating a lifetime of learning.

The assessment of what they learned and how well they had done so was just as relevant in those earlier days, before *the test*. My students created portfolios of their own cumulative student work - their renderings, essays, compositions, performances, debates and reflective essays. All of this was actual evidence of student learning.

Today's emphasis on a state test makes this hands-on type of learning practically impossible. It is predicated, instead, on rigid timelines, on students digesting a fixed amount of facts and figures, and on a testing format that emphasizes memory and recall at the expense of critical thinking and thoughtful, purposeful learning. Then, we add to this narrow testing mix an assessment that is in a language that is often the second language of a student population whose English fluency is still very immature. Finally, we make the test a condition either for promotion to fourth grade or for graduation and the testing scenario is now wrought with high anxiety. For many youngsters this is a fatal mix.

Make no mistake about what I am claiming here: The emphasis placed on a single high-stakes test in Texas as the measure by which we hold our public schools, teachers and students accountable is seriously flawed. It goes against all that we know about authentic and relevant assessment of student learning, and it has seriously weakened our capacity to prepare our children to become thoughtful, successful and responsible citizens.

The evidence is all around us. Since the inception of the TAAS test, Texas continues to record alarming dropout rates, most recently ranging from 30 percent of its general student population to 50 percent of its minority student population. In February, 1999, the University

of Texas reported to the Texas House Subcommittee on Education, complaining of “marked declines in the numbers of students prepared academically for higher education.”

Since 1982, when the first of the Texas tests was implemented, the rate at which Black and Hispanic students fail ninth grade has been steadily increasing, reaching as high as nearly 30 percent in the late 1990s. After George W. Bush became governor of Texas, the state’s own college-readiness test, the TASP, showed a dramatic decrease - from 65.2 percent to 43.3 percent - in the numbers of test takers passing all three tests in reading, writing and math. In Texas, SAT scores, a barometer of sorts for college preparation, show no improvement in contrast to national scores. On the NAEP, another national test often used as a gauge of academic preparedness, the average statewide score gains in Texas surpassed those of the nation in only one of three comparisons - fourth-grade math.

Even more astounding - in light of the amount of national acclaim given to the Texas Testing Miracle - is the fact that, while Texas NAEP scores are sluggish at best from year to year, TAAS gains are touted as greatly increasing from year to year. From 1994 to 1997, TAAS scores showed a 20 percent increase! A similar discrepancy appears between the scores of White students and students of color, with the gap between the two on the NAEP widening yet appearing smaller and decreasing greatly on the TAAS.

What could possibly be causing such dramatic differences in test score results? Consider the following facts: Hard data inform us that since the advent of TAAS, the number of children excused from taking the TAAS test on the grounds of special education exemption has increased sharply - nearly doubling from 1994-1998. In fact, the number of youngsters being identified as special education students is, in some Texas communities, more than double the national norm.

Also, even though fewer high school students are graduating (slightly less than 70 percent in the 1990s) there has been a subsequent sharp upturn in the number of GED test takers. The 2000 census data for my own border community, where minority students are a distinct majority of the population, shows that 45.2 percent of its adult population over the age of 25 has no high school diploma. Can we truly claim to be “leaving no child behind?”

So where do we go from here? What lessons have I learned from my own 40-some-odd years working with Texas schools, their teachers and their children? What should the Texas experience teach us about what school reform and accountability should *really* be about? What can you, as our next American president, do to make a real difference? I would not have been able to tell you this years back, but it has become crystal clear today, as I’ve witnessed our world becoming more challenging and more diverse, and our school house more and more beset by forces that threaten, rather than support, our youngsters’ access to successful futures.

Mr. President, help us regain the awesome power that lies within our public schools - the power to link young people to great learning experiences. Help us reclaim those classroom activities which ultimately shape young people into productive and healthy citizens, in every aspect of the word.

Public schools should be, and can be, pathways that guide young people toward vigorous citizenship grounded in those democratic values which today, more than ever, are absolutely essential in our world. To get to the reality of good citizenship we must provide a school house in which youngsters are engaged, inspired and challenged. Our schools should be filled with

classrooms where both essential basic skills *and* the greater intellectual and social skills needed for the burgeoning 21st century are the rule: cooperative team work, problem solving, fair play, self expression and assertiveness, among others. I want to see a return to classrooms where learning and motivation are intrinsically linked, and I want to assure that our educational system supports such classrooms and their teachers.

This is where you come in, Mr. President! Help us by becoming the lead advocate for those school practices that would literally stimulate and assure schools that are pathways to great teaching, great learning and great communities.

There is an enormous divide that separates those of us who teach, whether educator or parent, from those who set policy. If we are ever to truly reform our educational system, it must be done on the basis of what we know about good teaching and learning. School accountability and development should not be predicated on rigid and narrow assessment systems that run so grossly against the kind of teaching and education that we know schools should nurture and strengthen.

Help us facilitate the public dialogues that would bridge those gaps that exist today. There are critical issues which need to be explored: children's rights to fair and equitable assessment; high-stakes testing versus authentic assessments; issues regarding resources, equity, and a "dumb-down curriculum" that concern so many of us who teach; and the equally worrisome role that partisan politics seem to play in these issues. Help us broaden that discussion and spur engagement within the greater community, which we sense is already sympathetic to public schools but is unsure about how to actively support them. Help the educators reclaim their voices also. I speak for them as one who entered this profession "accidentally" and gradually grew in my own knowledge of what would make me a really wonderful teacher.

It has been this eventful journey that has made me realize, just as it has my countless other colleagues, that we need to lead a true reform of our public school system *now!* What Texas set out to do 23 years ago with the introduction of that first TAAS test was perhaps well intentioned. However, after years of rigid, high-stakes testing, and equally rigid and stifling test-prep lessons that are totally out of sync with what makes rich teaching and learning, the results absolutely can not be claimed a victory, neither for our children nor for our state.

So, I say to you: Come to Texas and learn from our experience. Spend a day or two in our classrooms and visit with our students and our teachers. Meet and visit with my granddaughter, Victoria, a bright and clever little third grader who this past spring agonized over the advent of the third-grade TAKS test - the first one ever to hang the threat of retention over the heads of Texas third graders. Beginning several weeks before the test was first administered, Victoria, who was reading fluently in her kindergarten year, bit her fingernails down to the quick and cried for hours. She was fearful about failing - in spite of having tried all the test-prep strategies that consumed hours of her classroom time week after week. Eventually, Victoria passed the dreaded test, but not before it left its mark on her. At the tender age of nine, this child experienced the fear of failure, a fear she simply did not have the maturity to deal with!

Just as important, however, come and meet those intrepid and dedicated teachers and principals who can still be found scattered throughout our schools, braving and enduring the testing system while moving forward with marvelous teaching and assessment practices. They are too often the minority in what continues to be a test-driven Texas majority. The irony is that, as never before, we know and can speak about what makes for rich and relevant teaching and learning: lessons very much like those medieval literature experiences that my students

and I so much enjoyed when I first began teaching. Yet, we are starving in the midst of a teaching and learning feast, forced to forego the good stuff for the sake of a test-driven, tasteless curriculum.

Help us reset our learning course. Help us reclaim the teacher's voice so that it rings out not only in Texas but all across this country as well. What an awesome opportunity you have to really do it right!

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