

Obama's School Vision Has Its Flaws

Christopher Uhl

Dear Mr. President,

As an educator, I have been particularly interested in your proposals for America's educational system. I confess, I am troubled. Your plan to increase the number of hours that kids spend in school and the continued emphasis on standardization and testing miss the mark.

Implicit in your idea to lengthen the school day and school year is the belief that *learning* occurs almost exclusively in schools under a prescribed set of circumstances, and that *living* is what we do outside of schools. I beg to differ.

Learning and living are inseparable. We need only recall those times during our lives when we were really learning and the chances are good that we were *not* in a classroom, nor was there a credentialed "teacher" involved!

As a result of sitting in classrooms, year after year, living in the realm of abstraction and obeying the dictates of teachers, most Americans gradually *learned* to silence their questions, desires, and passions.

Veteran teacher and principal, Lynn Stoddard calls this *the great brain robbery!* We often see this robbery taking place right before our eyes. A child enters kindergarten, filled with curiosity—bubbling with questions. Then, as the official core curriculum kicks in, the child's head begins to drop, her shoulders begin to droop, her eyes lose their sparkle until, finally, after a few years, the lights go out—the robbery completed.

Kids don't need more time in classrooms, they need more time in the community, pursuing their own interests and questions, in the presence of able mentors.

I also think you are off base, Mr. President in so far as you imply that learning is, necessarily, hard work. I have heard your story about being awakened at 4 AM by your Mother to study. You've said this was "no picnic." However, common sense tells us that when we are forced or cajoled to learn something it doesn't really stick. Sure, we pass the test, but if we were to take that same test a year later we would probably flunk it. What's ignored in the imposition of standardized curricula is the importance of desire when it comes to learning. When desire is present—a rare event for many schoolchildren—learning is fast, joyous and lasting.

Too, I am concerned that your emphasis on testing and grades is misdirected. Grades are, more often than not, simply a measure of a student's ability to play the game of school. And as Stoddard rightly observes "grade-point averages only reflect our culture's need to shape students to a common pattern and compare the learning of each child with others." No doubt, the harm exceeds the benefit.

Finally, I fear that your education plan is also shortsighted in so far as you tie the primary purpose of education to fostering American competitiveness in the global economy. This is a narrow and life-sapping goal if there ever was one! Our highest calling as humans is not to compete with each other, nor is it to spend our lives working at jobs that do little or nothing to foster truth, beauty or goodness in the world.

Allow me to suggest a more ennobling objective for education: To help young people assume their birthright which is to develop their unique gifts, whatever they might be, for their own self-realization and the betterment of their communities.

Instead of seeing schools as soulless places designed to train young people to cope with the challenges of a fatally flawed global economy, have the heart and wisdom, Mr. President, to imagine our schools as community centers—places that foster neighborhood revival and the vitalization of creativity, purpose, and the human spirit. That's change we can all believe in.