

School reform requires balance

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When Superintendent of Schools Constance Clayton warned City Council that the austere \$1.3 billion budget she presented could have "disastrous" effects on the education of the city's children as well as on the School Board's ability to reform the system, she had finally exhausted my unconditional support for the efforts of the public school reformers.

I have now joined those who believe that before the taxpayers invest any more in public education, they are entitled to a little more accountability. We need a more balanced and disciplined approach to school reform, not a bigger budget.

Accountability to a uniform academic standard, a positive motivation for learning and equality of educational opportunity were the three pillars upon which public education in this city was built. Unfortunately current policy-making fails to recognize these truths.

School reform in this city has operated on the principle that more rigorous standards would not only improve the quality of education but that all students

would rise to meet the challenge of tougher standards. Underlying this theory was the outdated premise that individual achievement would eventually determine the ability of the student to gain admission to the college of his choice and ultimately, future economic rewards in the job market. Thus, expansion of the magnet school program, merit promotion between grade levels, more stringent grading and teaching to meet the requirements of the Scholastic Aptitude Test were pursued as a means of achieving academic excellence.

In fact, those reforms only served to encourage competition, not the love of learning that inspires children to care about their educations.

Inevitably those children from disadvantaged backgrounds continued to lose the "competition" to those who attended not only Central High, Girls' High and the magnet schools, but also the private academies. The "school choice" debate earlier this year underscored the fact that only those students who, from the start, have greater resources to do well in school would benefit from an educational system that victimizes those without these advantages.

More recently, reform efforts have been refocused to provide for a positive learning experience where the students' individual interests and intellectual development take priority. School-based management where principals, teachers and parents join in the effort to run individual schools began, on a limited basis.

Also under consideration is restructuring of primary education by eliminating elementary grade levels in favor of ungraded classes where students can learn at their own pace without the stigma of failure.

It is questionable whether school-based management will work in a system in which principals have discretionary authority or a superintendent operates on a highly-centralized management style. Similarly, there is concern that elimination of grade levels and grading will lead to a general lack of accountability, with students simply "getting by" doing the least amount of work.

Accountability, when properly served, is the basis for a quality education.

Those truly concerned about the public schools must seek a proper balance between equal opportunity and academic excellence. Each is essential if we are to overcome the current problems and prepare our children to be constructive, caring members of society. Until school reformers create that balance, education in this city will continue to be defined as little more than an act of appropriation, rather than a process of empowerment.

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