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'I'm As Mad As...'

By Rich Sloane
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, August 21, 2013

Howard Beale had it right in the movie “Network”: “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore.” You could look it up.

Having been close to education for the past 14 years, I’ve become more and more disillusioned as time goes by. From the view out my window, where I went to yell as Beale asked me to do, things have gone from bad to worse at every level. I will admit there are glimmers of hope, but if we don’t start acting like adults I’m afraid we’re doomed to the decline and fall of American education and society.

Here are a few examples of why we’re headed down the path to perdition.

Funding. With appreciation for the fact that money makes the world go round, as we cycle through the ups and downs of economic growth and decline, education continues to take a back seat at all levels. We cut back and then give back. But it seems like one step forward, two steps back. At the level of the individual, the corporation and the government, the majority often seem unwilling to make the sacrifice that in generations and causes past made this nation proud and great.

Whether it is taxpayers, corporate philanthropists, or policy makers, too few seem to understand that education is truly a foundational underpinning of all that we treasure in American society. Many states and school districts have stopped funding support of the extraordinarily effective program of National Board Certification for teachers. Here’s a program that identified and mentored the most motivated, creative, and talented individuals in the teaching profession, only to have the funding yanked out from under its feet.

Policy and philosophy. The recent announcement by North Carolina that the state will no longer pay more for teachers who hold a master's degree is reflective of how we as a nation are devaluing education. That is wrong on every level. MBAs, more pay; licensed doctors, more pay; accredited lawyers, higher salaries. Certified plumbers garner more pay than an apprentice.

But teachers? Sorry, Charlie. Don't tell me that research shows most teachers holding master's degrees won't achieve better student outcomes than those who lack that credential. On the whole, higher levels of education will spark better outcomes in measures far beyond test scores.

Common Core too tough for your kids? Give me a break. This country was founded on squishing like bugs those challenges deemed "too tough." If we don't raise the bar, the bar will fall and crush us like an anorexic weightlifter. We've seen it happen in the past. Nationalizing education? Puh-leeze. We gripe about being second tier to Singapore, South Korea and Finland but are unable to put our national shoulder to the wheel to achieve educational excellence.

We dragged each of those nations out of the degradation of war, put them on a sound economic post-war footing and watched them use their new-found confidence, conscience and smarts to kick our educational butts.

Uncle Sam, take charge and get us out of this mess!

Arne Duncan, in my opinion, is the most visible, vocal and proactive Secretary of Education in our nation's history. While I may not subscribe to everything he wants to do, I applaud his bringing education into the forefront of the nation's challenges.

Beyond the issue of pay, the way we treat our school teachers is just short of disgraceful. I believe in accountability and view it as another tool in the box that can improve outcomes in student learning. But asking teachers to pay out of pocket for things they deem important and necessary to the learning process is crazy. I suppose that's always been the case in some school environments but in this and any economy, such expectations are disrespectful and probably at odds with some employment law.

And the work hours! At some point in most professional careers many find it necessary to come in early, stay late, work weekends. But consistently meeting your clients when they arrive before sunup, by the bus load? And taking Wednesdays off for golf? I've been

present at a number of charitable golf tournaments but I'll be darned if I've ever seen a foursome of teachers teeing off together.

There is no single solution that will solve the issues of education in America today. But absent resolve and some sort of consensus that education is the challenge of the century, I'm afraid we're destined to backslide in ways that are too uncomfortable for me to consider.

I once had a dream of finishing out my professional life as a public school teacher, and actually went so far as to gain certification and work briefly as a substitute teacher in Florida. The work was too hard and I buried that dream along with Kinescopes of "Our Miss Brooks." You could look it up.

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