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12-19-90

There's a lot of talk these days about multicultural education--and a lot of confusion about what the term means.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a moment.

Real multicultural education helps children appreciate this country's rich history of our country. It tells them about the many and diverse groups that have struggled together to build our democracy and its unique institutions. This kind of multicultural education does justice to the motto on the Great Seal of the United States: E Pluribus Unum--from many groups we have become one nation.

Have the public schools always offered our children a real multicultural education? Of course not. Critics are right when they say that, until a few years ago, "monocultural" would have been a more accurate description. But this is changing.

Students now are not just learning about the contributions of Abraham Lincoln; they're also learning what this country owes to Frederick Douglass.

They still learn about the tradition of freedom and religious toleration that began when our country began. But now our students also learn that we have often failed to live up to these ideals and that we must work constantly to develop and preserve them.

But some people are challenging this kind of multicultural

education. These people believe that, because some minority groups have been denied their rights, the study of American history and democratic values is somehow demeaning for students who belong to these groups. These kids, they say, will find inspiration and strength only from learning about their own original cultures.

This is not multiculturalism at all--though it goes under that name. It's ethnocentrism, and it will foster division instead of unity. Telling our students only about what has divided us is as misguided as telling them that we have always lived up to our values. And instead of teaching our kids how they must work together to overcome our common problems, it will teach them that no group has anything to say to any other group.

This is is not speculation. All we have do is look at Eastern Europe to see the frightening reality of ethnocentrism.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.

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Script on MARKET SCHOOLS for Radio America

12-19-90

Many people get excited about proposals that would allow public school funds to pay for education in a private school. They say, "At last! We'll be able to send our kids to exactly the kind of school we want!" But is that the way private schools work?

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a moment.

Supporters of various proposals to use public tax dollars to buy a private school education tell parents that now their kids won't be limited to public schools. They'll be able to choose whatever school they'd like--just like the rich folks. And the public will foot the bill.

So people get the idea that picking a school will be something like shopping at Macy's with a big, fat gift certificate: You find lots of different brands, colors, sizes and prices, and you choose exactly what you want.

But that's not what this kind of school choice will be like; it'll be much more like applying to join a country club than shopping at Macy's.

Country clubs don't accept you just because you admire their golf course and you've filled out an application. Even if you have the money, they don't have to accept you. They might wonder whether you'd fit in with the crowd that already belongs. And they might decide that it's not worth taking a chance of losing

three or four old members to get one new one.

You can choose a country club, but the real choice is theirs.

That's how admission to private schools works, and that's how it would continue to work, even if these schools got public funds. Private schools set up their own admission policies, and they admit or reject students who apply on the basis of these policies—they're the ones who do the choosing.

To get into a given school, you may have to be a high achiever; you may have to produce evidence that you're not a discipline problem; you may have to convince the admissions committee that you will fit in at the school—you may have to be the right religion.

Private schools certainly have every right to exist, and many serve their students very well. But people need to get rid of the notion that they're going to choose the private school their children will go to. The private schools will choose—even if the public foots the bill.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.

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Script on Long Term Commitments for Radio America

October 19, 1990

In our own daily lives, we each set long-term goals and then figure out how to meet them -- like saving to buy a house, or go to college. If we can set long-term commitments for ourselves, why not for our schools?

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a moment.

Schools all over the country are struggling with budget cuts -- maybe schools in your community. From Florida to California to New York, public schools have almost a yearly fight to get enough funding. This is especially troubling because of the impact it could have on school reform -- and on the ability of today's school children to succeed.

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What could the budget problem mean to your child's school? Well, it could mean that your child will continue to attend school in an old building. Twenty-five percent of all school buildings lack sufficient space and maintenance. It could mean that class sizes will be high, since there is not enough money to hire more teachers or paraprofessionals. You might lose good teachers to other communities that will pay them better. Or maybe your school will continue to use outdated books and not be able to buy important new technologies, like computers, that our kids need to function in the world they'll work in.

It certainly means that important changes in our schools will not come to pass. To make changes, teachers have to think and read and talk together to find new ways of reaching kids. Teachers, administrators and people in the community have to devise new ways of governing schools. But you're not going to engage all these people if they don't know whether their achievements will survive the next budget crisis -- or whether they'll even have a job next year.

series of points to your class? And being a good teacher means knowing how to group students--what combinations will help the weaker students in your class learn and spur the brighter ones on?

So sure, it's important for teachers to be on top of their subject, but ignoring the professional side of teaching is like saying surgeons can learn all they need to know about performing heart surgery from reading textbooks. And wherever training programs are inadequate--as they are in too many places--these programs need to be improved instead of being written off, which is what critics often suggest.

Good teaching demands a lot from the people who do it. Teachers have to know their stuff, but they also need practical, professional training. So the question is not which is more important--because good teachers need both.

This has been Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.

Script on STUDENT INCENTIVES for Radio America

October 22, 1990

My mother and father always told me that it was very important to do well in school--and I'm sure parents are still telling their children that. But are they right?

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a moment.

How much does success in school really count when high school graduates look for a job or apply to college?

Take the youngsters who go right from school to a job. Do employers decide which new graduates to hire on the basis of what courses the kids took or what grades they got? Do they even ask whether the kids came to school regularly? Of course not. All most employers want to know is whether or not a kid has a high school diploma.

So youngsters who really have done their best in school--and maybe taken some tough courses--have about the same chance of landing a job as the kids who just put in time. And they're likely to get the same starting salaries.

The result? Our students are learning a bad lesson--that there is no connection between being good in school and getting a good job with good pay. And they have no incentive to do anything more than just get by.

What about the youngsters who are going on to college? Well, the small percentage who hope to get into elite colleges have to work pretty hard. But the rest know that if they have a high

school diploma, they'll be able to find a college that will accept them--and maybe two or three. So long as they can pay.

It wasn't always like this.

Once upon a time, students knew that they would be measured against a very high standard when they applied to college. And they worked hard to meet that standard. Now that colleges don't require much, kids don't do much. They just ask, "What's the least I need to do to get admitted?"

Youngsters are just like adults; they do exactly what they must in order to get what they want--get a job or go to college. And they're smart. They can see that school doesn't count.

We need to re-establish the connection between doing well in school and getting a good job or getting into college. Our young people need to know--because businesses and colleges send this message with their hiring and admission policies--that doing well in school is indeed important.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.

Script on TESTING for Radio America

10-10-90

I'm all for testing students, but there are some big problems with the way we're doing it now.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a minute.

What's wrong with our current standardized, multiple-choice tests? For one thing, they don't tell us much. All of you have seen the yearly standardized test scores published in your local newspapers. They go something like this: 58.2 percent of our students are above the national or the state average in reading, as against 57.9 percent last year. ~~And in math, 69.2 percent are above average, compared to such-and-such a number last year.~~

But what do these numbers mean? If 69 percent of the students in your school or district are above average, what can they do? And what do they know? Can they do a two-step math problem or write a letter or perform a science experiment? The numbers don't tell us.

~~And what does "average" mean? If you've got a room full of giants, the average is going to be higher than if you have a room full of pygmies. So where do your children really stand? The averages don't tell you.~~

In the second place, testing students only with standardized, multiple-choice tests has a bad effect on teaching and learning. Whatever your test is, teachers are going to spend a lot of time preparing students for it. For example, if the test just has short paragraphs and multiple-choice questions about them, you can be

sure that students will only be reading short paragraphs and answering multiple-choice questions.

So it's no accident that few of our youngsters can write. Standardized multiple-choice tests ~~can't assess~~ ^{don't assess} writing. And it's no accident that our kids can't do science because most of these tests ignore science.

Standardized multiple-choice tests are great for testing simple things like facts and dates—but living in the real world ~~requires much more.~~ It requires being able to think, solve problems, persuade, argue and build. And if we want children to learn these skills, we'll have to use tests that require them—the old-fashioned essay-question tests, for example.

I strongly believe in testing students and in reporting test scores to the public. ~~The American people are spending more than \$200 billion a year on education, and they have a right to know what they're getting for their money.~~ We need tests to tell us how well ~~our~~ students are doing. ~~We need tests to report on whether~~ ^{and} ~~schools are getting better or worse over time.~~ And we need tests that will ask students to show skills that go beyond filling in the blanks. Our standardized, multiple-choice tests, ~~are~~ ^{we need more than} ~~not~~ ^{they are} doing the job.

This has been Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.

Script on PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE for Radio America

10-10-90

Would it be better for America's students—and for our public education system—if parents were allowed to choose the public schools their children attend?

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. I'll be back in a moment.

Public school choice appeals strongly to many Americans because we believe it's wrong to force people to do anything without a compelling public interest. And there's no strong reason why students should go to one public school rather than another.

Then, too, public school choice might allow a better match between schools and students. Kids who found an appealing program in a public school across town could apply; youngsters who were dying to get out from under a lousy school in their own neighborhood could do so.

But that's not what public school choice advocates are saying. They're saying it's a cure-all. According to them, public school choice will improve schools because schools, like businesses, will compete for customers. Bad schools will shape up or close, and good ones will flourish as new customers flock to their doors.

But will public school choice improve public education in this way? Is the analogy to business correct?

Not really. It's possible that bad schools might close in time, but it's doubtful that good schools would or could grow the way successful businesses do. Schools have a limited number of seats.

Where would they get the money to expand beyond their current capacity? Without the profit incentive of the marketplace, would they even want to?

~~And why doesn't anyone talk about the downside of competition?
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~~If the main goal of schools is to attract customers, we might see less emphasis on student achievement instead of more, with schools skimping on education to give students what they want instead of what they need—Get a free trip to Disneyland! Come and swim in our new Olympic pool!~~ ^{day care -}

It's naive to think that public school choice would automatically lead to excellence. We have some good examples that prove just the opposite. For years, many for-profit trade schools have made all sorts of false claims about the skills they teach and the jobs they can get their graduates. But the market hasn't led them to improve—or driven them out of business.

We are in a time of educational crisis. We ought to be rewarding schools for how well their students achieve, not for how good they are at luring customers. Public school choice may bring about some improvements in U.S. schools, but choice by itself is no cure-all. It will not get our youngsters to learn.

This is Albert Shanker on the Education Watch. Thanks for listening.