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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

### **On Images and Education**

By Peter Smagorinsky, The University of Georgia

A few years ago, Fox News pundit Bill O'Reilly was invited to dinner in a Harlem restaurant by the Rev. Al Sharpton. Each has served as a foil for the other's constituencies. To O'Reilly, Sharpton represents Black Wilding, the phenomenon that many in the Fox News audience assume is a daily urban occurrence: when a band of poor, black youths roam the streets engaging in social mayhem from assault to robbery to rape to vandalism to murder. To Sharpton, O'Reilly represents those aspects of White society that believes that all Black people are Wild, based on media reports that emphasize crime and rely on fear to construct images that serve to characterize whole groups of people according to stereotypes based on the behavior of the few.

In O'Reilly's reports in the wake of their night out, he expressed astonishment that, at a restaurant full of Black people, there was no violence, no hostility, no Wilding. He reported to his audience that, in a restaurant full of Black people, the only thing that happened was that Black people ate food and talked pleasantly with one another, just as they might in any other restaurant.

I begin with this story neither to valorize Sharpton nor to mock O'Reilly, but to show one example of the perils of making judgments about people based on media images and accounts. Because he has had direct little experience with Black people and works within a media bubble that constructs them as a society of Wilders—a demographic that in fact has little actual substance in daily life—O'Reilly approached his dinner in Harlem with some trepidation and anticipation of an evening of violence and danger. His actual experience in a restaurant patronized by Black people led him to a different perspective on a population he knew largely through media images. Going into their community and spending time, albeit only a few hours, among them led him to question his own stereotypical views, at least for a while.

Similarly, many people base their opinions of public schools on select media images, particularly those that depict schools as violent, shabby dungeons filled with indifferent and incompetent teachers and disaffected and ignorant students. These images have helped to create a feeling of panic and alarm about American global competitiveness, and as a consequence, have fueled policy "reform" designed to rid our classrooms of terrible teachers and restore schools to the business of education, using accountability methods developed by edupreneurs and imposed by policy people who themselves have little direct experience in schools.

What happens, however, when you go into actual schools to see what's taking place on a day-to-day basis? Nearly 20 years ago, in *The Manufactured Crisis*, David Berliner and Bruce Biddle analyzed data that showed clearly that, while most people think that public education is in crisis and needs a massive overhaul, they believed that the schools in their own communities are pretty good. Not perfect, but pretty good; neither in need of massive overhaul nor ideal and fine just as they are. But on an A-F grading scale, about a B. Meanwhile, they perceive public education as a whole to be worthy of a grade in the D-F range.

As they say in the world of commerce, what we have here is an imaging problem. How can it be that schools in general are terrible, but the ones that people are most familiar with are pretty good? Upon what information is such a view based? Are we composed of a nation of people who, at a distance, accept the images that the media provides us and only skeptical when they misrepresent what we personally know something about?

Last fall, *Mother Jones* magazine—probably the antithesis of Fox News in political orientation, and so undoubtedly a dubious source for many who follow this blog—published a piece by Kristina Rizga called “Everything You’ve Heard about Failing Schools is Wrong.” To write this report, Rizga did something akin to what social science researchers call an ethnographic study: She spent a full academic year in a “low-performing” public school in San Francisco, Mission High School, to see why it was regarded as a failure. What she found, however, was something quite different. “The surprises began almost right away,” she reports upon first entering the school:

Judging from what I’d read about “troubled” schools, I’d expected noisy classrooms, hallway fights, and disgruntled staff. Instead I found a welcoming place that many students and staff called “family.” After a few weeks of talking to students, I failed to find a single one who didn’t like the school, and most of the parents I met were happy too. [Mission High School’s] student and parent satisfaction surveys rank among the highest in San Francisco. . . . people seemed friendly. Even the security guards were cracking jokes. . . . There were after-school programs—the Latino student club, soccer, creating writing. [A prospective student, Maria,] asked a few students if they liked Mission. To her surprise, all of them did.

Note that Rizga opens her account of the school by talking about how surprising it was that pretty much everyone there liked this “low-performing,” failing public school. The prospective student had had been warned about its dangers: “Everyone Maria knew outside of Mission told her not to go there. Her mother’s friends said she should pick a better school. Maria’s friends said Mission had gangs.” But none of these perils materialized during actual visits to the school. Instead, she found a lot of happy people, from students to teachers to security guards, who liked being there—not because of scholastic laxity, but because it served their personal and developmental needs, including their academic goals for advancing in society.

In class, students worked on their assignments, with teachers providing a positive social updraft through their fields of study and encouragement toward destinations such as college. Meanwhile, the students—many of whom spoke English as a second language—performed poorly on standardized tests, suggesting to outsiders evidence of urban school failure. Yet those on the inside saw what, according to Rizga, even such conservatives as David Brooks have found: that

school policymakers are obsessed with reductive measurements such as standardized tests, while “the key to success is more often found in realms that resist quantification—relationships, emotions, and social norms,” factors through which young people may become engaged in their studies and develop feelings of affiliation with the school institution and the pathways it affords.

Rizga’s year-long observation showed that, even as tests may mismeasure achievement, and as policymakers award yet another contract to edupreneurs to raise scores and thus the appearance of rigor, kids at Mission High were engaged in challenging intellectual tasks. Maria, the prospective student who eventually enrolled, illustrated “an intellect battling to find its voice: developing research and analytical skills, the ambition and empathy to immerse herself in worlds beyond her own, and the tenacity and confidence to tackle challenging problems and keep rewriting her papers even as she wrestled with the basics of her new language.” But such open-ended thinking and problem-framing are not the stuff of the accountability movement, in which multiple-choice tests determine the quality of teaching and learning.

Rizga, who went to Mission for a year in order to understand why schools fail, instead found why measurement is failing: because it views test scores as independent measures, in spite of what [David Berliner calls exogenous factors](#): those outside the control of the school, particularly poverty. When superficial means of measurement, in conjunction with a barrage of negative media images, provide the basis of the public’s view of its schools, it’s no wonder that most people think that schools are failing, even though the one in their own community is pretty good.

“Reform” has become the educational word of our time, and reformers like Arne Duncan are making profound changes in how schools operate, away from those that are built on relationships and genuinely challenging intellectual thinking and toward reductive multiple-choice tests as the primary measure of school effectiveness. Too much evidence is mounting, however, that reforming schools in this manner is leading to schools that truly fail. They fail kids by taking all that’s worth learning in school and reducing it to trivial assessments. They fail teachers by taking all decisions out of their hands, eliminating their judgment from the policy process and making their jobs dreary and repetitive. They fail administrators by forcing all into the same box regardless of school demographics and evaluating their effectiveness based on factors that are likely out of their control. They fail communities by undermining the historic role that schools have played as the epicenter of values and continuity. And they fail the nation by working from false images in order to produce schools that, unlike their recent predecessors, were doing quite well until forced by administrative fiat to adopt failed policies.