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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.

Putting Socrates and Jesus to the good-teacher test

Peter Smagorinsky

Most education “reform” ideas I’ve heard in the last few years have centered on getting rid of bad teachers. I’d like to propose addressing the problem from the other end: How about making school a place where smart people want to be?

Imagine being in a work environment where, in order to make sure that poor performances are discouraged or punished, the rules are structured to ensure uniformity at a low, yet acceptable level. Then imagine being a smart, creative, dynamic person in such an environment. You have great ideas that might lead to new ways of doing things, but the rules are structured so that your job is to produce your widgets in the same manner as your least inspiring colleagues. That way, everyone’s widget looks the same: not terribly interesting or useful, but at least it functions at a passable level. Would you stay, or would you go?

Or would you even seek out this work environment in the first place when other settings encourage you to think imaginatively, to be innovative, to respond to situations using your judgment, to experience your day as something over which you have some control, to go home at the end of the day feeling as though you and your ideas are valued, respected, supported, and rewarded?

Attracting and retaining the sort of teachers envisioned by Arne Duncan—the best and the brightest, the vibrant and the forward-thinking—seems highly unlikely in the sort of environment he is creating with his Race to the Top initiative. His plan is designed to drive bad teachers from the profession by making teaching and learning uniform and making teachers accountable to his low standards. Duncan’s standards allow for few opportunities for talented teachers to engage in informed decision-making—informed by their own knowledge of their kids and their subject areas—or to exercise sound judgment. This plan, he believes, will attract and retain teachers who will lead the U.S. into a new era of enlightenment.

Let’s take some renowned teachers from history. Socrates, although at times rather a bully, used a method to interrogate and expose the weak thinking processes of students. His teaching was centered on producing better thinkers who could then help advance Athenian democracy. But Socrates in the Duncan era would not be engaging his student in thought. He would be preparing them to pass tests that evaluated their ability to answer questions about which Greek fighting ship was invented first, the trireme or the pentekontor, and whether or not the trireme was a single tier ship with two tiers of oars, or a double tier ship with one tier of oars. (Correct answer: The trireme was a single tier ship with two tiers of oars. Bonus points if you knew that there was

only one man to an oar. If you want to know about the pentekontor, then Google it, as I did to learn these trireme-related factoids.)

Or let's take another ancient teacher of some note, Jesus. Whether you are a Christian or not, you might consider Jesus to be a pretty good teacher, or at least acknowledge that his lecture notes have survived for a pretty long time. Imagine him giving the Sermon on the Mount, and then having stone tablets distributed to the assembled listeners in which they were required to answer questions about his speech. Blessed are the merciful, because (a) theirs is the kingdom of heaven; (b) they shall be comforted; (c) they shall inherit the earth; (d) they shall be filled. I hope you were paying attention, or it's eternal damnation for you. Actually, that was a trick question: The correct answer is that the merciful shall obtain mercy. See you in Hell.

Fortunately for them, neither Socrates nor Jesus taught in a modern U.S. school, where the emphasis is on getting rid of bad teachers instead of attracting and retaining good ones. I suspect that neither would last long as the sort of test-administering functionary required by Secretary Duncan.

Rather than structuring schools so that the relatively small number of bad teachers will be driven from the profession, I would prefer to organize schools so that they attract and reward good teachers. We will have a few bad teachers no matter what we do. But if we obsess on them, then we'll lose sight of the fact that good teachers require something more than an environment meant to punish bad ones. Good teachers need to feel valued and respected. They need to have the latitude to exercise good judgment, to be different when they need to, to incorporate new ideas into their teaching, to view their work as a way to grow intellectually and in the process inspire their students toward the same vigorous and invigorating way of approaching life. The straightjackets of minimum-competency national standards and the testing mandates that enforce them may well make such work virtually impossible to imagine or carry out.