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BEING ALERT TO THE REFORM AGENDA: A RESPONSE TO BRUNO MANNO

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Both Dr. Bruno Manno's address at the National Catholic Educational Association and the perspective presented in his essay prompt a response in which I wish to challenge some assumptions and even disturb present notions about the reform movement. While I congratulate efforts to connect the national school reform efforts with the needs and future of Catholic education, I believe it is a most difficult and complex task—one not easily translated.

These remarks are inspired by my work with many excellent Catholic secondary school educators and with even more persons who are in public school settings. It is from that knowledge and experience that I offer this commentary on Manno's ideas.

First, I am strongly in favor of schools becoming the best possible places they can be, and in no way should you conclude from the following remarks that I do not support school improvement efforts. Recent descriptions of public education refer to that institution as a frontier of despair (McLaren, 1994); and many people I know who work in the public sector suffer greatly and are truly in despair. The issues are multi-faceted and complex. No easy answers exist to profound problems. Even so, for the common good, we—all schools—simply must be about getting better.

That said, I suggest a few specific ways we need to be "heads-up" and "wide-awake" about getting better. In fact, I think, we must be even quite suspicious of the rhetoric of the reform agenda or in Manno's term, the "grammar of accountability." We should view the movement carefully through lenses we believe make us "different," make us Gospel-centered to carry out the good news of the Gospel—a message of unquestioned love and radicalism that often stands us on our heads. And if it does not, it should. Here are a few of the agenda items that raise flags for me.

Some of what passes for the reform movement is deeply imbedded in the conservative agenda, often the conservative Christian agenda (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; McLaren, 1994). This is a message of closed virtue, of a literal reading and interpretation of the Bible, and of shunning and shaming those who venture to interpret events and experiences differently. This ideology espouses a righteous intolerance of anything not defined as America's God-fearing cultural tradition. The Christian extreme right operates on two levels at the same time. Part of the agenda is publicly proclaimed. Even if I do not agree with their stance, at least here they say what they think. But far too often another rather insidious and masked agenda stands. I am not only referring to the Protestant fundamentalists who regularly and rigorously attack the public schools but those in our midst as well. In the Midwest recently, a group, primarily anti-abortionists, invited the local archbishop to celebrate the liturgy with them. After discovering they also promote beliefs that AIDS is a just God's revenge against immoral people and the anti-Semitic belief that the promotion of abortion is a Jewish agenda to retaliate against Hitler, the archbishop quickly removed himself from an embarrassing situation. The religious right is opposed in subtle and not so subtle ways against multi-cultural education and against diversity. They fight hard against anything they feel is "not of God" either in curricular content or teaching methodologies. They oppose anyone who is "different" by their definition. Catholic schools began precisely to serve those who were "different" in their day and were based on a strong and deep belief in the power of education to help people improve themselves. Catholic education is about inviting "in" rather than carefully leaving people "out." By ignoring the influence of the conservative right, it is possible that today's students will have inherited an age in which liberty and democracy are in retreat.

Another area of concern is the grip that standardized testing promoted by the reform movement has on our way of thinking about the purposes and success of education. The testing business has become a \$100 million dollar industry; according to some, this figure may be underestimated (Sacks, 1997). As one of our country's growth industries (along with the construction and expansion of prisons), standardized testing has caused us to focus less on what people can do and more on how well people, even five-year-olds, can take tests. High scores on these tests have come to be interpreted as the true measure of the quality of students, teachers, and school systems; low scores, as abject failure.

My concern is that tests have become a highly effective means of social control. We have settled on, and the reform movement promotes, a system that defines merit as the potential to achieve only according to test results. At the same time, there is clear evidence that "much of the research confirms suspicions that such tests thwart rather than help educational reform and that they continue to produce inaccurate—if not biased—assessments of the abil-

ities of many Americans,” (Sacks, 1997, p. 26). Sacks continues to explain that “while standardized tests correlate weakly with success in school and work, they correlate all too well with the income and education of one’s parents” (1997, p. 27). He calls this result the “Volvo effect.” In other words, then, the biggest portion of “potential” goes to those with highly educated and well-to-do parents. According to Mensh and Mensh (1991), the result is that standardized tests, created from the prior assumptions of the test-makers, “keep academic barriers in place for those groups historically confronted by them” (p. 71).

When test results are used to track students, we know that lower-track students, once placed, rarely move into the higher ranks. They see themselves as failures and doubt their ability to succeed (Oakes, 1985). A child, more likely than not, from a low socio-economic background who is marked as a failure at an early age rarely survives in school. The American ideal of the equal plane becomes fictitious.

Besides categorically labeling many poor and underprivileged children as failures, this overemphasis on testing has also resulted in the reduction of the teacher to a deskilled and devalued clerk. Linda Darling-Hammond (1985) reports in a study of teachers,

We learned from teachers that in response to the policies that prescribe teaching practices and outcomes, they spend less time on untested subjects such as science and social studies; they use less writing in their classrooms in order to gear assignments to the format of standardized tests; they resort to lectures rather than classroom discussions in order to cover the prescribed behavioral objectives; they are precluded from using teaching materials that are not on prescribed text books, even when they think these materials are essential to meet the needs of some of their students and they feel constrained from following up on expressed student interests that lie outside the bounds of mandated curricula. (p. 209).

Overemphasis on testing and the effort to program results has also limited funding for arts and music. This is a tragic mistake given the power of the arts to transform the human heart, to foster teamwork and cooperation, and to enlarge our imagination.

Because evidence suggests that “standardized testing flies in the face of recent advances in our understanding of how people learn to think and reason,” (Sacks, 1997, p. 27) there is a concerted effort to implement different ways to evaluate students and educational process. These attempts, which include multiple methods of assessment and a variety of ways to show not just the potential of the learner but also the accomplishments, are a step in a better direction. Nonetheless, as educators move ahead with alternate methods of knowing how we know, a strong conservative backlash is moving toward consideration of even more mandated state and national testing in the

name of rigor and the continued belief that merit equals test scores.

These are not just public school issues. I think we are either determined to follow along with the public school agenda or do so unwittingly far too often. If this is the case, and I think it is, what happens to the responsibility of the Catholic school to assist the student to understand the present system enough to take a stand on matters of equality and justice? The imperative to analyze and remediate the existing social and institutional practices which reproduce existing class, race, and gender inequities is lost in the effort to conform. We educate, instead, for “what is” rather than educating for “what might be.”

Catholic educators have an excellent record in many inner cities serving those whom society has left out or left behind. We have success stories with students with potential and we have great success with those who at first seemed limited. My request is that in the midst of getting better, of paying attention and giving consideration to the policies of the reform agenda, we reflect on them with a critical mind and the heart of a follower of Jesus.

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Karen Ristau, who has served Catholic education in a variety of roles, has recently taken the position of vice president of academic affairs at St. Joseph College, 1678 Asylum Ave., West Hartford, CT 06117. Previously she served as director of programs in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

A REJOINDER TO KAREN RISTAU'S REMARKS

BRUNO V. MANNO

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Karen Ristau is “suspicious of the rhetoric of the reform agenda” (particularly the grammar of accountability) because “some of what passes for the reform movement is deeply embedded in the conservative agenda—often the conservative Christian agenda.” She follows this with a range of claims

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