

Donley Award Remarks

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Let me start by saying thank you. It is an honor to share this day and these awards with such deserving colleagues. It is an honor to share the Donley award with such a distinguished cast of predecessors. And it is a very special honor to receive an award named for a man I have long admired – a colleague, a mentor, a genuine leader, and, in a very real sense, a national treasure.

Despite the very kind introduction, I reach the end of my career acutely aware of my limited gifts – one of which has always been the ability to come up with the right words. So when I started thinking about what I would say today beyond thank you and how honored I am and how all my good fortune is due to my parents blah blah blah, I was stunned by how uncertain I was about what to say.

I know I can start by saying that a lot of public policy has helped a lot of children. The Free School Act of 1834 gave life to the idea and eventually the reality of public education for virtually all children. When I began my career in 1971, most students with disabilities did not even go to school – something that seems downright medieval today. The Children’s Health Insurance Program has literally given life to a lot of kids whose illnesses would otherwise have gone untreated. More recently, about 20 years of effort finally gave life to publicly-funded pre-K programs in Pennsylvania.

But during the past decade or so, I have become more and more disenchanted about our capacity to develop, enact, implement, and support policies that really help children over the long haul. And I have become increasingly troubled about the tone of our democracy – not just the uber-partisanship and lack of civility but the total lack of regard for intellectual honesty or the need to connect policies to real people’s real problems. On the other hand, this is a day for celebration and lunch, both of which ought to be on all of our priority lists.

So what should I say? I learned a long time ago that collective views are almost always better than singular views, and that led me to ask two people who have been in this business even longer than I have what they thought I might say. Of course, since they have rarely agreed about much, except their abiding commitments to public education, I’m not sure what collective guidance I thought I would get. Paula Hess said I should say what was on my mind. Joe Bard told me it might be the only time in my career that anyone actually listened – if I didn’t go on too long.

I don’t want this to sound like a lecture or, worse yet, a sermon. And I don’t want you to think that I am wedded to some idealized view of the past. So let me offer instead a short cautionary tale about education policy and what happens to it along the way.

About 20 years ago, when I worked for the State Board of Education, we undertook to rewrite the state’s curriculum regulations. Many of you were not around in the pre-standards era, so this may seem unbelievable, but back then the state required only that every student complete a certain number of courses in English, math, social studies, and science – nothing about which specific courses, nothing about content, nothing about what needed to be learned. During the preceding decade or so, the requirements had been ratcheted up twice. Nonetheless, the so-called “customers” of public education – employers and college faculty members – told the Board there had been no improvements.

The Board was hardly a radical body, and initially it approached the regulatory review intent only on fine-tuning and updating. But in the course of that work, some of our members began to ask a fundamental question – if state efforts to regulate inputs (such as hours of English and math instruction) led to uneven and inadequate outcomes (in terms of student readiness for the next stage of their lives), were we regulating the right things? On the other hand, there were virtually no other models. Every state did what we did, although some southern states prescribed the entire curriculum, and Minnesota was moving haltingly toward designating statewide learner outcomes.

After months of seminars with experts from across the opinion spectrum, meetings with K-12, higher education, and business leaders, and public hearings in places I didn't even know existed before, we devised a different scheme. We were convinced by two principal arguments. First, state regulations typically limit the work of practitioners more than they enable that work. Second, the state has an obligation to ensure good results from its multi-billion dollar annual investment in public education.

So we set about to construct a different kind of state curriculum regulation. We gave up state control of inputs that assured no particular results. Instead we opted for state specification of results to assure children would be ready for what came next in their lives, and we gave a whole lot of freedom to educators and community leaders to decide how best to achieve those results for their students. We knew that we could not dictate every thing that every student must know, so we concentrated on the big things that would assure readiness for the future – the ability to read and understand various texts, the ability to discern fact from propaganda, the ability to use math to solve problems, an understanding of scientific principles and their impact on the world in which we live, an understanding of and commitment to the obligations of citizenship, the ability to work collaboratively and solve problems, and an appreciation of diversity. Because we wanted to avoid having the state intrude inadvertently on local decisions, we required each district to develop its own testing and accountability system subject to state approval and instituted state tests that were limited to reading and math at three grade levels – to be used to keep the system honest, not to determine the future of each of Pennsylvania's 1.7 million public school students.

That was nearly 20 years ago. Where are we today? When we thought the state's job was to specify goals and let professionals doing the work determine how to meet those goals, we had 53 student learning outcomes. Today, we have 117 math standards for grades 3-5. I would dazzle you with how many thousands of other standards we have, but since I am not doing the hard work of teaching or leading schools and am therefore not being held accountable for meeting them all, I don't really care enough to be bothered counting them. When we thought accountability was a shared responsibility, we had a low-stakes state testing system and a high-stakes local testing system overseen by the state. But today everyone who knows anything understands that the only tests that matter are the state tests. There are local assessments, but no local assessment systems, and they are not subject to state oversight.

Two decades ago, state policymakers believed that if they used an open and public process to set goals for what students knew and were able to do to become successful adults, we could trust professional educators to design programs to support that achievement, especially if we stripped away a lot of the input rules that required everyone to do school the same way. Back then, we actually thought the average teacher and principal understood the needs of their students better than the average legislator, or Education Secretary, or billionaire foundation guy. Today we know that educators are essentially technicians – trusted only to run the machines devised by Bill Gates, Arne Duncan, and almost every Governor and state education official who raced to the top of the altar to worship their universal wisdom.

We will not have excellent schools for our children if we do not have excellent teachers and school leaders. And it is hard to see why the best and brightest of our young people would desire to sign up for 30-year careers as technicians – and for the abuse that is increasingly heaped upon them by our nation’s leaders. We know that our poorest-performing students in our poorest-performing schools need the absolute best of our best and brightest to teach them and to organize their schools as effective learning communities. So what fool (let alone the vast majority of our policymakers) thinks that will happen if teachers who take the risk of teaching in low-performing schools are punished by loss of income, loss of jobs, and perhaps loss of licenses?

We will not have excellent schools for our children if we do not support them financially. But if the recession has proven anything it is that public education is optional, and while policymakers are willing to take a break from supporting our schools, they are not willing to take a break from blaming the professionals who work in them.

And we will not have an excellent education for our children if we forget that learning is fundamentally a social, not just an individual, activity. Policymakers should not elevate the interests of school systems or teachers or administrators over the interests of children and their families. But if we have learned anything since 1834, we have learned – hopefully – that the vast majority of our children will not grow into successful adulthood unless we nurture the institutions that support their learning and development.

None of this is to say that we had it all right 20 years ago or that the *status quo* is just fine or that continuous improvement is unnecessary. But I know I would have aimed in a different direction if I thought the road we chose would lead us to the standardization and narrow focus and top-down control of everything that matters in education, if I thought it was even possible to make schools the joyless places that punish creativity that so many have become. Today we have precisely the schools we need – albeit not adequately funded – if our future depends upon a nation of standardized test-takers.

But if we want the young people who buy the house next door to be interested in and conversant about the world around them; if we want them to work collaboratively with their neighbors to solve local problems; if we want them to help their employers find better ways of doing their work; and if we want them to help our nation and our world by creating new and meaningful work to do – then we will ask ourselves one day soon why we took public education down this path.

I still long for a day when schools help young people develop inquiry, creativity, and risk-taking and thus support their collective learning and their individual genius.

Let me end on a hopeful note. I really am happy to see so many old friends here today. But I am happier still to see so many young friends. Most of you are smarter than I am and more committed than I ever was. I am glad you want to get up every morning and try to make the lives of children better than they were the night before. And I hope you will always ask yourselves: “What am I doing today that will help real children in real schools and communities to live better lives?” That should never become a political slogan. But it should be a litmus test for your own efforts and your own intellectual honesty.

Thank you all for honoring and indulging me.