

When All Else Fails, We Must Protect Childhood

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Failure is difficult to accept for many people. Competition and winning are so engrained in our individual psyches that there is often little room to accept failure. Although we know that some failure is necessary to eventually reach success, we tend to shy away from accepting that our efforts have resulted in failure. Does accepting failure mean we give up? Not necessarily, but it does mean that we must rethink our approach and determine what can be learned from our failures that can help us as we move forward. Perhaps when we accept failure, we make space for success to find its way into our actions and strategic plans that follow. Well, it is time to acknowledge we have failed at preventing the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) from infecting public education. Moreover, as we admit to this failure, we must develop a new plan to move forward that takes what we have learned into account. We must protect childhood.

Some might question whether it is fair to say we have failed. Those active in the fight to stop the privatization of public education are likely not ready to declare our work a failure. They may be willing to concede that we are not winning some of the battles, but retain hope that we may eventually win the war. However, the truth is that for now, we have failed. We have failed to stop the expansion of school choice that threatens the existence of public schools through the proliferation of charters and vouchers. In the United States, most school-age children are

educated in traditional public schools, but given that the new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is a strong proponent of school choice, we can expect to see this trend reversed in the future. School privatization is a tool for standardization, which is one of five features of GERM (Sahlberg, 2012), and although it may be progressing slowly in the United States, we have failed to stop it from taking root and undermining the foundation of public education. We have failed to stop another feature of GERM—test-based accountability systems, which punish and reward schools and teachers based on student achievement on standardized tests. The opt-out movement developed as a way to resist test-based accountability by encouraging parents, students, and teachers to opt-out of high-stakes standardized testing. The growth of the movement has threatened the ability of some states to test 95% of all students mandated under federal education policy, and this led the Department of Education to issue warning letters to 12 states in 2015 (Strauss, 2016). This might seem as though we are winning, especially since the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes language that protects the right of parents to opt out, but it also maintains the 95% testing requirement.

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States may be able to choose the type of tests they administer to children, but test-based accountability is here to stay. So this is another fight that we have failed to win.

In addition to failing to stop accountability through standardized testing, we have also failed to stop the push down of developmentally inappropriate standards onto young children. The Common Core standards, adopted by most states, impose expectations on young children that are out of step with their development. And although some states have decided to drop the standards and/or drop either of the two assessments related to them, the push for more rigorous academic standards for young children remains a cornerstone of education reform. Early childhood experts continue to voice their concern over the harm these standards cause to young children, to their ability to self-regulate, and to develop a sense of efficacy as learners. These concerns go unrecognized by policy makers, legislators, and business leaders who draft and mandate standards for all young children. When we are shown the research on how kindergarten is the new first grade and preschool is the new kindergarten, we have to recognize our failure to stop developmentally inappropriate standards from invading early childhood education.

There are still more ways that we have failed. We failed to stop the de-professionalization of teaching by preventing fast-track teacher preparation programs like Teach for America that use underprepared young people as teachers in the neediest schools. We have failed to stop the assault on public education through school closures in communities of color. We have failed to stop racist school discipline practices that suspended 42% of black boys from preschool in the 2011-2012 school year (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). We must acknowledge these failures so we can understand the limits of our collective efforts and decide

how we can refocus our energies towards a future that will lead to more successful outcomes.

My first suggestion is to change the narrative around GERM and the attacks on public education. Attacking the accountability movement and the push for tougher standards has proven to be a losing strategy. Our insistence that these measures harmed student development and learning has branded us as unwilling to be held accountable for ensuring that all students can achieve. The more we resist test-based accountability and inappropriate reforms the more we are branded by the corporations and privateers as resistant to innovation. The narrative must be changed. We must convey clearly that we want the same thing every citizen wants: to protect childhood. Not childhood innocence from being exposed to controversial topics and issues, but actual childhood. The time that children have to be young and to learn and develop. The special period of life that provides every person with the foundational skills to develop their personality and build their potential. A test can never measure what a child can become and children should not be exposed to certain ideas and knowledge based on their zip code. We must reframe our fight in a way that no one can put forth a valid objection. Protecting childhood is goal many can support because most of us agree that childhood is a unique time of life that deserves to be separated from the adult years.

Along with changing the narrative, we must make protecting childhood a nonpartisan issue. The assault on public education is not just a conservative attack by Republicans against liberal democratic education. The truth is the Democratic party aligns with many aspects of GERM, and many Democratic leaders are supporters of choice, privatization, and test-based accountability. We cannot win if we continue to work under the assumption that we are engaged in a partisan fight. As we rebrand

our message, we must make sure that it is put forth as a nonpartisan one that everyone can support. We can learn from other special interest groups that advocate for their members through nonpartisan lobbying, such as the America Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Their policy agenda involves advocating on issues that are important to their members, but they maintain a nonpartisan focus which allows them to experience success instead of failure. Advocating for elderly members who pay a fee for representation is different than advocating for the protection of childhood for the most vulnerable members of our society who have no voice. But both must be presented as nonpartisan issues that all can support.

Lastly, we must emphasize why it is so important to protect childhood. Why should others care about the state of childhood? **We need to make it clear that protecting childhood is a matter of national security.** It may seem farfetched to invoke such nationalistic rhetoric, but the truth is the future of the United States of America depends on our ability to protect childhood. We cannot produce capable leaders who can take on global problems if we allow childhood to become an experimental playground for corporations and social engineers. Solving the global climate crisis, responding to overpopulation, eradicating world hunger, and curing global diseases are tough issues that require competent individuals to work collectively to engender new solutions. We have the best chance of producing citizens capable of leading the future when we protect the childhood of all children.

In conclusion, we must learn from our failures and develop a new strategy that promotes the vision of early childhood education we seek. The Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education developed after the devastation of World War II and with a desire to rebuild a society free from oppression. This

effort resulted in a world-renowned approach to educating young children that posits the image of the child as capable and strengthens the role of teachers, parents, and the environment in working collectively to support the growth and development of young children. Perhaps we can learn from our failure to stop GERM and develop a philosophy centered on the protection of childhood that is nonpartisan and driven by the necessity to ensure national security. Giving up is not a solution and doing the same thing we have always done and expecting different results will only lead to more failure. When all else fails, we need to protect childhood.

References

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About the Author

Denisha Jones, PHD, is an Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at Trinity Washington University. Dr. Jones began as a kindergarten teacher and then a preschool director before spending the last 12 years in teacher education. Dr. Jones is active in the fight to stop the corporate takeover of public education, organizing and speaking at numerous rallies, marches, and conferences. She is a board member and administrator for the Badass Teachers Association, Inc., United Opt Out National; and she is on the advisory board of Defending the Early Years. Her research interests include developing critical consciousness in pre-service teachers, organizing activist research projects that challenge the privatization of public education, and leveraging the intersection of public policy, social movement lawyering, and critical social justice education to dismantle the neoliberal assault on public education.