

Taking Back Our *Public* Schools:

Escaping Market Myths
and Doing What Works Best for
Children, Democracy, and Our World
- Karl F. Wheatley, Ph.D.

“We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.”
- Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Beware “Reformers” Wearing Expensive Business Clothes

A central truth of modern life is that the 1% and large corporations have substantially transformed our global civilization—the economy, governments, media, agriculture, even public discourse—in ways that fatten their wallets and increase their political power. As Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders both put it, the economy *is* “rigged,” and our rigged civilization is hurting average people, crippling democracy, and destroying the planet. In this rigged context, language itself became corrupted—a “Healthy Forests” initiative was really about chopping down forests to sell lumber, and an educational policy with the caring name “The No Child Left Behind Act” was really structured to gradually privatize public education while leaving no *corporation* behind. Tax “reforms” enrich the 1%, agricultural “reforms” promote unhealthy agricultural practices that profit big corporations, and most “educational reforms” actually *de-form* education. So, once we lose our childhood naiveté, we are not surprised to discover that...

Despite their lofty slogans, the corporate education policies mostly did more harm than good.

Why did corporate-oriented, authoritarian, test-driven, factory-style schooling fail? These policies failed because they were based on *economic and mechanistic values and principles* of markets and manufacturing, instead of the *organic and cultural values and principles* that govern healthy development and learning. Trying to “run schools more like a business” is a doomed mission because...

Education’s purposes are broader, deeper, and different than those of markets or factories.

Kids are not cars, and great development and learning do not work like manufacturing.

In fact, in many ways, great development and learning works in ways that are *the opposite of* the logic of markets and manufacturing: That is, principles such as self-centered individualism, standardization, measurability, efficiency, tight control, competition, and privatization backfire very badly in education. Disturbingly, this market-based approach also gradually replaced democracy in public school governance and increasingly privatized one of America’s national treasures—our system of public K-12 education.

Happily, and in sharp contrast with the market-based values and logic of these failed policies, there are *lots* of better ideas for running schools in ways that fit our most cherished goals and also reflect the principles of development and democracy. However, people consistently resist these superior ideas because they’re conditioned to view the world through market ideology plus a few other misguided ideas:

“The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.”
- John Maynard Keynes

I’ve spent 15 years studying why people get fooled about “what works” and the many other reasons they hold onto inferior approaches—in fields such as education, nutrition, and government—and I know where the landmines lay between where we are now and healthier education that reflects our highest ideals. So here are some of the paradigm-changing values and ideas that we’ll need for the journey ahead:

- * Education should focus much less on economic goals and much more on serving people and the planet.
- * **Emphasizing “market-based thinking” does more harm than good in most areas of life.**
- * For the purposes of educating the masses in a way that is consistent with our highest ideals, **public education is broadly superior to a market-oriented/privatized approach.** It’s not even close.
- * **Most of what matters in education and life is not on the tests,** so test scores alone cannot begin to tell us how well learners are learning or teachers are teaching. We must stop pretending they do.
- * **There is no such thing as real “measurement” in education,** and emphasizing reliably quantified learning objectives guarantees that we will wind up using an inferior paradigm for education.
- * Carrot-and-stick incentives and competition backfire badly as approaches to motivation in education.
- * Standardization and tight control stifle development and learning: Education needs *much more* freedom.
- * How we judge “what works” does not work. Many “evidence-based practices” do more harm than good.
- * Language is power, and it’s impossible to fix education using our current rhetoric (e.g., accountability).

These ideas will sound strange to people because our schools and society have been based on the wrong values and ideas for so long. It’s time to de-bunk the myths and adopt healthier values, new ideas, and a different paradigm. I call the paradigm we need “Big-Picture Education.” Why? **The #1 reason people get fooled about “what works” in education and life is that they focus on narrow and short-term results instead of looking at broad and long-term effects, including all the ripple effects of their current approach.** Maximizing quality requires systems thinking that focuses on broad and long-term effectiveness for the goals we value most for children and our world. So what is big-picture education?

Big-Picture Education

What works best in the long run for the goals we value most for children, society, and the planet?

An array of research regarding that question steers us toward the goals and practices below:

Core Values: Someone must put food on the table, but making materialism and economic growth the central purpose of schools, life, and society is unhealthy, morally wrong, and suicidal. Those values are how civilizations fall and blow past the environmental limits that allow our living planet to keep us alive. ***Schools and society must be organized around caring for people and the planet.*** So our core values include love, empathy, caring, basic needs, sharing, cooperation, equal opportunity, freedom, respect, individualization, democracy, happiness, the general welfare, and environmental sustainability. Some may dislike this list of values: They should debate it with Jesus, our Founding Fathers, or the Dalai Lama.

Goals: All domains of development matter and affect one another reciprocally, so physical, emotional, social, motivational, moral, creative, and intellectual development are all valued parts of the curriculum. There is special attention to sustaining children’s intrinsic motivations to learn, promoting healthy internalized motivations, and developing character. The core values above are strongly emphasized in schools, including caring, sharing, cooperation, the knowledge and skills to promote an environmentally sustainable civilization, citizenship, and learning the responsible exercise of freedom. Human civilization will not be saved if education is only aimed at “marketable job skills” and economic growth. Also, the emphasis must be on long-term success, not short-term acceleration of learning of academic facts or splinter skills. Across subjects and domains, we emphasize deep understanding and ability to apply what you learned to real-world situations. We de-emphasize “measurable objectives” because such an emphasis undermines student motivation, initiative, creativity, and deep learning. Finally, given the failures of the standards movement plus what we know about development and learning, overly-numerous, academic, atomistic, and tightly grade-specific standards statements are replaced by fewer standards statements for all developmental domains and subjects and that span multiple grades (like the old “benchmarks”).

Meaningful Curricula and Big-Picture Teaching Methods: Overall, we strike a healthy balance between *teacher-initiated* lessons and units, *curricula jointly-planned by students and teachers* (e.g., project-based learning), and *child-initiated* learning (play, free voluntary reading, independent studies). Substantial reduction in de-contextualized single subject instruction aimed at isolated facts and skills in a

predetermined order. Fewer worksheets! Dramatically increased use of transdisciplinary curricula connected to real life and learners' interests (exploration, play, free voluntary reading, service learning, place-based education, apprenticeships). Emphasis on culturally and personally relevant curricula and learning experiences carried out for purposes that feel meaningful to learners. Learning is often shared with authentic audiences or directly improves the world. Substantial individualization of curricula, often through learner's efforts. Increase in true cooperative learning and cross-age tutoring. Substantial increase in the arts—as valuable in their own right and as media for enhancing other development and learning. More control over curricula and teaching by teachers, learners, families, and the community. *“Less is better:”* Less content coverage, but more depth, real-world applications, and better student engagement.

Authentic Assessment: Stronger emphasis on real-world validity and reduced emphasis on reliability. More whole-child assessments. Recognition that there is no such thing as “educational measurement” or “objective testing,” and that assessments should assess what matters most, not what is easiest to reliably and cheaply quantify. Recognition that teacher-conducted assessments appear to be as good or better than standardized tests for assessing the goals we value most. Recognition that *less* assessment is both possible and often preferable, especially if students' intrinsic motivation to learn is alive and well. **Elimination of high-stakes standardized testing in PK-12 schooling.** Occasional use of low-stakes standardized testing, using matrix sampling, to reassure the public that some external (but less intrusive) monitoring of schools and districts is occurring. Increased support for teachers (professional development, observing other teachers, release time) to help them improve their assessment skills and carry out the assessment goals they value. More portfolios, student work samples, and other authentic assessments planned by teachers, students, and others. More assessments conducted long after the teaching occurred (e.g., 2 years later).

Trustworthy Research and Evidence: We must end fad diet thinking in educational evaluation. Teachers and researchers routinely misjudge effectiveness, and largely for the same reasons. We need a shared understanding across society that just as many fad diets are effective in the short run for losing weight but backfire in the long run for both health and weight, many teaching methods are effective in the short run for boosting testable knowledge and skills, but backfire in the long run for learning, motivation, creativity, initiative, and student conduct. Big-picture education values research regarding ***what works best in the long run for the broad range of goals we value most for the whole child.*** If teaching methods cause kids to do better on tests of isolated reading skills, but over the long run they have no better reading comprehension, dislike books more, and misbehave more, then those “evidence-based practices” don't really work. In general, very “scientific” research studies that study the wrong set of outcomes over the wrong time frame, and without attention to ripple effects are not just useless for improving education, *they are often positively dangerous*, and this is true regardless of the study's sample size or the rigor of the statistical methods employed. As the renowned mathematician and scientist John von Neumann put it, “There's no sense in being precise when you don't even know what you're talking about.”

Democratic Governance: More emphasis on respecting teacher professionalism, using democratic decision-making processes, and involving students and families in shaping the educational process. Democracy is messy and time-consuming, but it empowers people, increases commitment, and steadily develops the capacities of more citizens, while autocratic management creates apathy, resistance, and the atrophying of skills and judgment for all except the few making the decisions. Ronald Reagan noted that “concentrated power has always been the enemy of liberty,” so sustaining strong schools and a healthy democracy requires a much broader sharing of power than we now see in our schools or government.

Privatization and Charters: For the purposes of educating the masses in a way that's consistent with our highest ideals, **public education is broadly superior to a market-oriented/privatized approach.** Taxpayer dollars intended for public education should not be siphoned off to for-profit schools or management companies, but should remain under the control of public officials. Moreover, reflecting the narrow individualistic bias of market ideology, all charter school research I have ever seen is at the wrong level of analysis. If our goal is to judge whether expanding charters is beneficial or not, the correct level of analysis is not charter schools versus roughly-comparable public schools, but the net effects of charter school expansion *on the entire district and the community it serves* (This is another example of how a “big-picture perspective” changes how we evaluate things). Finally, however appealing a particular

charter school may appear to be to specific students or parents, the selective and exclusionary tendencies of charters makes them more like private clubs rather than the kind of public sector institutions we have created to better ensure that equal opportunities and freedoms are available to all of America's citizens.

Advocacy, Acceptance, and Facilitating Healthy Changes: Our brains have been well conditioned to think according to a wide range of market-based values, goals, principles, metaphors, and ideas that simply don't fit how most of life works. Thus, when test-driven, factory-style schooling fails us, or when factory farming fails to produce food in a way that fits the laws of nature, we try to fix what's not working by using the same faulty values and thinking that created the problems in the first place. You can see this all across society: From so-called "reforms" in education, tax policy, agriculture, or regulations, policymakers keep trotting out market-oriented plans that are basically failed ideas from the past, on steroids. It is impossible to fix the serious problems we have in schools, society, or the environment if we keep using the failed markets-and-manufacturing thinking that created those terrible problems:

**"The significant problems we face cannot be solved
at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."**

- popular paraphrase of Albert Einstein

Like a hammer, the values and ideas of markets and manufacturing do a few things very well, but they do serious damage when applied to areas of life where they simply don't belong. I use hammers regularly, but I would never use a hammer to plant flowers, change a diaper, or, God forbid, resolve an argument. Similarly, market thinking works wonders for improving assembly-line efficiency, lowering prices, or manufacturing amazing and standardized automobiles. However, it is truly insane to try to educate children or grow food or run a representative democracy according to the values and logic of assembly lines and CEOs. **So moving toward the schools and society of our dreams requires simultaneously de-bunking and replacing the market-based thinking that has spread throughout so many parts of society where it doesn't belong, including schools.** Having studied where people get stuck in the change process and what strategies work, here's a quick list of the tools we need to make change happen:

Tools for Making Healthy Changes Happen

- 1) Unwavering commitment to the goals we value most for children and the world.** I and many others have asked thousands of people what their most cherished goals are for children—what skills, knowledge, habits, beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, or character traits are most important for children to learn, to develop, and to become by age 18? With remarkable consistency, thousands of people all over the country told me their number one priorities for children include goals such as **caring, love of learning, creativity, problem-solving, social skills, collaboration, independence, initiative, respect for themselves and others, character, risk-taking, life-long learning, critical thinking, confidence, persistence, good citizenship, strong work ethic, communication skills, adaptability, confidence, and to be well-rounded, healthy, and happy.** The lists are *always* dominated by social, emotional, moral, and motivational goals, or to put it differently, by life skills and character attributes, not academic outcomes. Of course we want children to learn to read, write, understand government, be able to conduct scientific experiments, but academics are neither our only goals for children nor our top goals for them. Looking at the big picture, we want a more caring and peaceful civilization, broad prosperity, functioning democracies that reflect the will of average people, and a healthier environment. Creating quality education for children begins with an unshakeable commitment to healthy whole child development and our broader goals for the world.
- 2) Understanding healthy development and learning.** Obviously, the more human development you know, the better. Related to #1, one of the bedrock truths of developmental psychology is that all domains of development affect one another reciprocally, so even if you are talking to someone who only values academics, they need to understand that there is no way to optimize academic learning without simultaneously caring well for children's physical health, mental health, basic psychological needs, emotions, social skills, identity, healthy motivations, moral and creative development. Those all matter in their own right, and also have profound ripple effects for academic learning.

- 3) A **“big-picture” perspective**. A focus on what works best in the long run for the goals we value most for children and the world. Not getting fooled by narrow and short-term results. Understanding the effects of different paradigms and understanding why **we need an entirely different paradigm**.
- 4) **Ethical professionalism**. A deep *moral* commitment to “Do the right thing.” Rejecting the effort to re-define professionalism as mindless obedience. Speaking out and taking action for children’s sake.
- 5) **Knowing your facts**. It helps to know facts about how test-based accountability has failed, or that decades of research reveals that performance pay doesn’t improve performance in complex professions such as teaching, or that emphasizing reliably-quantified objectives tends to narrow and dumb-down curriculum, while undermining freedom, initiative, creativity, and deep understanding. It helps to know that a large study in Germany found that play-based kindergartens yielded better outcomes across the board five years later than did academic kindergartens. It helps to know that in the Eight-Year Study, the students who did the very best in college were the ones from the high schools *that were the most non-traditional*, and best reflected the ideals of progressive education. But facts alone won’t change hearts and minds or promote change: Let’s stop believing they will.
- 6) * **Develop and consistently employ effective framing**. Language is power, and we need to understand how language restricts and influences thought. Stop using the language that reflects and perpetuates inferior educational approaches, and adopt language that promotes healthier policies and practices.

A key example of the triumph of misleading framing over truth was when the advocates for the corporate-style transformation of public education successfully branded themselves as “reformers” who were applying conservative ideas to the improvement of schools. Once they were seen and repeatedly described as the “reformers,” they then had the moral upper hand as the people trying to improve education, and anyone who opposed them was easily slandered as “a defender of the failed status quo.” Critically, even those who consider recent policies to be deeply destructive still used the word “educational” followed by “reformers” to describe these people, thus playing into their hands. Let’s see how different framing casts these people and their policies in a fundamentally different light. George Lakoff, an expert on conceptual framing, has written that an honest name for NCLB would have been “The Kill Public Education Bill.” Here are some other ways of re-framing these policies and policymakers:

“When you wage war on the public schools, you're attacking the mortar that holds the community together. You're not a conservative, you're a vandal.” - Garrison Keillor

“High stakes testing isn't about kids. It's a weapon against kids.”
-Meg Robbins, Center for Collaborative Education

Language shapes thought and can “move the goalposts” on us—changing what we see as acceptable or unacceptable options, so we must be *very* careful about what language we use. Given our goals and vision for education, some terms that perpetuate myths, promote the wrong view of the situation, or steer us to the wrong practices include: “Failing schools, incompetent teachers, obstructionist unions, higher standards, high student achievement (almost always means only test scores), measurable objectives, learning targets, rigorous academics, global competitiveness, the basics (as used to mean the 3 R’s), objective testing, education is just like any other business, market-based thinking, measure, incentivizing excellence, value-added, data-based decision making, evidence-based practices, scientifically-based teaching methods, and greater accountability” Also problematic is our use of the term “test” as the default term for “assess” or “assessment,” a habit that conditions our brains to think far too often of standardized *tests* rather than some other teacher-designed assessment. By the way, there is no real “measurement” in education, and tests can never be “objective,” but when we use language that falsely suggests that tests are objective or can “measure” things, then standardized tests automatically seem superior to “subjective teacher assessments,” and it becomes easy to argue for replacing teacher-planned assessments with commercial tests. This was a pivotal step in taking away teacher autonomy and ending local control of the curriculum.

The language to use more includes **“our failing economy, education is a unique profession fundamentally different from business or manufacturing, unions are as American as apple pie,**

public education is superior overall, meaningful goals, better standards, healthy whole-child development, children’s basic psychological needs, autonomy, freedom, healthy motivations, self-regulation, deep understanding, real-world competence, authentic assessment, democracy-based thinking, global cooperativeness, big-picture effectiveness, trustworthy research, environmental sustainability, broad prosperity, and mutual responsibility.” Transforming education requires using these ideas and others. Also, aim to shift debates from *quantitative* indicators to the *quality* of education.

Effective reframing requires us to totally **STOP** using the terms that reflect and perpetuate the worldview and practices you oppose, develop and use frames that challenge the values and ideas of the failed paradigm, and also develop and consistently use the frames that reflect our moral worldview, goals, and paradigm for education. Then we repeat, repeat, and repeat these ideas over many years. Re-framing totally changes the focus of discussions, but re-frame first and present supporting facts second. Be concise. Refuse to use the assumptions, worldview, goals, and language of the failed market paradigm.

- 7) **Ground our vision for education and society in moral and “American” values.** Start with the Golden Rule and Founding Fathers, not the theories of a Russian psychologist. Emphasize love, empathy, caring, peace, equal opportunity, freedom, life, happiness, the general welfare, democracy, and sustainability. Market-based thinking and so-called “market-based solutions” are part of a corporate takeover of American democracy for personal power and profit. Market thinking corrupts and displaces our highest moral ideals, so we must spread the word about how metastasizing market thinking robs us of our freedoms, equal opportunity, democracy, lives, liberties, and successful pursuit of happiness. The stakes are high, so boldly promote the better angels of our nature.
- 8) **Know well the educational alternatives, and model their use whenever possible.**
- 9) **Understand how we get fooled about education, including untrustworthy educational research.**
We focus on the wrong goals, and too narrow a set of goals. We fixate us on short-term rather than long-term effectiveness. We don’t engage in systems thinking. Our language misleads us (bad framing). We misinterpret numbers in multiple ways (higher or rising numbers often prove nothing). Our thinking about education is clouded by inappropriate metaphors. We confuse correlation with causation. We confuse *student* outcomes with *teacher* and *school* effectiveness. We confuse “some” with “all” or “most” (some charter schools are amazing, but most aren’t). We let our emotions cloud our thinking. The myths are repeated so often they just seem true. Some people *want everyone to be confused* about education, and work hard to confuse us. We only understand part of the education elephant and don’t know the whole story. A disorienting shock may impair rational thinking and action (the “shock doctrine”). Educational research usually misleads us about overall effectiveness.
- 10) **Modeling our values in our advocacy approach, and avoiding getting baited or attacking others.**
For cooperation and love to displace competition and strife, we must model cooperation and love. Remember the march from Selma, and when baited by some troll’s angry or even vicious personal attacks, just turn the other cheek and let the light of your message shine. The attacks are designed to change the topic or get you to cede the moral high ground. Stay the course and we shall overcome.
- 11) **Get well organized and spread the word.** Organized greed trumps disorganized democracy any day. Taking back our schools and society from those who seek to take over or destroy them will require organized effort. Spread the word every chance you get, and send it out through PTAs, other organizations, presentations, newsletters, blogs, op-eds, letters to the editor, talks with neighbors, etc.
- 12) **Repetition of the above strategies, over time.** Change is a marathon, not a sprint. We can actually make small changes happen every day, but the larger transformation will take years. Remember that reframing *is* social action, and that we are the leaders we’ve been waiting for.

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