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Uncommon common sense

A review of What's wrong with our schools and how we can fix them

Zwaagstra, M.C., Clifton, R.A. and Long, J.C. (2010). What's wrong with our schools and how we can fix them. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Senior Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

The educational reforms presented in the new book, *What's Wrong with Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them?* may seem like common sense. But as the old saying goes, the problem with common sense is that it is often uncommon. The uninitiated reader might assume that school policy already dictates that students earn a pass or receive a grade based on achievement, but this isn't universally true in North American public schools. Authors Michael Zwaagstra, Rodney Clifton and John Long draw attention to many practices within public education that result in students who are woefully unprepared for post-secondary education and productive citizenship.

As educators, the authors have written an insightful book that will appeal to parents and education professionals. The book is divided into three sections. The first part addresses fundamental issues in education like the benefits of school discipline and appropriately designed tests including the standardized variety. Part two examines practical classroom issues such as teaching style, learning theory and the role of homework. The final section addresses two issues the authors refer to as distractions. This includes the role of teachers' unions in student wellbeing and use of "Edu-babble" – the terminology of educational philosophy that is vague and often confusing for parents. Each chapter of the book addresses a single issue and provides a case study, evidence and arguments and finally practical steps parents and educators can take to address the concern.

The heart of the argument

The core issue in the book is the long running debate over the fundamental purpose of public education. The authors argue that the dominant view in public education, especially in academia, "encourages teachers to engage in social reform by being unapologetic advocates for the idea that teachers must help free students from the oppression of a narrow, inadequate perspective on the world." They argue that this makes teachers akin to social revolutionaries using the classroom as the primary tool in bringing about social change. The authors call advocates of this view, romantic progressives, taken from the

writings of E.D. Hirsch Jr. Such notable romantic progressives include University of Illinois professor William Ayers and author/lecturer Alfie Kohn. Elements of progressive education are evident in many classrooms. The authors argue that this perspective leans too heavily on the idea that children learn best when they adapt new information to what they already know (constructivism). There is an element of truth to this, but because each child is encouraged to derive his or her own meaning from the material, learning facts becomes secondary.

The authors adhere to the opposite view that places value on content and teaching fact. They promote “greater emphasis on ensuring students are knowledgeable and skillful in specific content areas and are educated to be successful in a complex modern society.” The authors argue that this position doesn’t dismiss proven traditional practices and recognizes the importance of open discussion and debate on educational matters. The authors advocate for a return to common sense defined as “sound judgment based on the wisdom of practical experience, the discernment arising from critical assessment, and the insight derived from special knowledge gained through systematic study and inquiry.” They argue that educational research has its place, but research alone cannot predict what an individual teacher should do with a unique group of students. The authors support their claim with several instances where policies have been enacted based on research findings that have been overstated.

Hot topics

The authors raise several practical issues that always provoke debate. They challenge the ideas and research behind the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. While this might be beneficial in some circumstances according to the authors, it is often more disruptive for the classroom and less effective for children with disabilities. While the authors don’t support strict streaming policies, they do argue that inclusion policies derived from case law and legislative mandate may not serve the best interest of all children.

Another hot topic raised by the authors is performance based incentives for teachers and school choice for parents. The authors support both proposals, but argue that principals need flexibility and some autonomy for these policies to work effectively in creating better schools.

When it comes to fixing schools, the authors believe the remedy will flow primarily through parents, teachers and the citizenry. The authors argue that educational reform will be achieved through accountability and appropriate incentives, not more funding and further regulation. Not every sympathetic reader will support all the recommendations, but the authors have given readers a compelling diagnosis of what ails public education and practical entry points for engagement.