

*Excerpt from State of the Union speech by Tom Mooney at Ohio Federation of teachers annual convention*

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On Tuesday, OFT released the most comprehensive report yet published on David Brennan's White Hat education empire. We exposed more of their abuses, lack of public oversight and profit motive. But, no matter how much OFT and others expose their academic failure and various scams, parents and students keep signing up. So, we also have to look at ourselves. It's time to come to grips with the need for bold reforms, not just incremental change in public education. Reforms need to be guided by research, but also by listening to parent and student voices, expressed in surveys and focus groups and in our day to day encounters, when they tell us why they choose charters despite poor academic results.

First and foremost is always safety and discipline. Now it is not teachers or paras that fail to enforce school rules. And, most principals, left to their own devices, would strive to maintain an orderly learning environment. Too often, it is the district bureaucracy that interferes, watering down discipline codes, second guessing discipline decisions made at the

school level, covering up rather than facing up to problems, protecting ineffective principals, and rewarding those who don't bring them any bad news.

Parents also say charter schools offer more individual attention, or at least promise that they will. That's puzzling because often their classes are larger, or their on-line teachers have 150 students. No doubt some are attracted to smaller schools. They fear their child will fall through the cracks in big, impersonal schools. But, maybe they also mean that they, the parents, get more personalized attention from charters. If so, that's a message we must hear. We must change our organizational culture and make sure parents feel welcome, and that their questions or concerns are addressed. I know we can do better at that than the corporate charter school chains. We simply have to deal with the fact that we are competing for clients. That is not likely to change even if we succeed in making charters more accountable and eliminating the worst of them.

But, I think parents are also alienated by the rigid, impersonal, bureaucratic nature of our school systems. They are frequently told we can't do this, or you can't enroll here, or the school can't offer this course or program anymore because of district decisions. Sometimes the union contract is blamed

because it's convenient. Well, in my experience, our members don't like the bureaucracy any more than parents do. And, we should be able to find common ground here with conservative policy makers who don't like large public sector bureaucracy in general.

Too many suits usually become an issue only when there are budget cuts that must be made. The amount of money they consume is an issue, but it's not the main problem, I believe. The bigger problem is how the bureaucracy distorts decision making, in discipline policy and practices, in curriculum and program decisions, in allocation of resources. Every new supt. has to take us in a new direction, adopt a new curriculum or testing program. We end up tacking back and forth across the bay and not getting anywhere.

Why do urban superintendents last an average of three years? It's such a consistent pattern that it can't be the individuals; it's the job, the expectations we place on it. The superintendent is supposed to be the sheriff who rides in and cleans up the town all by herself, as if he or she could personally teach all the children to read. It doesn't work. Those expectations become self-defeating because they encourage a 'do it my way' approach rather than collaboration with the teaching profession in the district.

I believe it's time to call the question on our outdated, top down, bureaucratic structure of public education, with the superintendent cast as CEO or savior. It's time to flatten out this system, not just trim, but demolish the bureaucracy, give schools much more operational autonomy, while preserving what makes public schools public, elected boards of education that govern each district. Let's give some real authority to school site councils that include parents and community stakeholders as well as teachers and other employees. But, practitioners should have the predominate say over professional matters, such as teaching methods and materials, and student discipline.

I realize that bureaucracy is more of a problem in large districts. But in smaller districts, teachers' professional expertise is not always respected, and educational decisions are too often made by those furthest removed from the classroom.

It's the right time to call the question for several reasons. First, the charter school program promised small, autonomous community based schools and delivered corporate chain stores instead. But, parents clearly find that promise attractive.

Second, the state has largely taken over curriculum. It defines the learning objectives via state standards, provides curriculum frameworks and even model lesson plans and assesses whether students are meeting the standards. This was one major function that district administration traditionally performed. It's time to let the professionals at the school level get together and figure out how to get the students to the standards.

Since state standards, not textbooks, drive the curriculum, and the internet offers a vast universe of instructional resources, give teachers a budget and let them select materials. Do we need a district wide reading or math program? Let teacher representatives come together and decide. Do we really need subject supervisors or the equivalent to call the meeting? (Cincinnati has a curriculum council for each major subject area; a council consists of teacher delegates from each school where the subject is taught. Each council has a steering committee and is chaired by a lead teacher.)

Another major function is supervising schools and their principals. Large districts always have area superintendents, or elementary and secondary school directors or the equivalent. At best, these folks can serve as troubleshooters, but more often they are

flack deflectors and micromanagers. Since their job needs to be justified and they want to keep complaints off the superintendent's desk, they take up the time of principals and teachers by interfering in what should be routine school level decisions. (Johnny can't go on the field trip because he didn't meet his teacher's behavioral or academic requirements. Parent complains, calls supt.'s office, complaint referred to area supt., who calls principal, summons all concerned to a meeting which usually wastes everyone's time.

These positions and their subordinate staffs we could definitely do without IF we clearly define what decisions are made at the school and classroom levels.

Simplifying federal and state programs and funding streams may be crucial to downsizing district bureaucracy, since each program wants its local administrators. With more and more accountability for results, there is less and less legitimate need to micro-regulate the means. Districts will still need some people who do grants and compliance reports for the foreseeable future, but teachers and principals should be trained and trusted to implement programs consistent with legal requirements.

Districts pay people and administer benefits. Since salary and benefits are standard, they should remain district functions. So should data collection and reporting.

Then, there are logistics and support services: purchasing books and supplies, maintaining buildings, food services, transportation, Logistics is one area in which it's logical to assume that economies of scale can bring efficiency and save money. But, you know, all too often, the central office doesn't do a very good job in those areas either.

With the exception of transportation, which obviously needs to be planned and coordinated on a district wide basis, I don't think the bureaucracy is worth the theoretical economies of scale. Somehow, parochial schools, which function under more loose knit districts, manage to get the roofs fixed, purchase books and supplies and feed their students.

Professional development? Which district does a good job of providing powerful, timely, relevant PD? Teacher unions and professional associations should become providers and compete for available state, federal or private funds, or at least assume more

responsibility for brokering and arranging high quality PD.

What about recruiting and hiring? Maybe there are large districts that do a great job of recruiting; I haven't seen it. Teacher unions should help organize the recruiting function, as partners with management, and assemble a pool of qualified candidates. Hiring decisions could be made collaboratively by teachers and principals at the school level, applying negotiated criteria, as is already done here in Cincinnati and in a growing number of districts across the country.

But, if we roll back bureaucracy, the teaching profession must step up. I am not advocating "let the principals rule" which is another variation on the bureaucratic or corporate model. Nor am I proposing a *laissez faire*, 'do your own thing' approach.

Rather, I am suggesting a professional model, in which schools look more like law firms rather than units in a big, bureaucratic organization. We should rely more on professional standards and norms rather than a small army of supervisors to maintain quality. This requires that the teaching profession set standards for entry into the profession, take responsibility for inducting new teachers, helping those who are struggling and even removing those

who can't meet standards after meaningful assistance is provided. We will have to create and negotiate structures and procedures for handing these roles that are credible and fair. The profession will have to take on more responsibility for professional development to ensure that all teachers keep up with research on effective teaching and new knowledge in our fields.

OFT locals have already taken on these roles to varying degrees; so have local unions elsewhere. But those who do find themselves in a constant tug of war with the bureaucracy to protect these professional initiatives and fund them.

The third reason this professional model is timely? It's what most other countries already have. We live in a shrinking world, a global economy as we are often reminded. But, when it comes to education, our policy makers and concerned business leaders seem to be wearing blinders, can't seem to imagine another way of organizing schooling, unless it's a market system.

These seemingly radical ideas are the norm in other countries. That's right. Education does not inherently come with a big bureaucracy. Public school systems in other countries simply do not have the local school distinct with a bevy of

administrators. The current wave of education reform, which began with *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, has largely been driven by international comparisons of achievement. We discovered that students in other developed countries achieve at higher levels. But we seem to be determined to try every other possible path to get the results they're getting except to do what they do to get them. By the way, one thing they don't do is leave the education of children to the market.

What they do is put the focus on the schools and the classroom, rather than a distant management structure. They rely on a well prepared and respected teaching profession rather than a single CEO. If American policy makers go to Hamburg, for example, to find out how their schools achieve, they might instinctively go looking for a school district office, and a superintendent or the equivalent. They might search a long time; they don't exist. They would have to visit a school, where they would naturally want to talk to the principal first. But, they might have to wait because the principal might be teaching a class. In other countries they have not forgotten that principal is an adjective. They are still the principal teachers, and they teach part of every day in most other countries.

That may be a stretch to get done here, but we must get policy makers and business leaders to take off their blinders and look around. In every other sphere, we are internationalizing. In education, we cling to the assumption that our traditional way of doing things is the only way. I don't want to idealize education systems in other countries, because they all have their weaknesses and challenges. But, education elsewhere is organized on a professional model. Without a district or municipal bureaucracy making decisions for them and micro-managing, teachers and the principal have to work together, apply their knowledge and training and figure out how to get the job done.

Should school districts create their own charters? I think so. Teachers and other employee unions should work with districts to create our own charters in order to demonstrate how to use the charter concept responsibly, to offer program parents and students want and reach students we're not serving effectively now. We need some changes in state laws and regulations to have the flexibility to make full use of charters. But, I think our main emphasis ought to be on revamping the public system as a whole to give parents what they want when they choose charters.