Closing Schools Makes No Sense …for Children

BY MITCHELL ROBINSON
Hillary Rodham Clinton has attracted a lot of attention recently for making a bold statement about closing schools that were performing “below average,” saying: “I wouldn’t keep an school open that wasn’t doing a better-than-average job.” US News & World Report rushed to Clinton’s defense, claiming her words were “taken out of context.” You can read the article and make up your own mind, but I think all of this commentary is missing the larger point around Ms. Clinton’s remarks.

Hillary, in suggesting that the solution to poorly performing students is simply closing schools, is merely following what has become a common trope in the corporate education reform community—the notion that “the problems” in education can be solved simply by, variously, “getting rid of the bad teachers”, converting public schools to charter schools, raising standards, or increasing the amount of standardized testing for students. Much of this rhetoric chooses to ignore the role that the corporate reform agenda itself has played in contributing to “the problems” in education, but that’s an issue for another post.

Whenever I hear public officials and education policy decision makers suggest that closing schools is a legitimate strategy, I know that person is not serious about actually improving educational outcomes. The decision to close a school is not made to improve student learning, or to increase the effectiveness of teachers. Put simply, closing a school is a business decision. School closings are a strategy lifted from the
“creative destruction” school of thought championed by economists like Joseph Schumpeter, and vulture capitalists such as Mitt Romney. The goal is to maximize financial resources, sell off existing assets, and provide an attractive return to one’s investors.

For these reasons, we tend to see more school closings in the charter school sector, especially for-profit charters—some for financial mismanagement, others for low enrollment, and still others for... more nefarious reasons. Now, while I’m no fan of for-profit charters, I still don’t believe that closing these schools makes any sense as an educational strategy.

When a school is closed, it creates more problems than when your local auto dealer or bank branch closes. While you may have to find a different place to buy a new car or cash your checks, closing a school disrupts an entire community.

Closing a school fractures families, scatters colleagues, and damages neighborhoods. Schools are not just places that children go during the day when their parents go to work—they are complicated, complex ecological and social systems that provide spaces for learning communities to develop and flourish. Schools are places where children go to feel safe, and to feel valued. Schools are places full of music, movement, art, critical thinking, food, lively discussions and play.

Closing a school is like ripping apart a family.

Are there schools that struggle? Of course. Just as there are car dealers and banks that struggle. How ironic is it, then, that many of the same hedge fund managers and venture capitalists that came to the rescue of the car companies and big banks that “struggled” in 2008 are the major investors in the charter industry now? The difference now is that these investors have the resources to send their own children to private schools, which have largely escaped the ravages of the “reforms” these investors have wrought upon the public schools. It’s a scorched earth policy, leaving nothing behind but shareholder profits.

And here is the core of the difference between education and business. When schools and students
struggle, our solution must be educative, not punitive.

When children struggle in public school, we teach them more, and we teach them harder. We don’t punish them for what they don’t know.

We stay after school, or come in early, and we try new strategies in an attempt to reach them in different ways. We don’t close the classroom door.

We call home, and talk to their parents to try to find out if there is something happening at home that’s getting in the way of their learning. We don’t suspend them from school.

Closing a school is punitive…and miseducative. There is nothing educative about closing a school. And we should reject any education policy that advocates school closings as a viable educational strategy.

Mitchell Robinson

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About Mitchell Robinson

Mitchell Robinson is associate professor and chair of music education, and coordinator of the music student teaching program at Michigan State University. Robinson has held previous appointments as assistant professor and coordinator of the music education area at the University of Connecticut; assistant professor of school and community music education at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y.; and director of wind activities and wind ensemble conductor at the University of Rochester. Robinson’s public school teaching experience includes 10 years as an instrumental music teacher, music department facilitator and high school assistant principal in Fulton, N.Y.
Jim says  
January 10, 2016 at 7:07 pm

Closing schools is the only rational solution to a problem that should never have been.

Prior to the introduction of the Prussian Industrial Model of schooling – essentially drone farms – the US enjoyed near-universal literacy. . . Massachusetts, for example, was 98% literate.

Fast forward 150 years or so. . . and 75% of all high school graduates are illiterate, and a full 80% are innumerate. How is this an improvement? Tax money flushed, is all it is – every tarnished penny of it.

The faster the school end of the School-to-Prison Pipeline is relegated to the dustbin of history, the better educated and safer our children and grandchildren will be, Full Stop.

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