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Obama's School Choice: Shouldn't the Education that Malia and Sasha Receive be Available to All?

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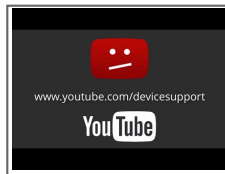
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TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2009

Obama's School Choice: Shouldn't the education that Malia and Sasha receive be available to all?

Our colleague David Marshak has just published this provocative piece for the August 3rd issue of *Education Week* and has permitted us to reproduce it on our blog. David is professor emeritus at Seattle University and our colleague here at Western Washington University. In his article, he describes the Sidwell Friends School that President Obama's children attend and asks why all children don't have this kind of education available to them. In asking this question, David exposes the wrongheaded direction that the public school is taking today. All

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children may not be able to attend this kind of elite private school, but all children ought to attend a public school system that is guided by the enlightened philosophy that shapes this school's vision. In reading David's description of the school, I saw many similarities with our partner school, the [Whatcom Day Academy](#), that I talk about in a [post](#) below where we describe the creation of the new Educational Institute for Democratic Renewal that houses the *Journal of Educational Controversy*. To read about the philosophy of our partner school, the reader can go to the link on our [Institute's website](#). Also check out our [YouTube video](#) below and hear teacher, Vale Hartley, describe her classroom at the 2008 Educational Law and Social Justice Forum.

ESSAY BY DAVID MARSHAK

Education Week

Published Online: August 3, 2009

COMMENTARY

Obama's School Choice

Shouldn't the education that Malia and Sasha receive be available to all?

By David Marshak

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wants to intensify the industrial, modernist character of American public schools. He wants a longer school day, a longer school week, and a longer school year. He wants national subject standards, which will inevitably lead to one national test. And he wants to institute merit pay, which is a euphemism for paying teachers to produce higher test scores. And this sort of merit pay, combined with national academic standards and one national test, will inevitably result in even more public schools becoming test-prep factories. Thus, more and more of the same.

Every one of these putative remedies grows from a belief that intensification of the command-and-control, modernist, factory model of production is what schools need to improve their performance.

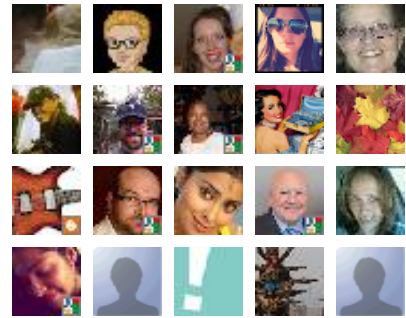
Arne Duncan seems to have no understanding that the most effective organizations in our society, both for-profit corporations and nonprofits, have evolved beyond command-and-control cultures. The author and business professor Peter M. Senge describes these new

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PURPOSE OF OUR BLOG

This blog is an extension of the *Journal of Educational Controversy*. It aims to promote a conversation between educational professionals and the general public in a pluralistic, democratic forum. Its main purposes are to:

1. Enable authors whose articles were published in the journal to update their ideas.
2. Inform readers of current controversies in education.
3. Announce future issues of the journal and events associated with the journal.
4. Promote a conversation between the authors and our readers.

entities as “learning organizations,” which are built on the foundation of systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. Senge explains why Duncan’s desire to intensify the factory model of schooling is destined for failure. “Today’s problems come from yesterday’s ‘solutions,’ ” he says. Factory-model schools, though always flawed by racism and classism, worked reasonably well when America was primarily an industrial society. But given our evolution into a more postindustrial culture, the industrial elements of schooling—mass production, rigid time and curricular structures, simplistic age-grading, and depersonalization and alienation—have become the problem, not the solution.

A postindustrial society requires postindustrial, post-modern schools. We could find a good example of this kind of education by following President Barack Obama’s two daughters to school one morning. Since their move to Washington, Malia and Sasha Obama have attended the Sidwell Friends School. It is both private and expensive, but these are not its essential characteristics. Sidwell Friends is more profoundly defined both by the values that it rejects—and by those that it embodies. Sidwell rejects the modernist, industrial paradigm of schooling that makes school like an assembly line engaged in mass production, that claims all children should learn the same stuff at the same time. It also rejects the modernist claim that children’s individuality and inner knowing are irrelevant to education.

Sidwell embraces a post-modernist paradigm of schooling defined by the following elements:

- Sidwell is a prekindergarten through 12th grade school, with 1,097 students. This is about 84 children in each grade, a small enough number so that no child is lost in the crowd. If Sidwell had a free-standing high school, it would have all of 336 students.
- Sidwell offers “a rich and rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum designed to stimulate creative inquiry, intellectual achievement, and independent thinking in a world increasingly without borders.” It does not limit its curriculum to the antiquated 19th-century subjects, as does every set of state curriculum standards—or the new national standards that Arne Duncan is pitching.
- Sidwell encourages its students “to give expression to their artistic abilities.” It does not cut the arts out of the curriculum to focus only on math and reading, as so many schools have done in our testing-obsessed era, but understands that the arts need to be an integral element in every child’s education.
- Sidwell Friends School is a community that values “the power of

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individual and collective reflection.” It values not only knowledge that is outside the child or teenager, but also what children and adolescents know within themselves. Sidwell encourages reflection and inner knowing, neither of which are acknowledged in any state’s academic standards.

- Sidwell promotes “an understanding of how diversity enriches us,” recruits a diverse student body (39 percent of its students are persons of color), and offers a global and multicultural curriculum.

- In its curriculum and communal life, Sidwell emphasizes “stewardship of the natural world” and engages its students both in learning the science of ecology and in developing the ethics that are at the core of the concept of stewardship: that every individual has a personal responsibility for ecological health and sustainability.

- Sidwell also promotes service, and its curriculum and communal life engage its students in understanding “why service to others enhances life.”

- Sidwell explicitly acknowledges multiple forms of accessing knowledge and truth: “through scientific investigation, through creative expression, through conversation, ... through service within the school community and beyond.” All state standards are far more simple-minded.

- Sidwell recognizes that schooling is about both individual learning and learning how to work together well with others. “Work on individual skills and knowledge is balanced with group learning, in which each person’s unique insights contribute to a collective understanding.”

- Sidwell is a school that focuses on personalization of learning and on educating the whole person. “Above all,” its literature declares, “we seek to be a school that nurtures a genuine love of learning and teaches students ‘to let their lives speak.’” Sidwell’s central ambition is “to recognize and nurture each person’s unique gifts.”

Yes, Sidwell Friends is an expensive private school; the tuition is about \$29,000 a year. And it has one teacher on staff for every seven students—plus small classes and expensive facilities.

But Sidwell’s commitment to implementing a post-modern paradigm of schooling based on the personalization of learning, a global and multicultural curriculum, an emphasis on ecology and environmental

Access Quality Education: School Funding Litigation, Policy, and Advocacy

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American Civil Liberties Union



American Democracy Project

American Democracy Project at Western Washington University

American Educational Studies Association



American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL)



Native American Representation in Children's Literature: Challenging the People of the Past

Narrative, by Julie Stivers



Annenberg Classroom



Asian American Curriculum and Research Project - Home

Bill of Rights Institute | Educating young people about the Constitution

C-SPAN Classroom



C. A. Bowers, Online articles and books

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stewardship, service to others, multiple forms of knowledge, and personal responsibility and excellence has little to do with money. It's driven primarily by the value of educating the whole person, and any school in America could enact a program founded on that same value.

If Barack and Michelle Obama have abandoned industrial-paradigm, modernist schooling and have chosen to send Malia and Sasha to a post-modern school focused on the personalization of learning in the context of a caring, responsible school community, isn't it time for every family in the nation to have the same opportunity?

And if President Obama sends his own kids to such a school, why are he and Arne Duncan advocating policies that would intensify the most defective features of industrial schooling, rather than trying to transform schools to make them more like Sidwell Friends?

David Marshak is a lecturer in the Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies and the Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University, in Bellingham, Wash., and is a professor emeritus at Seattle University.

First published in *Education Week* on August 3, 2009.

POSTED BY LORRAINE KASPRISIN AT 11:34 PM 

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LABELS: [BARACK OBAMA](#), [DAVID MARSHAK](#), [DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION](#), [INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS](#)

4 COMMENTS:



Lorraine Kasprisin said...

Here is a comment sent in by:

Linda C. Allen

Director

Clarity Enterprises, LLC

I wanted to post a comment – so here it is: how do we make parents aware of the different methodologies involved in the educational process so that they can make informed decisions for their children? Granted, the current form of public (And most private) educational philosophies center on the industrial model – top-down, rigid. What we're seeking is the post industrial model, which no one has figured out. Sidwell Friends

Democratic dialogue

 **Democratic Purposes for Schools**

Unpacking Engagement



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Education Policy Blog: Hosted by the Forum on the Future of Public Education
Should States "Pay It Forward" for Higher Education?



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Freedom Forum



Freedom Writers Foundation

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

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may provide a foundation for Sasha and Malia, just as it did for Chelsea Clinton, but most children in the United States have the kind of support systems at home they are privy to. How do we compensate for that?

AUGUST 12, 2009 AT 8:14 PM

e Linda said...

Soon after the Obamas selected Sidwell Friends for their daughters, I read about the school on the Internet and had the same thoughts expressed by Mr. Marshak. Why are President Obama and Mr. Duncan seeking an enlightened kind of education for their own children, while advocating an industrial model, bound to fail, for other children? It's especially perplexing because the president expresses a good appreciation for authentic education in his books and speeches.

While it's true that the public schools cannot provide some of the expensive perks of Sidwell Friends (especially regarding class size) our public schools could definitely model themselves after the Sidwell philosophy of educating the whole child. (We have over 100 years of research supporting this model.) Indeed it could be argued that many of our schools, located in affluent communities, already do. The school attended by my grandchildren in a rich suburb of San Diego is in stark contrast to the impoverished school where I taught. (Grandchildren learn in relaxed child-centered classrooms while poor children are doing test prep drudgery all day and all year). Why not provide wonderful, and yes, "joyful" educational opportunities for all our children? Psychologists will tell us that regimented instruction for young children is a recipe for failure. (Forget what the tests say; everyone is just drilling the kids on the exact items!)

To close the gap we need to provide a Sidwell Friends environment for at-risk children from their toddler years. Can we afford to copy Sidwell's preschool program for our poorest children? Can we help with their health needs?

Even with twenty children in a class, all public schools could nurture the talents of each child. They could encourage the character traits we wish to see in our democracy and give children the opportunity to discuss ideas, work on projects, read good books, write in journals, draw and paint, play an instrument and generally enjoy the experiences of exploration and problem-solving. Test prep should be banished.

Imagination Conversation

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**National League of
Democratic Schools —
Reclaiming the Purpose of
Schooling**

**Pacific Northwest Labor
and Civil Rights Projects**

Peter Levine

Standardized tests would still be given, but only under the strictest security (a completely different form each year and no peeking!). Also, bring back PE teachers (that might solve the obesity epidemic) and serve nutritious lunches, as they do at Sidwell Friends. Surely we can afford that!

I would like to say this to President Obama and Mr. Duncan: Look at Sidwell Friends and use this school as a model. All children can benefit from it. You have already chosen the best. Now just find a way to spread the good stuff to our public schools and then we'll see the improvement that we all covet. We've done drill and kill for years now and we know it doesn't work. It's time to copy a school that succeeds.

AUGUST 12, 2009 AT 8:17 PM



lindsay said...

Give education ten years without high stakes testing schools would naturally become more post-modern. It's not until testing goes away along, with the standards that drive it, that schools have room to breathe.

I'd like to see the state of education and student outcomes in Iowa tracked over the past 30 years. Every other state in the U.S. has adopted state standards and, along with them, high stakes tests. Are kids in Iowa any better or worse off than the rest of the nation? Is schooling there any less "industrial"? As a kid growing up there, the only tests I ever remember taking were the ITBS and tests created by my teachers. The students I now teach in Texas take district benchmark assessments every six weeks, TAKS, the Stanford-Aprenda, field tests for the NEW end of course exams we'll begin this year, common course final exams, ...in addition to the assessments classroom teachers give. Teaching and learning is lost to testing. Away with tests for a generation and I think education would reform itself.

AUGUST 15, 2009 AT 9:08 AM

e **Aadhar Institute** said...

good job done guys... very nice blog.... very interesting and knowledgeble... hope you will post newer content in coming days..

[Organic baby bedding](#)

AUGUST 26, 2009 AT 11:59 AM

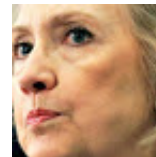
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