

Subsidizing Failure

In Nevada, good schools are ignored and bad schools are rewarded.

By Vin Suprynowicz

(Mr. Suprynowicz is the assistant editorial page editor of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.)

Following the statewide administration of the standardized TerraNova tests to Nevada schoolkids last October — and in keeping with the stipulations of the Nevada Education Reform Act of 1997 — 23 Nevada public schools have now been designated as “inadequate,” 13 of them here in Clark County (Las Vegas).

The “inadequate” designation went to those schools where at least 40 percent of students ranked in the bottom quarter of all kids taking the test — in *all four* subject areas.

Now, the Nevada Legislature’s prescription to remedy the situation begins to kick in. And that solution demonstrates once again how wide is the gulf between the way a government bureaucracy attempts to deal with a perceived problem, and the way it would most likely be dealt with in the free market.

Let us imagine for a moment that a statewide test had revealed that children’s clothing sold in 13 Southern Nevada stores was totally inadequate — that 40 percent of the pants, shirts and jumpers sold at those stores disintegrated into wet pulp the first time they were washed. How would the corporate owners of those stores respond?

First, of course, we must stipulate that parents who buy children’s clothes are free to shop wherever they please. No county bureaucracy assigns them to the one and only clothing store in their “district,” where they are required to shop by law. Therefore, the first thing the owners of the inadequate clothing stores would have noticed, following publication of the tests results, would have been a precipitous decline in customers.

This would eliminate the “wait and see” response. To avoid bankruptcy, the store owners would have to act massively and quickly.

The owners would basically face two choices.

1. They could close down the failed stores, lay off their failed staffs (especially the buyers who decided to take a flier on the “trend” towards cardboard clothing), put the old premises up for rent, and shift their emphasis to attracting more customers to the stores which *were* succeeding.

OR

2. They could come up with a campaign to assure customers the failing stores were now vastly “improved.” Though again, this would almost certainly start with the posting of signs declaring “Under New Management.”

Now, let us compare the bureaucratic solution, as reflected in the minutes of the May 28 meeting of the Legislative Committee on Education.

Actions regarding the two schools which demonstrated “high achievement?” None. No discussion of honouring any administrator or teacher at either of these schools with an award dinner, a plaque, or a raise. No scheduling of a lecture and workshop tour by these academic heroes to teach their successful methods to others. And as for the “inadequate” schools?

They get more money. The administrators of those schools were encouraged to submit “funding requests” for an additional \$100,000 to \$400,000 apiece. Even Western High School,

whose principal contended last year that the school’s “inadequate” ranking was a “mistake” (caused by kids in a few rooms goofing off and not taking the test seriously) lined up to seek an additional \$132,000 to buy new readers, instructional materials, and “SuccessMaker” computer software.

And what “remediation strategies” we have. The funding requests are laden with trendy monikers, from Project LIFE (Literacy Intervention for Excellence), to “Success for All,” to something called the “Animated Alphabet.”

Only one school — Johnson Elementary in Washoe County — actually dared report to the Education Committee that they have put in place a program teaching “phonics.”

Will some of these “programs” do some good? Possibly. But the economists keep warning us that whatever we subsidize, we get more of. If word gets around that we collectively give \$200 a day to the panhandler on the corner, by next week a dozen more fellows will have given up their low-wage jobs, and the panhandlers will be elbow-to-elbow, imitating the chorus line from *The Full Monty*.”

If the result of academic failure is that the same failed administrators get more money to spend, how long will it take before kids at the *better* schools are being urged to mess up on the tests, so *they* can get to watch the “Animated Alphabet,” just like everyone else?

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