Today’s urban curriculum more narrow than 100 years ago

Is more Math better?

A few weeks ago I decided to go through a few old files in my cellar and came upon my father’s report card from the Theodore Roosevelt Junior High, class of 1933. The Roosevelt, located on School St. in Jamaica Plain, then the Hernandez, and coincidentally the site of my first teaching assignment.

One curiosity of the report card is the variety of subjects my father was taught in his three years at the school, which covered grades 7-9. The school offered what we would customarily think of as a ‘core’ subjects—Math, Science, English, History, Physical Education, Health and Hygiene, and penmanship. Then a batch of what we would call electives: Choral Practice, Manual Arts, Music, Dressing and Art Appreciation. Then even more ‘electives’: Geography, French, and Latin. All told he was graded in 15 subject areas, well beyond today’s urban standards.

His education was probably typical for those times, and he later went on to Roxbury Memorial High School (now O’Byrants), then the Army, and later came back to college for a year or two, going nights. But this isn’t going to turn into a piece about the good old days. The ‘good old days’ in urban education weren’t very good.

One hundred years ago, there was a huge achievement gap along immigrant population lines. Extraordinary high student retention rates differing along immigration groups led to extraordinarily high and disparate student dropout rates. High school graduation rates were similarly skewed.

As with today, many of the above disparities had much to do with family income, and those immigrant groups which had a higher proportion in skilled labor or as merchants, did better in school than those who didn’t. (See http://www.epi.org/publication/webfeat_jasons20060926/)

In many ways our schools have progressed, and our achievement gaps—as bad as they are—are narrower than they used to be. None of this is to excuse today’s education gaps, at least as measured by standardized tests. But our progression over the last 100 years, as limited as it may seem, cannot mask our other deficiencies, i.e., the fallout of the high stakes, standardized testing movement.

Let’s focus on one aspect of the testing craze: the narrowing of the curriculum.

We have become a nation, in urban America at least, of a narrowing of our curriculum.

And here is where my father’s report card comes into play. Notwithstanding the many positions on Ed Reform, a key result of the movement has been to narrow the curriculum in urban America’s schools. Many, if not most of our children, have extended time each day in math and ELA, with a dose of social studies and science thrown in, leaving precious little time for anything else. This isn’t to say that these so-called ‘core’ subjects aren’t important—of course they are. Arguably, they are most important subjects. But there is more to this.

Students need to be able to learn and choose different subjects to study, both ‘core’ and non-core. They need to be taught in varied ways, and they need to find school fun, exciting and challenging. There has to be a reason, and an excitement to go to school. Our daughters, while at Boston Latin School, liked school but loved Choral Practice even though it was only held once every few days. One morning she was sick and insisted that she was well enough to go to school. We knew differently but she was insistent. I got a call from the school nurse at the end of 1st period—right after choral practice—to bring her home from school. Yes, school has to offer enriching and exciting reasons for children to want to go to school. Having more electives and a vibrant and varied curriculum would be a good start.

Our schools (along with other urban schools districts) take the opposite approach, perhaps, to their own detriment.

Given the fear of state-imposed sanctions, (e.g., going from level 3 to level 4 or Turn-around, or going from Turn-around to Charter) our schools generally have moved in the direction of saturating our students’ schedules with more math and more ELA. Fail the math MCAS? Here’s an 80-minute double block. Fail it again? Let’s make it two 60-minute blocks. What gets lost is in all of this is that more time may work—only to a point. But where is the point of decreasing returns?

In the 7th grade I was ‘forced’ to sign up for clarinet while a student at Boston Latin School. I happened to hate playing the clarinet. My father made me practice an hour per day or so. He could have made me practice two hours and it wouldn’t have mattered. I hated playing the clarinet. At the end of the year, I still couldn’t play much of anything. Mercifully, he understood (or wore me down) that more time practicing would be counterproductive, and soon there was to be no more clarinet practicing in the Stutman house.

We are so test-focused that we push (brown-nose) children into more math and more ELA ‘for their own good.’ What we don’t realize is that many children might perform better in math, for example, if they had less of it each day and had other attractions or electives (music, art, karate, theater, geography, woodworking, technology, French, and fill-in-the-blank) to motivate them to come to school and to do well in school. Many children might do a whole lot better in their ‘core’ subjects—might appreciate learning more—if they were more motivated to come to school excited about their non-core subjects.

Let’s take a look at what other school districts offer in their course of study. I looked at Weston, Quincy, Dracut, Brookline, and Salem to see what they offered their high school students by way of curriculum. You will not surprised at the results in Brookline.

Richard Stutman
BUTU President

Richard Stutman’s father’s (Sidney) report card from the Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School, circa 1933.
improvements in students learning, teachers professionalism, school management, and student funding. While the majority of the Act’s impact will take a decade or longer to be felt, a tremendous amount was accomplished during the first year."

Two decades have come and gone and the “impact” is certainly being felt. Far from being “unprecedented,” the result of charter schools in Massachusetts is a new segregation - one based upon language and disabilities rather than race or sex. At present, by law, there is a New World of education, those students who are not fluent in English or who need special accommodations are usually found in the cash depleted public schools whereas those students who have already mastered English and who are not in special education classes are increasingly found in charter schools.

Is this the bold new era of educational reform envisioned at the end of the last century? If not, we must chart a new course before our neediest students are forgotten, the clock, left behind.

Talking to legislators

It is imperative that all of us reach out to our State representatives and senators. If at all possible, go visit your representatives in their offices. If that is not possible, then a telephone call is far more effective than an email.

The bottom line is that all elected officials want to be re-elected. Thus they will listen to whomever is the most vociferous. Therefore we should be the more vocal side. So, when you talk to your state legislators, please have them observe the stark and startling disparity in the enrollment of ELL and SpEd students in charter and regular schools.

The following are taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education’s website:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited English Proficient</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boston Latin School</td>
<td>02.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATCH charter high school</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State average</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entire BPS district</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The English High</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boston Union Teacher

20 years after Broad v. Board of Education, echoes of Plessy v. Ferguson are emerging in today’s charter school movement. But instead of race, the issue of this century is ability.

When talking to your state legislators, please have them observe the stark and startling disparity in the enrollment of ELL and SpEd students in charter and regular schools. The purpose of education

by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Morehouse College Student Paper, The Maroon Tiger, in 1947

A s I engage in the so-called “bull sessions” around and about the school, I too often find that most college men have a misconception of the purpose of education. Most of the “brethren” think that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses. Still others think that education should furnish them with noble ends, rather than means to an end.

It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life.

Education must also train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for oneself is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and propaganda. At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.

The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.

The late Eugene Talmadge, in my opinion, possessed one of the better minds of Georgia, or even America. Moreover, he won the Phe Beta Kappa key. By all measuring rods, Mr. Talmadge could think critically and intensely, yet he contends that I am an inferior being. Are those the types of men we call educated?

We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.

If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illigal propagandists, consumed with immoral acts. Be careful, “brethren!” Be careful, teachers!
What is the process for filing a grievance?

A grievance is a statement which says that a teacher’s rights have been violated due to a misrepresentation or misapplication of the contract. A grievance must be filed every time an individual teacher’s rights are violated in order to refer it to mediation through the BTU Vice President. If the grievance is unresolved at Step 1, a mediator shall be assigned to assist the parties in an attempt to resolve the complaint. If the dispute is not resolved following the mediation, the grievance may be appealed to the next Step. Once the grievance goes beyond Step 1, the BTU Vice President handles the process of mediation, Steps 2, 3 and finally, if necessary, arbitration.

When do programming preference sheets come out?

The contract states, “No later than February 1st, programming preference sheets shall be distributed to all teachers.” For High and Middle School teachers it reads, “Programming preference will be honored to the extent consistent with the provisions of this Agreement [contract]. All preference sheets shall be returned by March 1st.” This means that a ‘preference’ is just that, it does not mean that the teacher is guaranteed their choice as submitted.

The contract also details, “On or before February 1st, a list of all non-teaching assignments for which administrative periods are given in a teachers’ program shall be posted in each school. These assignments may be applied for in the teacher’s program preference sheet as herein [within the contract] provided.” An applicant for such a non-teaching assignment who does not receive the assignment shall, upon request, be given the reasons for not having been selected by the Principal or Headmaster.

How do teachers obtain access to their personnel file?

In order to view your personnel file, go to the BPS Human Resources Department on the third floor of 26 Court Street within a reasonable enough time during regular business hours (9 am-5 pm) for HR to retrieve it and you for to then look at it’s contents. A photo ID to verify your identity in order to have access to your file must be presented. If you’d like to contact the HR Department you may call them directly at 617-635-9600. A teacher has the right to access to his or her file without delay. You also have access to your ‘teacher files’ at the individual school level, if a school principal/headmaster keeps them there as well. The same parameters detailed below apply to your official files at HR and to the one your school keep.

The BTU labor/management contract states, “No material derogatory to a teacher’s conduct, service, character, or personality shall be placed in the files unless the teacher has had an opportunity to read the material. The teacher shall be notified of any material in his or her file.

Mayor Menino Says Farewell

Outgoing Mayor Thomas M. Menino stopped by the BTU hall to bid adieu. He thanked the membership for their hard work in transforming Boston into one of America’s premier school districts.

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D E A D L I N E:

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Know Your Rights

by Caren Carew

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BTU members and their children celebrate the holidays!

Photos by Michael J. Maguire
On December 9th, more than 250 teachers, students, parents, and community activists participated in a Town Hall sponsored by the Boston Truth Coalition. The event was part of National Day of Action to Reclaim the Promise of Public Education.

From excessive standardized testing to the bureaucratic teacher evaluation system much of the so called “reforms” that have been imposed on public schools have been top down initiatives written by those in power who promote a corporate vision of public schooling. But at Boston Truth’s Town Hall the real stakeholders in public schools came together to put forward a different vision. Parents, teachers, and students called for a rich and varied curriculum and schools that are respectful to all.

The list of organizations that make up Boston Truth is impressive. Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ), Boston Teachers Union (BTU), Boston Parent Union (BPU), Boston-area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), Boston Workers Alliance Citizens for Public Schools (CPS), Coalition for Equal Quality Education (CEQE) [which also includes the Black Educators Alliance of Eastern Massachusetts (BEAM), The Bus Drivers Union, Work for Quality, The Fight Back Network], Fair Test Save Our Schools, Teacher Activist Group (TAG), Boston Jobs with Justice (WJ), Youth Organizers United for the Now Generation (YOUNG) Coalition (which includes Youth on Board, Boston Youth Organizing Project (BYOP), and El Movimiento is the coalition’s latest member, American Federation of Teachers - Massachusetts (AFT-MA), Quality Education for Every Student (QUEST), Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH) and Press Pass TV.

Most in attendance agreed that this is merely the beginning of the struggle to take back public education. But it was an impressive beginning and people left the event committed to continue the struggle for as long as it takes.
“T”oday’s National Day of Action is the largest coordinated action to reclaim and protect public education in recent memory. Parents, teachers, students and community members are taking part in the Day of Action because they know that the market-based ideologies of privatization, austerity, division and competition are failing our children. They want to reclaim our schools and improve public education for all.

“This Day of Action is truly nationwide:Thousands are participating in events across the country, and tens of thousands more are showing their support online. "Communities from coast to coast are experiencing injustices in public education that have become all too common – scarce funding and resources, deep-rooted inequalities, hyper-testing, school closings and lack of local control. But while ALFCI (the American Legislative Exchange Council) and others are trying to diminish public education, parents, teachers, students and community groups are taking their schools back.”

On this Day of Action, we call upon our leaders to listen to those closest to the classroom about what’s best for our children. While we agree on the overall goal to prepare students for life, career, and college, we also must be clear that the market-based approach has failed. We need a new path paved with early childhood education, project-based learning, wraparound services, teacher autonomy, professional development, parent and student voices, fair funding formulas and more. We must reclaim the promise of public education.”

**RTC Executive Board Minutes**

**November 4, 2013**

*Members present:* Annie-Marie Adduci; Anne Broder; Marie Broderick; Mary Cahalane; Sandy Carle; Donna Cooley-Hilton; Martha Cotton; Larry Connolly; David Donovan, Chairman; Phil Fassano; Ruthanne Kennedy; Marilyn Marion, Secretary; Leonore Miraglia, Vice Chairman; Mary Jo Murphy; Linda McNamara; and Paul Tenney.

**Excused:** Eileen Ganley

**Committees Attending**

- Social Committee Member, Mary Gaughan
- Legislative Committee Members, Janey Frank, Jenna Fitzgerald Jean Cristiani, Mary Oyama, Joan Devlin, Sandra Baler-Segal
- Angela Cristiani, BTU Political Organizer

The meeting was opened by the Chairman at 10:15 a.m.

**Reports**

**Secretary:** October’s minutes were read and accepted.

**Treasurer:** October’s Treasurer’s report was read and accepted.

**Treasurer** Anne Broder, reported on her findings regarding a sound system for the November luncheon. Discussion took place regarding the necessity of having a better sound system than what has been in place.

**Chairman:** The chairman made the following motion: that we hire someone for the sound system at the November luncheon. Motion was unanimously accepted.

The chairperson said that he would contact Bill O’Connell to ask if he would give the bouquet of flowers at the luncheon to the retired teacher who is 100. Report Accepted

**Co-Chairman:** Letters were sent to the membership about the $1 per month increase in their Delta Dental plan. Report Accepted.

**Benefits:** The RTC link on the BTU website will be updated to include information Delta benefits. Report Accepted.

**Remembrance:** A list of deceased BTU/RTC members from September 2012 through September, 2013 was given to the Committee. Report Accepted.

**Scholarship:** No report.

**Social:** Over 600 members are expected to attend the fall luncheon. Report Accepted.

**Travel:** The Travel Committee requests a table to be placed outside the function room at the November luncheon. Report Accepted.

**Legislative:** Outreach letter will be sent to other city unions regarding COLA asking them to send representatives to Retirement Board meetings in support of raising the COLA base. Committee will seek an appointment with new mayor to talk to him about retiree issues. Committee recommends support for “An Act to Improve Quality in Early Education Care Centers” (HB477 and SB 223). Committee requests email address from RTC to contact legislators in support prior to 11/25/13. Report Accepted.

**Meeting** was suspended at 11:21 a.m. to wait for Michael McLaughlin, Retirement Board member, who was invited to speak to the Committee.

Meeting was reconvened at 11:42 a.m. Unfortunately, Michael was in a traffic jam in Concord and would not be able to make our meeting. However, he told the Chairman that he spoke to the Board at Segal Actuaries as well as to the Retirement Board and we were put on their November 13 agenda. Legislative Committee invited all to attend the Retirement Board meeting and those who wish to attend can meet the Committee at the BTU at 9:00 a.m. on November 13 to carpool to City Hall. Report Accepted.

**Data Processing:** Website continues to be maintained. Report Accepted.

**Membership:** No report.

**Old Business:** None.

**New Business:** Create an agenda for the November fall luncheon. Meeting adjourned at 12:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Marilyn F. Marion, Secretary

---

**AFT President Weingarten on National Day of Action**

Charting a new course…

[Continued from page 2]

urban centers have more non-native English speakers and typically have more special educational needs. Likewise, charter school supporters will mention Boston Latin School. This is another clever ploy to deflect attention from the miserable job charters do in educating urban centers have more non-native English speakers and typically have more special educational needs.

Charting a new course…

continued from page 2

charter schools for what they truly are. This would now be a good time for you to offer ideas to your elected official.

**It’s all about the Benjamins**

Supporters of charter schools will insist that the funding formula has been fixed. It has indeed been adjusted since 1993, but today’s charter schools still receive the average, not the actual, per pupil expenditure from their sending districts. Average sounds so harmless but is so misleading.

Let’s look back at our previous chart. BLS has about 30 students in a class. For quick math let’s say that the BLS teacher for that class costs the city $90,000 annually. Thus average per pupil cost is $3,000. Now let’s look at a Spalding class of 18 students. The average per pupil cost is now $5,000. How about a class with one student who has multiple mental, emotional, and physical handicaps. That per pupil expenditure is $90,000. And let’s not forget our paraprofessionals. The average cost now goes up even more. You get the idea.

Charter schools typically (and perhaps by design) educate students more like BLS but take from the BPS the average citywide cost, not the actual cost. Multiply this difference over several hundred students and over two decades and we are talking about some serious money.

Ask your state legislator how much more money is needed from traditional public schools is in any way going to help the traditional public schools. Competition is fine in some ways, but this equations feels more like a mugging.

**Paring Thought**

The way to approach charter schools is to expose their inequality, both of funding and of enrollment. If the legislature were to mandate that public charter schools receiving public money must educate the same segments of society as traditional public schools, then their siren call would fade away. Let us make that our New Year’s resolution to address these inequities with our local elected officials.

4 a “send-in district” is the district a student would attend if he were not enrolled in a charter school*
We’re Learning Here
A project by Amika Kemmler Ernst, Ed.D.

Curtis Guild Elementary School

The Curtis Guild Elementary School is in East Boston, close to Belle Isle Marsh. Nearly 90% of its 300 students are Latino/Hispanic – mostly immigrants from Central and South America. I was invited to the school by literacy specialist Maureen Galvin and welcomed by school secretary, Ms. Jane Paronich with a big hug!

I never quite got used to the layout of the school, which consists of two brick buildings “nested” together in a weird configuration. The classrooms are on three levels and accessible by different staircases. Space is at a premium: copy machines are in a hallway near the office and the small teacher’s lounge is next to the boiler room.

As I looked for good angles from which to take photos in each classroom, I was delighted to hear so many encouraging words from teachers. Science teacher Meredith Martin started her class by asking students to talk about ways to make a sound louder, exclaiming often about their good ideas as she moved around the room. Linda Titus had her Kindergarteners chorus, “Nice try!” when a student got a wrong answer, and “Good job!” for a correct response.

Word study was a common lesson during my visit, which makes sense considering how many of the students at the Guild are English Language Learners. John Rogers had developed a way of reviewing vocabulary with one of his fourth graders operating the computer for his classmates. As they matched words with meanings, the kids acted out each word, adding a kinesthetic component to their learning.

Movement is valued at this school. One teacher had her students take a brief “stretch break” in between subjects. Dance teacher Niki Thelismond had an enthusiastic group of children moving to music in the auditorium. In an outdoor gym class on this beautiful day, Stephen Mahoney had K2 students counting as high as they could as they tossed beanbags back and forth, while he helped individual children with their throwing technique... and everyone gave a cheer when one pair counted up to 100!

I learned while I was visiting the Guild that the principal had recently resigned. While it’s impossible to know what went into his decision to leave just as the school year was getting underway, I imagine the pressure to constantly raise test scores may have played a part. As always, I was impressed by the ability of teachers to stay focused on children during such an abrupt transition... they are the only ones who seem to live up to that BPS slogan on a daily basis.

Amika Kemmler Ernst, Ed. D.
amika45@comcast.net

I am doing a math problem in this photo. I am learning how to multiply big numbers.

Destiny Paige, Grade 4

We were throwing beanbags to our partners and counting in gym class. Mr. Mahoney was helping us. We are learning how to throw and catch.

Genesis Rolon, Justin Lima, Kimberly Vasquez, & Odalis Alvarez, Grade 1

I was matching lower case letters with the capital letters. I am learning the whole alphabet – A is first and Z is last! I have also learned how to write my name!

Marlon Morales Vargas, K2

Ms. Menes is showing us how to play a game on the computer. We are learning lots of words and how to do subtraction.

Jeffrey Mayorga, Arnold Maldonado, Isabella Espinosa, & Dennis Vasquez, Grade 2

We were doing word study with Ms. Rua, writing down each word as she says it. We are learning how to use correct punctuation in our writing. For example, we’ve learned that when you write dialogue, quotation marks go at the start and end of each person’s words.

Ms. Rua’s Grade 3 students

In this picture we are using our hands to demonstrate one of the definitions of “swell” – having a good time. We were reviewing the meanings of each of our vocabulary words. We are learning what words mean so that we don’t have to stop and think about it when we read a book.

Mr. Rogers’ Grade 4 students

This is in science class with Ms. Martin. We put string over a plastic cup and plucked it to make a sound, then made the sound louder by putting a cone over it. We attached a tube to the cone to keep the vibrations from escaping. We’ve learned that vibrations make sound and the more something vibrates, the lower the pitch.

Carlos Landaverde, Jose Guzman, & Melanie Cadavid, Grade 4

We were listening to an alphabet story that rhymed! We are learning our letters and numbers. We’ve learned that rhyming words have the same ending sound, like “cat” and “hat.”

Ms. Nagle’s K2 students

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Ms. Rua’s Grade 3 students

In this picture we are using our hands to demonstrate one of the definitions of “swell” – having a good time. We were reviewing the meanings of each of our vocabulary words. We are learning what words mean so that we don’t have to stop and think about it when we read a book.

Mr. Rogers’ Grade 4 students

This is in science class with Ms. Martin. We put string over a plastic cup and plucked it to make a sound, then made the sound louder by putting a cone over it. We attached a tube to the cone to keep the vibrations from escaping. We’ve learned that vibrations make sound and the more something vibrates, the lower the pitch.

Carlos Landaverde, Jose Guzman, & Melanie Cadavid, Grade 4

We were listening to an alphabet story that rhymed! We are learning our letters and numbers. We’ve learned that rhyming words have the same ending sound, like “cat” and “hat.”

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