



THEMES in the NEWS

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Making School Reform Work: Mike Rose Offers a Guide

By UCLA IDEA

Mike Rose, our colleague at UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, offers an analysis of the nation's school reform efforts that reformers and reform-minded activists should not miss. We encourage you to read the piece and share it widely.

Rose lays out six concerns about the current school reform movement: over-heated rhetoric; blanket layoffs and "house cleanings"; overreliance on a single, "big idea" or silver bullet; undue attention on teachers and lack of attention on instruction; placing the new and young on a pedestal; and downplaying poverty.

Rose asks reformers to tone down their rhetoric and quit their finger-pointing. He urges people to recognize that everyone involved in education cares deeply about the young. There is no class or category of villains.

He cautions against the current fashion of advocating or threatening massive school overhauls—sometimes including the firing of all staff at particular schools and thus losing valuable expertise, insight, and community support.

Rose warns of becoming attached to a single, "Big Idea." "The problem with the big idea approach to school reform is that large-scale educational problems have more than one cause and thus require more than one solution," he writes. For example, after "small learning communities" were widely promoted and many millions spent to break up large schools into smaller academies, it turned out that reforms depend more on the specifics of the "restructured" schools than on the general idea of smaller-is-better. Likewise, a current "big idea" advocates charter schools, but increasing documentation shows that highly effective charters are not an easy or cheap route to reform.

Rose calls for more emphasis on instruction rather than the facile blaming of ineffective teachers—a distinction that is easily missed by many who don't have extensive experience in schools. Also, he criticizes the emphasis placed on staffing schools with young, new teachers in order to increase education quality. Yes, schools should attract young, committed individuals, but they are not a substitute for balanced and diverse staffing.

Lastly, Rose asks reformers to keep poverty in mind. Hunger, homelessness, unstable families and more, play big roles in students' lives. For example, in response to these worsening conditions, Washington, D.C., schools began offering dinner to students.

Rose's analysis of the current school reform movement doesn't blaze new ground. Rather, he embraces the accumulated knowledge and research on effective schooling and reform, and asks that reformers not get distracted by false hopes and rhetorical excesses. His six categories of caution for reformers are temperate and demonstrably accurate guides for improving schools.