My Life and Times with the Madison Schools

Up Close, the Author Finds That Politics Obscure Key Educational Issues

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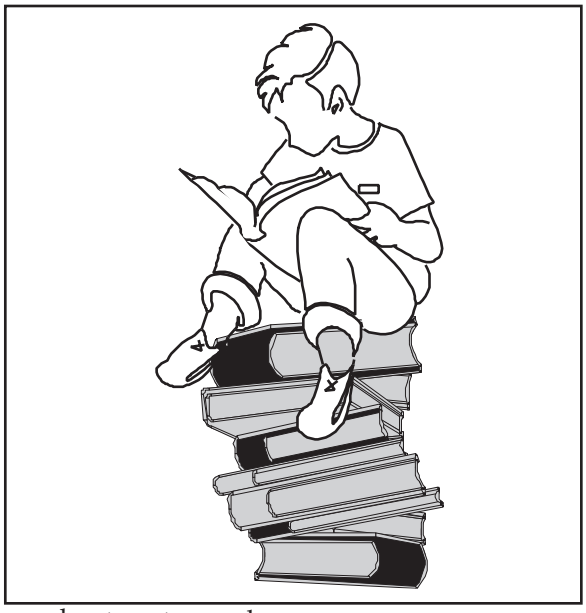

Having kids is a lot like throwing dice. You never know how you and your mate's genetic code will spill out. Snake eyes: The kid gets your mathematical obtuseness and your spouse's fear of heights. Seven! The little tyke inherits your love of words and your spouse's consummate sense of order.

Who knows how the dice will fall? It's a crap shoot, so to speak. But that's the nature component of spawning kids. The nurture element is another story. We try so hard to shape their environment to good effect.

How eye-opening, then, when I realized I had gotten it wrong with my older daughter. I had embraced the wisdom of the day, circa 1993 in Madison: Read to your kid and everything will turn out fine in terms of literacy. Not a problem. Our house overflows with books, magazines, and newspapers.

Came the spring term of first grade and my wife and I heard the bad news: Our oldest kid was struggling with reading. *Huh, how could that be?* I had read to her nightly since infancy. She was supposed to learn to decode words from my storytelling, right?

To our great luck, she was assigned a reading specialist who used a kinetic-style of phonics instruction where the kids sounded out words as they gestured with their hands. Before the year was out, our dear daughter turned into a killer reader.

I say we were lucky because the instructor was at our school only because the principal had stubbornly insisted that remedial phonics be taught—a stance, as we'll see later, tainted her professionally in Madison. Another, more costly and seemingly less-successful program called Reading Recovery was, and is, the Madison district's preferred intervention for early-grade reading problems.

I was relieved at the outcome, but also chastened by my first taste of educational politics in Madison. Whole-Language instruction (with its emphasis on submersing kids in a media-rich environment with the expectation that by osmosis they would learn to read) was in full vogue then, and it had let my daughter down. The traditional way of teaching kids phonics to decipher words had been sup-

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planted by a method supported by advocates of progressive education.

In liberal Madison, "progressive" is always good. But one of the lessons I've learned as a parent and as a journalist—I'm the editor of *Isthmus*, an alternative weekly that has taken some gimlet-eyed investigations of the local schools—is that freighting educational discussions with "progressive" and "conservative" (or similar) political trappings is neither accurate nor helpful.

The political baggage becomes just one more impediment to resolving the utterly crucial issue of improving urban-school performance.

Nothing is more important for the health of a city, says Paul Soglin, the multi-termed ex-mayor of Madison and UW-Madison lecturer on urban affairs. Good public schools attract middle-class families, and those respectable burghers pay the bulk of the property tax bills, set the community behavioral standards and, in short, are the pillar on which a healthy city rests.

"Good public schools are a city's greatest asset," says Soglin. "Because the most important thing to everyone, no matter how they scream about taxes or traffic congestion or environmental issues, is their children."

Spreading the blame

Both the left and right share the blame for using education as a proxy fight for their political agendas.

Take the disastrously poor performance of kids in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). (Factoid: 18,000 MPS students are considered chronically truant.) The discussion is so dominated by liberal-conservative smack-down over school vouchers that no other improvement strategy ever seems to be in the spotlight. In Madison all we hear about MPS is the distant boom-boom of the big guns of the teachers' union and the free-market foundations pounding one another.

In my town, we have our own political overlay that distorts educational issues. Progressive politics is unthinkingly equated with progressive education, the child-centered, let-the-kids-learn through-their-own-experience that began with John Dewey.

That approach *does* work for some kids. My younger daughter attended a Montessori preschool that was as child-centered as they come, and that setting was marvelous for her development. But in the Madison schools other techniques such as phonics and drill-and-drill-some-more mathematical memorization are consigned to the TB ward of quarantined conservative ideas.

Not helpful. Maybe even damaging. And certainly confusing. I'm a pretty liberal guy on most counts. (Forget that I thought GOPer Mike Ellis would have made a great candidate for governor this fall.) And I live in the true-blue, lib-prog-commie redoubt of Madison's near east side where Greens and Trotskyists probably outnumber Republicans.

Yet there I was four years ago with four or five fellow travelers hiring a math tutor to teach our 6th grade daughters straight-ahead, no-frills Singapore math two nights a week after school.

Why would we want supposedly "conservative" math pedagogy? Because our kids (my younger one in this case) were bored out of their gourds with their school's Connected Math program. The emphasis on story problems, self-guided exploration of math concepts (why not just teach kids what *pi* equals?), too many tiresome group projects where a few kids did most of the work, and the drag applied to the class by the kids who just didn't get it, had left our kids twiddling their thumbs.

But, hey, that was middle school writ large. ("Middle school isn't supposed to be challenging," a colleague's National Merit son blurted out when I asked him about his experiences.) That December my youngest had come to me at Christmas break with some of the most dispiriting words a parent can hear from a child's lips: "Dad, I'm bored in school."

And she expected me to fix it.

One class fits all

Now, the older one is just as smart as her kid sister, but the younger one is impressively serious about her studies, while my eldest organized her high school life around soccer and the general principle that having fun trumped everything else. (In her sophomore year of college she's made the amazing discovery that studying hard and getting good grades is pleasurable, too.)

There was no happy answer to my younger daughter's disenchantment. The Madison school district, in the face of punitive budget measures from the state and the big stick of the federal No Child Left Behind law, was beginning to slash its Talented and Gifted (TAG) staff and shift resources to helping struggling students.

Deliberate it or not, the result was to create the sort of heterogeneous classroom in my daughter's 6th grade classes that key people in the Madison district would now love to see in its high schools. My daughter's English teacher was clearly a cut above the average, but she told me she was struggling to teach an A to Z classroom.

Everybody was there—the super bright, the average, kids with learning disabilities or emotional problems, four or five non-English speakers, two or three surly kids who seemed like strong candidates for jailhouse orange in a few years, plus one memorable boy who periodically ricocheted around the room like a pinball, teasing the girls and raising a ruckus.

Clearly, this was a class with a wide range of abilities, and an even wider range of interest in the serious business of learning. It was beyond me how this good teacher could engagingly talk about literature to kids whose reading skills probably ranged from barely literate to darn near college level.

In the end, the best that could be done wasn't much at all. My daughter was periodically sent to the hallway or the library to work on honors assignments all by her lonesome. The days of a TAG teacher coming in the classroom to work with four or five kids in the back of the room or in the library were gone.

The progressive indictment

Of course, I'm being a selfish bastard for complaining about her classroom. An illiberal, oppressive, racially-insensitive, selfish bastard at that. Welcome to Count A of the progressive educator's political indictment of folks like me.

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The prolific Alfie Kohn is the leading proponent of this view. His latest book deals with the evils of homework. He also argues, in previous tomes, against testing, letter grades, awards ceremonies, academic competition, and keeping score in high school sports. (Okay, I made the last one up.) Kohn's 1998 essay, "Only For *My* Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform," lays out the case for banishing me and my kind from the ranks of the righteous. He wrote:

> They may be pro-choice and avid recyclers, with nothing good to say about the likes of Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh; yet on educational issues they are, perhaps unwittingly, making common cause with, and furthering the agenda of, the Far Right.

For Kohn and his supporters (some of whom are embedded in the Madison schools), it's a given that the techniques of progressive education are morally superior and the best approach for teaching disadvantaged kids. The problem is, where's the proof?

UW-Milwaukee's Sammis White, in a 2005 study published in this magazine's sister publication, *Wisconsin Policy Research Institute Report*, found that poor kids in Milwaukee fared better in reading and math with Direct Instruction than with other techniques.

UW-Madison's Mark Seidenberg, meanwhile, coauthored a 2002 review of reading research in *Scientific American* that concluded that children become skilled readers much more readily with phonics instruction than with the Whole Language approaches. (Phonics, or teaching kids the rules of sounding out letters, is a Direct Instruction technique.)

Seidenberg points out that Whole Language and its variations require parental reading at home to reinforce classroom work, while the story problems in Connected Math require that kids be competent readers. The problem: Poor kids often have trouble reading and their home life may be too chaotic for parental support.

"What's progressive about introducing techniques for reading or math that discriminate against children who are poor?" Seidenberg asks.

Bailing out . . . and returning

Deciding to pull my daughter out of middle school the following fall wasn't easy. It cost a wad of money, and my wife and I are "small d" democrats who believe in public education. But Eagle School in Fitchburg, which screens applicants by IQ test results, was a marvelous choice.

With a couple hundred carefully-culled kids, low student-teacher ratios, and a demanding curriculum, my daughter blossomed. By 8th grade, under the tutelage of an extraordinary history teacher (take a bow, Angela Abbott), she was writing 2,000-word papers on how Hitler and Stalin consolidated power. These were assignments, I should add, that were more demanding than the ones my older daughter was getting in a senior TAG history class.

But Eagle was also what you would expect: overwhelmingly white, middle-to-upper-class, with a few Asian-American kids and only one or two African-Americans. Not to mention the odd fact that my daughter was one of only two east-side kids in the entire school. All the rest were from the toney precincts of Madison's west side and the suburbs.

It was a great two years, but sending her back to public school to Madison East for high school made sense. From my older daughter's classes I knew there were dedicated teachers, a good selection of TAG classes, and a protective east-side community that watched over East.

Let me wax poetic for a moment. The school's "East Side Pride" motto was more than a slogan, too. East-siders have a prickly defensiveness, almost a collective chip on our shoulder in looking at the rest of Madison. We do hang together.

This has its roots in the city's history. Madison self-importantly saw itself as the "Athens of the Midwest" in the late 19th century because of the centrality of the University of Wisconsin to the city's life. Deeply ambivalent over the wave of smokestack industrialization transforming cities like Milwaukee, the city fathers settled on the "Madison Compromise" in which a factory district was established on the east side and the west side was kept clean for the professional and professorial classes.

One hundred and twenty-five years later, the east side still has a blue collar constituency. The lefties and countercultural types have settled in as well, riding the crest of rising real estate values to become the bourgeois bohemians of David Brooks' "Bobos In Paradise." Add in some low-income neighborhoods and a growing number of blacks, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans, and the east-side mix is complete except for the cherry on top of the multi-culti mix.

Those are the affluent kids who live in Madison's first exclusive suburb, Maple Bluff, which overlooks Lake Mendota but isn't all

that far away from the lunch-bucket crowd at the Oscar Mayer meat processing plant. Those Maple Bluff kids and families see themselves as east-siders too.

I like the mix. I like it a lot. On its better days, the East High School population—1,805 kids that happen to be 56% white, 22% black, 11% Asian, 9% Hispanic—looks a lot more like the modern day world than Eagle School does.

The question though for rich and poor, high- and low-achievers alike: Are they getting a good enough education at East to function in the globalized economy? I wonder.

Education for the New World

Two summers ago I saw the future, and it was unsettling, as I wrote in an *Isthmus* column. My youngest daughter, then 14, found herself a racial minority in a class of gifted kids in a three-week program at Northwestern University. Among the 16 or so children, a dozen were Asian or Asian-American.

The class wasn't computer science or engineering or chemistry—classes increasingly populated by international students at the college level—but a "soft" class, non-fiction writing. (Struggling with those 2,000 word essays had prompted her class selection.)

When several hundred parents and students met that afternoon for the introductary remarks, I spotted more turbaned Sikhs in the auditorium than black people. I can't say if there were any Hispanics at all.

Earlier, I had met my daughter's roommate and her mom—both thin, stylish, and surgically connected to their cell-phones and iPods. I casually assumed that the kid was a suburban princess, Chinese-American division. Later, my daughter told me that her roommate was from Hong Kong, the daughter of a banker, and had, at the age of 14, already taken enrichment classes in Europe and Canada. And, oh, she had been born in Australia.

Welcome to the 21st century.

The libs are right about this stuff. In the coming decades, the faces of power and influence won't be monochromatic white and solely American; that being multi-lingual will be a powerful advantage in the business world; that familiarity and ease with other cultures will be a plus; and, above all, that talent and drive will be the passwords of success in the global economy.

Will my kids have the skills, temperament and knowledge to prosper in an exceedingly competitive world?

Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*, his chronicle of the rapid economic and social changes wrought by the mercury-like spread of new technology, is the essential primer for understanding this new world.

In a nutshell, we shouldn't bet on American hegemony in technology and economic growth in the 21st century. In a ramped-up, knowledge-based, digitalized economy, there are no borders. The built-in advantage the U.S. enjoyed after World War II—our industrial base was untouched, while the rest of the developed world's lay in ruins—has finally run its course. Today, many tech jobs can just as easily be performed in Bangalore and Beijing as in Waunakee and Waukesha.

Most of us have had those eerie moments when the distant winds of globalization suddenly blow across our desks. For parents, it can lead to an unsettling question: Will my kids have the skills, temperament, and knowledge to prosper in an exceedingly competitive world?

As much as anything, that helps explain the Boomers' obsession with grooming their kids with coaches, tutors, enrichment classes, summer camps and taped Bach while junior is *in utero*. This is, of course, the nurture card played to the max.

Where's the challenge?

I'm no different. I want my kids pushed, prodded, inspired, and challenged in school. Too often—in the name of equity, or progressive education, or union protectionism, or just plain cheapness—that isn't happening in the Madison schools.

Advanced classes are being choked off, while one-size-fits-all classes ("heterogeneous groupings") are created for more and more students. The TAG staff has been slashed nearly in half (one staffer is now assigned to six elementary schools), and even outside groups promoting educational excellence are treated coolly if not with hostility (this is the fate of the most excellent Wisconsin Center For Academically Talented Youth [WCATY]). And arts programs are demeaned and orphaned.

This is not Tom Friedman's recipe for student success in the 21st century. Sure, many factors can be blamed for this declining state of affairs, notably the howlingly bad way in which K-12 education is financed and structured in Wisconsin. But much of the problem also derives from the district's own efforts to deal with "the achievement gap."

That gap is the euphemism used for the uncomfortable fact that, as a group, white students perform better academically than do black and Hispanic students. For example, 46% of Madison's black students score below grade level on the state's 3rd grade reading test compared to 9% of white students.

At East, the state's 10th grade knowledge-and-concepts test show widely disparate results by race. With reading, 81% of white kids are proficient or advanced versus 43% for black students. The achievement gap is even larger in math, science, social studies, and language arts. No wonder TAG classes are disproportionately white.

Reality is that the push for heterogeneous class grouping becomes, among other things, a convenient cover for reducing the number of advanced classes that are too white and unrepresentative of the district's minority demographics.

But beyond the elementary years can you really teach both ends of the grading curve in the same classroom and do justice to both? I've had teachers tell me, yes, that "differentiation" can work in the classroom. (Indeed, having TAG instructors and foreign-language translators doing "pull-outs" with small groups in the back of the room is a differentiation technique.) But I suspect it's really, really hard even for great teachers, especially if they lack the support staff.

My daughter's 6th grade experience is too strong in my memory to think otherwise.

"It can be done effectively, but the research so far suggests that it usually doesn't work," says Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, head of Northwestern's Center For Talent Development in Evanston, a student-enrichment group similar to WCATY.

In the perfect world, Madison would learn from the Evanston schools and their relationship with the center. Faced with predominantly white faces in its advanced high school classes, this racially mixed district didn't dump those classes but hired Olszewski-Kubilius' group to run an after-school and weekend math and science enrichment program for promising minority students in grades 3-6.

In other words, raise their performance so they qualify for those advanced classes once they get to high school. Now there's an idea!

Middle-class abandonment

The danger Madison faces is too starkly pitting the needs of the kids who have fallen behind against the needs of the high achievers. It will make things even worse if middle-class families feel their kids are suffering.

Milwaukee's ruined school system is a testament to middle-class abandonment: Three-quarters of MPS's 93,000 kids are categorized

as low income (as defined by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch).

In prosperous Madison, with its rock solid economic base of state and university jobs, 40% of its almost 25,000 students are low-income, up from 20% in 1990. Fourteen of its 30 elementary schools have enrollments that are 50% or more low-income.

Anyone who follows education knows how worrisome these numbers are. Not just for the challenge of coping with the learning and behavioral problems that often surround poor kids from troubled families, but for the prospect of continued middle-class flight.

"It's not just middle-class whites," says Soglin, "but middle-class blacks, middle-class Hispanics and middle-class Asians who leave the city. The great myth of the '70s is that the flight is all white. But most middle-class people then were white, and middle-class blacks just didn't have the housing options they have today."

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Yet I have some optimism about the future of the Madison schools. Even with the occasional classroom stinker (like my daughter's 9th grade TAG English teacher who began each 50-minute class by reading the kids their horoscopes), Madison has a solid base of experienced and committed teachers. And despite all my carping here, the district can point with pride to reductions in the achievement gap and a significant jump in the graduation rate.

Moreover, the parents are still in the trenches watching out for their kids and their schools, challenging so-called progressive policies they see as damaging to their children. Especially at East, where school pride is a serious thing.

Much of the credit goes to retired principal Milt McPike, who ran the school with a firm hand for 23 years before retiring in 2002. (Governor Doyle gets a high-five for naming McPike to the UW Board of Regents.) A former professional football player with a commanding presence and a booming voice, McPike was a legendary figure on the east side.

He knew everybody and everything, from the first names of his students, to the neighborhood cops, social workers, and businesspeople who filled him in on the stuff that wasn't yet in the papers.

McPike also knew that he needed to keep those Maple Bluff families invested in the school if East were to avoid a descent into poverty and trouble. My neighbor, who worked at East for years, said that McPike's reassuring presence was a major reason why those well-off Maple Bluff parents kept sending their kids to Madison's blue-collar high school. Indeed, McPike is credited with boosting East's Talented and Gifted program in the 1980s. He felt schools should serve the needs of all kids, and in this case his support of TAG helped keep those Maple Bluff families on board.

Perhaps it was inevitable, but McPike's departure sent East into a tailspin.

Not a "team player"

The descent began when School Superintendent Art Rainwater abruptly overturned a review committee's recommendation to replace McPike with the elementary school principal who had championed remedial phonics. Her problem according to the scuttlebutt: Not a "team player."

Never mind that Barbara Thompson was a firm, no-nonsense leader who was respected by the neighborhood and who was tiger-like in defending her school. Not to mention, like McPike, she was African American and a role model for kids whose own life might be lacking adults to emulate. Thompson, in other words, was the sort of candidate a school district might pay a headhunter tens of thousands of dollars to recruit to lead an at-risk urban high school.

Today, Thompson is the administrator of the small, rural New Glarus school district, and she has, it's worth noting, instituted Direct Instruction programs to help failing students master reading and math.

The next three years saw East struggling with weak leadership and increasing gang violence. McPike's replacement proved properly compliant to the central administration and perhaps not surprising virtually weightless as a school leader. Two years later, the school board paid her a wad of go-away money.

Her replacement was young, energetic, experienced in a multicultural school setting, and seemingly committed to working with parents and the faculty to improve East. Folks were impressed, but this fall the new principal unexpectedly announced an end to all TAG classes in the 2006-07 school year and creation of a core curriculum (heterogeneous classrooms, in other words) for all 9th and 10th graders.

The uproar was so great—150 people turned out at a parents' meeting—that he never got a chance to explain how he wanted to expand Advanced Placement classes for juniors and seniors and offer enhancement classes before and after school.

Rainwater quickly stepped in. Though some parents suspected he was the real force behind the new guy's reorganization plans, the superintendent whistled a halt to major curriculum changes in any of Madison's high schools. The district, Rainwater said, needed to take "the quality time necessary" to hear from the broader community before changing the high school program.

You better believe it.

The uprising in defense of TAG was something to see. Parents and teachers who would freely identify themselves as progressives weren't afraid to challenge the excesses of progressive educators.

And me? I'm fairly confident that my youngest daughter will get a good education at East. I just hope parents after me reach the same conclusion.