Why Education Reform Won't Help Schoolchildren

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A teacher re-certification system, under which public school teachers take special "development" courses to boost their knowledge and teaching skills, was started a year ago in Illinois. It is part of a plan that began six years ago amid the national push to reform education.
Investigative reporting by the Chicago Tribune has just discovered that teachers are claiming "professional development credits" for gambling at the racetrack, enrolling in Tai Chi classes, and learning to give massages. I'm not making this up; stay tuned.

On a hot Saturday in July, 45 Chicago-area teachers assembled at the Arlington Park race track where they had lunch, placed bets, and cheered for their favorite horses. The afternoon of gambling was part of a two-day, 15-credit hour class called "Probabilities in Gaming."

The teachers learned how to read the racing guide and calculate the payout. Before placing their bets, they discussed betting odds and how to pick a winner, such as considering the age of the horse and the days since his last race.

The final assignment was to create a math problem for their students and discuss it. When the teachers departed, however, the classroom math problem had not come up.

Nevertheless, David Spangler, the professor who taught this course, claimed that a day at the race track gets teachers excited about math. "The goal is to take math out of the classroom. This is math in the real world."

The high school and middle school educators enrolled in the class said it was a beneficial professional development tool. One teacher commented, "I think it's boost to a classroom when you have active stuff kids can do."

Another teacher, however, had misgivings. He admitted that, "when I told my wife I was going to Arlington racetrack, she didn't believe I was going to a professional development class."

Other "development" courses were held earlier this year at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Teachers earned "development" credits for Tai Chi and massage therapy classes.

A masseur calling himself "Magic Fingers" taught 25 teachers the finer points of back rubs, including how to knead kinks out of necks and lower stress levels. In another course on the university campus, Tai Chi expert Al Lawrence led 30 teachers through a Tai Chi workout.

The rules for teacher re-certification specify that teachers must accumulate a prescribed number of credit hours. Other activities that can fulfill the requirement include attending workshops, serving on statewide committees, writing magazine articles, and participating in union activities.

Local committees decide whether the credits claimed by the teachers should count, but the teacher unions dominate those committees and the appeals committees. The State Board of Education is supposed to oversee the program, but the Board does not even know what classes are being taken for credit.

Nationwide, comprehensive school reform is taking a variety of other forms. It is estimated that more than 8,000 schools will spend $1 billion this school year on school reform models.

Reform can mean anything from tossing out almost everything a school does to implementing a "model" recommended by an outside consultant. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch recently listed ten expensive models that are used in St. Louis schools, including one that brings the school up to $1,000 per student in extra federal dollars.

The federal government is spending $260 million a year on the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program, which gives schools three-year grants if they sign up to use a reform program. The law says that grants will be awarded only for programs that have been proven effective, but the law also says it's OK to fund any of the 17 programs designated on the government's approved list, even though they are largely untested and researchers question their value.

The American Institute for Research found that only three of the 17 programs could produce some evidence that they work. University of Arizona professor Stan Pogrow, a national critic of comprehensive reform, says legislators and educators are swayed more by aggressive lobbying than by sound research.

U.S. schools don't need billions of dollars of federal money or high-priced consultants to design comprehensive reform with lots of bells and whistles. They just need to teach first-grade children how to read by the proven phonics method.

At the start of World War II, the U.S. illiteracy rate was 4 percent for whites and 20 percent for blacks. At the end of the 20th century, the National Adult Literacy Survey and the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 17 percent of whites and 40 percent of blacks can't read.

The hope for all these illiterates is not in more federal spending or phony "reform." Their only hope is for someone to teach them how to read, and it doesn't look as though that someone will be the public schools.