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Introduction—TEM, The Education Mess

Abstract: This chapter argues that education is a mess. A mess is a system of problems that are so highly interconnected such that no problem exists or can be studied independently of all the other problems that constitute the mess and the entire mess itself. The chapter also lays out the debate with regard to what to do about TEM, The Education Mess. On the one side are those who favor charter schools. They believe that the public schools have failed and therefore need to be radically redesigned, if not jettisoned altogether. On the other side are those who support public schools and seek to improve them, not abandon them. The chapter argues that both sides need one another more than they realize. Both are needed if we are to have any hope of coping with TEM.

“...People need to think a little more about the problems kids in this school [Manual High School in Indianapolis, Indiana] have and the issues they have to deal with day in and day out [alcoholism, bureaucratic and uncaring administrators and teachers, chronic poverty, constant threat of crime and violence, drugs, divorce, guns, homelessness, low parental and teacher expectations, school and parental apathy, parental abandonment, teenage pregnancy, etc.]. There are a lot of social issues and a lot of home drama. There are a lot of things, a lot of factors that go into a school being unsuccessful. People want to say it’s the kids. Or the parents. Or the teachers. Or the system. [sic] It’s not that easy. There’s no one factor that can turn everything around. Americans want quick fixes and easy solutions. Sorry, there isn’t one when it comes to education. All you can do...is put every ounce of energy you have into helping every student you can.”

Rich Haton [Teacher in Manual High School]

Introduction

A central theme of this book is that education is a mess. While many, if not virtually all, who study education agree in some form or another with the broad proposition that education is a mess, having said this, agreement quickly vanishes. The extreme divergence and abject bitterness between different philosophical positions, values, and worldviews about what to do to “solve’ TEM” quickly take over and dominate the debate. Indeed, different parties don’t see the “same mess” to begin with, let alone whether it’s “solvable or not.”

The conflict is so bitter, deep, and intense that it virtually prevents—paralyzes—everyone from seeing that the solution does not lie in any of the one-sided perspectives and extreme worldviews. Rather, if there is a “solution,” it consists in forming new perspectives and worldviews that integrate and go far beyond the old ones. More than they realize, all positions are highly dependent upon one another.

In fact, we show that none of the previously stated positions can even define the problem adequately, let alone solve it, acting solely by themselves. They need to incorporate seriously the very things to which they are so strongly opposed in order to form richer definitions of “the