

## Music, Educational Equality and the Secretary Search

The story goes that the great jazz pianist, Theolonious Monk, took his son to a concert and afterwards asked him what he thought of the music. His laconic response was. “A lot of notes, Dad, a lot of notes.” I was reminded of this story while listening to a state board of education committee work on the job description for the new Secretary of Education.

To be fair, the board did a good job on an impossible task. They staggered through the vaporous job criteria which dutifully required doing this, doing that and doing the other. Phrases such as “data driven. . . effective leadership’ and , “strong organizational culture” lubricated a silvered impression of thoughtful erudition while conveying no concrete meaning, whatsoever. It wasn’t music.

A board member suggested that maybe the board should give some passing attention to, the state’s largest problem, **inequality**. The Governor had characterized it as “persistent” and thwarts our “strongest community revitalization tool.” Inequalities permeate our educational and social worlds. They happen when some children are shuttled into less-demanding classes, when a child receives a better education because of the mere fortuity of being born in an affluent family or advantaged community. They happen when children’s opportunities are limited by race, religion, or culture. It is often cloaked in insidious newspeak that a deprivation represents opportunity

While not expressed in such blunt terms, the committee’s conversation turned. The notes began to sound like they were in the same key. A threshold had been crossed. The conversation became more excited. Clearer. Certainly we must teach children basic skills, science, and the like but education is far more than isolated atonal blobs of subject matter.

Work still needs to be done. The draft job description says we must have a person with “demonstrated success” as a “transformational leader.” but it makes all the difference as to what that means. A frank scrutiny of the research will not turn up examples of demonstrated and continued success, at scale, for the simple reason that educators know that we don’t prize what’s important.

In this most perilous time for our nation since the Civil War, we see children with automatic weapons, mass murders on our streets, the arrest of the past

president, global warming, floods of biblical proportions , massive fires. And a “closed” government whipsawed by interest politics.

Are our leaders teaching what should be taught for a democratic society?

**How are we doing?** We have fewer students, schools—often the linchpin of communities -- are closing, qualified teachers are frequently unavailable, state oversight is mythical, costs are among the highest in the nation, public schools are often underfunded while private schools contend they should be publicly funded. While standardized tests are not good measures, our declining scores cannot be blamed on covid

### **What we need in the new secretary?**

We have to go back to Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann to understand what they clearly saw as the greatest danger to a new and delicate democracy. At that time education was only available to the wealthy. Echoes of the dangers of classism are seen in our growing wealth gaps. The very existence of the nation depends upon democracy and equality. The lesson is still valid. While not expressed in these terms, the state board committee affirmed this core. A couple of members committed real eloquence on the necessity for educational equity.

For the state board and the new secretary, we need more than a review of administrative rules. When teaching about nuclear physics we must teach why nuclear weapons cannot be used. Artificial intelligence can develop food sources for a world. They can also destroy the world.

### **What attributes should the new secretary bring?–**

When giving a speech, I slipped and said something like “If we want to effectively compete with world powers, we must master the hard sciences. A mother leaped to her feet and passionately exclaimed, “I don’t want my son to be an effective competitor with world powers. I want him to be a good father, a contributing member to his community, a good husband, a compassionate citizen. I want him to be a good man.”

The new secretary and the state board should be the composers and conductor of music. Don’t waste your six years. They go by fast.

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