

# Education Fads Argue for Republican Education Proposals

November 1, 1998

by J. E. Stone  
[Education Consumers Foundation](#)

Republicans have good ideas about education but they need a message that connects with the average voter. My suggestion is that they make an issue of the ineffective and unwanted fads to which schools are subjected. Public education's history of fads and failures document the truth of the larger Republican message, i.e., that government solutions fail because bureaucratic monopolies tend to serve themselves first and the public second.

Republicans are known for cutting government waste, reducing taxes, etc. and they are thankfully skeptical about costly education initiatives. But while fiscal restraint might retard faulty educational initiatives, the Republican message is easily taken to mean that they are anti education. Of course, Democratic spin makes that interpretation all the more likely.

Moreover, it is not obvious how less is better--especially to people who pay little taxes. By contrast, Democrats offer solutions with intuitive appeal--create a program, spend money. More is better. Republicans deride the Clinton administration's never ending stream of proposals as trivial and piecemeal but they appeal because the average voter can understand

The Republican call for vouchers is a good example. It is easily twisted to mean that they are interested only in helping rich Republicans with the cost of private schooling. In addition to conveying a negative impression, it is a proposal that many voters may not understand. To understand the prospective value of vouchers, one has to believe that mediocre schools are a product of indifference to parent "customers" and that market pressures would cure the problem. My guess is that many citizens have not gotten that far in their thinking.

In other words, Republican proposals may be effective but the message is controversial and plausible only to the well informed. Of course, the matter of whether vouchers--especially vouchers with strings attached--would solve problems or merely create different ones is an unanswered question.

The education initiative supported by Republicans and not attacked by Democrats--School-to-Work--is a political liability. It appeals to big business, not parents, teachers, and taxpayers. Support for STW may garner campaign contributions from the Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce but when parents begin to see how it really works, their reaction will be a substantial negative. Parents are not going to want their children subjected to some experimental economic planning/human resource development scheme concocted by big business, big education, and the Clinton administration's Marc Tucker. Republicans ought to take the position that STW is expensive and unproven and that it should be fully implemented only when its effectiveness and public acceptance have been independently documented in one or two of the vanguard states. Otherwise, in a year or two, when it filters down to the schoolhouse level, Democrats will be calling it a turkey and say that it was foisted on the schools by big business and the Republican leadership.

Instead of leaving the impression that their party only wants to cut education budgets, I suggest that Republicans use fads to illustrate how big government and big bureaucracy are at the root of public education's failings. Such an approach would be consistent with existing Republican proposals but would frame them in more visible and less abstract terms.

Very much of what parents find objectionable about the public schools is a product of governmentally instituted innovations/fads. Fads detract from and undermine the educational aims of parents and teachers by making them secondary to the objectives favored by academics and bureaucrats. Fads are visible, familiar, and thought to be of dubious worth by most parents and teachers. They are introduced to schools not because parents and teachers request them. They are introduced because some "educational innovator" wants to see them implemented--over the dead bodies of parents and teachers, if necessary.

A Republican message focused on the fads and failures of recent history would tell quite a tale about what is wrong with the schools and how government imposed solutions serve perverse ends. It would raise questions about the political forces that shape public education and it would support the Republican assessment of the problem, i.e., that government funded monopolies serve themselves first and the public second.

In California, for example, statewide achievement test scores fell as whole language and bilingual education were mandated by the California Department of Education. They are prime examples of curricular initiatives mandated without any solid evidence that they would do what parents and taxpayers want. The California DOE advanced the theories of education professors, not the aims of the parties who pay for and use the public schools.

Public education's recent history is riddled with equally egregious examples. From the "new math" and its successor the "new, new math" to "open education" and the "self-esteem movement," the public schools have convulsed with fads. Most have been ineffective, many have been destructive, and virtually all have been implemented with only nominal regard as to whether they serve the public's educational aims.

Failed educational "innovations" are a smoking gun. They are a monument to the malignant effect of schooling controlled by and for government monopolies.

Unlike so much of that which undermines education, fads are visible. They are common knowledge to parents and teachers. Experienced teachers can name ones that have been introduced and reintroduced repeatedly--under different names, of course. Parents question them, teachers resent them, and the public recognizes them as a prime source of educational mischief.

From "progressive education" to "outcome-based" education, bureaucratically instituted fads have a long and easily cited history of failure. Year after year in school after school they are ballyhooed, implemented, and kept afloat until the money runs out. Yet despite an abysmal record, the colleges of education continue to devise them, the U. S. Department of Education continues to fund them, and the state departments of education continue to push them down everyone's throat. The cycle of fads and failures never ends because it serves the interests of the education community's stakeholders--and that is the charitable conclusion. The alternative conclusion is that fads persist because the government agencies whose mission is to defend the public's interest in quality education are incredibly incompetent. How else could they miss the mark of improved achievement so consistently?

In truth, educational fads are, for the most part, untested pedagogical enthusiasms fueled by bureaucratic largesse. Whether by design or ineptitude, they do not serve the public's interest in improved achievement; and neither their academic creators, nor the agencies that develop and support them deserve public confidence.

A Republican message characterizing educational fads as academic experimentation with other people's children would directly link the visible problem seen by parents and teachers to the much less visible problem of misdirected effort by a self-serving monopoly. Fads offer a compelling illustration of why Republican calls for deregulation, choice, and local control are reasonable approaches to school improvement.

Think of the parent and teacher testimonials that could be aired on this issue.

"Isn't it time we get these bureaucrats off teachers' and parents' backs?"

In addition to connecting with both parents and teachers, such a message would strengthen the Republican assertion that the problems of public education are not going to be solved by throwing money at them. Fads have emerged and reemerged over many years under both Democrats and Republicans. Their persistence is exhibit "A" as to how the solutions provided by government bureaucracy tend to serve their own interests and those of the special interest groups with whom they collaborate, not the public interest. Bureaucracies and their stakeholders are equal opportunity hoodwinkers.

From a strictly political standpoint, a message highlighting fads would be a very tough for Democrats to refute or co-opt. As Checker Finn has noted, Democrats are "joined at the hip" with education's producers thus Republicans aligning with education's consumers would make good political sense. At the national level, at least, the Democratic Party has become the party of government, its clients, and "helping" interest groups.

Democrats would find it hard to deny existence of fads yet joining in an attack would threaten the lifeblood of their core constituents.

Highlighting fads and the harm they have brought about would strengthen the Republican case for choice, deregulation, and accountability. In particular, I would add the phrase consumer-friendly accountability, i.e., accountability that can be understood by the average parent, homebuyer, and taxpayer. Until the data on educational performance is widely disseminated and put in a form that most people can understand, a political consensus supportive of Republican proposals will be difficult to build and maintain.

Parents want to know how their kids are doing in school but the narrative style report cards they receive obscure the message. Even report cards with traditional grades often misrepresent achievement. At the college level, parents, students, and employers want to know which schools are best but data on student learning is never available. Instead they are forced to judge on the basis of public relations and inputs. Homebuyers want to locate near good schools but with the exception of localities using value added performance measures, the available data is often impossible to interpret. All of these examples call for "consumer-friendly" accountability.

Republicans have tried to present their ideas but wound up looking like uncompassionate skinflints. By highlighting educational fads and the harm that have brought about, Republicans strengthen their case for traditional proposals on choice, deregulation, and accountability. By emphasizing "consumer-friendly" accountability, they connect with the concerns and interests of average citizens who want the best for their children.