

A Glimmer of Hope
By: Dr. Sue Skidmore

Sophocles posited, “a man cannot stand twice in the same river,” the same may be said of the American public school system. Since its inception, it has been ever-changing. In colonial America, its purpose was to teach religion and obedience to authority. In the mid-1800’s, the common school movement urged the education of all. In the early 20th Century, progressive education was its mission. However, great change was lurking around the proverbial corner—change which would swing the pendulum from balance to extreme.

The first occurred in 1957, when the Russians launched Sputnik. OMG! The Russians were technologically more advanced than Americans! What’s wrong with our schools? The second occurred in 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* warned America of its failing public school systems. “Dumbed down curriculum,” lack of rigor, and mediocrity emerged as favorite buzz words. The Japanese were producing cars far superior to US built autos. Why? Japanese students took algebra; all American kids weren’t forced to take algebra. Racked by innumerable tornadoes of reform, today’s schools promote a college-ready purpose. National standards drive the curriculum, and copious amounts of test scores determine who wins and who doesn’t.

Frankly, I believe many of these tornadoes have homogenized education. The notion all students must take these classes, for these number of hours, and attain these scores is ludicrous. Particularly, while in direct contrast, vast amounts of dollars are diverted to charter and sometimes private schools, whom by law are trumpeted for “doing their own thing.”

However, a glimmer of hope arose this week in both the Florida and Texas legislatures. (Certainly in the national school reform movement, these two states are major players.) Similar legislation in both states calls for axing the Algebra 2 requirement for all. Both bills would allow options for students enrolled in career and technical education programs that lead to industrial certification programs. Both bills are designed to meet their states’ needs of their workforces.

While these bills are not novel, perhaps, Florida and Texas have come to the conclusion that college educations do not automatically equal successful workforces. Duh! A wisp of sanity has occurred. America still needs hairdressers, air traffic controllers, police and fire personnel, auto mechanics, and entrepreneurs. We need plumbers, carpenters, and computer technicians. We need culinary chefs, artists, and musicians. We need soldiers, pilots, and sanitation workers. We rely on farmers, grocery store employees, and care-givers. We rejoice in being entertained by movies and concerts, by competitive sports, and by docents in a museum. In short, a college education is not necessarily a requirement to earn the ticket to success. Simply, it is **one** avenue.

I’m not Wonder Woman. I cannot fix a flat tire. I cannot fix a leaky faucet. I cannot lay tile. I cannot pave a road, nor can I triage a car accident. My college educations have simply given me the skills to be a formidable contestant on *Jeopardy*, to write a good sentence, and to lead a public school. Yet, I managed to do all of these trivial things without Algebra 2, without the common core standards, and without coloring volumes of test question answers.

Further, as a continuing student of history, I’ve learned it is cyclical. The pendulum will return to balance. Fanaticism will temper. A glimmer of hope is on the horizon.