

Michael MacNaughton: Why Miles' market-driven reforms won't work

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For the past decade, public education policy has been driven by philanthropic organizations such as the Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation and the Broad Foundation. The Broad Foundation, the least wealthy of the three, spent a large percentage of its almost \$400 million investment in training programs through the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems, which operates the Broad Superintendents Academy.

Eli Broad and his foundation believe that public schools should be run like a private business. They recruit business and military leaders into their superintendent training programs. One tenet of Broad's philosophy is to produce system change by "investing in a disruptive force."

Sound familiar? This is the very language that DISD Superintendent Mike Miles (Broad Class of 2011) uses regularly and with impunity.

Broad superintendents are taught that continual reorganizations, firings of staff and experimentation to create chaos or churn are productive and beneficial because they weaken the ability of communities to resist change. As Miles said to critics last week, "Whenever there's some serious change, there's going to be some pushback, so it's expected."

A hallmark of the Broad style of school reform is increasing class size, imposing high-stakes, test-based accountability systems on teachers and students, and implementing pay-for-performance schemes — the blueprint for Miles' "Destination 2020" plan.

But there are serious cracks in the foundation. Across the nation, the market-driven reform movement is beginning to crumble. Former Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall was indicted in a massive cheating scandal. Michelle Rhee, former Washington, D.C., superintendent, is facing accusations that she knew about widespread cheating and did nothing to stop it. Bill Gates, writing recently in *The Washington Post*, backed away from teacher evaluations using student test scores after spending hundreds of millions promoting high-stakes testing.

Last week, the Economic Policy Institute released a report showing test scores increased less and achievement gaps grew more in the reform cities than in other urban districts. Test-based accountability prompted churn that thinned the ranks of experienced teachers, but not necessarily bad teachers. Reported successes for targeted students evaporated upon closer examination while emphasis on widely touted market-oriented reforms drew attention and resources away from initiatives with greater promise. John Tierney, in *The Atlantic*, writes that “educational reforms need teachers’ buy-in, trust and cooperation to succeed; ‘reforms’ that kick teachers in the teeth are never going to succeed.”

To date, not a single major urban district has seen success through these reform methods.

However, travel to Union City, N.J., or take a drive down I-45 to Aldine ISD in north Houston to see what *is* working. In Aldine, which enrolls more students than Washington or Boston, student achievement continues to rise while the achievement gap keeps shrinking.

They quietly get the work done by running excellent pre-kindergartens and relying on a curriculum rich in writing and literature. These districts regularly assess student progress — not to punish teachers but to address student needs. Administrators drop in on classes unannounced, but they’re not searching for bad teachers. Instead, they are offering help to struggling teachers and proposing ways that the classroom can be run more effectively.

When Miles graciously met with our board, we spoke of the gains in graduation rates and financial stability the district had made during the prior four years. We discussed the current weaknesses, including hiring and retention, communications, curriculum and culture. The district was making steady progress — similar to Aldine and Union City — and we offered our help and support.

We agreed that successful districts don’t use fear as a motivation but, instead, build a culture based on trust. Only consistent and targeted instruction in stable schools, not churn and disruption, will achieve the results we all want. Miles, however, continues to follow his own path.

We are nearing the tail end of this most recent education reform movement, and Broad superintendents such as Miles are dinosaurs facing extinction. It is time that the trustees admit that Miles is not the right leader for DISD and let him pursue his lucrative consulting career elsewhere.

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