

Lily Eskelson: NEA Vice-President

I'm feeling very, very old this year, because next year will be my 30<sup>th</sup> year since beginning my teaching career as a Utah teacher at Orchard Elementary School in Granite District. Which means this year my first 4<sup>th</sup> graders will turn 40.

And that's odd. Because I turn 39.

I have another milestone. 20 years ago I was the Utah Teacher of the Year. Which was totally weird because my friend Sue, nominated me as a joke. But I write a really, really good brag book and she's so mad at herself right now.

I changed offices last year when I became the NEA Vice-President and I had to move a bunch of files into my new office, and I found the file of speeches I gave 20 years ago as Teacher of the Year. I could have written them yesterday.

I gave speeches to teachers, but I also to the Rotary Club and to the Business and Professional Women's luncheon and to the PTA. It was the first time I'd ever given a speech to anyone over the age of 12. And I was talking about how much I loved my job and how good I was at it because I was too stupid to know that I was supposed to ask permission for all the weird stuff I was doing. I just tried to make learning really fun. Because all the best teachers I knew did weird, fun, creative stuff. And I wanted to be like them.

And they let me steal their best ideas and the whole staff- the secretaries, and the custodian and the resource teachers and the librarian and the teachers all worked together to make schools a place our kids wanted to be, and the parents were appreciative that we put in the extra time to make it special, and they wrote us little notes.

But in every speech I talked about what might happen in the future if we started down the wrong road- a road I was already seeing on the map. A road that misused standardized tests.

I remember having to explain to parents that the percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test was different from a percentage- that the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile meant that their child did better than average on that test. Then, they'd still look at the report card and see my grade: a B+ and ask how 60% was a B+ and I'd have to do a reteaching thing and explain it again. They kept thinking the test meant something it didn't. And they believed what they saw on a computer print-out more than they believed my more comprehensive explanation.

So in 1989, I was already worried that the tests were worrying people inappropriately. And I begged every audience-20 years ago- to help public schools to always do the right thing and treat students like the blessed individual miracles that they always have been and always will be-with limitless potential and unique ways of learning and succeeding.

And apparently I did a lousy job, because just what I had been afraid would happen is now part of our lives and the lives of our babies.

They tell me the recession is over. They need to tell that to the thousands of teachers and support staff who are holding pink slips. As an Association, we're up to our necks saving the very jobs of our members. And I hope you will forgive me for asking you to remember that while we are fighting for the survival of our jobs, we cannot stop fighting for the survival of our profession.

I am here to ask you not to give up fighting for what it means to teach and what it means to learn. There's too much at stake. The future is at stake.

I am here to ask you to make sure your passport is in order. Because we may all have to escape for a moment to the North: I hope Finland is in our future

Most of what we hear about taking standardized tests is all about making sure schools are doing a good job. We hear that handing us scripted lessons is all about making sure we do a good job. We hear that we must standardize quality. We must move to "McDonald's-like" consistency.

So now I want to move to Finland.

They are at the top of virtually every international academic ranking. At an international conference, I made a bee-line over to the person representing Finland's delegation to learn their secret. And she said: "Please don't ask me if we put a secret ingredient in our reindeer milk."

She said: "There are some things we have you cannot export. 99% of our students all speak the same language. No one from Brazil wants to immigrate to Helsinki. We have very, very few really poor people and very, very few really rich people. We are all pretty middle-class.

"We all have publicly-funded health care so we don't worry about getting sick. Our old-age pension system provides all of us with a minimum income, so our families don't worry about who will take care of the grandparents. No one pays anything for education from pre-school to graduate school, so students focus – not on what they can afford – but how far they want to go." She said: "You cannot export our demographics and you don't seem interested in exporting our social safety net."

But, she said: "We were not always at the top of international test rankings." She told me theirs has been a transformation of their schools – 40 years in the making.

She told me that there is no elite private school system. Virtually all students are in public schools which means everyone cares about public schools. She said: "When we hear you talking about things called vouchers where the

government would pay for families to take their children away from the public schools, it makes no sense to us. We want everyone to care about everyone's children. So everyone makes sure the public schools have what they need. And why would anyone want to take their children away from that?"

(You and I might not want to hear this part, but I want to be completely honest about what she said.) She told me, in her opinion, what weren't the factors that made the difference. She said a factor was not dramatically smaller class sizes – their average is about 30. It was not that they spent dramatically more money – It's about \$5,000 US dollars per student in 2008. Their teachers are not paid dramatically higher – about the average among European Union countries.

She also said it wasn't things like uniforms – She said: "We consider our children very individual." She said: "There are no rewards or punishments for top grades. We don't give prizes to children for doing what they are supposed to do – in fact we have no valedictorians in our high schools. We just expect that they will do what they should and what they can to the best of their ability. So they do."

"Oh." She added, almost as if she had forgotten: "And we stopped wasting time giving standardized testing many years ago."

This, she believes, is when they started making their progress to the top of (ironically) the testing charts. She said: "Our teachers convinced the Ministry of Education that the tests were taking up too much time that should have been spent teaching."

And then she said, as if it would be self-evident to any moderately sober person: "And of course the Minister of Education listens to the teachers."

I want to live in Finland!

But let me tell you the best part... In a national Finnish survey asking teenagers to name their #1 favorite profession, the overwhelming choice was "teacher". ( <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/02/27/7330>)

What you pay someone is important, and Finnish teachers have a strong union and they are paid as professionals, but that's not why teenagers said, "I want to be a teacher."

Listen to the combination for transformation: They got rid of tests that didn't matter. They concentrated on teaching and learning what did matter. And they made teaching a sought-after, highly-skilled profession.

All the staff who work in a public school are seen as holding a public trust. Teachers are respected. You have to be receiving top University grades to even

apply for teacher training. Last year in Finland there were over 6,000 applicants trying to get into the teacher program. Only 800 were selected. And the training is rigorous. They would not conceive of taking shortcuts to comprehensive teacher training. They would not put students at risk with an unprepared teacher, because they expect so much from their teachers.

These highly prepared professionals are given incredible autonomy. There is a national curriculum, but each teacher selects his or her textbooks, designs the instruction, collaborates with colleagues and decides how to assess progress.

There are only statistical samplings of student progress at each school, but these scores only used for program diagnostic purposes. There is no competition among schools to be the top. No ranking, no naming-and-shaming. The sample results are discussed with faculties to assess strengths and weakness in the programs, and the professionals – the teachers and their support staff – decide what changes should be made to constantly improve services to the students. It is simply the expectation that you will be a professional.

When I told her about No Child Left, she was more than appalled. I think she felt pity for us. Not only as educators, but as a nation.

We have an insane testing movement in America today that is based on a failed business model of rewards and punishments for making your number. We are all living with the results of the failure of American schools of business who trained MBAs that you must have a top you can reward and a bottom you can punish. They were taught that fear and greed were powerful motivators. The result is that top people were rewarded for short-term gain by manipulating the numbers – by measuring what could make them look good on paper.

I believe it is that same business model that has brought the world to the brink of economic disaster where executives were hitting their numbers and making their bonuses even as their business were going bankrupt.

Our business model is at complete odds with the education model of the most successful school system in the world. And yet, when the international rankings came out, politicians and pundits and talking heads – who didn't analyze the whole report- were alarmed that our American kids weren't being competitive with Finland's kids so we needed to pile on more standardized tests and more scripted lessons and more blame to public schools and more shouts to privatize them. In short, they demanded that we do more of everything that Finland said hurt students.

I want to escape from this place where it's always the loudest people with the biggest megaphones who don't know what they're talking about. But I love my country. And I love my colleagues. We are the people who know what we're talking about. We know how to do this. Give us freedom to be professionals. To

decide what measurements matter. To design our instruction. To learn from each other. To constantly improve. Give us the freedom to teach.

I began teaching in the generation before No Child Left Untested. Those of us of an age to remember true teaching and true learning must move forward out of this darkness. Adelante. Those among us who decided on a career in a public school because we wanted to make a difference in the world must move forward. Adelante. Forward.

And by the way, I'm not saying that we invent the next script. I don't think there's one silver-bullet template that works like a cog in a factory machine. That's the point. There will be a thousand paths to try, but every one of us must move forward – individually and collectively - and leave what doesn't work and never did and never will behind.

This is heresy in the business world. They want their products to be uniform and consistent. They want to plug it in and have it perform to specifications. And that's exactly how I want my cell phone to work. A child is not a cell phone. There is no one formula – no one path that will work for every student, because our students each have a unique destination.

We'll find the right roads. But [they] will look very different in our United States than ... in Finland. And different in one district than another. One school to another. One classroom. One child. There's an old poem that says: Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar.

Traveler, there is no path. You make the path as you go. Invent it.

Finland has shown us one path. But whatever path we travel, there is, for me, a North Star. A light to move towards: The light of our professionalism. We must take charge of our professionalism. We must demand respect and that we be worthy of that respect. And our professionalism and our worth should be measured by one yardstick: whether or not we are doing what is right for the whole child that has been entrusted to our care – teacher, support staff, administrators, school boards, college faculty – all of us who care for someone else's child.

There is no greater honor. No more profound responsibility than to dedicate your life to someone else's child. Recognize that - even if no one else does. Especially if no one else does. Recognize it, and then make others see through your eyes. We will have to work harder than our Finnish colleagues to do that. They are born into a culture that believes in them and trusts them. But regardless, we will be worthy of the work we have accepted.

... We have our hearts to guide us and we have each other believing in each other. This is a combination that cannot fail.