

## **“School Reform” Legislation Nothing More than Snake Oil and Illusion**

Wikipedia explains that "The expression [snake oil] is applied metaphorically to any product with exaggerated marketing but questionable and/or unverifiable quality or benefit." New legislation under consideration at this year's State Legislature is nothing more than snake oil intended to create the illusion of school reform without any verifiable degree of probability that the target of school reform will actually be achieved.

The true target of school reform is getting the bottom 20-25% of the State's school children to grade level and eliminating achievement gaps. The State "school reform" plan, however, is nothing more than flight from, and financial abandonment of, public schools without any verifiable degree of probability that the bottom 25% of students will do better because of it.

The illusions started with the notion that since some public schools are doing poorly, then all public schools are basically inadequate. The reality is that 8 out of 10 academic indicators, including State test results, attendance rates, and graduation rates, are at or near the highest levels ever.

The next illusion was that school choice (i.e. Charter Schools) and tax vouchers for private schools will result in closing achievement gaps. The reality is that nationally, only 17% of Charter Schools are even as successful as the average public school. Regarding private school vouchers, the reality is that private schools have entrance criteria that are very selective, and for the prices private schools charge, they are not going to allow low achieving students of different religions in their schools. Even Charter Schools that start with low performing students can and will send any uncooperative and special need student back to public school.

The third illusion has been that schools do not need additional funding. In fact, small public schools are told to consolidate to save money. Despite universal acknowledgement that mandatory Kindergarten, full day kindergarten, summer school and pre-school funding are needed (and provided in most other States), low State revenue cannot cover them and cuts are unavoidable. The reality is that the proliferation of hundreds of Charter Schools creates more financial loss to public schools, as well as inefficient spending due to more staffing and profit-taking sponsors. The reality also is that millions of State tax dollars that could go to new education programs would not be collected due to private school vouchers.

The fourth illusion is there are too many ineffective teachers and not enough highly effective teachers. The reality is that the disadvantages some students have are so great that only significantly more time for instruction will make up for being two or more years below grade level. Another reality is to consider from where are the proliferation of Charter Schools going to find their highly qualified teachers.

The fifth illusion is merit pay. Supposedly teachers and administrators will work harder if they get individual financial rewards for better student performance. The reality is that a major study in Nashville, Tennessee where \$10,000 financial incentives were promised and awarded, resulted in no difference in student achievement between teachers getting financial incentives and those not getting financial incentives.

Snake oil salesmen, like the Wizard of Oz in the Emerald City, don't want anyone looking behind the curtain to see their illusion. They also want to be out of town before the public realizes the illusion. New Charter schools will have 5-7 years to prove they aren't any better, if not worse, than public schools. Plenty of time to get out of town. The public needs to look behind the curtain of illusion in this State regarding "school reform" before it's too late.