

Educationally Speaking
December 2009

The Tyranny of Dead Ideas. This is the clever title of a new book by Matt Miller that recommends “letting go of the old ways of thinking to unleash a new prosperity.” Like many other authors, Mr. Miller believes that changes are needed to public education if the desired level of student success is to be attained. As parents and educators, it is our responsibility to evaluate the effectiveness of our schools and to determine if there are new ways of thinking that will result in greater productivity.

The primary premise in this book is that schools should no longer be a local matter and that only “a dose of ‘nationalization’ can save local schools.” There is substantial evidence that schools are no longer a local matter. For us in California, the first substantial transition occurred with the implementation of Proposition 13. This shifted the funding of public schools from the local community to the state. With the shift in funding came a substantial shift in decision making. Until recently, a significant amount of state monies were dedicated for specific purposes, with little local discretion. The curriculum is defined by state standards and the state accountability systems helps to ensure that local districts teach and students learn the state standards.

No Child Left Behind is an example of a “nationalized” effort to influence public education. This federal program has increased federal funding of schools, expanded achievement expectations for all students, and increased state and local accountability. One of its weaknesses, which Mr. Miller identifies, is that we have 50 states meeting federal requirements in 50 different ways. Added to that, using California as an example, in our one state we have over 1000 school districts implementing their own local decision-making in order to meet our state’s standards. The author proposes a national curriculum, with a common national assessment and performance expectations, for all students. While this may sound like a novel idea, the National Board of Governors has already endorsed a national core set of curricular standards, but falls short in recommending a national assessment.

Will there be a stronger shift to a nationalized educational system? Time will tell. Will this mean the elimination of local school districts? Probably not. However, we may see a change in the roles and responsibilities of staff and school boards. Time will tell.

Dale J. Mitchell
Superintendent