

Lost in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

TODAY'S CORPORATE EDUCATION WOULD BREAK FRED ROGER'S HEART

For weeks, Broadway Metro packed the house with viewers of *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, the heartwarming film about Fred Rogers, aka Mr. Rogers. The movie's resonance is perhaps rooted in nostalgia, or perhaps it's a fervent desire to celebrate kindness in the mean-spirited Trump era. At any rate, there's nary a dry eye in the house when the credits roll.

The movie details Rogers' philosophical grounding in child development and appropriate early childhood education. What Mr. Rogers understood was this: The thoughts and feelings of children are real. They matter. They deserve to be acknowledged and to be taken seriously. Adults need to listen to children and respond respectfully.

For those of us who have questioned what has happened to public education in the data and metrics-driven "corporate reform" era, the film also is a painful reminder of how tragically far we have ventured from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood — so far away that we are now lost.

As the school year begins, Oregon's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is kicking into gear. This was mandated by 2012's HB 4165 and is now in its fifth year. In the first weeks of kindergarten, young children, new to the big school experience, will be taken out of their classrooms and tested in literacy, math and for "social-emotional approaches to learning." This data will be stored in the Oregon Department of Education's Consolidated Collections: Big data about little people. The testing-sorting-tracking of these children will be underway.

Additionally, local school districts will administer a series of standardized assessments throughout the school year. District 4J will use the easyCBM tests to monitor whether the children are on track to reach their third grade literacy goals. The "Bluebird," "Robins" and "Sparrows" reading groups of the past are now on steroids.

Kindergarten testing is just the warm-up for what's to come. At some local low-income (Title I) schools, the first graders are tested three times a year in both reading and math with district-mandated tests. The "low" readers are taken from the class for remediation every day, the "somewhat low" readers are tested ("progress monitored") every two weeks and ranked accordingly. Their teacher must attend a

monthly data team meeting — during the school day — to go over the latest testing data with the administrator, counselor, Title I Coordinator, subject area leader and testing coordinator.

Where is Mr. Rogers' neighborhood in all of this incessant data collection? Where is the time for learning for the pure joy of learning? What are the students, especially the "low readers" experiencing? For that matter, what are their teachers experiencing?

Learning to read is of tremendous importance, no doubt. But, remember, children are people. They learn at different rates, just like big people do. Children should not be labeled through "scientific" testing because they learn to read at their own pace.

Teaching children the subsets of reading skills is the hard work of reading education. It's a complex, highly professional skill. But teaching children to love to read is of paramount importance. Yes, teach reading. But teach the love, the joy and the magic of reading above all else.

Most of our schools no longer have librarians, but they all have testing coordinators. That would break Mr. Rogers' heart.

Aside from the corporations who make fortunes in the testing industry, most early education data-based "experts" are certainly sincere. They want children to be able to read by third grade so that they will be successful in school and in life. But many of them have lost their way. They have lost sight of Mr. Rogers' wise insights: That the thoughts and feelings of children are real. They matter. They deserve to be acknowledged and to be taken seriously.

The children in our neighborhood deserve to have their first year of public school filled with joyful learning. They and their teachers must be defended from the current over-testing insanity.

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