PONDERINGS OF THE PRESIDENT
By Laurie Ordin

Last month my Ponderings was a rant, (perhaps I should rename this column “Rantings”) about how economic inequality leads to educational inequality in American schools. Spring Break provided me with a few extra hours to begin a book I have been meaning to read for a long time, Finnish Lessons by Pasi Sahlberg. This book was on my “to read” list from the moment I heard about it, but I finally bought it after I had the opportunity to hear Mr. Sahlberg when he was invited to speak at the Marin County Office of Education last year. The room was packed, but I didn’t see anyone else there from CoM. Most of the people there were from K-12, so I thought you might be interested in some of the high points about the Finnish school system that I have learned so far.

Although this has not always been the case, the Finnish schools have consistently out-performed schools in all countries over the past decade. Interestingly, being the best is not Finland’s goal. Sahlberg joked with us during his talk that all they really care about is being better than Sweden. But, actually, that is not true. Sahlberg stressed that the underlying key to Finland’s success is their cultural commitment to equality and cooperation.

Here are a few other highlights from Finnish educational policies that I have learned:

- Almost no high stakes testing takes place.
- There is universal preschool, but formal education does not begin for children until age 7.
- There are no private schools.
- ALL children get a free, nourishing meal at school.
- ALL children have quality healthcare.
- ALL teachers have at least Master’s degrees.
- Teaching is at the top of the list when Finns describe their most respected professions.
Teachers are well trained researchers and spend a good deal of their professional time in continued research and collaboration.

- Finnish teachers have a great deal of influence and autonomy regarding curriculum and every other aspect of education.
- Only about 1 out of 10 students who apply to become teachers are accepted into the program. It is more competitive to get into Education School than Law School or Med School!
- Union participation is extremely strong in Finland. Although union participation is voluntary, 95% of Finnish teachers are union members.
- Finnish students spend less time in class and less time on homework than students in other developed countries.

I could go on, but I think you get the picture. Does this sound anything like the American system? From my perspective, hardly at all. Most interestingly, many of the hallmarks of Finnish education run counter to the recommendations made by most of the so-called reformers of the American educational system. Let’s just look at one of these points.

How many of us think that high stakes testing is contributing to the meaningfulness of the educations our children are receiving? At the college level, how many of us have noticed an improvement in our students’ learning since we have been mandated to constantly develop and track SLOs? Would it surprise you to know that much of the high stakes testing being blanketed over American schools is produced and distributed by McGraw-Hill and other huge publishing companies? Would it surprise you to know that the McGraw-Hills summer with the Bushes in Kennebunkport?

How many of us fear that education is turning into just another opportunity for big business to make huge profits?

It has been estimated that standardized testing in American schools costs about $1.7 billion annually. This is less that 1% of the total education budget in the U.S., but still a significant chunk of change in the pockets of the publishing companies. How could $1.7 billion help poor children in this country? How much better would education in this country be if we were able to step away from the mind numbing, soulless lessons that our students constantly endure prepping for these tests? Don’t get me started about how these tests are used to evaluate, reprimand and fire teachers. How about the ways they are used to fund schools? The better performing schools are rewarded. Shouldn’t more funding go to try to help the students in the poorly performing (and poor, of course) schools instead? What about the endless cheating scandals we are now hearing about that seem ubiquitous around the country as desperate teachers and principals hide away to erase and replace the answers the children have entered, in an effort to win “The Race to the Top.”

And one more thing that really gets to me. How much is done to help individual students based on their individual scores on these exams? Or, better yet, how about looking at the exam of an individual student and saying to the student, “Hmmm ... looks like you are having trouble with this or that. Let us help you with that.” Is this ever done? Who has time for such indulgence when you are constantly coaching children to take tests well?

Gee, I didn’t even get to rant on about how Finnish schools succeed in spite of the fact that they are highly unionized. Maybe in my next rantings...oops...I mean Ponderings. In the meantime, stay in informed, stay in touch, stay involved. ☐
EDITORIAL
(The Crying Game)

For years, especially at the start of contract negotiations, the District usually releases data to support their claim that there is no money for faculty wage increases. And it typically comes with the added advisory that there need to be benefit “adjustments” and that without these we might be subject to lay-offs. It’s the old game of “poor-mouthing” and it seems to be de rigueur at the start of every contract negotiation.

But then when we get into the bargaining process and are able to examine the details of the District’s claims, and begin to see how and where they spend their money, and look at their priorities and at their revenue stream; their assertions of penury become far less convincing.

And if we point out that property tax revenue is projected to increase, providing additional revenue to the District, we usually get the response that “it’s too early to tell,” or that “even if there is additional revenue it needs to be used to replace moneys taken from the reserves, or used for other purposes” etc. etc.

IT’S CLEAR THAT FACULTY COMPENSATION IS ALWAYS THE DISTRICT’S LOWEST PRIORITY.

Fortunately, UPM has an experienced bargaining team and we’ve heard all the District’s laments before at previous negotiation sessions and we know that if we remain resolute and aren’t beguiled by District tears, we can arrive at a fair and equitable agreement that recognizes the financial needs of our membership and preserves the fiscal viability of our college.

THE WAY TO HONOR WORK, WHICH ALL MANAGEMENT CLAIMS TO DO, IS FIRST OF ALL TO PAY FOR IT.

-- Barbara Ehrenreich

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DEUS EX MACHINA

There was a convention in ancient Greek theater that when a dramatist had difficulty in resolving a seemingly unsolvable plot, he would lower an actor playing a God onto the stage by a mechanical crane, and the actor/God would magically intercede and bring a happy ending to the play.

And so the expression “deus ex machina” (God from a Machine) came into use to describe a plot device in a play that authors used to extricate themselves from complicated situations.

There are numerous examples of the deus ex machina in literature, both ancient and modern. Homer used it in “The Iliad” and Shakespeare used it numerous times. Nabokov used it in “Lolita” and William Golding used it in “Lord of the Flies;” all extricating themselves from plot complications that were seemingly insoluble.

One modern example of the deus ex machina would be in Brecht’s “Three-Penny Opera,” where Macbeth is saved from the gallows at the last minute by an emissary of the Queen arriving on horseback granting him a reprieve.

The problem with the deus ex machina solution is that it shows a lack of creativity on the part of the author – an easy way out of a difficult plot situation that they themselves have created.

As far back as 300 BCE Aristotle argued that the resolution of a plot must arise internally, following from the previous action of the play and not from some contrivance.

But the deus ex machina as a solution for difficult problems is not only evident in literary works. We also see it in government and in industry and in the military, where quick and easy solutions are being used to try to solve complicated problems.

And we also see it used at College of Marin.

For years now, our Administration and our Board of Trustees have used deus ex machina “contrivances” to try to rescue our college from the downhill slide that our Administrators themselves have created.

Jim Middleton bet the farm on the quick fix of a “Digital Village” and then on “Scenario Planning,” all the while ignoring the need to work on accreditation standards.

But the most striking example of the use of a God from a Machine device at CoM is the attempt by Fran White and our Board of Trustees’ to extricate us from our deep decline and turmoil by initiating the expenditure of a quarter billion dollars for Measure “C” modernization.

Do any of us really believe that the mechanical Gods that Dr. White and our Board lowered onto our campus by the name of Swinerton et al, have resulted in CoM becoming a superior educational institution?

Obviously we can’t reverse the blunders of a past administration, and fortunately Dr. White is no longer with us. But we still have Trustees on our Board who are also responsible for the waste and senselessness inflicted on our campus by Measure “C.” Some of us think these trustees need to be held accountable. This upcoming Board election we have the opportunity to do just that. We have the opportunity to turn them out of office. □
"FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER"
A SAMPLING OF MYTH AND MISCELLANY FOR THE UNION FAITHFUL

COMPELLING IMPORTANCE

Several years ago one of our unit members needed to take a day off to attend to some important family matters. The member was not sick so he couldn’t legally invoke the sick leave provision of Article 5 of our contract. And his absence would not qualify under the Personal Necessity Leave provisions of Article 5, which requires advance notification and District permission, except for personal mishaps or the death of a family member.

So what was he to do? He could, of course, take the day off and report that he was ill, but he did not wish to do that because it was not true.

So he took an unapproved day off, and as a result was penalized with a letter of censure in his personnel file. And his salary was prorated for an “unauthorized” absence (Article 24.12). He suffered these penalties because he was unwilling to misrepresent the reason for his absence, and despite the fact that he had over 100 days of accrued sick leave.

As a result of the unfairness of situations like this, our UPM bargaining team negotiated Article 5.2.16; Use of Sick Leave for Matters of Compelling Importance. “...a unit member shall, at his or her election and without prior approval, be granted up to a maximum of six (6) days leave of absence in any contract year in cases of compelling importance. Said leaves shall be deducted from the unit member’s accrued sick leave.”

So, if you need to take time off which does not qualify as Sick Leave or as Personal Necessity Leave, make sure that you reference Article 5.2.16 when you report your absence upon your return to work. Otherwise the District might censure you and prorate your wages for failure to meet contractually required classes. □

LABOR HISTORY WEEK

In 2002, the California Education Code designated the first week of April as Labor History Week (Ed Code Section 51009). The purpose was to encourage schools "...to make pupils aware of the role the labor movement has played in shaping California and the United States."

Labor History Week offers an opportunity to give students the knowledge of where employee rights came from and the obstacles that labor has faced in trying to establish equitable working conditions -- rights and conditions that were routinely resisted by management, often violently, often through political influence or manipulation.

On, April 5, 1954, the longest strike in U.S. history began, as workers at the Kohler Plumbing Company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin went on strike when the company failed to negotiate in good faith with their union. The NLRB ruled in the workers’ favor, but it wasn’t until 1964, ten years later that Kohler agreed to pay the $4.5 million in back wages and pension contributions that they owed.

Did political influence or manipulation by outside forces play a role in the long delay in resolving this strike and awarding the strikers their court ordered settlement? Some observers question whether the fact that Mr. Kohler’s nephew was the Governor of Wisconsin had anything to do with it.

But whether yea or nay, isn’t this a perfect illustration of the comment made by William Gladstone, British politician (1809 - 1898)...

“JUSTICE DELAYED, IS JUSTICE DENIED.”
UPM MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

I hereby apply for membership in the United Professors of Marin, AFT Local 1610

Name: ___________________________   SS#: ___________________________
Address: ________________________   City: ________________   Zip: __________
Date: ____________________________   Email: __________________________
Home Phone: ______________________   Campus Ext: ______

Check the appropriate category:
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___ I am a temporary credit or non-credit employee on the semester system
___ I am a Community Education instructor

Return to the UPM mailbox or to the UPM Office, TB-124.
And please make sure you have completed the UPM payroll deduction option, in Human Resources.