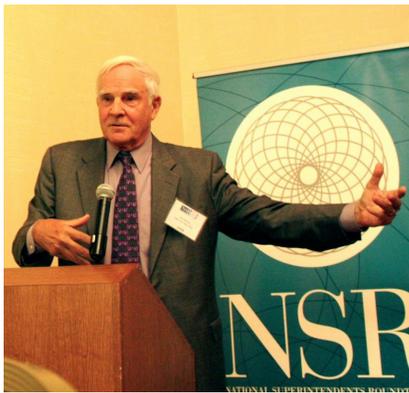


Roundtable Special Report - February 25, 2016

Greetings!,

The Roundtable was fortunate to have the opportunity late last year to



John Merrow

hear from long-time, award-winning PBS broadcaster John Merrow as he reflected on 41 years covering public schools. The Q & A from that session below was published in [Valerie Strauss's "Answer Sheet"](#) in the *Washington Post* on February 15.

As noted below, during his session with the Roundtable, Merrow reflected on struggles with Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC and with Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO of

Success Academies, a chain of charters in New York City. Suspension rates in Success Academies grade schools were three times the rates in New York City's K-12 schools, he noted in his [final PBS report](#), while five-year-olds could be tossed out of school. Moskowitz minimized these issues, although Merrow reported that critics worried the suspensions were part of an effort to drive low-achieving students out of school to maintain high test scores. He predicted a scandal lay in the offing involving charter schools generally.



On cue, two scandals involving Success Academies erupted. In late

October, Kate Taylor reported in the [New York Times](#) that one of Moskowitz's schools in Fort Green, Brooklyn maintained a "got to go list" of 16 students, nine of whom subsequently were gone. Next, on February 12, Taylor produced a [follow-up story](#), replete with video footage (above), about a teacher bullying and humiliating a first-grade student while classmates looked on rigid with fear. Moskowitz dismissed the incident as little more than a bad hair day.

But enough of Mr. Merrow's prescience. Here's what he had to say about what he learned in 40-odd years covering American schools.

Award-Winning Journalist John Merrow Reflects on American Schools

By
James Harvey

By the time he retired last October, John Merrow had had a 41-year bird's eye view of American schools as a journalist with NPR and PBS NewsHour. Armed with a doctorate in education from Harvard, he'd served as a critical school friend throughout his career, pointing out the flaws in the thinking of defenders and critics of public education alike.

In just a single example of his doggedness in pursuing a story, Merrow once spent six years following superintendent David Hornbeck around Philadelphia for the raw material on a documentary about life as an urban school superintendent, titled, appropriately enough, ["The Toughest Job in America."](#) Merrow, who founded the production company, Learning Matters and won numerous awards in journalism including Emmy nominations, prestigious Peabody Awards, and the Harold W. McGraw Prize in Education, was once hailed by Jim Lehrer, former host of PBS NewsHour, as "quite simply, the leading education journalist in America."

He was in a reflective mood when he met with the National Superintendents Roundtable late last year, engagingly putting on a PBS hat to play the role of his successor interviewing him about what he'd learned over four decades -- and then removing the hat to respond.

Q. What's your big takeaway after 41 years?

A. Parents used to send kids to school because that's where the knowledge was. They were also interested in socialization and custodial care. That's all changed. And it's not clear schools have responded as briskly as they should have. Today knowledge is everywhere with the internet. We have apps for socialization. And custodial care is a shaky justification for schools. Educators need to find their way in this new world.

Q. You have interviewed every US Secretary of Education, from Shirley Hufstedler, President Carter's appointee, to Arne Duncan, President Obama's. Who was the most effective?

A. Richard Riley, President Clinton's appointee, by a landslide.

Q. The least effective?

A. Lauro Cavazos. He was in over his head. He served from the tail end of the Reagan administration through the first two years of the first President Bush's term, a period when education was being run out of the White House.

Q. The meanest?

A. I'll take the Fifth on that, but William Bennett was capable of saying very harsh things.

Q. What are the biggest changes you've seen since 1974, when you first got into this line of work?

A. P.L. 94-142 brought children with disabilities fully into our schools.

Q. If you had a favorite bumper sticker about schools, what would it be?

A. We need a system that asks each child, "How are you intelligent?" not "How intelligent are you?"

Q. What lesson do you draw from No Child Left Behind, the rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act pushed through by the second President Bush?

A. I thought the lesson was clear: Washington can't run public education, but Democrats concluded, 'Republicans can't, but WE can.'

Q. What lies ahead?

A. I think we'll see Common Core will remain embedded in the states, even if under different names in different states. The opt-out movement is significant. It's not going to go away unless national and state leaders change their approach. Tying teacher evaluations to testing was a mistake, probably Arne Duncan's biggest mistake.

Q. What's your biggest regret?

A. I regret my inability to pry loose the document that demonstrated that Michelle Rhee failed to investigate cheating in Washington, D.C. in time to include it in my Frontline film. We got the secret memo about two weeks AFTER the broadcast. (See: <http://takingnote.learningmatters.tv/?p=6232>)

Q. And your biggest fear?

A. I worry that schools will remain isolated from the larger society and be expected to solve problems for which they are not equipped. We need to stop blathering about the "achievement gap" while isolating children by race and economics. Community schools and the like are essential.

Concluding Thoughts

Thinking out loud during question time with participating superintendents: Merrow thought that education journalism had improved but acknowledged room for improvement. . . He argued, we can't fix our education problems with cheap tests that cost 15 cents per 100. "Hartz," he said, "spends 10 times as much to test flea powder. . ." Part of Secretary Duncan's legacy will be to see Congress clip the wings of his successors.

This award-winning journalist concluded his impressive reflections by noting that his final broadcast for PBS Newshour in October had set off a *contretemps* with Eva Moskowitz, founder and CEO of Success Academy charters in New York City, a network of 34 charter schools. In the broadcast, Merrow pointed out that the chain's Code of Conduct for students prohibited 65 infractions ranging from bullying and gambling to littering and failing to be in a "Ready to Succeed" posture. Suspension rates at Success Academies, he reported are three times higher than the city's K-12 public schools, even though 70% of Success Academies are elementary schools. Wondering what a five-year-old would have to do be tossed out of school, he challenged the practice of high suspension rates in Success Academies, reporting that critics of the chain think the practice is related to an effort to persuade some parents to pull children unlikely to test well out of Success Academies.

As he looked to the not-too-distant future, Merrow anticipated that a major scandal would erupt around charter schools.