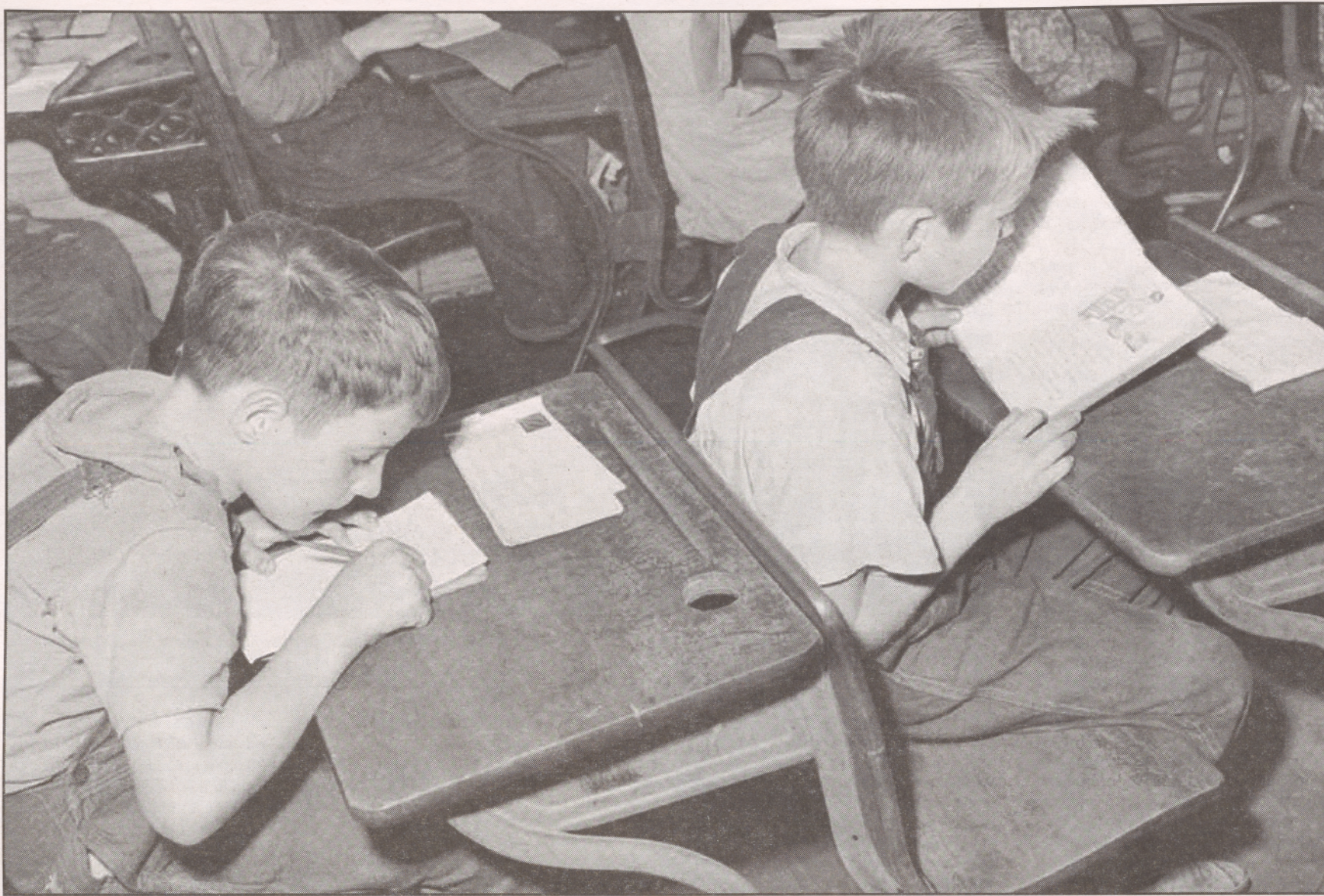




U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Our corporate classrooms

Bill Bigelow on the dangers of standardized curriculums and how to take a fresh look at teaching students

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Bill Bigelow is an educator and activist who taught social studies in the Portland Public Schools for more than 30 years. Though he has left the classroom as a full-time teacher, he is actively involved in the U.S. educational system through his work with both Rethinking Schools, a quarterly magazine that focuses on critical issues in education from a social justice standpoint, and the Zinn Education Project, a project that provides teachers with resources to teach outside the textbook and to present a more honest, critical and full portrait of the world.

I first became familiar with Bigelow's work in a classroom on the Quileute Reservation on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. I was teaching Family Literacy to a group of Native American and Latina women. Looking for something to supplement the materials I was using, I found a curriculum called "Discovering Columbus," written by Bill Bigelow.

It wouldn't be until I moved to Portland in 2011 that I would meet Bigelow in person purely by coincidence. He is a gentle and curious man with a passion for education, justice and fairness. I sat with Bigelow to ask him about the plight of, and hope for, our educational system.

Sue Zalokar: You had a somewhat unique teaching experience in that you co-taught with Linda Christensen, now your partner, who is also very active in the education community.

Bill Bigelow: Linda and I began teaching together in 1986 at Jefferson High School. And then we taught for five years together in the same classroom, although we were at Jefferson together for many years. It was transformative for me. It was absolutely my best teaching experience — being in the

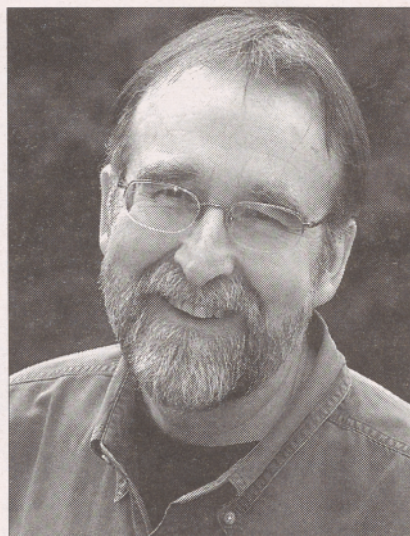


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Bill Bigelow

same classroom (with another teacher) where you could debrief every day and kind of celebrate your triumphs and pick up the pieces when things didn't go as you planned. It was wonderful.

S.Z.: I'm curious — in a flawed system, how do teachers offer students the best educational experience possible from within it?

B.B.: It's important for teachers to have opportunities to share with each other the knowledge about teaching and what works — what engages students and what excites students. There needs to be a conversation among teachers about that.

The problem with so much of the school reform right now is the idea that it will come from on high. It will be the standards. It will be the prescribed, corporate-designed textbooks. It's the idea that that's where wisdom lies.

A different model is one of educational leadership and helping teachers collaborate and share with each other and offer workshops for each other.

S.Z.: We had the Portland Public Schools (PPS) teacher strike in February ...

B.B.: The almost strike.

S.Z.: Yes. And then the almost strike at PSU at the beginning of April. Both strikes were averted, but it speaks to the unrest within the teaching community.

B.B.: I'm no longer a classroom teacher and I'm not a part of the bargaining unit, but I think that teachers have been kicked around a lot and vilified. Teachers have been portrayed as the problem and the obstacle to student learning — it's just ridiculous. It is a hateful time in many respects for teachers.

And in fact, teachers are not the problem; teachers are the solution. Teachers are the ones who — if schools are going to be imaginative and creative and loving and participatory places, we're the ones who are going to do that. The authorities are not going to do that.

Part of the discussion and movement toward a strike, I think, had a lot to do with the national context that we're all a part of too.

S.Z.: Just to clarify, when you say the national context, do you mean the educational community?

B.B.: The push for standardized tests.

S.Z.: Let's talk about textbook curriculums. We use them, and yet we know that they aren't fully informing our students. How is it that we have this textbook conundrum?

B.B.: Part of the problem is that these textbooks are trying to sell to the state of Texas. And so, the state of Texas drives the curriculum in many respects.

S.Z.: Texas?

B.B.: For example, the global studies textbook, "Modern World History" that is adopted in the Portland Public Schools. Of the 34 teacher-advisors for this textbook, 17 of them are from Texas and so the textbook leans right. Textbooks have always sort of leaned right, so that's not new.

Newer perhaps is that there is more of a push to force teachers to teach from the textbook. And this is at the same time that there is increasing concentration in the textbook industry.

In fact, let me just share. (Bigelow pulls out "Modern World History," a textbook he has brought with him. It is bookmarked with slips of paper sticking out from every edge). So you end up with stuff like this. Let me just back up and say, this "Modern World History" textbook is the only textbook for the only required course that students take about the world in high school.

S.Z.: In Portland?

B.B.: In Portland, yes. But it is adopted in many places throughout Oregon, so it's not just Portland.

It has two pages on the war in Iraq. There is not a single mention of demonstrations against the war. There is not a single quote from any Iraqi about the nature of the war. There is nothing about the U.S. economic war against Iraq — the whole free trade, neo-liberal agenda pushed on Iraq. And the final, quote, "critical writing activity" offered to kids is (Bigelow reads from the textbook):