The Failure of American Public Education

Government is wholly unsuited to teach America's students.

John Hood Monday, February 01, 1993

Many American critics believe that the major problem with public education today is a lack of focus on results. Students aren't expected to meet high standards, the argument goes, and the *process* of education takes precedence over analyzing education *results* in policy-making circles.

This is a valid argument (as far as it goes). Indeed, it can be taken one important step further.

We not only fail to hold individual students accountable for poor performance, we have also failed to hold the entire government-controlled school system accountable for its performance since at least World War II. Public education is itself a failure. Why shouldn't individual students follow its example?

The history of reform efforts in American public education is replete with half-hearted measures, with almost comical misdiagnoses of education problems, with blame-shifting, and with humbug. Everyone is an expert (most have, of course, suffered through the very system they want to reform). At any one time during the course of school reform, an illusion of debate often obscures a surprising consensus on the heralded "magic bullet" of the decade —be it school centralization or progressive education or preschool education or computerizing the classroom—that will solve America's education problems. These magic bullets always misfire. But instead of changing their weapon, policy-makers simply put another round in the chamber, foolishly believing that the newest fad will succeed despite the failures of its predecessors.

Some critics believe that public education reforms fail because they are compromised or sabotaged by the education lobbies—teacher associations, administrators, and the legislator in their pockets. There is certainly some truth to that explanation, as we shall see. But in many cases, attributing the failure of reform to subversion merely exonerates that reform. Most reform ideas are either irrelevant or destructive of education. They would fail whether organized political interests opposed them or not.

Many conservatives believe that American public education is in poor shape today because of cultural and social trends, most beginning in the 1960s, which destroyed classroom discipline, the moral basis for education, and a national consensus on what students should learn. Again, there is some truth in this proposition, but ultimately it fails to explain why American students do not possess the communication and computational skills they need today to succeed in college or in the working world.

Furthermore, many free-market thinkers believe that applying market competition to the public schools will solve many of America's educational problems. I'm sympathetic to this argument, but it ignores the role of government policies other than student assignment to schools, which inhibit school success. When government policy continues to impose rigid personnel rules, bureaucracy, regulations, and a mandate to use education to engineer social or political outcomes, a school cannot successfully impart the needed skills, knowledge, and perspective to its students—whether these students choose to be there or not.

Lastly, the rhetoric of school reform often ignores the crucial role of individual decisions (by students, by parents, by business owners, by educators) in determining educational outcomes. You can lead a horse to water, the old adage goes, but you can't make him drink. It's a folksy way of imparting an important individualist truth. Providing students opportunities at school does not guarantee success if students watch television rather than do their homework—and parents let them. By assuming that any set of reform ideas can magically create a well-educated citizenry, we oversell the role of policy-making. Education requires initiative, a trait notoriously difficult to create or impose.

A Century of Reform

Public education and public-education reform share a common history. There is no past paradise when all students excelled. There is no perfect prototype for public education hidden in history, to be uncovered today and bestowed on a thankful nation. Rather, American public education is best thought of, historically, as mediocre. It was a serviceable system for preparing students for an agrarian or assembly-line world in which only an elite pursued higher education.

Public education in America really began in earnest after the Civil War, when government-funded and -controlled schools supplanted the earlier system of private education. According to the U.S. Department of Education, some 57 percent of the 12 million school-aged Americans in 1870 were enrolled in public elementary or secondary schools, though only about 60 percent of those enrolled attended school on any given day and the average school year was 132 days. By the turn of the century, the percentage of school-aged children attending public schools had risen to 72 percent, with almost 70 percent of enrollees attending on any one of the 150 days in the school year. Most public education still occurred in the early grades—only two percent of the student population were in ninth grade or higher.

By 1989 almost 90 percent of school-aged children attended public schools. Almost all attended class daily (with some important local or regional exceptions) and the average school year had grown to 180 days—still too short, say many modern critics, but a 40 percent increase since Reconstruction. Most students stay in school at least throughout the high-school grades, while a record number are pursuing higher education.

American policy-makers and educators began to create in earnest our centralized, monopolistic public education system at the turn of the century. For example, over a relatively brief period from 1890 to 1910, public schools increased their share of the high-school population from two-thirds to about 90 percent—a proportion of public to private schools which has persisted until the present day. There were a number of factors motivating this change. During the last few decades of the nineteenth century, public education had grown steadily as a primarily locally controlled phenomenon, often emulating or taking over ownership from private schools. Education was still basically focused on learning skills, such as reading or arithmetic, and schools often reflected their communities in very obvious ways.

But by the start of the twentieth century, a number of different groups began to believe that a comprehensive, centrally controlled (at least on the city or state level), and bureaucratic public education system was crucial to America's future. The Progressive movement, for example, sought to replace haphazard government decision-making (such as that provided political machines or community schools) with a more standardized, "predictable" approach. At the time, they viewed such change as necessary to eliminate corruption and graft. Similarly, the child welfare movement began to press for changes in family life—for replacing child labor and family neglect with public education.

Simultaneously, American business leaders began to see a decentralized, "patchwork" education system as a liability in international competition. U.S. manufacturers, especially, saw the rise of Germany as a significant economic threat and sought to imitate that country's new system of state-run trade schools. In 1905, the National Association of Manufacturers editorialized that "the nation that wins success in competition with other nations must train its youths in the arts of production and distribution." German education, it concluded, was "at once the admiration and fear of all countries." American business, together with the growing labor movement, pressed Congress to dramatically expand federal spending on education, especially for vocational instruction. Also, business and education leaders began to apply new principles of industrial organization to education, such as top-down organization and a "factory-floor" model in which administrators, teachers, and students all had a place in producing a standardized “final product.” These leaders created professional bureaucracies to devise and implement policy.

Finally, perhaps the most important boosters of America’s new public education system were what we might today call “cultural conservatives.” The turn of the century, after all, was a time of tremendous immigration. As more and more immigrants arrived in America, bringing with them a plethora of languages, cultural traditions, and religious beliefs, American political leaders foresaw the potential dangers of Balkanization. The public education system, once designed primarily to impart skills and knowledge, took on a far more political and social role. It was to provide a common culture and a means of inculcating new Americans with democratic values. Public schools, in other words, were to be a high-pressure “melting pot” to help America avoid the dismal fate of other multi-national politics. American political leaders were all too familiar with the Balkan Wars of the early 1900s, and were intent on avoiding a similar fate.

The Expanding Role of Public Education

By now, you should be experiencing a heavy dose of déjà vu. These themes and concerns have continued to dominate American public education until the present day. “Do-gooders” throughout the twentieth century have sought to expand the role of public education in all aspects of what was once family life, such as instilling moral values, providing health and nutrition, fighting delinquency and crime, and protecting children from physical and psychological abuse. Today, they are the primary advocates of Head Start and other supplements to school that intervene in virtually every aspect of a student’s life.

Business groups, especially national organizations and corporate magnates, have frequently played a high-profile role in educational affairs during this century, constantly warning of the economic threats posed by international competitors (as in the Sputnik scare of the 1950s or the “competitiveness” debate today) and supporting a professional, centralized approach to public education (in stark contrast to what the same business leaders believed was appropriate in economic policy).

Finally, a host of groups across the political spectrum have looked to public schools as a key means of accomplishing what they consider to be important political or social objectives, such as racial integration, social tolerance, democratic participation, or environmental awareness.

The history of public education reform is a story in which these groups—sometimes in concert and sometimes in opposition to professional educators with their own designs—jockey for position to make their indelible mark on the school policies of the day. Reform efforts have reappeared regularly; in the 1940s, the watchword was "life adjustment education." Educators, worried about a growing dropout rate and the seemingly frantic pace of post-War technological innovations, sought to help students adjust to a changing world. One example of a class introduced in public schools during this period was entitled "Basic Urges, Wants, and Needs and Making Friends and Keeping Them." That's the *1940s,* not the 1960s.

This "promising" development fell victim to the education scare that began when the Soviet Union put its Sputnik satellite into space in 1957. The focus shifted back toward learning basic subjects, though in new and sometimes misguided ways. A flurry of activity followed the Sputnik scare, exemplified by such innovations as new math, open classrooms, programmed instruction, and ungraded schools (which are now making a comeback). During the 1960s, these ideas began to filter throughout the American public education system (all the more susceptible to fads and trends because of its increasingly centralized nature). Some of these notions worked in particular schools, while failing dismally in others—another common result of school reforms generally. In the 1970s, some new ideas were added to this increasingly unwieldy mix, such as the behavioralism craze, whole-language reading instruction, mastery learning, and the spread of standardized testing of both students and teachers.

Finally, during the 1980s the school reform bandwagon got a new set of tires and a fresh coat of paint. Following the publication of A *Nation at Risk* in 1983, governors instituted all sorts of teacher training and testing programs, curriculum changes, and higher performance standards for students. At the same time, states dramatically increased spending on all facets of public education. And President Ronald Reagan, promising to eliminate the U.S. Education Department during his campaign, actually helped administer a significant outflow of new federal money for public education, mostly directed toward specific programs for needy or minority students.

What Was Gained?

Despite the widespread public impression, felt every five years or so since World War II, that something "new" was happening in public school reform, education statistics tell a different story. They demonstrate very little change in student performance (and most measurable changes were downward). Here's a brief report card on four decades of public education reform:

Many so-called education experts believe that class size—the ratio of students to teacher—must be reduced to improve learning. We've already tried it. From 1955 to 1991, the average pupil-teacher ratio in U.S. public schools dropped by 40 percent.

These experts also proclaim that lack of funding hamstrings reform, and that the 1980s were a particularly bad time for school finances. Wrong again. Annual expenditures per pupil in U.S. public schools exploded by about 350 percent in real dollars from 1950 ($1,189) to 1991 ($5,237). In only two years during this 40-year period did spending fall: 1980 and 1981. Spending grew by about a third in real terms from 1981 to 1991.

The average salary of public school teachers rose 45 percent in real terms from 1960 (the first year data are available) to 1991. This increase masks a more variable trend. Real salaries rose until 1974, when they began to level off and even decline. The average salary reached a trough of $27,436 in 1982, after which it rose to an all-time high of $33,015 in 1991. Instructional staff in public schools generally saw their earnings increase faster than the average full-time employee—from 1950 to 1989 the ratio of instructional-staff salary to the average full-time salary in the U.S. increased by 22 percent (although it sank from 1972 to 1980). Student performance has hardly kept pace with the dramatic increases in resources devoted to public education. While the percentage of students aged 17 at the beginning of the school year who graduated from high school rose 30 percent from 1950 to 1964, it has leveled off since then. In fact, the 1991 percentage is lower than the 1969 peak of 77.1 percent.

Evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other performance measures shows how poorly served America's public school students really are. Just five percent of 17-year-old high school students in 1988 could read well enough to understand and use information found in technical materials, literary essays, historical documents, and college-level texts. This percentage has been falling since 1971.

Average Scholastic Aptitude Test scores fell 41 points between 1972 and 1991. Apologists for public education argue that such factors as the percentage of minority students taking the SAT can explain this drop. Not true. Scores for whites have dropped. And the number of kids scoring over 600 on the verbal part of the SAT has fallen by 37 percent since 1972, so the overall decline can't be blamed merely on mediocre students "watering down" the results.

Only six percent of 11th graders in 1986 could solve multi-step math problems and use basic algebra. Sixty percent did not know why *The Federalist* was written, 75 percent didn't know when Lincoln was president, and one in five knew what Reconstruction was.

Another measure of the failure of public education is that almost all institutions of higher education now provide remedial instruction to some of their students. The Southern Regional Education Board surveyed its members in 1986 and found that 60 percent said at least a third of their students needed remedial help. Surveying this evidence of failure among college-bound students, former Reagan administration official Chester E. Finn, Jr., wrote that "surely college ought to transport one's intellect well beyond factual knowledge and cultural literacy. But it's hard to add a second story to a house that lacks a solid foundation."

Why American Public Education Fails

There are several characteristics of government institutions which, common to virtually all American public schools, inhibit the successful operation of schools. These include:

Rigid personnel rules and regulations. Those schools with little to no interference from outside supervisors or regulators on hiring and firing decisions tend to be the most effective schools as measured by student performance. John Chubb of the Brookings Institution and Terry Moe of Stanford University provided a good explanation for this in their 1990 book *Politics, Markets and America's Schools:*

> Among the reasons why direct external control may interfere with the development of an effective school, perhaps the most important is the potentially debilitating influence of external control over personnel. If principals have little or no control over who teaches in their schools, they are likely to be saddled with a

> number of teachers, perhaps even many teachers, whom they regard as bad fits. In an organization that works best through shared decision-making and delegated authority, a staff that is in conflict with the leader and with itself is a serious problem . . . such conflict may be a school's greatest organizational problem. Personnel policies that promote such conflict may be a school's greatest burden.

Tenure is not the only barrier to successful school organization. School organizations that call for greater differentiation among teachers and pay some teachers more than others on the basis of performance or drawing power rather than seniority clash with government-mandated salary schedules. Positions and salary levels are decided by the state without any relationship to a particular school's situation. To foster successful reorganization of schools and more effective and efficient use of teachers, school systems or even individual schools must be able to employ their teaching staff as they see fit and pay them accordingly. If a school has a hard time finding a good science teacher (not a hypothetical situation in many districts) it should be able to set the salary for that position at a level which will attract qualified persons.

Uniform salary schedules were originally enacted to address racial and social inequities among teachers, not as a "better way" of organizing the teaching force. These inequities have largely been addressed and can be prevented by other means. But like so many governmental policies, uniform salary schedules have outlived their usefulness. Reorganization might involve paying teachers of one subject more than teachers of another subject, or paying a good teacher with ten years' experience more than a mediocre teacher with 15 years' experience. As education researcher Denis Doyle of the Hudson Institute wrote: "There is no mystery as to how to find and retain qualified teachers of mathematics or the sciences. Pay them what the market demands, provide them with benefits that are competitive, and create a work environment in which they can derive genuine professional satisfaction. Pay differentials are the answer."

And yet mediocre teachers, who dominate teacher unions and the education lobbyists in Washington and the state capitals, continue to resist this basic change.

A civil service system. A related set of problems for American public education stems from the early twentieth-century view that public services can and should be delivered by a regimented, compartmentalized civil service. All indications are that the teaching profession will best be organized in the future as firms providing specific services to schools, rather than as a unionized set of government employees with tenure and little performance-based accountability. They should, in other words, come to resemble law firms. In teaching firms, more senior partners would enjoy tremendous name recognition and respect, attracting clients for the firms while imparting their proven teaching strategies to junior partners and associates. Can you imagine such a system evolving within today's public education system?

Monopoly. It's not an attack on teachers to suggest that they, like all other workers, respond to incentives. When a school enjoys monopoly control over its students, the incentive to produce successful students is lacking. When student performance doesn't correlate with reward on the school level, individual teachers see no need to go the extra mile to help students when the teacher next door receives the same rewards for merely babysitting. And without the pressures of competition in education, parents are bothersome nuisances rather than clients who might potentially go elsewhere if not satisfied.

Centralized decision-making. When decisions on such issues as the makeup of the history curriculum or the daily school schedule are mandated from above, school leaders lose initiative and school policies become disconnected with the students and teachers they supposedly exist to serve. At a time when American industry is abandoning the factory model and top-down management as hopelessly irrelevant to modern enterprises, so too must schools seek better lines of communication and a more effective way to make decisions about everyday problems.

Tinkering around the edges of the public school system might reduce the impact of one or two of these government characteristics, but they'll never be eliminated without substantially limiting government interference in education.

There is much disagreement about whether these characteristics have become more pronounced over the last few decades. But the trend lines aren't the point. In a world in which the returns on education dropped off fairly rapidly in the upper grades and college—in other words, when a junior-high school education was enough to obtain gainful employment and function in society—America could basically afford to have an inefficient, bureaucratized, and ineffective system of public education. When students fell through the cracks, they had a fairly soft landing. Today, however, technological innovation and a host of other factors have dramatically increased the returns on education. All students must be able to compute, communicate, and think to make their way in an increasingly complex and confusing world.

The Triumph of Politics

What *has* clearly been on the rise in recent decades is the use of America's public schools for the purpose of engineering some social outcome deemed desirable by political leaders. This is an unavoidable, and perhaps insurmountable, failing of government-run education.

Both liberal do-gooders and conservative culture warriors look to public education to achieve public goods. In the 1950s and 1960s, a national focus on the problem of racial segregation helped steer education policy away from questions of excellence to questions of equity and access. In the 1970s, activists bent on such diverse causes as environmentalism, humanism, spiritualism, and even socialism began to target the school curriculum. They produced all sorts of programs, handbooks, textbooks, and other materials, and used political influence to have these adopted as part of the school day in many jurisdictions. Meanwhile, America's developmental psychologists and early childhood experts, deep in their environmentalist (in the sense of non-genetic) phase, got the attention of educators and political leaders. They argued that formal education should be supplemented with special counseling and self-esteem programs, that formal education should be extended into the preschool years, and that the federal government should be involved in funding these early-intervention and compensatory education programs. Policy-makers believed them. So we now have Chapter 1, Head Start, in-school counselors, and other "innovations," the usefulness of which is now in great doubt.

When every call for fundamental change in American education is rebutted not by arguments about student achievement but by arguments focusing on race, class, social mixing, and other social concerns, it is difficult to imagine real progress. When teachers spend much of their day filling out forms, teaching quasi-academic subjects mandated from above, and boosting student self-esteem (as contrasted with serf-respect, which is earned rather than worked up), learning is difficult if not impossible.

While government is wholly unsuited to teach America's students because of all the characteristics listed above, private schools offer an example of what American education could be. After trending downward for decades, private school enrollment increased during the 1980s. This year, private schools accounted for about 12 percent of America's students. The fastest-growing segment of the private school market is the non-religious school, but Catholic and other parochial schools continue to supply excellent education opportunities to poor children and minorities both in inner-cities and in rural areas. Studies show that private schools produce better students than public schools do, even when you take into account the selectivity of some private schools.

It's true, as some public-education boosters charge, that even private school students have shown some declines in achievement over the past half-century—but that proves only that other influences in society besides schooling can have a significant impact on student performance. Private schools provide a better education than public schools even though American families generally do not sufficiently value education and students often lack initiative and concentration.

By any reasonable measure, America's monopolistic, bureaucratic, over-regulated system of public schools is woefully unprepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Political, business, and education leaders continue to talk about "reforming" the current public education system. They should, instead, be discussing how to replace it.

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