

Sixteen for '16 - Number 3: A Rededication to Public Education

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If the knowledge factory model of public education doesn't even improve standardized test scores, what is it good for? The obvious answer is: nothing. We need to put the public back in public education and be clear about our goals and the best way to achieve them.

Reform (noun): a policy that is designed to undermine the effectiveness of a public institution in a way that generates private gains.

Reform (verb): to make something worse (e.g. education reform).

When did reform become a dirty word? Thirty years of education reform have brought a barren, test-bound curriculum that stigmatizes students, vilifies teachers and encourages administrators to commit wholesale fraud to hit the testing goals that have been set for them.

The current age of reform can be traced to the landmark 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, subtitled "The Imperative for Educational Reform." Future dictionaries will mark this report as the turning point when the definition of reform changed from something good to something bad, from a cause to a curse.

In 1981 Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, appointed an 18-person commission to look into the state of America's schools. He charged the commission with addressing "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system." The commission included 12 administrators, one businessperson, one chemist, one physicist, one politician, one conservative activist and one teacher.

No students or recent graduates. No everyday parents. No representatives of parents' organizations. No social workers, school psychologists or guidance counselors. No representatives of teachers unions (God forbid). Just one practicing teacher. And not a single academic expert on education.

It should come as no surprise that a commission dominated by administrators found that the problems of America's schools were mainly caused by lazy students and unaccountable teachers. Administrative incompetence was not on the agenda. Nor were poverty, inequality and racial discrimination.

A Nation at Risk began from the assumption that our public schools were failing. Of course our public schools were failing. Our public schools are always failing. No investigative panel has ever found that our public schools are succeeding.

But if public schools have been failing for so long - if they were already failing in 1983 and have been failing ever since - then very few of us alive today had a decent education. Who are we to try to fix failing schools? We are ourselves the products of failing schools.

Which gets to the point of the matter: For most of the 150-year history of public education in America, public schools have done a pretty good job. There is no crisis of public education. There never has been. Or at least not until now.

This time is different. The issue isn't the quality of public schools. The issue is the survival of public schools. Public schools face relentless attacks from pro-business conservatives who see America's public education budgets as pots of gold to be mined for private gain. The conservative agenda calls for nothing less than the privatization of public education in America. The privatization agenda can be very seductive. Students aren't studying? Threaten to fail them and hire private testing companies to keep them in line. Teachers aren't teaching? Threaten to fire them and create private charter schools to replace them. Parents are voters and by definition always right, so empower parents as consumers to buy the education they want for their children. We choose and buy our children's food, clothing and toys. Why not choose and buy our children's education? Why should government bureaucrats decide what's best for our kids? The conservative agenda will put us in charge of our children's education. What could be wrong with that?

There are at least two good reasons why strong public schools are in the national interest; tax money should be used to support only public schools and for-profit companies should be excluded as much as possible from all forms of education. These two reasons are the bedrock foundation for public education.

First, our children's education should be in the hands of professionals whose first and only priority is education. Do we really want our children's futures to be in the hands of for-profit corporations? For that matter, do we really want our children's futures to be completely in the hands of their parents?

It is a sacrilege in politics to say anything bad about parents, but let's face facts. Collectively, we give our children too much food and too little exercise. We use televisions and computers (sorry, educational videos and learning software) as baby sitters. Our basements, closets and garages are filled with piles of junk that pass for toys.

Parents are great at love and security but maybe not so great at education. In contrast, public school teachers are full-time professionals who are trained in child development and paid to focus on our children all day (and often unpaid into the night). Sometimes it's best to rely on professionals for things that really matter.

An important principle of professionalism is that professionals should not stand to gain or lose from the decisions they make in carrying out their professional duties. A serious problem in the

medical profession is that doctors can make much more money from drug companies than from their patients. A better model is to insulate professionals from financial considerations.

Clearly, for-profit schools are dangerous because they care more about their profits than about our children. So are companies that provide packaged educational products like standardized tests, test preparation software, canned lesson plans and even school lunches. Buyer beware.

Public schools insulate educational decision-making from profit motives of all kinds. Unionized schools ensure even higher levels of professionalism by insulating educators from the day-to-day pressures of financial performance. That's not a bad thing. That's a fantastic thing.

Union protections reduce the incentives teachers face to give high grades just to keep everyone happy, to push "difficult" children out of their classes and to teach to the test. Unions ensure that school districts provide professional training opportunities for teachers and administrators. And unions prevent favoritism in the awarding of raises and promotions, substituting instead the principle of seniority based on experience. In short, a unionized school is a professional school. The second reason that strong public schools are in the national interest is that the most important purpose of public education is to build the American nation.

Think about it. Why is the government even involved in education? Why not leave parents to pay for their own children's education? We don't feed, bathe, house and clothe each other's children. Why do we pay to educate them?

The answer is not charity. We have programs to help feed, house and provide medical care for the children of the poor. But we don't provide these benefits to the children of the rich. We don't even provide free medical care to the children of the rich. But we provide free public education to everyone.

We provide public education to everyone because education is primarily about good citizenship. It is not primarily about academic learning. All those hours spent in classrooms should be used to help our children grow into happy, productive, moral, responsible, reasonably well-behaved adult citizens who care deeply about our communities, our country and our world.

Subjects like art, music and theater are just as important for citizenship as are subjects like English and math. Reading, writing and basic arithmetic may be necessary skills for life in modern society, but when was the last time you had to diagram a sentence or factor an equation? And if you had to, could you?

Even if private companies or charter schools did raise student test scores (and there is no evidence that they do), they cannot shape citizens.¹ Citizens can be created by committee only. And the bigger that committee - the broader our children's education - the better.

Education for citizenship requires the involvement of parents and teachers - but also school administrators, elected school boards, parents groups, teachers unions, parent-teacher associations, religious congregations, local businesses, sports clubs, community orchestras, playhouses and all the other stakeholders in society. Children need multiple bases of support in learning how to grow into adulthood.

This is where the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* went tragically wrong. It excoriated the transformation of schools into community centers and sought to reverse the trend. Ever since then, education reform has focused on turning schools into knowledge factories. Teach more; study more; test more. Everything else: less.

The data show that the knowledge-factory model of education has done nothing to improve test scores. Countries such as Finland that embed schools in the community do much better on standardized tests than we do, and states like Massachusetts that embed schools in the community do much better on standardized tests than do states that focus more on knowledge transfer.²

Not that success on standardized tests should be the goal of public education. It shouldn't. But if the knowledge factory model doesn't even improve standardized test scores, what is it good for? The obvious answer is: nothing.

Worse, the knowledge factory model is absolutely catastrophic for meeting the true goals of education. It destroys them. We don't need schools to disseminate knowledge. We have the internet for that, and before the internet we had books. Most of us learned very little in school.

What we need schools for - strong public schools - is to reproduce America in the next generation. America isn't a place. It's a people. All Americans have a stake in shaping what the next generation of America will be like, even people who don't have children. That's why even people who don't have children pay taxes to support public education.

Our next president should put the public back into public education. We don't need gimmicky national standards programs. We need national financial support for local public schools staffed by professionals who know their students and care about their communities.

Enough with false reform. The federal government should entrust communities to bring up good citizens, and give them the resources to do so. It may go against political nature to provide funding without demanding measurable outcomes, but good citizenship is not measurable. Measurable or not, education for good citizenship is what we need from our public schools.

NOTES

1 NCES 2011 report: *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report*.

2 NCES 2011 report: *US States in a Global Context: Results from the 2011 NAEP-TIMSS Linking Study*.

