

# Educational Reform or Ineptitude?

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That the American educational system is broken is one fact that everyone, it seems, is in agreement with. “Despite decades of reform attempts and billions of dollars of investment, the American education system badly needs improvement.” Only 34 percent of eighth graders are proficient in mathematics, 29 percent in science and 33 percent in reading. Compared to other countries, American students score near the bottom—21st out of 30 in science and even worse in mathematics—25th. Only 70 percent of students graduate on time. Americans also give the nation’s public school system poor grades, with 70 percent grading the system as C, D or F.

Reform movements can be likened to the crocus which bursts into bloom every autumn. Although begun in the nineteenth century, reform movements increased in the 1980s. Ronald Reagan tried to reduce or eliminate the Department of Education, and Hirsch attacked progressive education, advocating an emphasis on “cultural literacy.” In the 1990s most states adopted outcome-based educational reforms. Committees were created to set standards and select quantitative instruments to assess student performance. Standards-based National Education Goals (Goals 2000) were set by the U.S. Congress which culminated in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It is still an active nation-wide mandate. Outcome based reformers suggested other methods, such as constructivist mathematics and whole language studies. Some advocated replacing the high school diploma with a Certificate of Initial Mastery. Other reforms suggested are school-to-work, which would require all students except those in a university track to spend substantial class time on a job site. In the 2000s, several more education reforms were proposed: longer school days/years, after-school tutoring, charter schools, school choice, school vouchers, smaller class sizes, improved teacher quality, improved teacher training, higher credential standards, higher teacher pay, performance bonuses, firing low-performing teachers, internet and computer access in schools, mainstreaming special education students, higher curriculum standards, better textbooks, redesigned schools and classrooms, more private schools, school choice, and even home schooling. None has shown a measurable improvement in the quality of education in America. In fact, it appears that the more reforms undertaken, the worse education gets. For decades, the nation has been grasping at straws to build a house that the big bad wolf huffs and puffs and blows down. Now we have another straw—Race to the Top.

One example given of how to improve schools is that of Washington, DC. Michelle Rhee, the system’s Chancellor, thinks she may have a solution: Treat it like any other business. Make educators accountable for their successes and failures. If you don’t succeed as a principal or teacher, she “wants you out.”

*When she arrived two and a half years ago, she inherited schools like Sousa Middle. “It was out of control,” Rhee says. “I mean, there were more children in the hallway than in the*

*classroom, all the kids had hoods on, had their earphones in, [and were] swearing at teachers." Rhee removed the former principal and fired 11 of 31 teachers, introduced school uniforms and Saturday school. Last year's test scores were up double-digits: 25 percent in math, 17 percent in reading. The attendance rate is 98 percent. Impressive, isn't it?*

*Let's ask some questions. Rhee fired a principal and 35 percent of the teachers. Where did she get the replacements from? More likely than not, she stole them from other schools. But then the stolen teachers had to be replaced? How? Were the teachers Rhee just fired rehired? If so, that doesn't help. Although she may have improved one school in her district, she may have also worsened others.*

*And what if this method were practiced at every school throughout the nation? Let's do some arithmetic.*

The nation's colleges and universities grant about 100,000 teaching degrees a year. More than 12 percent of all newly hired "teachers" enter the workforce without any training at all, and another 15 percent enter without having fully met state standards—that's 27 percent. Hiring them won't help. That leaves 73,000 adequately trained new teachers a year. But the schools lose about 300,000 teachers a year through attrition, which means that at the current rates, our colleges and universities are graduating about 227,000 fewer teachers each year than are needed even if no poor teachers are replaced. (Obama recognizes this, but he gets the number wrong. He says, "And year after year the gap between the number of teachers we have and the number of teachers we need . . . is widening. The shortfall is projected to climb past a quarter of a million teachers in the next five years.")

There are about 100,000 primary and secondary schools in America staffed by about 3,000,000 teachers. If a third of the principals have to be replaced, 30,000 new principals have to be found. New principals usually come from teaching faculties. And 35 percent (the percentage of teachers Rhee fired) of 3,000,000 is 1,500,000. Together, that makes 1,530,000 teachers that have to be replaced?

Suppose a goal of 18 years (one school generation) were set to replace them. Sixty thousand would have to be replaced each year. But this makes the yearly teacher-gap rise to 287,000. To eliminate this gap, the nation's colleges and universities would have to almost triple the size of their current graduating classes; yet no one advocating this way of improving the America's educational system seems to realize it. Perhaps they all flunked arithmetic! Does this suggested reform make any sense? The only possible result of this reform is either an exacerbation of the teacher shortage or the moving of so-called poor teachers from one school to another. This reform makes everything worse.

Furthermore, these numbers assume that the reform would take place over 18 years, which is a long time in economic terms. The average time between economic downturns in America is less than fifteen years. Halving the time set to "reform" the system doubles the needed size of college graduating classes to almost six times their current sizes. Race to the Top or Snail's Pace to the Top?

Michelle Rhee wants to treat education like any other business. How will that help? The Postal Reorganization Act signed by President Richard Nixon in 1970, replaced the cabinet-level Post Office Department with the United States Postal Service, a corporation-like independent agency with an official monopoly on the delivery of mail. Just look at how

wonderfully that worked out! Service has deteriorated while the cost of mailing has risen. Now, apparently, Saturday delivery is to be eliminated. What about General Motors and Chrysler? Those businesses worked so well they required bailouts. Chrysler required bailouts twice; remember Lee Iacocca? What about AIG and the rest of the financial industry? And what about all the businesses that file for bankruptcy every year? Should education be run like those?

These reformers seem to believe that raising standards will improve student performance. But will it? If students can't meet the current "lower" standards, how will raising them make things better? Isn't it possible that higher standards will merely result in lower graduation rates? What do any of these reforms do to change the attitudes of students? These reformers neglect the distinction between teaching and learning. If students aren't motivated to learn, improved teaching won't help unless the assumption is made that improved teaching will in itself motivate students. Is there any evidence to support that?

But Michelle Rhee gets something right. She says, "the reason isn't the kids—it's the system. In [this] society there is not a particularly high regard for education." No, there isn't! The American educational system doesn't work for the very same reason all sorts of other things in America don't work—the culture pursues the wrong goals.

Citing the shortcomings of the No Child Left Behind Act, President Obama wants American students to be more competitive in the global economy. "We want to challenge everyone—parents, teachers, school administrators—to raise standards, by having the best teachers and principals, by tying student achievement to assessments of teachers, by making sure that there's a focus on low-performing schools, by making sure our students *are prepared for success in a competitive 21st century economy and workplace* [emphasis mine]."

But the Congress doesn't work because it's members believe that their function is to promote business at the people's expense. Immigration programs don't work because business claims it needs low-wage labor. The courts don't work because judges favor businesses over consumers. The healthcare system doesn't work because the profits of businesses must be protected. And education doesn't work because educating Americans is not its goal, providing for the needs of business is.

Education in America is a misnomer. All that it amounts to is various kinds of vocational training. The President wants to encourage students to study mathematics and science to promote business. The President believes that students can be attracted to mathematics and science by making the study of these subjects fun. "We've held science-themed events like Astronomy Night here at the White House. That was . . . fun, by the way." But that's been tried before, and it doesn't work.

American students see athletes, some of whom have never been to college and some of whom have but never graduated, making fortunes. Students see entertainers succeed who have had no meaningful educations at all. Sports and entertaining are more fun than mathematics and science. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are hailed as American icons; both are college dropouts. Commission a poll. Ask students if they'd rather be rock-stars or mathematicians. It's not necessary, is it? We all know the answer.

Better still, if anyone wants to know why the American educational system will not restore or save the American economy, ask the President, the members of Congress, the Captains of

Industry, and the thousands of American shopkeepers why they never wanted to be teachers, mathematicians, or scientists. Ask them why they haven't encouraged their children and grandchildren to become teachers, mathematicians, and scientists. They could at least afford the educations required without having to take on the years of indebtedness other students are forced into. The answer will reveal why the proposed reforms will never work.

Americans work for companies by necessity but not enthusiastically. On the job, they do exactly what is required and no more. American workers long ago realized that going the extra mile to better corporate prospects never results in corporations going the extra mile to better the lives of their employees. These employees know that whenever a company believes that it can increase its profits by abandoning workers, the employees become sacrificial lambs. Now people are being told to become teachers, mathematicians, and scientists to save America's business oriented economy. Wouldn't it be wiser to reorient the American economy to serve the needs of people?

People who in all likelihood could not master these subjects themselves are trying to convince students to become mathematicians and scientists. What is really wanted are trained infantry in the army of industrial workers commanded by CEOs with MBAs who in all likelihood could not even recognize no less solve a simple differential equation that any mathematician or scientist would consider child's play.

The wealthy who control America never have wanted and do not today want an effective educational system. What they have always wanted and still want are trained hurdy-gurdy monkeys, because they know and have always known that a truly educated populous would not tolerate the unjust seventeenth century legal system based on English common law that promotes and maintains this immoral seventeenth century economic system. Nations have often tried to use schools to make better workers, and that's all these reforms are aimed at doing.

But these seventeenth century institutions have now plunged America into the pickle. A seventeenth century economy cannot compete with twenty-first century economies. It needs mathematicians and scientists and a lot of other smart people too. But educating mathematicians and scientists is vastly different from educating accountants, lawyers, and MBAs. Mathematicians and scientists must be highly literate, capable of thinking independently, willing to question commonly accepted beliefs, demand evidence, and provide proofs that are then subjected to rigorous peer review. Once people acquire those skills, seventeenth century institutions cannot endure. So America's wealthy elite are now impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If the seventeenth century economy can't compete, it will fail, and if the people are educated enough to enable it to compete, it will be dismantled by criticism and reform.

Solving Americas educational problems, and most of its other problems too, requires a fundamental cultural change, one that changes all of America's institutions, especially the law, business, and the way the government operates. The problems cannot be solved otherwise. Given human inertia, the task is immense.

America today is a nation that emulates seventeenth century England. The common people, without whose efforts society could not exist, have but one function—provide for the needs of the economy; the economy does not exist to provide for the needs of people. Nassau William Senior (1790-1864) spoke of the laborer's relation to his employer as the "connexion

between him and his *master* [emphasis mine].” But master-slave is a Hegelian contradiction, not a relationship that promotes cooperation.

In academia, the dictum, publish or perish is well known. A new dictum that America’s wealthy need to learn is, alter or falter. I doubt that they’re up to the task.

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