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Education in the US: Crucial, but a Constant Quagmire

One day in my AP US history class, our teacher quickly summarized the 1894 Pullman strike, in which workers in a factory that made railroad cars went on strike, practically bringing the nation's railroad system to a standstill. As he spoke, my classmates and I, silently hunched over our desks, feverishly took notes. This material would doubtless be on the test at the end of the week and then on the AP exam in a month or so; if we didn't remember the details of the strike and of the other events the teacher was quickly reading off a bullet-pointed PowerPoint slide, we might fail the tests, and move further away from our college dreams.

I was about to scribble down a summary of the strike when I began to wonder: wait a second, how did a strike in a single railroad car factory shut down the whole nation's railroad system? Couldn't the railroads just make due with the cars they already had until the strike was over? When I asked the teacher what the missing link was, he said he didn't know, and went to the internet to do some quick research. We found out that the American Railway Union, a national union of railroad workers, organized its members to strike in sympathy with the Pullman workers, thereby disrupting railroad service all over the country. Thus, the missing link between the strike at a single factory

and the paralysis of the entire nations railroads was discovered. If no one had asked, the story would have remained incomplete, like a novel with a hundred pages missing from the middle.

A shallow, incomplete understanding of a single event in US history won't make or break a student's education. But the Pullman strike anecdote was not an isolated incident — save a few good discussions, the mindless writing of notes and regurgitating of facts onto tests is commonplace for the class, and for many others in the school. In my math class last year, a student asked the teacher one too many times whether the material we had just learned would be on the test, or whether it could safely be left unstudied. "It's not just about the test, it's about thinking and learning!" the teacher exclaimed, visibly frustrated with the student.

Although the teacher's idealism was admirable, the problem is that, unfortunately, school really *isn't* about thinking and learning, or at least not anymore. Many of today's high schoolers and teachers are more driven by fear of failure on tests than by anything else, and even in the top "college-level" AP classes taken by many students, it seems that days can pass without any meaningful discussion of or reflection on the material being studied. Kids study because they're afraid of failure, not because they're interested — it's hard to be interested in anything when one's brain has been fried by hours of homework.

The smothering of intellectual curiosity evident at my school and in other high-performing schools across the nation is largely a result of pressure from parents and

friends (a lot of which originates in the intense competition for college admission), but the thousands of lower-performing schools in less affluent areas are facing similar problems, although with different causes. In these schools, test scores not only factor into the future of the student, but can also lead to the firing of a teacher, or even the closing of the school. In these schools, testing acquires a life-or-death atmosphere among staff as well as students, and much time is spent training and endlessly drilling students to pass the standardized tests. The underlying causes in these schools are different, but the results are the same — students, their innate curiosity smothered by endless work and meaningless facts and skills, are forever turned off to learning. Without pressure and support from their parents and peers or the help of the pricey tutors and other resources available to students in affluent areas, these students often drop out of school, thus continuing their communities' cycles of poverty and hopelessness.

How did the American educational system arrive at this sorry state, continually lamented in magazine articles and a perennial subject of vague, sweeping promises by presidential candidates, in which constant testing is causing many kids to give up on themselves and drop out, and turning others into notetaking-and-regurgitating automatons?

How We Got Here

According to Diane Ravitch, an historian of American education whose new book, *The Death and Life of the American School System*, examines the past few decades of developments in education reform, all roads lead back to the 1983 report *A Nation at*

Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform, the result of Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report was the earliest clear expression of the sense of urgency and crisis which now pervades the national debate about education. The report opened with the urgent claim that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur — others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments." It cited several signs of decline, from decreasing SAT scores to expanding remedial courses for college freshmen to increasing expenses for training incoming employees in companies and the military, and recommended that the nation's schools be held to higher standards. It focused on the content of the curriculum as the most urgent thing to be improved, and urged that education in the basic subjects — math, science, social studies — be strengthened.

From this sweeping report emerged the national standards movement, which, under Lamar Alexander, President George H.W. Bush's secretary of education, sought to develop voluntary national curricular standards for all of the major subjects, hoping to set the bar high for what students would be learning in American public schools. But the movement was short-lived. Opponents from the right, most notably Lynne Cheney, attacked the history standards as focusing too much on minorities at the expense of "traditional history": George Washington, the Constitution, the great generals of the Civil War and World War II, etc. The debate over national standards soon degenerated into an "angry ideological conflict," and "the subject of standards, curriculum, and content became radioactive to political leaders" (Ravitch).

The idea of federal-government-endorsed national standards was dead, but the sense of crisis created by *A Nation at Risk* was not. The Clinton administration tried to strike a compromise with its Goals 2000 program, which gave states federal money to write their own standards. This way, Clinton could say he was promoting standards, without actually having to endorse one controversial set of standards or another. When George W. Bush was elected, he merged Clinton's idea of states developing their own standards with a powerful idea from the corporate world to create one of the most influential bills in the history of America's education system.

The Promise of No Child Left Behind

The bill was No Child Left Behind, and the idea behind it is that the performance of teachers and schools can be accurately measured by state-wide standardized tests. This assessment, called "value added" analysis because it supposedly can quantify the amount of value a teacher is adding to his or her students — is at the heart of No Child Left Behind (commonly shortened to “NCLB”) because it allows free-market principles to be applied to the world of education: just like in the competitive world of corporations, schools can be driven by clear incentives and punishments, applied impartially on the basis of numerical test scores, instead of muddling along, driven only by informal and imprecise self-assessments.

Michelle Rhee, the take-no-prisoners chancellor of Washington, D.C.'s public schools, embodies this corporation-like, unsympathetic new attitude toward reform: "People say, 'Well, you know, test scores don't take into account creativity and the love of

learning.' [...] I'm like, 'You know what? I don't give a crap.' Don't get me wrong. Creativity is good and whatever. But if the children don't know how to read, I don't care how creative you are. You're not doing your job" (Ripley).

The free-market strategy was appealing when the law was passed (and still is — President Obama's education reform strategy largely follows NCLB's framework, with relatively minor revisions) because it absolves policymakers from the difficult responsibility of figuring out what it takes to run an effective school, and places the responsibility on the shoulders of the people running the schools. The federal government would supply the incentives and sanctions, the legislators (most prominently Ted Kennedy, but also many Republicans and other Democrats) thought, and the resultant pressure would force schools to innovate and achieve gains, just as companies innovate to stay alive and thrive in the dog-eat-dog corporate world. A similar initiative proposes giving vouchers to parents, which would enable them to send their kids to private schools, thus broadening the competition among schools by creating a large market of parents, vouchers in hand, ready to send their child to the best school around, be it public or private. Again, Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of the market would force schools to innovate, weeding out the ineffective schools and rewarding innovation.

The Failure of *No Child Left Behind*

But it hasn't quite worked out that way. Kennedy, one of the law's leading proponents, called the results "modest, but [...] noticeable" (Kennedy) — a far cry from the promised gains — and the charter schools which were supposed to be hotbeds of

innovation have largely turned out to be a disappointment, falling far short of the free-market magic envisioned by NCLB's proponents.

What's more, NCLB did not only fail to produce the gains it promised, but it, more than anything else, is responsible for the intense, punitive atmosphere, so toxic to creativity and curiosity, that is what most of today's students associate with the word "school". Not only is the atmosphere toxic, but the curriculum gets narrowed as well, because NCLB only mandates that two subjects — reading and math — be tested. "The curricular content assessed by high-stakes tests," says James Popham, a researcher and writer on testing and education, referring to NCLB-mandated tests, "tends to drive other subjects and other cognitive skills from teachers' classrooms. The erosion of a rich curriculum clearly robs our children of important things they should be learning".

NCLB also unfairly places the blame for bad test scores on teachers and schools, when in actuality many other factors determine a child's scores: normal year-to-year variation in the average intelligence of incoming students, the socioeconomic status and home environment of students at a particular school — educators almost universally recognize that a student's home environment has a large effect on their readiness for and performance in school (Popham). When these factors conspire to produce low test scores for a certain school, the blame unfairly falls upon the school's teachers and administration, the school is punished, and everyone — the teachers, the kids, and the policymakers — loses.

By all of these measures, NCLB is a bust. As Ravitch puts it, the standards

movement which originated with *A Nation at Risk* and sought to strengthen school curriculums was gradually "hijacked" by free-market reformers who, with NCLB, actually moved the nation *away* from *A Nation at Risk's* goals: NCLB has led to a narrowed, dumbed-down curriculum, and a decrease in deep thinking and learning. She writes, "We may find that we have obtained a paradoxical and terrible outcome: higher test scores and worse education."

What Do We Do Now?

NCLB's promise of free-market magic motivating schools to fix themselves hasn't worked. Thus, the difficult question: what do we do now? Many politicians believe that NCLB's core premise was in fact correct, but its implementation was bungled. President Obama's upcoming education plan promises to make key corrections to NCLB, among them measuring schools and teachers by students' *progress*, not their absolute performance in comparison to other students in the same grade, thus rewarding teachers for making progress instead of unjustly holding them accountable for the quality of their incoming students (Bloomberg).

Obama and others also threaten to remove the traditional excellent job protection for teachers provided by teachers' unions, making it easier to fire teachers deemed underperforming and replace them with new recruits. "This is something that annoys me beyond words," says Debra Ciamacca, leader of TEEA, Tredyffrin/Easttown's teachers' union. She recommends giving more support to underperforming teachers instead of firing them without any notice, perhaps through mentoring by an experienced teacher or

through state-run teacher workshops.

Other researchers point to the nation's teacher education system as a target for reform. Teaching is still a "dark art," says Ciamacca — the skills needed to do it effectively in practice are hard to teach, so that even graduates from prestigious education schools often enter the classroom utterly unprepared to keep a lid on a classroom of energetic kids, let alone teach them algebra. Despite the obvious importance of a good teacher, says writer Amanda Ripley, effective teaching still largely seems "more like alchemy than science, a mix of motivational mumbo jumbo and misty-eyed tales of inspiration and dedication." It's becoming clear that academia's teacher-training practices have become detached from the problems of the classroom, and much more research and better teaching are needed to improve the quality of the nation's teachers (Green). To this end, researchers are closely studying the techniques of good teachers, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has started a \$335 million project to identify effective teaching practices (Green). Hopefully these projects will be able to demystify effective teaching to some extent, and move it at least a little further away from a dark art and closer to a science.

Other reformers look to technology as the silver bullet which will engage students and stem *A Nation At Risk's* "rising tide of mediocrity" by getting kids excited about school again. "Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach," writes Marc Prensky, a writer on technology in education. He recommends integrating technology into the classroom and

designing curriculums and lesson plans around technology, instead of banning cell phones and other devices from the classroom and forcing kids to "power down." On the other side, some observers, including Yale computer scientist David Gelernter, maintain that there is no substitute for traditional teaching, and that integrating more technology into schools will merely overwhelm students with information, not engage them in learning. "Our skill-free children are overwhelmed by information even without the Internet," he wrote in response to a Clinton initiative to increase internet access in schools. "The glossy magazines and hundred-odd cable channels, the videotapes and computer CDs in most libraries and many homes — they need more information? It's as if the [Clinton] Administration were announcing that every child must have the fanciest scuba gear on the market — but these kids don't know how to swim, and fitting them out with scuba gear isn't just useless, it's irresponsible; they'll drown" (Gelernter).

My own experiences strongly confirm Gelernter's worries and discount Prensky's claims. Internet research or work days at school are invariably full of the "drowning" feeling Gelernter describes, as my classmates and I flit from article to article, trying to separate the wheat from the chaff and construct a meaningful narrative from the firehose of information coming our way. "The Web is a propaganda machine for short attention spans," writes Gelernter, and it's true — never has there been a greater threat to the kind of concentrated, sustained, in-depth thought that underlaid our society's greatest achievements. Of course, the Internet can be used for good. But, to return to Gelernter's analogy, we can't throw students into the Internet's sea of information without first teaching them how to swim — how to think critically, to identify essential arguments and

themes. For these skills, nothing can replace old-fashioned methods: discussions between student and teacher, and the careful reading and writing of narratives and arguments.

Lessons Learned

If the long and troubled history of American education reform has taught us anything, it's that there is no silver bullet, no magic cure for the system's failings. The accountability and voucher movements didn't cure the system, and neither will more technology. Better teacher training will help, although it's unlikely that the magic of good teaching will be fully understood anytime soon. But the education system this nation demands and needs cannot be achieved by policymakers and educators alone. Parents must get in on the act, and will have to enforce some new rules if they wish to see their expectations met — it's not possible for a child who has spent hundreds of hours feeding on bite-sized intellectual junk food from TV, the Internet, and videogames to become the kind of high-caliber thinker needed to confront big problems. Nothing will fix education but the old standbys: a solid curriculum, good teachers, and motivated students.

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