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The Federal Reform of Schools: Looking For The Silver Bullet

by

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All major reform efforts, like the current effort to reform America's schools, are built upon an array of assumptions and guided by a set of expectations that deserve careful examination. My remarks are designed to examine those assumptions. Consider the assumption that the state of our economy is influenced by the state of our schools, a major theme in both *A Nation At Risk* (1983) and *America 2000* (1991). According to the framers of these documents, how students do in school has a significant bearing on the economic well being of our nation. This belief appears to be widely held. Is it true? Is it true that higher math and science scores, the two fields in which we are to become number one by the year 2000, will make America more competitive?

Is the current position of the American automobile industry, the industry that has given us gas guzzler cars, oversized fins, and the Corvair, due to decisions made by on-line workers or due to decisions made by graduates of prestigious business schools? And would the competitive position of this industry be significantly improved if only its corporate executives had taken more science and math in high school?

Another widely held assumption is that our schools are in a deep state of crisis. Are all our schools afflicted or only some? Is it true that the cause of this crisis, if there is one, is located in the schools? Might there be other causes? If there are other causes, can the schools do something about fixing them? What should schools do about the divorce rate in America? What should schools do about child abuse, about children who, every day, come to school hungry? And what should schools do about racism in America, about the low birth weight of babies born to mothers who have had little or no prenatal care? What should the schools do about joblessness, about levels of unemployment compensation that make it impossible to keep families intact, about a culture that celebrates Nintendo, afternoon soap operas, and "Wheel of Fortune"? Could these, too, be sources of poor school performance?

If a culture is judged by how it treats its old, its young, and its poor, what can we say about ours?

Why do we think we will get a kinder, gentler America by beating our neighbors in an educational Olympics? Why do we seem to think that poetry, the fine arts, music, and literature have no contribution to make to the creation of a kinder, gentler America?

Why do we think that all students should be measured by the same tests, or that we will be able to calibrate the results of different tests in order to make them comparable?

Why do we believe that we can embarrass teachers and school administrators into higher levels of professional performance by imposing a single set of predetermined educational standards on their students? Why do we think that better teaching and a more caring school will be created by the treat of a national report card?

Why do we believe that the most important aim of education is to get everyone to the same destination at the same time? Why do we think that the primary aims of education can be assessed on tests given within the school rather than on tasks children engage in voluntarily outside of the school?

Why would a President who has made choice the centerpiece of his educational reform platform support educational policies that prescribe a common set of educational goals, a uniform assessment system, a national curriculum, and a public report card? Is choice in education like the kind of choices we now have when we decide on whether to tune into the CBS, NBC, or ABC six o'clock news? Are those "choices" choices?

Why do we seem to believe that the real source of educational inertia is the absence of model schools or that their presence will make replication possible, as if the process were biological rather than political and social?

Why do we think that those whose children are doing well as things now stand will support reform efforts that might jeopardize their children's position in the race for scarce education resources? Why do we think an American that is conservative in politics will endorse a liberal approach to the reform of schools?

These are some of the questions that puzzle me. What puzzles me even more is that questions like these seem to puzzle policymakers so little. Indeed the federal approach to school reform—and make no mistake about it, federal it is—seems oblivious to such considerations. The questions I have raised do not appear to give policymakers even the slightest pause. Who among them has asked why *A Nation At Risk* (1983), the most highly publicized policy paper in American education in this century, has had so little effect on how schools function, what students are taught, or how teachers teach? Might it not have been appropriate to have read the literature on school reform or curriculum change so that the sources of school stability were understood. Instead, we have *America 2000* (1991), the latest federal initiative to improve schools. Is there any reason to believe that it will be more influential than its predecessor? Even more fundamental is the vision it provides to American schools. Is it a vision that has the depth and generosity we want for young Americans? Is a marketplace metaphor the best we can do for our children? Is it really true that in curricula as in socks, one size fits all? I don't think so.

Given the questions I have raised and others that could be raised, why would a major federal program addressed to the reform of American schools apparently neglect them? Why would a major reform initiative be taken that in so many ways echoes the failed attempts of the past? Part of the reason is that uniformity in aims and standards and methods of assessment are complexity-reducing mechanisms. It is far tidier to have a single set of aims for all, a single curriculum for all, a single set of standards for all, and a single array of tests for all than to have locally developed approaches to school improvement. Furthermore, the public wants such standardization if it can get it. It seems perfectly reasonable to the public to have a common set of standards related to a common curriculum. It makes sense (Gallup and Clark, 1987). What makes sense, of course, is that common goals, common standards, a common curriculum, and a common assessment make comparisons among students, schools, and states possible. When you feel things are falling apart, you tighten up. You mandate and monitor and monitoring is facilitated by standards and by standardization.

We are, after all, a meritocracy. Standardization is a way to judge merit. If each student runs on the same track and is measured by the same clock, determining who comes in first, second, and third is not formidable. The fact that all children do not begin at the same start line is, apparently, not a consideration the public or the educational policy planners wish to entertain. The fact that there is more than one educationally defensible version of mathematics education, social studies education, science education, arts education, or language arts education is dismissed as a consideration: it makes the problem of deciding what to teach and the task of judging and comparing student performance too complicated. The fact that some children might be better served running down a different course than others seems to concede too much to curricular differentiation. Differentiated programs are not tidy. And all of this in a nation that has prided itself on the state control of its schools and on the plurality of cultures and values that it has historically celebrated.

Instead, we look for the silver bullet or the constellation of bullets that will bring students and schools in line. The bullets we have found privilege science and math, national goals, national standards, national tests, a national report card, and a national curriculum. Once these are standardized, choice can kick in and the rationality of the marketplace can take over. The effects of this approach to school reform are in a number of ways potentially debilitating. First, this approach legitimates the public's perception that what really counts in education is preparing their children for the world of work: what really matters is regaining our competitive edge. Second, it distracts educators and educational policymakers from the deeper structural sources of school inertia. It replaces serious analyses with slogans. "Just say no to drugs" finds its educational counterpart in "First in science and math by the year 2000."

Third, it develops cynicism and passive resistance in veteran teachers who have seen so many bandwagons come and go. Amidst the cymbals and the drums, the hype and the sound bites, they know that at the end of the day they will be teaching thirty children in their own classroom or a hundred and fifty per day in a school that isolates them from their colleagues and that gives them scarcely enough discretionary time to meet the needs of nature. Fourth, it conveys to the public and professionals alike that the ability to measure, to compare, and to rank is what education is about. It is not. Education is about learning how to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. It is about learning how to savor the quality of the journey. It is about inquiry and deliberation. It is about becoming critically minded, intellectually curious, and learning how to frame and pursue your own educational aims. It is not about regaining our competitive edge.

What is particularly disappointing about current federal reform efforts is the apparent failure to use serious scholarship to cope with an admittedly complicated and seemingly intractable problem. Schools are robust institutions and tough to change. It would be far better for American children for reformers to have the courage to say "We don't know how to reform schools into what we would like them to be, but we will try to find out," than to try to find the silver bullet which so many times in the past has failed to hit its target.

References

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