

In My Opinion: The Educational System—Ignored

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Early in the last century elementary school education boomed. By the Second World War completing high school was the big development. Following the war, college and university education swelled to an unprecedented extent. In the last third of the century quaternary education, beyond the formal diploma and degree granting system of primary, secondary, and tertiary education, took its place as the biggest development. The nation is now fully committed to education at all four levels, but still approaches it from personal, institutional and governmental perspectives as if each of the levels were an independent activity based on separate considerations, evaluations, participation and funding.

Evolution, of course, continues at each level. We have now moved primary school substantially back into mostly mandatory kindergarten and even further with the growth of the nursery school. At the other end colleges and universities in their constant search for more revenue are beginning to compete in the quaternary area with training programs, executive programs, and specialized educational activities, often in their off season, that is, in the summer. The state college systems have seen great political and practical value in geographic spread so that the community college is now a solidly ensconced aspect of tertiary education. It is booming since it is usually put on a sink-or-swim basis and hence has become the most entrepreneurial and successful part of tertiary education. The community colleges also are linking themselves closely to the quaternary phase of learning.

Despite all of this dynamism, the fact remains that few people in positions of responsibility at any of the four levels pay much attention to the system as a whole. They do of course give lip service to it. The primary and secondary levels are casually aware that their products flow into the workforce or into tertiary education, while tertiary education knows and largely ignores that its output must eventually go to work. All are aware of the growing competition from the quaternary sector.

The theme of this essay is that the overall system is performing far below what it could or should and unequivocally below what the high allocation of resources and the vast employment of people in the system should yield. I suggest some of the reasons for this incoherence in order to stimulate interest in reform.

The decline in K-12 has been recognized for decades and documented and deplored by a handful of studies and commissions, all of which almost mechanically repeat the same message, but lead to no action. It has reached the stage where now a second generation of Americans are victims of the decline in primary and secondary education. This situation makes it difficult to appreciate and acknowledge the catastrophic cognitive collapse of K-12.

Kids today do not know where France is, are not quite sure which way South America is on the map, really do not know what the two sides fought about in the Civil War, or cannot quite tell you for sure what the New England states are. Yet they have parents who are about 65 percent or so satisfied to very satisfied with the education their children are getting. Why is that? Those parents are the first generation produced by the terribly degraded system. Those parents cannot do numbers in their head, cannot spell words with more than six letters. They do not know history and think that geography is a science about rocks, and really have no idea of where the picture goes when you turn off the TV set. Without their intense concern and aggressive deploring of the status of K-12, legislators have no incentive to do much.

Many things have led to the decline in K-12, including better opportunities for the intelligent women who were once the backbone of that system. There also is the heaping of many new non-educational missions onto K-12. Perhaps most important of all, a grossly misfired attempt to improve the quality of school teachers has resulted in an iron triangle promoting incompetence in teaching. In order to justify higher pay, teachers have to have more education. Colleges were quite willing to cooperate since this created new students. Formal courses and degrees mean higher pay. Everyone benefited and seems satisfied. The content of that teacher training as seen by anyone who has been through it is so watered down as to be mere slop. But the iron triangle between the educational bureaucracy, teachers and their labor unions, and the schools of education is such that everybody makes out while the students end up short-changed.

It would be madness to claim that there are no good or great teachers in K-12, but it is doubtful that more than 20 percent of them are knowledgeable, trained, motivated, able, and committed enough to aggressively educate students. The situation is so

bad that about one-third of college freshman now undergo some kind of remedial course work that could not even be dignified as advanced high school. It just rehashes routine skills that they did not learn in the first 12 grades. One would never guess that an advanced and wealthy nation would treat its putative greatest asset, children, so shabbily.

At the college level of course no one needs to give a moment's concern to the premier schools-the Harvards, the Yales, the Caltechs, and the Berkeleys. They have the cream of the crop, and the crop is so big that there will always be enough cream to keep their pitchers full. The real problem is in the other private, state, and municipal colleges and universities. Rather than looking at education as a flow system, the second tier, and public colleges and universities accept whatever comes along, refusing to denounce the deplorable quality of the freshmen and in turn failing to motivate children's parents to take effective action to frighten the legislatures into school reform.

Why does this happen? It is easier to go along than to rock the boat. A further problem is that tertiary education has been watered down in several ways-more vacation time, fewer hours required for credit points, and fewer credit hours required for graduation. In my judgment a typical college graduate today, compared to 1950 or 1955, is getting only 70 percent as much formal education, quite aside from the content and its quality.

The portion of tertiary education that is the star of American education and the envy of the world are the graduate schools. We outshine the rest of the world. Now isn't that ironic, that we can have decaying primary and secondary levels but a glowing graduate level? Not at all! The system is so large that we can continually find enough students to fill the postgraduate slots. On the other hand we are far below what we need in graduate education of native-born students. An increasingly high percentage of graduate students are foreign rather than native born. That in part has to do with the relative economic structures of foreign countries. It also has to do with the relatively high pay for Americans with bachelors and masters degrees and the relatively long time required to complete a doctorate.

The fundamental lack in systems thinking and action at each level is a good reason for each of the numberless actors to remain silent, making no protest about the quality of and the input and output of students throughout the system. Eventually students get dumped into the workforce. Neither the secondary nor the tertiary level pays attention to the fact that their products will soon work. Massive education of people for degrees in psychology, history, or English does not make personal, social, or economic sense. There is nothing wrong with, and great value in, adequate learning in English, psychology, and history. But to

let the students decide, or let parents-still too uninformed to make good plans-decide on a choice of degree field, is an outrage. What kind of production system gives no attention to the quality, the utilitarian value, or the serviceability of its output? Why do those in academic careers not cry out against the state of the system? For many young academics, it is the publish-or-perish struggle for tenure. For older, tenured faculty, it may be simply too much trouble. After all, the professorate has historically been great on debate but limp in action.

K-12 and certainly college, as part of the tertiary level, needs much more attention to the content of the curriculum and preparation for work. The centerpiece of reform at both the secondary and tertiary levels should be the traditional three goals of education: preparation for work; training for civic duty; and carrying the cultural heritage.

Just think about this. It is common among people to say "Oh, I don't have a good memory" as they fail to recall something quite ordinary, but we never ever hear anyone say "I don't think well." Yet the problem that surrounds us is that there are endless numbers of our fellow citizens who simply do not think well. That is the worst abuse perpetrated by primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

Quaternary education comes into play as a growing factor to pick up the pieces, to help people with their hobbies and personal interests, and often to enhance their skills in present or future employment. Even there the system is slow to recognize that the populations most in need of quaternary education are those who have dropped out of school prematurely or who are blue collar and hence with too limited opportunities to advance in the information based society. One of the characteristics of this needy group is that they often abhor the classroom because they have had bad experiences with it. To expect for them to go to a classroom and give up their time is to expect snow in July. What our system has to do is recognize the reason why more people do not participate in quaternary education and respond accordingly. Research in Canada, which is a good model for the USA, shows that ordinary citizens undertake a half-dozen self-initiated learning projects in the course of a year. Virtually none of them are part of any formal system.

Is there anything happening that could change the system? Yes. The most adversely affected group that is served by the educational system is business. We are all familiar with the repeated stories of the inability of corporations to hire competent people. Yet businesses have stood back from taking effective political action. Most of their actions are unfocused even when well-intentioned, and not politically powerful enough to jolt the local or the state government into basic reform. Let us hope that

something will occur to alert the business community of what it must do. That is not to say that there are not many good business sponsored programs out there, but they are not effective at the core of the problem. Changing the content and organization of the educational system to move it to responsive and responsible preparation of students for a full future life is urgently needed.

Perhaps we are closer to bringing about change than is obvious. Drawing on one of the black activists of the 1960s, Julius Lester wrote, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power Gon' Get your Mama*. To paraphrase that, educators better watch out "cause distance learning gonna eat yo lunch." Distance learning and computer-assisted learning are doing fairly well at the postgraduate level and moving into many courses in science and engineering in college. It will soon become clear that the only reason for going to college will be for those courses that absolutely require hands-on and second, to find a life's mate. Public or private education costs a family \$25,000 to \$200,000. The chance to do a fair amount of that remotely has to be appealing. That will in turn lead to a star system. Would anyone be satisfied with the best from East Nowhere College when one can get the top professors from anywhere on tape or screen? Cost effectiveness will drive business more to distance learning. The economics of potential savings will drive parents in the same direction.

At the other end of the educational system, find yourself a middle class three to seven year old and watch them. They are well on their way to becoming virtuosos with the computer. As they move on into the formal system they will find it utterly inadequate for their own level of skill. Parents will demand more, or they will withdraw their children, as about 2 percent have now done, for home-based learning. Or they will seriously augment the home-based leaning through remote learning, and the effect of that will be pressure all the way from K-12.

This brief essay cannot cover recommendations, specifics, and details of what might be done to reform the system. Where you stand in the flow may permit your advocacy or actions to improve the whole system. Colleges and universities are not noted for their collegiality, but individuals may always rise to the bait. An appeal to administrators for systemic action is also unlikely to be productive since their primary function is rearranging the deck chairs and stilling unrest. Any fundamental changes in the total system would take six to 12 years to show up, which works against any administrative hope for long range planning. Nevertheless there are things that could be done. Here are a few suggestions.

There is a great opportunity for an AAUP project involving a comparison of stratified samples of students in different curricula, in terms of occupational, income, social, and personal consequences.

A number of different groups could begin an annual inventory and evaluation of innovations five to ten years ago, to establish and certify successes.

The evaluation of remedial education tied to a report on the sources of students requiring it could be valuable in state systems, the primary appeal being to better define the effective use of resources. This could possibly motivate the state system to apply pressure to the K-12 elements in their own states.

Distinctly different for state higher education would be detailed reports on the sources of low performing students for similar feedback to those responsible for K-12.

The initiation of social responsibility reports on a department by department basis could be begun at any college or university, since there are sociologists on every campus. This could interestingly be tied to a project of the American Sociological Association. If the social responsibility reports did what I think they would, it could quickly spread across the country.

Business is the largest single organized group in the country unequivocally suffering from the deterioration in all three levels of education. In those communities where one or two businesses predominate, they have a special opportunity to organize other elements of the community into K-12 reform. Of course, business must keep its hands off any suggestion of curriculum modification, but that would take care of itself if the community reform program advocated the following:

- Eliminate everyone from the classroom who is not a teacher, with the exception of classes for the handicapped.
- Subject all teachers to a test of knowledge of their subject (I estimate that one-third would be enthusiastically retained, one-third given their walking papers, and one-third offered solid remedial training).
- Put the principals back in power; too much control has gone downtown or to the county seat.
- Provide lateral entry into teaching by substantive testing and where appropriate provide a three-month crash course in pedagogy.

The failure of the recurrent national surveys of education to bring about change has resulted from their failure to be tied to proposed actions and to groups ready to implement those actions.