
Strengths and Weaknesses of American Education

Taking the time to examine the strengths of the U.S. education system helps to put our problems in perspective, Mr. Kirst suggests. There is no evidence that abandoning our public schools will improve the situation.

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BY MICHAEL W. KIRST

THE PUBLIC education system in the U.S. has served this nation well. Today and in the future, it must meet unprecedented challenges. However, arguments about whether the performance of our students has declined over time miss the point. The 1990 Oldsmobile was better than any Olds made before. But was it good enough to meet worldwide competition in 1990? A similar question faces U.S. education: Are we good enough to stand up to worldwide competition?

The time is right to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. public education system. We need to build on its strengths and shore up its weaknesses. We know more than ever about how to do this, but serious questions remain about the resources we are willing to de-

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vote to the task and about our political will to get the job done.

WHAT IS RIGHT

Inclusiveness. The U.S. K-12 education system as we know it today was created in the mid-20th century to serve all pupils for 12 years and not weed them out at an earlier age. Until very recently, this policy provided high retention rates compared to those of other nations. Since 1970, however, other industrialized nations (e.g., Great Britain, Australia, and Japan) have increased their retention rates dramatically. The inclusiveness of our system through high school is no longer the competitive edge it once was, although 88% of our young people have earned high school diplomas or the equivalent by age 25.

Nevertheless, we should strengthen our efforts at dropout prevention and expand the second-chance opportunities we offer to dropouts who wish to resume their schooling. The GED (General Education Development) program, broad access to community colleges, and high school adult education programs are parts of the U.S. system that are frequently overlooked. Moreover, their curricular standards are a concern and need to be reviewed, but the role they play in the U.S. education system should not be underestimated.

Postsecondary education. The most commonly cited indicators of the health of education in the U.S. — international assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), scores on college entrance exams, scores on standardized achievement tests, and the results of state assessment programs — all ignore the value added by the postsecondary education system. However, in the international arena, the U.S. system of postsecondary education — including community colleges, trade schools, and universities — is one of our chief strengths.

For example, in 1988 the U.S. spent a higher percentage of its gross national product on public and private higher education than any other country in the world. Moreover, U.S. spending on higher education as a percentage of all education spending was 39.4%, compared to 20.8% for West Germany and 21.4% for Japan.¹ The principal reason for the

high level of U.S. spending on higher education is that the proportion of the population participating in higher education is greater here than in any other large nation.² But the U.S. per-student expenditure on public and private higher education is also high. For example, in 1988 the U.S. spent about \$9,844 per pupil for higher education while Japan spent \$6,105 and France, \$4,362.³

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We should also be pleased with the *total* years or days of schooling that young people in the U.S. accumulate through age 25. Much is made in the press about our 180-day school year, compared to a school year of 240 days in Japan. But it is rarely mentioned that in the U.S. the highest percentage of 24-year-olds in the world graduate from a four-year college or university. Our particular advantage is in the percentage of females who graduate from colleges and universities. The U.S. graduates 24% of its 24-year-old females; Japan, 12.4%; West Germany, 10%.

Many studies have emphasized that U.S. students complete little homework and do not work hard on academic subjects in high school.⁴ But U.S. students are often confronted with a demanding academic regimen in college. The adjustment to the academic pressures of the university in freshman year can be difficult for many U.S. students, but they do make up for the ground lost in high school.

The difficulty of the postsecondary experience in the U.S. contrasts sharply with the situation in Japan, where the university years are viewed as a time to

take it easy between the intense academic pressure of high school and the demands of Japanese business. Japanese universities are not as challenging as those in the U.S., especially for the many Japanese women, who often take a less-rigorous academic curriculum that prepares them for homemaking.⁵ A 1988 study of teacher education students in the U.S. and Japan concluded:

Although American students seem to know less about global issues than Japanese students at the beginning of college, by graduation they are performing as well. This is attributable to a considerable positive difference between U.S. freshmen and seniors, and a small difference between Japanese freshmen and seniors. This finding corroborates recent statements by Japanese scholars expressing concern about the quality of higher education.⁶

The preeminence of U.S. graduate schools is widely recognized. The U.S. attracts a large number of foreign students, and our most prestigious research universities are certainly competitive by world standards — many consider them to be the best in the world. Is there a better technical university in Japan or Germany than MIT, Cal Tech, or Stanford? Given the overall quality of all U.S. research universities, it is likely that some of the international academic gap is closed at this final stage, at least for our most outstanding science and math students.

Content standards and assessment. A recent international study concluded that U.S. 9- and 14-year-olds compared quite favorably with their counterparts in other industrialized nations in reading.⁷ While basic reading looks relatively good, we still have a long way to go before the majority of U.S. students can comprehend complex passages and grasp the tone and mood of the author. Moreover, math and science appear very weak in international comparisons. The U.S. math and science curricula do not expose the mass of students to very much problem solving, statistical inference, chemistry, or physics.⁸

Some help appears to be on the way. For example, by the end of the 1990s, the U.S. will probably have national curriculum standards and subject-matter frameworks, though not a detailed national

curriculum. Currently, de facto national “policies” are all around us – set by the school accreditation agencies, such as the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges; the College Entrance Examination Board; and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

The movement toward national content standards in various curricular areas is justified by several concerns.

- Current state and local standards for pupil achievement and teacher performance are lacking in rigor and do not provide uniform data on outcomes – data crucial for interstate or local comparisons.

- Commonly used multiple-choice tests are excessively oriented to low-level basic skills that inappropriately emphasize single right answers. Moreover, local education agencies tend to choose commercial tests that do not adequately emphasize analysis, statistical inference, mathematical problem solving, experimental science, synthesis, expository writing, and complex reading. Many widely available standardized tests – such as the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, the Stanford Achievement Tests, and the Metropolitan Achievement Tests – are

not geared to the high curricular standards of our economic competitors in Europe and Asia. Since the U.S. is involved in worldwide economic competition, complete local control of tests and curricula is a luxury we can no longer afford.

- Since the commonly used standardized multiple-choice tests are pitched at such low levels, parents and the general public receive a “phony story” that exaggerates what U.S. pupils know and can do today – compared to prior decades or to students in other nations. The “Lake Wobegon” effect, in which all the students are above average, then becomes the reality.

- U.S. tests and exams often do not have “high stakes” for the pupils who take them. Few employers look at the transcripts of high school graduates, and state assessments are not used for college entrance. The Scholastic Aptitude Test is not aligned with the high school curriculum and purports to measure “aptitude” rather than achievement.

A coalition of policy leaders has concluded that national subject-matter curricular standards that meet world-class benchmarks are needed.⁹ This coalition contends that a nationwide system of ex-

ams should be developed and aligned to these world-class standards in five core subjects – English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. Moreover, the results should be reported for individual students, and “high-stakes” decisions should be based largely on student performance. Specifically, the coalition contends that employers should use the results of national exams when hiring high school graduates and that universities should consider scores on national exams as well as high school grades. Furthermore, these initiatives for national standards need to be part of any state-level strategy for systemic reform, especially in the areas of staff development and teacher training.

Local flexibility. Despite the likely evolution of national standards, the locally based education system in the U.S. is flexible and can innovate without feeling the heavy hand of national control. The 15,000 school districts provide the U.S. with the ability to adapt to diverse local contexts. While many districts are stuck in political gridlock, others are increasingly on the move. Citizens with the resources to relocate can find many educational choices to suit their tastes. Despite growing state control, there is still a large range of options in local education. Districts differ in their mix of secondary school curricula and in their stress on extracurricular activities. They also differ in their local tax burdens.

Socialization and the common school. The U.S. system of public education has been a crucial element in unifying a nation of immigrants, producing the *unum* from the *pluribus*. More immigrants entered the U.S. in the two decades between 1970 and 1990 than in any previous 20-year period. Consequently, the need to teach community values and concepts is just as urgent as it was during the rise of common schools at the turn of the century. If the public schools do not include the vast majority of our children, the only other common transmitter of our culture will be television. And so far television does not seem to have had a positive influence on American youth.

We have lost much of the national cohesiveness that the common school crusaders helped to create. Today, powerful and well-organized interest groups – whether labor, business, or agriculture – have no inclination to unite with other



“I never really wanted to be a guidance counselor, you know. I always wanted to be a TV talk-show host.”

The U.S. has no national strategy for staff development that provides depth and breadth for its teachers.

segments of the community to explore differences and work toward the common good. Although the leaders of these interest groups are not irresponsible, they have developed attitudes that make collaboration with others almost impossible. Since each group feels that it is not getting what it deserves, the leaders are in no mood to work with others to shape a constructive future.

PROBLEMS WITH U.S. SCHOOLS

The bottom half. The U.S. is particularly weak in providing higher-order skills to those students – roughly half – who do not go on to postsecondary education. In part, this failure is caused by the declining conditions of children and the relative lack of support here for children, compared to other nations in the industrialized world.

Today, more than 20% of children in the U.S. live in poverty, up from 14% in 1969.¹⁰ The median income of families in the bottom income quintile (lowest 20%) has eroded over time, and the gap between the incomes of the poorest and wealthiest families has grown.¹¹ The decline in real income for those in the lowest quintile has been accompanied by gains for those in the top 40% of the income distribution. Race and ethnicity, gender, and family structure are strongly associated with the likelihood of living in poverty. In 1992, half of families headed by single women lived in poverty, compared to only 11.4% of two-parent families.¹²

While many children fare well in low-income households, studies have shown that children in such circumstances are more likely to die in infancy and early childhood, suffer serious illnesses, become pregnant during their teen years, or drop out of school. They are also less likely to continue education beyond high school.¹³ Despite the statistical association of these outcomes with poverty, the direction of causality is less clear. The diminished life chances of the poor may be linked to the lack of access to adequate health care and nutrition, the often lower quality of schooling in low-income neighborhoods, the stress of poverty on family relationships, or a variety of other elements.

Family structure. Traditionally, most institutions that serve children and youths make the implicit assumption that children live with two biological parents, one working in the home and the other working in the formal labor market. This traditional family type now accounts for less than one-third of all families. Forty-six percent of children live in homes in which both parents (or the only parent) work outside the home.¹⁴ Because of an increase in divorce and in the number of births to single mothers, about 60% of all children and youths will live in a single-parent family for some period of their lives.¹⁵

Teachers. While the U.S. is developing challenging and better-conceived curricula and exams, there is no commensurate effort under way to improve the training or the working conditions of teachers. Teachers still work in a structure that inhibits collaboration and professional growth. Staff development programs are typically one-shot affairs with scant follow-up and coaching. The U.S. has no national strategy for staff development that provides depth and breadth for its 2.2 million teachers. The U.S. also lacks levers to improve teacher preparation, which is largely controlled by independent universities and driven by state requirements. The probable result will be minimal classroom implementation of the high-level national content standards.

Fragmentation and gridlock. In the 1950s and 1960s, the politics of education was a “closed system” that was unresponsive to communities and political constituencies. Now the situation is quite different. Numerous actors and constitu-

encies have created a sense of fragmentation and have led to complaints that no one is in charge of U.S. education policy. This fragmentation of interests inhibits coherent reform. For example, it is very difficult to align categorical programs with the standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Moreover, it is difficult to sustain education reform over a long period of time because newly elected politicians do not generally want to continue reforms that they did not originate.

Most of the social movements of the 1990s differ from those of the 19th century that led to the creation of such social institutions as the public schools. Today, social movements are interested in challenging public institutions and trying to make them more responsive to forces outside the local administrative structure. Some would even assert that these movements help fragment decision making so that schools cannot function effectively. This conclusion is reinforced by the almost unremitting litany of the media suggesting that violence, vandalism, and declining test scores are the predominant conditions of public education.

In California, for example, this situation has become so serious that the schools increasingly suffer from shock and overload characterized by poor morale and too few resources to operate all the programs that the society expects schools to offer. The issue then becomes how much change and agitation a public institution can take and still continue to function effectively. Californians have confronted numerous initiatives, such as Proposition 13, vouchers, and spending limits. Citizens in California and elsewhere go to their local school boards and superintendents expecting redress of their problems only to find that the decision-making power rests with the state. The impression grows that *no one* is in charge of public education.

All of this does not mean that local school authorities are helpless. Rather, it means that they cannot control their agendas or shape outcomes as much as they could in the past. Superintendents must deal with shifting and ephemeral coalitions that might yield some temporary local advantages, but many important policy items on the local agenda arise from external forces, such as state and federal governments or the pressures

of interest groups, including teachers.

There is a feeling abroad in the land that the education system *cannot* be restructured on a massive scale. According to this view, the most that we can expect is incremental improvement, along with a few showcase anomalies of structural change. More "projects" do not seem to be the answer. But national exams on their own are not a sufficient policy either. Perhaps our biggest weakness is our uncertainty about what to do next in pursuit of comprehensive and systemic change.

THE WEAKNESSES of U.S. education are most evident in big cities, and the strengths are clearest in suburbs with high incomes and high levels of education. NAEP results, however, highlight significant weaknesses even in the upper ranges of achievement in terms of problem solving, synthesis, analysis, statistical inference, and comprehension of complex passages of prose.

Despite a century of education reforms, nothing much has changed at the classroom level. Reforms that have lasted have usually been structural additions that are easily monitored and create a long-term influential constituency. Some examples are vocational education and the use of Carnegie units. But overcoming the weaknesses discussed above will require reform at the lowest unit — teachers and teaching — in addition to systemic restructuring. It will also require the polit-

ical will to stick with a coherent strategy directed toward improving student outcomes in all parts of the education system. Our democracy leads us to make frequent changes in leadership, and new policy makers must overcome the tendency to throw out their predecessors' approaches automatically.

Analyses on a national scale mask urgent problems that specific U.S. regions confront. In the Southwest, for example, students with limited facility in English are a large and growing portion of the population. One of every eight schoolchildren in the nation lives in California, but more than 20% have limited proficiency in English, and by the year 2000 half of California children will be Hispanic or Asian. The educational problems of these children never make the top of national lists, which suggests that a nationwide analysis may not always lead to the right approach in specific regions.

It is probable that the Clinton Administration will focus on job creation through policies that emphasize the transition between high school and the workplace. However, it is doubtful that apprenticeships will provide a complete answer to the problems of the bottom half outlined above. It seems more likely that apprenticeship initiatives will have but scattered and limited impact. Other strategies to meet this challenge may be even less effective. Some proponents of national exams contend that, if employers ask for national exam scores, students will be motivated to work harder in school. This theory has never been tested in the U.S.

and will require large-scale mobilization of employers.

Taking the time to examine the strengths of the U.S. education system helps to put our myriad problems in perspective. There is no evidence that abandoning our public education system will improve the situation. A great deal of rhetoric and numerous theories surround the alleged panacea of choice. But the strengths of the U.S. education system are embedded in our culture and history, and we should not discard them easily or without better data about what choice would actually accomplish. The U.S. education system is gigantic, with roughly \$250 billion spent annually, 2.6 million employees, and 44 million pupils. Untested schemes, such as vouchers, are dangerous and represent a plunge into unknown waters. We already know quite a bit about systemic education reform and school improvement.



"Once upon a time, a long time ago, before there was any such thing as counseling, there lived a wicked queen and her beautiful stepdaughter."

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2. *Education at a Glance* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1992), p. 77.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
4. Joseph Murphy, *The Education Reform Movement of the 1980s* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1990), pp. 10-19.
5. Michael W. Kirst, "Japanese Education: Its Implications for Economic Competition in the 1980s," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1981, pp. 707-8. For a critique of U.S. higher education, see Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker, *Thinking for a Living* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
6. John Cogan, Judith Torney-Purta, and Douglas Anderson, "Knowledge and Attitudes Toward Global Issues: Students in Japan and the U.S.," *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 32, 1988, pp. 282-97.
7. Warwick B. Elley, *How in the World Do Students Read?* (New York: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, July 1992).
8. For direct comparisons of achievement in the U.S. with that in other nations, see *Education at a Glance*.
9. See *Raising Standards for American Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992).
10. See Harold Hodgkinson, *A Demographic Look at Tomorrow* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1992), p. 4.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7, 8.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
15. *Ibid.*; see also Marshall and Tucker, *op. cit.* K