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FEATURE STORY: A FRIENDLY BATTLE OVER CURRICULUM

Our Schools Today— Are They, In Fact, Obsolete?

by Dr. Roger Wilson



In the spring (2005) issue of this publication, my colleague, Dr. Sean Lancaster, agreed with remarks about America's public school system made by Microsoft's Bill Gates at yet another national educational summit held last February. Lancaster stated that "our schools are doing a poor job of preparing our students for the world they will encounter, and we have the means to make the kind of system change that is necessary." Gates was a tad more blunt "America's high schools are obsolete, our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded even when they're working exactly as designed [they] cannot teach our kids what they need to know today."

Where does one begin with such a statement from one whose place atop the economic pyramid commands that his utterances be given consideration? Gates, however, represents a long line of corporate leaders who have criticized public education over the decades. As I instruct my ED200 Introduction to Education students, one has only to look to the not-too-distant past to find similar contentions—1957 and the post-Sputnik response, or the 1983 Nation at Risk report where it was claimed that America was committing "unilateral educational disarmament." This latter document was instrumental in the development of our current educational regime. And yet, America remains the planet's wealthiest country with the largest national economy, largest GNP/GDP (but not the largest population), and largest per capita income. Even in this

present economic climate where companies continue to shed jobs, our economic growth still exceeds that of the European Union, and our unemployment rate is lower. Yet, we could all agree, too, that these facts mask very real social and economic inequities within our society, issues that need our greater attention, and in which the public schools have but a limited role to play.

Certainly, no one would try to argue that all is well in the public schools. And there is no doubt that Gates is well-intentioned and that the family Foundation is designed to address some of the real problems facing the educational system (nearly \$1B having been distributed). As Dr. Lancaster points out, "Bill Gates is taking a very proactive approach to the problem and spending his money in ways that will help bring about change." But as Gates' solutions demonstrate, he is a corporate leader, not a student of sociology or education. And even as a corporate leader, there is some question as to his understanding of the macro relationship between the labor market and the economy and even the society in which both are embedded.

While acknowledging the disparities in social class wealth, class relationship to minority status, and the inequities wrought upon school districts in lower income communities, Gates offers his three R remedy rigor, relevance, and relationships and he wants more college graduates (India produces more), particularly from lower SES groups. He claims that the states' curricula are

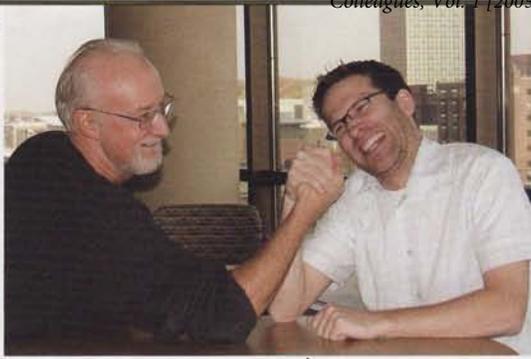
insufficiently rigorous, though, watching how they devise new ways to gerrymander their standardized test results so as to comply with NCLB, one cannot help but wonder what that rigor might look like. As with all such curricular criticisms, the questions of relevance for whom and for what arise. For Gates, relevance pertains to the students' "lives and goals." But where do standards and standardized tests fit? Must states rethink what they have devised so far? Presumably not, since Gates also draws upon International mathematics and science test comparisons (e.g., TIMSS) to build his argument about the decline in public education performance.

The three Rs are not his only remedy. He calls for "stable and effective governance[,] equitable school choice[,] performance-oriented employment agreements [and] the capacity to intervene in low-performing schools." His particular use of words remains problematic because operationalizing these terms is very different than appealing for their understanding in some common sense fashion, a nuanced difference that politicians are very conversant with. And in the case of performance-oriented employment, if private schools and past experience offer us any insight, and if implemented on a large scale, the act would only serve to further alienate educators, and exacerbate their tendency to emigrate to other employment early in their careers. The private sector, particularly the technology industry, is rife with stories about questionable employment practices.

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Having educators become part of that practice is counter-productive. It would be hard to envision Gates's third R relationships with students not suffering in such a potentially volatile work environment.



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viewpoint does not mean that I think schools do a poor job of meeting their current goals and objectives, which is what Gates would argue. He may be right or Dr. Wilson may be right . . . but

that misses my point. Today's schools are not adequately focusing on the future.

Let me describe the old model in which America dominated. We had a system that was designed to allow many students to fail because these students could fail in the system while still obtaining manufacturing jobs that had salaries high enough to raise a family. This system worked even when it failed.

Now, I want to explore the status quo that Dr. Wilson is defending. This is the world that Michael Handel, the sociologist that Dr. Wilson cites, refers to as well. We all recognize that the manufacturing jobs of yesterday are now leaving our shores and will likely not return. Further, one third of our students are failing to graduate from high school and finding the positive in American schools when so many students fail to finish this system is difficult. The wages for people who fail to graduate is no longer enough to support a family like it once did. These days, a high school graduate who does not go on to college will also find it hard to make a wage to support a family. Further, America is using a law referred to as H-1B visas to give hi-tech jobs in America to foreign workers. Last year, we filled the quota for H-1B visas almost immediately for the whole year. That shows how popular hiring these foreign workers was for American corporations. This year, we are likely increasing the number of H-1B visas issued by 50% or more to close to 100,000. Hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in the last 5 years are apparently needed to fill positions here in the U.S. because corporations say these workers are necessary for the United States to remain competitive and on top of the world. Do these indicators point to an America where our high schools are doing well? Do these indicators make our high schools appear obsolete? I think so.

Now I'd like to examine the future that America can still dominate if our educational system recognizes the need to make a change. This is not a change that is reflected today; rather, this is a change that we will realize tomorrow. This is the world I spoke about in my previous *Colleagues* interview when I mentioned that we are entering the information age. The information age is a world in which most workers are going to be using the Internet to

access information and most workers will use the Internet for communication (e.g., have you seen two high school kids have a chat via an Instant Messenger?). There is a term called "information overload" that now refers to the enormous amount of information we often encounter. The creators of Google, a popular Internet search site, used to brag that they were searching over eight billion web pages and the number of pages added to the database was increasing exponentially each day. There are nearly 23 million Internet pages related to "lesson plans." Search this phrase looking for specific information and you'll quickly be introduced to information overload. Teachers who can navigate through the millions of pages to quickly and effectively find the most appropriate lesson plans are going to save much more time and are going to be much more effective in the classroom than teachers who settle for just something that pops up first or who just give up altogether on the search process. Most other professions are relying more and more on this same information source. Who teaches these skills? Who teaches students how to search effectively? Who teaches these kids how to validate claims online? Who teaches kids how to critically analyze information?

To illustrate this point, I have an activity in an undergraduate course I teach. I send my students to one of the first websites that appears when one does a search for "Martin Luther King" — <http://www.martinlutherking.org/>. I ask the students to evaluate the site and determine its worth for high school students. More often than not, these future teachers see the domain name and the title of the website, quickly glance at the site, and decide it's clearly about Martin Luther King Jr. They conclude that the site is worthwhile. The fact is that this site was created by a white supremacist organization and relies on innuendo and speculation to present their twisted views as fact.

This example is a simple one, but one of many. The types of changes needed in our public secondary schools to address the information age require more than a tweak as Dr. Wilson would suggest. No Child Left Behind has to be reformed as the first step and that will take a major initiative. And, this is not a republican or democrat objective. Utah is a very conservative state and they were the first state to give up on NCLB. Few teachers appreciate the current NCLB law as it is enacted. I think we all agree that accountability has value. Unfortunately, how the accountability gets implemented is in need of reform so that American high schools can realize long-term success into the future; into a world of globalization and into the information age. ☹

Gates does understand that the poor will remain so unless they acquire greater education and are afforded the opportunities it typically brings. However, where Gates remains silent, and as one would expect, is on the issue of corporate responsibility. It is disingenuous for corporate leaders to decry the state of education and, by extension, labor market preparedness when their labor needs and decisions are driven by the bottom line without consideration to the needs of workers and the wider society. One understands that in a capitalist global economy that the reduction of labor costs by transnational corporations is paramount. But at a time when the same level of productivity is being achieved by a diminished workforce, expecting the next and untested generation to be able to contribute easily in some meaningful fashion to the needs of the private sector is also unrealistic. When not only "call centers" and manufacturing jobs are being sent off-shore, but also jobs involving significant intellectual capital such as programming, CAD, medical research, statistical analysis and the like, the employment preparation role of schools is tested, and unreasonably so. Labor market prediction is the realm of the DOL, not K-12. But is such skill prediction really the issue? Methinks not! For those who claim that our workforce is insufficiently educated for the new millennium, that requisite skills are not present in our young, I direct them to labor sociologist Michael Handel:

[t]here is little evidence of absolute declines in cognitive or hard skills in the United States or generally poor performance relative to other advanced industrialized countries, despite frequent extreme statements to the contrary. It is even unclear how much of any problem is a shortage of cognitive skills rather than employer dissatisfaction with effort levels or work-related attitudes.

The data is simply not good enough for anyone to claim that the country's education system is going to "hell in a hand basket" and that schools need a complete overhaul. Of course, that does not stop such statements being made.

Our education system is in need of periodic review and revision, as are all systems. The question is to what extent and for what purpose. There's no doubt that we can do a better job of educating the poor and the minorities, but unless attitudes change towards those same groups in the world of investment or venture capital or the workplace, a college degree will have its limits. ☹