

THE REAL ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Educational quality and school attainment go hand in hand and affect individual earnings, income distribution, and economic growth. The quality of education is more important in economic progress and growth than the role and the quantity of schooling. Improving educational quality requires focusing on national priorities, institutions, and efficient educational spending (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007). There is also a role to be played by leadership, but perhaps leadership at the national-directive level where the goals of a country are the factors shaping educational learning contents and standards. This paper examines the state of education and schooling in America in relation to the existing crisis which has led to increasing calls for higher attainment, more accountability, and effective leadership, higher standards, and more time in school during an academic year. The authors explore the ideological basis of American education and school systems crisis from the perspective of national responsibility and concerns of educational performance with underlying economic factors such as progress and growth as determinants and shaping the debate about schools. Finally, a proposed change in educational philosophy and perspective using comparative examples is presented as offering some possible solutions for the education and schooling crisis as experienced in the American system.

Keywords: Educational quality, School attainment, Effective leadership, School reforms, Centralization, Decentralization, Economic growth, Accountability, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION:

Educational issues and challenges are difficult to deal with because education not only represents a domain of public good, but also involves the interests of multiple stakeholders with different accountability demands and expectations. Moreover, as education is an area of public policy with large stakes in political and social order, it also strikes a unique balance between state and private individual interests, especially in a democracy where elements of centralization and decentralization prevail in the struggle over control for the education system and the various decisions affecting schools and their roles. Ideological differences at varying levels further complicate the problem of defining and identifying the real issues or issue in education in the American system. This is also typical of many democracies where representation and concepts of equality lead to disintegration of a collective mindset and approach to educational philosophy, standards, and attainment.

American patriotism is known worldwide and has created both opportunities and challenges for social institutions including education. Most Americans really do not understand that educational attainment, especially at the pre-collegiate levels, is not an area in which America excels above other nations. However, the mythological aspects of patriotism sometimes cloud the minds of educators who fully recognize the shortcomings of the American educational and school systems, but still believe that America is ahead in the education arms race, and that its students and schools are superior in achievement compared to other nations. Such attitude and misunderstanding create problems when it comes to recognizing the real problems in the American education and school systems. Cultural egocentrism prevents the recognition that there are deficiencies and inferior quality in some areas, and thus, prevents the high level of activism and drive required in making great changes and creating strong and effective policies to address educational issues appropriately. On an individual level, the average American accredits America's political and economic rank in the world simultaneously to its education system across secondary and postsecondary schools. However, what individuals do not understand is that global comparative reports on educational standards and performance, especially in the areas of Mathematics, Science and Technology say something much different. Several political and educational leaders are willing to accept and have accepted the fact that American educational system, especially at the secondary level underperforms and ranks below even some of the world's developing nations. This recognition has led to numerous calls for reform, increased accountability, and the creation of policies that are focused on improving school effectiveness, quality, and standards for greater student achievement and success.

Despite the recognition and efforts over the past several decades to rapidly position the American education system and schools to become the forerunner of global competitive achievement through human intellectual capital attainment, the results have not been great and neither have they been equivalent to landing a man on the moon. Several challenges seem to act as obstacles toward the success of these policies and programs, and the philosophy and approach to education seems quite suspect as a major factor among these. Teaching and learning in terms of curriculum in American school systems at the secondary levels and the methods of assessment are significantly different from many nations that are at the forefront of the education arms race, and may potentially hold some implications for making appropriate adjustments in American educational philosophy. In fact, financial and economic policies associated with funding rewards based on standardized tests have been heavily used in American public school system with little results for some school districts. This should lead to further examination that considers more deeply the philosophy and approach to education as a potential area where failure and shortcomings in the system originate. However, this has not been the case because of the same issues of denial associated with the patriotism-cultural egocentrism approach and the economic-financial approach to addressing education problems in the American system. Hopefully, more considerations on pedagogy and educational philosophy will become part of the solution since teaching and learning as defining education quality affect economic growth and progress.

THE CRISIS OF AMERICA'S EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SYSTEMS:

America's schools and education system are in crisis and even the recent calls by Barack Obama, the President of the United States for higher standards and academic achievement communicate the urgency of making education a priority and formidable basis for global competitiveness. America has been losing its edge in educational attainment for a long time, and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, 1983, was one of the earliest and most prominent calls for attention to this matter. Though there have been great and many efforts

directed toward school reform, development and change in educational policies and the structure of schools, schooling, and education since the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, American schools and education system are still struggling to keep up with those of other nations, even many Third World nations that are outperforming American students by far, especially in mathematics, science, and technology; three subjects generally identified as critical to national economic well-being and global progress and competitiveness (McFarlane, 2010). America's public school systems are facing the greatest challenge in their history (Hale, 1999), and academic achievement in public schools is presenting important and hard-to-deal-with challenges for educational leaders (Sweeney, 2000). As a result of these challenges and educational problems, laws have been enacted and the federal government has become more involved in education at the public school level by using funding as a catalyst for positive change in education. An example of this is the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 signed into law by former President George W. Bush.

Despite sweeping school reforms that have changed literacy in some states such as Florida and Hawaii which ranked near to the bottom over a decade ago and where national literacy rankings have now significantly improved (Ladner, Lefevre, & Lips, 2010), education is still in crisis, and students are not having their educational needs met (Willimon & Naylor, 1995) as there is a gap between what graduates know and what they need to know to be successful in today's globally competitive economic environment (Hale, 1999). Thus, sweeping reforms and the mantra of effective leadership promulgated by higher demands for accountability and change seem to have only created great interests and policy-jargons, rather than the real actions and change relevant to move American schools to the forefront and ahead of all nations. America is a nation driven by competitiveness and not used to being second or even last in anything, so why should education be an exception? The time for change to bring America's education up to par with other nations' academic achievement and performance is now and not tomorrow as America is rapidly losing its competitive edge where the production of effective and skilled knowledge workers depends so much on education and training (McFarlane, 2008).

Many practitioners, writers, and researchers have lamented on the issue and many proposals have been made for change, many fingers pointed, particularly at school district leaders such as public school superintendents (Johnston, 2000), yet no visible and clear solutions to the present and ongoing crisis in American education system have been developed to bring America on track with countries such as Sweden, France, and other nations who have high academic achievement in public secondary schools and education (Ladner, LeFevre & Lips, 2010). The tendency to throw money at each and every problem has become a weakness in the attempt to address the state of education in this nation as tax dollars have in many cases acted as a lull to the mantras for change, higher accountability, increased academic performance, tougher standards in schools, and progress. This attitude needs to change and in his recent call for a longer school year to address the school-education crisis, President Barack Obama, argued that money is not the solution to America's declining academic standing or achievement in education (Goodwin, 2010). The call for a longer school year by the President comes from the recognition that those nations that are America's global competitors and outperforming America in educational achievement and quality, especially in secondary public education, have longer school years. Many educational leaders, policymakers, politicians, teachers and citizens have jumped on the bandwagon opposing and supporting the President's call for a longer school year. However, it is not certain if this will bring expected results in terms of students' achievement and performance in schools, especially if the real problem lies in the administration of education and the foundational or philosophical approach to education in American society. Longer school years will only add more hours of schooling just as building more schools and admitting more students have merely achieved anything except quantity rather than quality results.

THE REAL PROBLEM:

The real culprit that many practitioners and writers, policymakers and debaters are not willing to point to as the problem creating and causing America's school systems and education crisis stems from two intervening and intertwining, interrelated and interdependent factors: discipline and quality. The fact is that education and schooling on both individual and group levels have never been totally successful or effective without discipline, even when quality design and implementation are inherent in curriculum planning. Furthermore, there is also a lack of focus on quality in modern education, especially in American society where hypercompetitive struggles among schooling and educational institutions have pushed to the forefront a focus on the bottom line, even in public education. Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) have communicated this by stating that ignoring quality

differences significantly distorts the view of how educational and economic outcomes are related. There has been a tendency toward schooling rather than education in the present school economy or schooling economy (McFarlane, 2010), and this has created a focus on quantity rather than quality issues – how many graduates rather than the quality and true cognitive skills that affect interpersonal and community progress. America has far too long compromised its standards in education and academic achievement in an effort to level a society consistent with macro-sociological conceptions of universal equality where uniqueness among individuals account for differences in capacity for learning and academic achievement.

America has finally realized that years of increased and constantly increasing schooling opportunities have not delivered completely on the promise as drivers of economic success (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007), and this has brought shock and discontentment to a powerful nation which is rapidly losing its edge in marketable skills, economic achievement, and intellectual prominence. The most frightening and apprehensive implications perhaps are those which will lead even some unhappy Americans to admit that Americans are indeed far less capable intellectually than their counterparts – and this is definitely not the case. There is a lack of quality expectation and performance plaguing America's secondary public schools as diversity and inclusion policies must work to flex standards for those who are either not capable of learning, not motivated to learn, or who simply see no value in mental exercise in a formal education setting. The need for change is one that should take place in curriculum and standards so as to reshape the attitudes toward, and perceptions of education and its importance in human development and growth, and its importance to the nation's growth and progress, rather than as an economic pathway to walking the streets of gold. America needs to reinvigorate its roots and prune its branches to mirror the standard and quality that once characterized education and schooling when Ralph Waldo Emerson was a boy and William Jennings Bryan wrote his "Cross of Gold" speech. This particular statement refers to the passion which once defined America and Americans as far as such a virtue and privilege as education is concerned. It also points to a common good which brought people of faith together to make significant change and establish firm standards by which success was measured.

Perhaps our designation as a "cheating culture" (Callahan, 2004) explains our reluctance or ignorance to point to the real issue in education and school failure in America, or perhaps we have become a "lying culture" as well, even though cheating and lying are inseparable and interdependently sustaining twins. Perhaps this "profound moral crisis that reflects deep economic and social problems in American society" (Callahan, 2004, p. 13) as seen in our pervasive cheating across occupations and institutions is the real reason why we have failed to understand, pretend not to understand, or feigned ignorance to the real problem in education; a problem of quality education versus schooling. McFarlane (2010) defines schooling as "the process of enrollment, registration, matriculation, studying, and ultimately ends with graduation from a school and its programs" (p. 45) and education as "the knowledge, understanding, social and technical skills gained in order to better understand and identify with the world and people around us" (p. 45), clearly pointing out that there is a difference between schooling and education. This raises the quality issue, which Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) account for in defining the differences in economic growth among nations where quantity or amount of schooling is emphasized over quality of schooling or quality of education. According to Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) evidence suggests that educational quality is directly related to school attainment. Thus, a problem of quality coupled with declining levels of discipline in American education and school systems can negatively impact school attainment.

When America begins to understand the true connection between quality and economic growth - and it is getting there through tough lessons, there will be higher academic standards, higher accountability and more effective leadership to change America's education and school systems, rather than the present dollar-infusion and blame-game approaches. Each and everyone will start taking the responsibility for bettering the nation through education as America's competitive edge continues declining, costs of living and survival struggles increase, and living standard crawl to bare minimum for more and more citizens, especially those who once enjoyed opulence before America schooling systems totally fail to drive the expected economic success and progress for individual American families and the nation as a whole.

Mathematics and science scores have been two major sources of the measure of the quality of education among nations and America has not been doing well for sometime. In fact, mathematics and science scores over international tests which have been used and interpreted as a proxy for the average educational performance of whole labor forces (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007) have shown America to be far behind

some developing countries, and this is especially troubling as large and emerging competitive powers such as China, Sweden, France, Canada, among others outperform America in more than these two aspects of secondary, and even tertiary education. While the United States Department of Education and State and local government education departments have maximized efforts to focus on developing solutions to the education and school crisis, solutions that seem to communicate the identification of the real problem with American education and schooling systems seem to be far off. District leadership has been blamed for failure in public schools (Johnston, 2000) and most solutions have been developed to address leadership rather than followership or issues of discipline and standards.

After dedicating so much money and time to addressing and resolving the school systems and education crisis and after recognizing that there is little to no change in the nation's level of academic achievement, especially in secondary education or K-12 systems, there should be a realization that perhaps the issue is not one of leadership present or absent, but pedagogical in nature and cause. It is the curriculum and educational philosophy that determines educational quality rather than schooling in terms of quantity or amount of school (Ladner, LeFevre & Lips, 2010; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; McFarlane, 2010). Education in America is indeed in bad need of reform, but the extent and type of reform seems to be evading all actions, solutions, thoughts and efforts to sufficiently and once and for all fix the problem. Perhaps the inability to accomplish this is also evidence of the weakness of the education system and system of schooling at a broader level. Thus, the question is, why can't we find leaders to effectively come up with a genius solution to the existing education and school systems crisis? Perhaps there are too many stakeholders and investors holding different interests in and expectations for the American public school system. Democrats want to approach the problem in one way; Republicans another way, liberals and conservatives in their own ways, and policymakers and educators still have even different perspectives on the problem and potential solutions. At which crossroad will all these stakeholders meet to resolve a problem that has been left to ferment for far too long? Before we reach that crossroad it might be too late and the nation perhaps might slip too far to even recover and regain what has been lost in educational quality, achievement, and standard.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHANGE:

Finding a solution to the problem of America's education and schooling systems is extremely difficult because of the cultural, social, economic, political and ideological divisions in America, and the varied and many controversial or class issues and viewpoints that surround the issues of schooling, schools, education, and educational policymaking. In a democratic society where everyone must be heard and all stakeholders must be considered as important, issues that affect the entire community or society can often end up as a perpetual debate. When such a debate goes on for too long it becomes a culture in and of itself. This can be seen in the issues surrounding education and schooling. A culture of reform, tax dollars solution, standardized testing, accountability implementation, calls for higher standards, focus on district leadership, and alternative school developments seen in charter schools proliferation has emerged from the debates over and attempts to solve the education and school problem. However, they have been perpetuated without significant results and progress in the way of what is truly desired: taking America's education to the level where it is number one or close to number one in terms of global prominence, attainment in secondary education via mathematics and science test scores, and knowledge worker conceptual and cognitive skills that positively affect economic growth. Whatever solution is developed to answer the system-wide need for improved education and more effective schools, it must be based on the firm recognition and a philosophy built on acknowledging and fostering an understanding that "Educational quality - measured by what people know - has powerful effects on individual earnings, on the distribution of income, and on economic growth" (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007, p. 2), and thus direct citizens to embrace a national patriotism in education. A potential consideration to address and resolve the current crisis in educational standard and school attainment in America is to develop and impose a national uniform curriculum, one which perhaps models those curriculums of States ranking continuously in the top five among the 50 states in national literacy ranking. This would require a Federal mandate to dictate a national curriculum in accordance with nationally established and devised goals to face the problems and challenges of today and the future. Today's schools and education system in America are too individually-oriented rather than collectively-oriented. Thus, underperforming schools and students must hamper the progress and achievements of those school systems doing an excellent job through higher standards and higher teacher quality and expectations to reflect market

equality. The decentralization of education perhaps is part of the dissipating factor in educational decline as too many stakeholders are able to manipulate educational policies and standards for their own selfish benefits rather than for national progress. This is not advocating a communist or socialist agenda in education, but brings identity back to where education as a common good meant a united and collective approach and outlook to education and school outcomes. This means that standards must be nationalized rather than individualized following the examples of many Caribbean nations where previously before a stride toward Americanization and globalization, these nations focused mainly on educating a populace in accordance with national needs. Perhaps individualist societies from a Hofstedian perspective are very predisposed to focus more on education as a domain of individual autonomy rather than as collective economy. If such is the case, then America's education and school systems are doomed to a declining constant which will perpetuate until declination is no longer possible as far as the definition of "lowest standard" possible in educational attainment is concerned. On the other hand, if there are no differences in educational focus between collectivist and individualist societies, then perhaps America's real problem lies in its approach to education, which consequently is bound in the social constructs of a society.

A national curriculum designed around the needs and goals of the nation and federally mandated as to ensure uniformity in learning, quality, and standards would eliminate some of the competitive factors that characterize and define education and schooling in the United States. It would ensure that equality in schools prevails as in small island nations where a central ministry administers both approval and control over educational direction. This national curriculum would include a mandatory education developed around civic disciplines such as philosophy, ethics, political economy, geography and history, and applied disciplines such as science, mathematics and technology, while ensuring that basic education is afforded to each citizen in the way of being a functionally productive member of society or a universally educated individual capable of understanding both civic responsibility and the requirements of national progress. This nationally mandated and common curriculum would focus on developing individuals relative to national needs with one national standard defining proficiency. This is similar to the Caribbean regional examining body of the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) member nations where students tend to have a regional common measure of educational standard and expectations designed by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). This has structured the education of nations in the region to derive a similar curriculum preparing students for a five-year educational learning plan where students will take examinations to achieve defined levels of proficiency consistent with standards defined by the Council.

In many Caribbean and other nations where the systems of education and schooling are known for quality, rigor, and standards rather the schooling quantity, education is a centralized business overseen and approved by a department called a "Ministry of Education" which guides and determines educational policies and curricula per membership and common vision with the Caribbean Examinations Council. As a result, the level of literacy in the region, especially in common subjects or disciplines is relatively close and nations in the region hardly achieve a competitive advantage over each other in those key areas of education because all are functioning from a high standard roster and curriculum. America is a very big nation and the administration of education from a centralized philosophical focus is a difficult task if not impossible where education has long been connected to individuals' definitions and perceptions of political autonomy and self-determination defined under Constitutional charters. However, where a national priority becomes an urgency of the nation's pathway, there needs to be an avenue for a wise government to flex its legislative muscles to develop, implement, and mandate new standards as needed without incurring the accusations of tyranny or communistic-socialistic control. Education and schooling will not improve significantly in America to address the national education and schooling crisis until a nationalistic-collective approach to reform can take place.

CONCLUSION:

As we look toward politicians and government, school district leaders and expert practitioners for solutions to America's education and school systems problem, we must consider how much this nation and the world have changed over the past five decades and how these changes have affected our social and cultural values to create generations that grow increasingly different from those of yesteryears, and increasingly disconnected to collective well-being. We must recognize how the shift from liberal-arts focused education to education of and about individuals, industries, and business has affected the purpose and pace of learning. Educational-differential standards are certainly not the solution to building a system of shared values and

beliefs no matter how much diversity is valued and embraced. The affiliation and identification with a group must be deep enough to retain a common thread of understanding; and in case of society, this thread of understanding must encompass educational thought and achievement relative to the contemporary, evolving, and emerging needs of a nation state.

The proposal of a nationally-derived solution based on centralized educational ideology as a means for addressing and resolving current educational and school crisis is the most viable solution where prevailing divisional factions and factional understanding prevent progress as a culture of inactions and words. America needs to develop quick and effective solutions to address educational and schooling deficiencies and under-performance in order to secure its future in a world of change and uncertainty as resources decrease and global competition constrains growth opportunities for nations. Developing an effective solution requires agreement from the varied and many stakeholders who are shaping educational and schooling policies and practices. This also means a greater presence of the federal and state governments in educational planning, curriculum implementation and administration, and in the definition, development and application of standards defining literacy across states and school systems. Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) and Ladner, Lefevre, and Lips (2010) have shown that educational quality needs to be the predominant focus of improvement efforts; a focus on education rather than on schooling (McFarlane, 2010), since the purpose of schooling is education. Attempts at expanding access have failed to improve education and have proven that more schools and schooling options are not the solutions to America's education crisis. The neglect of quality as the appropriate index for measuring education has led nations to increase the number of schools dramatically over years, and this has in turn increased per capita literacy only where quality or standards have experienced significant or equal increase. Adding educational quality to all school reform efforts points education in the right direction as an institutional economic framework for value creation is firmly established to guide the teaching and learning processes. America has a crisis on its hand and it must be urgently addressed because human value is the most sustainable resource this nation can invest in to compete successfully and survive current and emerging global transformations.

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