

# Excuses & Complacency Will Not Help Our Schools

I'm puzzled by educators who propose to improve our schools with excuses and complacency. According to these people, our schools were good enough when they were children, and they're good enough now. For example:

- Gerald Bracey, formerly of the National Education Association, claims that public schools have never been better.
- A group from the Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque claims that all is well in our educational system except for schools in the inner cities.
- Iris Rotberg of the National Science Foundation claims that the international tests on which our students do so poorly are invalid measures of learning.
- Many researchers claim that concerns about the quality of U.S. education are vastly overrated.
- Colleges of Education claim that they are "leading the way" to greater scientific literacy.

These people want us to believe that all is well in our schools and that we should relax. Such an approach is, of course, convenient: It's always easier to deny the existence of a problem and do nothing than it is to solve the problem. Similarly, it's easier to demand complacency than to acknowledge these facts:

- SAT scores have declined steadily during the past 20 years (e.g. scores on the verbal aptitude test reached a historic low in 1991). We are supposed to believe that these and similar findings mean that "achievement in American schools is as high as it's ever been."
- During the past 30 years our schools have assigned less homework, required less reading and writing, replaced required courses with nonacademic electives and given inflated grades. We are supposed to believe that these and similar trends have increased stu-

dent achievement and have produced students better prepared for productive careers.

- Our students' performances on international standardized tests have been awful. Critics excuse these results by saying that comparing our students with their counterparts in other countries is "unfair" because it's "like comparing apples and oranges." We educate everyone, the critics claim, while other countries educate only the elite. This excuse is groundless. For example, Japan retains *more* students in high school than we do; these students also consistently outperform our students. Similarly, the enrollment of 13-year-olds in the U.S. is the same as in Canada, Spain, Ireland, Korea and the United Kingdom. However, our students do worse on tests than do their counterparts from any of these countries. Nevertheless, we are supposed to believe that our students' poor scores on tests mean that our students excel.
- Students in Japan and Korea are assigned twice as much homework as are U.S. students and get a steady diet of science and math in grades K–12. Meanwhile, nearly one-third of America's high schools do not offer a course in physics, and more than 40 percent of 11th graders in public school take *no* science. We are supposed to believe that the low emphasis on science in our schools has no effect on students' ability to contribute to and benefit from the science and technology that produce jobs and drive our economy.
- When comparing scores on math tests, the highest-scoring American schools ranked below the lowest-scoring Asian schools. A recent study done at the University of Michigan suggests that such problems are due partly to our schools and partly to parental attitudes. Asian parents believe that success results from hard work and diligence. Consequently, they expect more from their students and allocate more time for learning. Conversely, American parents believe that success—academic and otherwise—results from "luck" and "native ability." Consequently, they are more complacent and more easily satisfied than are Asian parents, regardless of their child's performance. Many parents could care less if their children learn science and math. We are supposed to believe that student performance is not affected by our low expectations and lack of accountability.
- The average Japanese school has more than 40 students per teacher (double the ratio for schools in the U.S.). Nevertheless, 98 percent of Japanese 18-year-olds graduate from high school (the U.S. average is 72 percent). The superior work force and work ethic in Japan largely explain why Japan has perfected many of the products that we invented (e.g. television, facsimile machines, etc.). Indeed, we watch television; Japan makes them. Once upon a time, we believed in hard work, too.
- Teachers' unions claim that one of their missions is "to improve our schools." Yet they oppose most attempts to improve schools (e.g. by rewarding effective teaching with merit pay). The latest example of this involved the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which announced its opposition to legislation that would:
  1. Abolish teacher tenure and seniority-based entitlements
  2. Impose merit-based standards for teachers
  3. Establish minimum standards in math, science, English and social studies for graduation.

We are supposed to believe that these unions exist primarily to "improve our schools."

- Colleges of Education should train effective science teachers. Instead, they lead the way to our ever-growing problem of scientific illiteracy. Although faculty of Colleges of Education typically award much higher grades than do faculty of other colleges (at least at my university and all six of those that I surveyed this week), their graduates know less about science than do graduates of all other colleges. Indeed, according to the National Science Foundation, only 10 percent of education majors are literate in science (by comparison, 27 percent of students who majored in science and engineering are considered literate in science). As pointed out by Frederick Bernthal, deputy director of NSF, "The

graduates entrusted with teaching our children . . . scored the lowest. This is a devastating indication for the future of science and math education in this country." While Colleges of Education manufacture accreditation programs, certification programs and doublespeak to try to validate what they do, their graduates—the ones who go on to teach science in K-12—know less about science than do other graduates who do not teach.

Our choices for improving our schools are relatively simple. We can continue to whine, make excuses and blame others while doing nothing to hold ourselves accountable. Or we can assume responsibility for our educational problems by implementing the many excellent ideas already proposed for improving our schools (e.g. imple-

menting merit pay and a more demanding and rigorous curriculum, firing incompetent teachers and administrators, eliminating the "education" major for undergraduates and stressing discovery-based learning). These reforms must be based on what was once the American Spirit: good ideas and hard work, not whining and excuses.

The greatest weapon that any country can have is an excellent work force. The best way to produce an excellent work force is to invest in and have high expectations of our schools, teachers and students. By investing in our schools, we invest in our economic future.

Randy Moore  
Editor

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