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The Latest Crisis over Education

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Recently Americans got some more bad news about public schools- 35 percent of high school seniors failed the national civics examination. Only 26 percent had "proficient" knowledge of the subject.

The response was predictable. Education Week, a weekly paper for teachers and education scholars declared, "Beyond Basics, Civics Eludes U.S. Students." Bill Bennett, while plugging his latest hefty tome, *The Educated Child*, told Larry King, " Yes, there is a crisis. There's a crisis of performance." And it's not, Bennett says, limited to civics. "Our SAT and NAEP (national assessment scores) in math, are not as high as they were in the late '60s." The Sacramento Bee and Atlanta Journal Constitution shuddered and uttered that this lack of civics education imperiled American democracy. Meanwhile the Denver Post spoke darkly of a "downward spiral" wherein today's young idiots pass on their ignorance to their offspring who eventually do likewise.

The response was mild compared to last year. In early 1998 there was a full blown politico-media freak out when the results of the Third International Math and Science Study were released. American high school seniors placed nineteenth out of twenty one states in math, beating only Cyprus and South Africa. Congress held hearings to wring their hands and fight over what was to be done. Business Week carried a piece that claimed that poor science and math skills threatened these youths' futures in the increasingly technology-oriented job market. The Bergen Record howled "no more excuses for poor performance."

Interestingly, American test scores have been low for decades. Though critics often point toward the late sixties as a better time in education, even then scores were mediocre. In 1967 the average American College Test (ACT) score was 19.9 out of a possible 36. In 1967 the average Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) math-verbal composite score was 1048 out of a possible 1600, which isn't exactly genius-level performance.

As for the change in scores over the past thirty years, standardized test scores were at their highest in the late sixties, then fell steadily until about 1981, thereafter creeping up to their present position just under their late sixties peak. In terms of raw

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numbers, on the (ACT) the average score actually rose slightly, from 19.7 in 1967 to 20.3 in 1998. SAT verbal scores slid from 543 in 1967 to 505, SAT math scores from 516 to 511.

So academic achievement hasn't been stellar since at least the late sixties. I say at least because during World War II the New York Times surveyed seven thousand students in thirty-six colleges. They found that these elite few (not to be confused with the many common Americans shipped off to fight) were profoundly ignorant of U.S. history, discovering, for example, that just 16 percent of students could name two contributions Thomas Jefferson made to American life.

Indeed, Americans have probably never been particularly well schooled. Richard Hofstadter, a historian who authored, *Anti-Intellectualism in America*, back in 1962, argued that Evangelism and pragmatism had always reigned in America, to the detriment of education and deep thinking. Over a hundred years earlier Alexis de Tocqueville had said roughly the same in *Democracy in America*. "Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusive commercial habits...seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts."

The question arises, then, if students have been performing so terribly for so long, why is it that of only late that the cries have become so loud? Half a century ago attack-books like *Quackery in Education* blasted the public schools and declared them a haven of boobery. But these tracts were dismissed as the work of extremists, which they were. And until George H. Bush arrived, no president spoke of becoming "the education president." It just wasn't a national issue.

This all changed in 1983 with the release of the report, *A Nation At Risk*. Commissioned by Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report declared,

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world...[T]he educational foundations of society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.

And the media and public ate this up. Pundits chattered about the crisis in education, and opinion polls suddenly registered widespread discontent with the state of the public schools.

Why this report had such a powerful effect is hard to say. Yes, at the time test scores had dropped, but something more was going on. Unlike previous screeds against public schools, this one was published by the government in Washington, D.C. One also has to wonder if it was also a matter of America's Evangelical conscience having a flare up, a kind of educational Great Awakening. After the riotous sixties, Vietnam, Watergate, and the self-indulgent seventies, perhaps many folks felt it was time for America to be reborn. They had, remember, in 1980

elected Reagan who promised a sunny return to greatness.

And let's not forget about the Japanese. While America's economy had suffered stagflation and then recessions during Carter's and Reagan's first years, Japan was soaring. It was at this time that talk flew over the superiority of the Japanese form of management, the superiority of the Japanese approach to managing the economy, and so forth. Contrarians on the left rightly pointed out that the fear of falling behind the Japan and the other Asian Tigers in the race for wealth and technology was on the minds of the commission who penned *A Nation At Risk*. A sizable number of its members were business people.

Thereafter, the trajectory is clear. A few years after *A Nation At Risk* came the governors' education summit in North Carolina, then George Bush's America 2000 and Bill Clinton's Goals 2000, both of which sought to raise academic achievement by encouraging states to raise their educational standards and assessments. In the states, policymakers began doing this and trying to "shake up the system." Right now they're experimenting with charter schools, voucher programs, and proposals that would link teacher and principal pay and continued employment to student test scores. Private schooling companies are popping up like daisies. The Edison Project, the biggest of the bunch, runs 51 schools in a dozen states. In short, critics' complaints have been heard.

So what's to come? Well, the economy has been booming for years and Japan's economy is in the doldrums. Drug use has dropped since the seventies and America stands indisputably as the only superpower. Happy days are here again.

So maybe this whole school reform movement will peter out. Indeed, the very success of the American economy in the face of the educational underachievement might be taken as evidence that the link between test scores and the Dow Jones Industrial is tenuous at best.

But don't bet on it. One can wonder whether the push to improve American education is just a capitalist plot. The reform movement is in fact widely supported by the business community. One can also be annoyed by Bennett's and others' hyperbole.

Still, the critics of American public education have a strong argument. What can be said for an educational system that graduates students who have a weak grasp of math, science, history, and the rest? One exam found that just 8 percent of high school seniors know that Rubens was a painter, 37 percent that Shakespeare wrote "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and but half that Montana borders Canada. Other exams have shown that students are fantastically unaware of the basics in American history, are especially unfamiliar with literature by women and minority writers, and know almost nothing about foreign cultures. How can this be good?

Americans for the most part may not be intellectuals. They do, however, know the value of a tax dollar and do demand bang for their bucks. With so many students doing so poorly it's not likely that taxpayers will feel they're getting their money's worth. Until they do, the reform movement will likely roll on.

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