

Slaying the God of Economic Utility: The Last Best Hope for America's Educational Enterprise

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The United States may be a largely monotheistic nation, but certain societal elements have nevertheless acquired god-like status. The late Neil Postman famously described this process in his provocative book, *The End of Education* (1995). With respect to the educational endeavor in the United States, Postman identified the largest and most powerful god as one concerned near-exclusively with economic productivity, that is, the god of economic utility. Why do we go to the trouble of providing free schools for all children? Ask any politician in the United States today and you will hear some reference to the economy. One or two of the more thoughtful politicians might add something about citizenship as an afterthought, but make no mistake about it, the common sense, and commonly-held, opinion among politicians and the general public is that schools are designed to serve society by producing youth who are equipped with the skills required by the world of work.

seemingly have no qualms about berating the nation's public schools for not doing the job to their satisfaction. Yet these same CEOs collectively spend billions each year trying to create unthinking, irresponsible consumers out of our children. Our kids are battered with messages telling them that whatever it is they want, "it's priceless"—or that they should "live richly." No need to work for anything—just use the card. They are told, ceaselessly, that in order to be cool, in order to have friends, in order to be loved, they must look a certain way, buy a certain product, and remain faithful to certain aspirations. In short, they must "be like Mike." The commercial messages aimed at our youth are distracting at best, in terms of the educational lives of our children, and most likely downright harmful. But these messages yield power and profit for some and so they continue, genuine concerns about America's poor educational performance notwithstanding.

Why is there no legislation that would prevent corporations from deliberately targeting children? Why is

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Prophets of the god of economic utility, CEOs from major corporations,

there no collective will to generate cultural norms that would protect children from efforts to turn them into unthinking consumers? Why is it that the average middle school student in this country can correctly identify over 1,200 corporate logos, but fewer than 12 plants native to their place on earth? Part of the answer to these questions is connected to the near-exclusive control of print and broadcast media by for-profit corporations. The “media monopoly,” as Benjamin Bagdikian calls it, possesses an unprecedented ability to dictate, and put parameters around, what Americans think about and discuss (Bagdikian, 2004). The media in this country have been totally complicit in the effort to remake our educational system into a societal institution subservient to Postman’s god of economic utility. For more on this topic readers should consult the work of media scholars like Bagdikian, Robert McChesney, Noam Chomsky, and others. However, for a full explanation of why our educational efforts became tied to economic needs we need to start at the beginning—the very outset of the American experiment.

Some Useful History

Our founding fathers were doing something quite extraordinary during the 1770s and 1780s. They were fashioning an alternative to feudal arrangements that had been in place for centuries. To do this, they needed to come up with answers to three perennial questions, three questions that all societies must answer, questions they cannot fail to answer, in fact. 1) How will we govern ourselves? 2) How will we meet our needs? And, 3) how will we educate our youth? The Enlightenment schol-

ars who focused on these questions put varying emphasis on one over another, because the answer to one will necessarily affect the answer to the others.

Without delving into too much history, suffice it to say that most of America’s leading Enlightenment spokespersons, like most Enlightenment scholars generally, felt that the economic question was primary—and that answers as to how to do politics and education should necessarily follow in the wake of the answer to the economic question. The supreme value driving the Enlightenment was human freedom—and when this value was inserted into the economic question, capitalism was born, or so many have argued.

When the economic question was viewed as primary, the answers to how to do politics and education became predictable. An economic arena defined by freedom meant a government that would protect economic freedom and an educational system that would promote economic wherewithal. In broad strokes, this is what has taken place in the United States. Granted, there has been resistance to this formula over the years, sometimes significant resistance, but the centrality of economics defined by freedom as the definitively American answer to the economic question has never been broken—even when that centrality led to a total economic collapse in 1929 and a near-total collapse in 2008.

The amazing staying power of the American perspective, the degree to which we cling to “free market economics” and pay homage to the god of economic utility, is tied to the eigh-



teenth century arguments made in an attempt to undermine the power of feudal arrangements. It turns out, according to Enlightenment scholars, that freedom is the “natural” condition of humankind, and that anyone who questions a free economic market is going against the “laws of nature.” To operate in accordance with “natural law” certain political changes needed to be made, like giving all male property-owners the right to vote, separating church and state, and creating a judicial branch that might rule on conflicts that occur in the economic arena. In short, it all unfolded as planned in the English colonies on the North American seaboard.

Speaking in general terms, once again, most post-feudal nations soon identified the downside of an economic arena defined by freedom and made “adjustments” to their economic theory. Karl Marx looms particularly large in this transition, despite the degree that he has been cast as the devil incarnate. Adjustments came to the United States, too, in the form of abolition of slavery, the establishments of city parks, the reform of prisons and asylums, the establishments of free public schools, the extension of suffrage to all males and, eventually, all females, the establishment of police and fire forces, social security, Medicaid and Medicare, etc.

Still, on virtually every measure of democratic health and well-being, the U.S. lags behind the top 25 modern democracies (Dahl, 2002). We have not made the adjustments that others have. For example, we are the only modern democracy that denies health care to millions of its citizens, resulting in tens of thou-

sands of needless deaths each year. It is not the citizen’s right to life that matters in America, but the return on an investment in health insurance corporations. We do nothing to protect American jobs from exportation—in fact, the 109th Congress actually created a tax incentive for corporations willing to export jobs—a certain strategy for raising stock prices. Yet another telling example that most Americans are unaware of is the fact that Congress passed legislation permitting the use of gas in meat packages so that red meat will stay red longer and not turn a darker color as quickly. This enables meat packaging operations to command top prices far longer than when the meat began to turn brown after a few days. This is an instance where Congress passed a law directly benefiting corporate agribusiness by condoning the intentional deception of American citizens, and many such examples abound. It should be clear at this point why economics is deemed to be the defining characteristic of the human condition and why the god of economic utility reigns supreme as the greater arbiter of educational policy and practice. As well, it should be clear why those with economic power are free to teach our youth what it means to be cool or how it is that they can make themselves liked or loved, and why no one cares much about the educational damage done in the process.

Blaming Schools for Tough Economic Times

The rhetoric of certain American CEOs notwithstanding, there is a truth that few people want to face or even admit, and that is that the problems in America’s public



schools—and you can name your problem of choice—poor test performance, the achievement gap, rising drop-out rates, bullying, violence, disrespect, disengagement, disinterest, you name it—any and all of these problems are only minimally related to what goes on in the nation’s classrooms. I will come back to this, but I’m going to stop on this note just long enough to do a little international rating comparison. If we put the nation’s educational performance up against other public policy driven enterprise in American society—even using the statistics cited by America’s harshest public school critics—you find that our schools are actually doing remarkably well.

One of the figures you’ll hear tossed around is that the U.S. ranks 23rd, internationally, in terms of student academic performance (Anderson, 2010). This is actually based only on student performance in reading, math, and science, and we only end up that low when 12th grade scores are figured in—we fare much better through grade eight, and I should also point out that many of the kids in other countries ahead of us on the list are taking these tests at age 20 or 21, compared to 17 and 18 in the U.S.—but ignore all of that. Assume the #23 figure is 100 percent accurate.

Then, let’s look at health care. Most Americans are not aware of the analogous ranking for the nation’s health care performance. It turns out that our collective health care enterprise ranks #37 in international comparisons (Murray & Frenk, 2010). If our schools are #23 and this means we have to totally re-do the way teachers are prepared, what does that suggest for the way America’s physicians

are prepared? If being #23 means we need to have a calculated plan to cut the power of teacher unions, what does being #37 mean for the power of the AMA?

I’m not proposing that we draw an exact analogy, or that there aren’t other issues that come in to play when these sorts of comparisons are undertaken, but the basics are clear enough—America’s schools, #23 in the world; America’s hospitals and clinics, #37 in the world. The reason you won’t find people complaining and writing op-ed essays about the poor performance of America’s health care system is because it hasn’t had to put up with a decades-long corporate and governmental attack in the same way that schools have. Whether you are looking at schools or hospitals you will actually find the very same phenomenon—those that perform poorly are in the nation’s poorest places—those that are indeed world class are located in the richest neighborhoods.

In fact, if we used only the public schools located in the nation’s richest neighborhoods, and claim that they represent all American schools, we would find that we jump all the way from #23 to #1 in international comparisons. If we simply pick those states that historically have been top performers and allow them to represent all schools across the country: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, we jump all the way from #23 to the top ten. There are reasons for all of this, but once again, very few of these reasons have much to do at all with the professional performance of teachers or administrators. There is a dirty little secret in the education



business, a secret so well kept that many teachers and administrators aren't really aware of it at all. The secret is that human learning is so nuanced, so complex, so intertwined with such a long list of variables, that quite frankly, we are not very good at trying to measure it. If we would listen to the nation's most sophisticated psychometricians, individuals like Bob Linn at the University of Colorado, we'd know this. They have consistently argued that we should not be using tests for high-stakes decisions—yet their advice is routinely ignored (Linn, 2005). In fact, tying teacher salaries to student test scores is a big part of the "Race to the Top" initiative. The rationale for this practice rests exclusively on consistent research results which demonstrate that the largest single in-school variable related to test performance is the teacher. The problem with this is that the most important word in that sentence is often ignored or deleted altogether: that word is "in-school." It turns out that in terms of statistical power, in-school variables, including the performance of a teacher, pale in comparison to out-of-school variables. Let me share just a couple of examples. An eighth grade boy gets on the bus in the morning ready to head to school and sit for a battery of standardized exams. Only to his surprise, he sees his girlfriend sitting with another boy. This circumstance, this moment of adolescent trauma, can wipe out a year's worth of instruction as measured by exams given that day. Or think about this. A week, or even a month, before tests are to be taken, a young girl receives an email from her father telling her how horrible her mother is—and this girl is supposed to do her best on a standardized exam? It's taken us a

long time to get to this point, but we now know that having stressed parents negatively affects a student's ability to focus and to learn (Matè, 2008). And there are a lot of stressed parents out there.

These are just a few of the infinite number of out-of-school variables that can have a larger impact on test scores than curriculum or instruction. But, it turns out that our standardized tests are very good at one thing, and this is the key ingredient in terms of fully understanding our educational dilemmas in this country. Standardized tests are much better at predicting household income than they are at predicting future academic performance. In other words, statistically speaking, the higher the household income, the higher the test score. When I say statistically speaking, I mean the larger the unit of analysis—and in the United States we're talking about a sample size of millions--the more confidence we can have in this trend. Are there exceptions? Yes, tens of thousands all across the country. And more's the pity, actually. These exceptions inhibit the ability of Americans to see the overall trend. But it is this sensitivity to household income that explains why if we pick and choose schools from the nation's wealthiest suburbs to represent the U.S. in international comparisons, we jump from #23 to #1. It is this sensitivity to household income that has forced supporters of testing to cling to the "value-added" notion—meaning, we know poor kids will score low, so we must measure what kind of gain a teacher produces during a year. The trouble is, at least at this point in time, according to Berkeley's Jess Rothstein, who served for many years as the



chief economist in the Department of Labor, the research surrounding attempts to capture a value-added measure suggests that it is little better than a coin flip (Rothstein, 2010).

For parents, or teachers for that matter, interested in improving the coin flip odds, they might latch on to the “proximity to Winnipeg thesis.” It’s been around for a long time and there is, admittedly, much more score variation among states than there used to be, but basically it goes like this: If you want your children to attend a school that will yield high test scores, move closer to Winnipeg, Canada. Statistically speaking, that should work—but with respect to these states, it isn’t because they are overrun with wealthy people, it is because they have low levels of student poverty. The net effect of this circumstance is that it lifts standardized test scores above states that have a greater divide between the wealthy and the poor—for in every instance this greater divide comes with the few at the top and the many at the bottom. Notice that in this analysis of test performance the topic of teacher or administrator preparation, their decision-making, their practice and policies related to curriculum and instruction—none of this has come into play. In fact, one of the landmark findings of John Goodlad’s systematic study of American public education, *A Place Called School*, was that it is nearly impossible to see any difference, from a curriculum or instructional standpoint, between good schools and bad ones. They use the same textbooks and the teachers use very similar methods (Goodlad, 1984).

Let’s move quickly to the issue of school drop-outs. We’re not doing well with this problem—in fact, it’s

a huge embarrassment to the devotees of No Child Left Behind. But once again, this problem has little to do with the performance of teachers or any of the other villains identified in the *Waiting for Superman* film. The sad truth is that drop-outs occur when the economic lives of those who drop out are not substantially different from the economic lives of those who don’t drop out. Rural people over 50 years old generally know and understand this. They saw our classmates drop out to farm full-time, or depending on where they lived, to work in the mines, or to commercially fish on coastal waters. It’s no different today. If high school graduates have nothing to do but roam the streets, drop-outs will soon join them there. What this means is that if we truly want to improve the performance of America’s schools, we must first improve the performance of America’s economy. Said another way, in order to improve America’s schools we need to fashion economic policy that will yield jobs, not export them, jobs that come with a wage conducive to living a dignified life. In 2010, American corporations created more jobs overseas than in the U.S. (Economic Policy Institute, 2011). The availability of work and the level at which it is compensated is a matter of economic policy—as is the current range in the wealth-poverty divide. Deliberate policy efforts, like de-regulating the financial industry and legislating tax cuts for the wealthiest among us, has pushed the wealth-poverty divide in this country to such a degree that it now exceeds the worst excesses of the medieval era. Indeed, these policies are quickly pushing us to the status of third world nationhood, places where people are routinely impris-



oned, where the environment is routinely put at risk, where food safety is increasingly suspect, and where a crumbling infrastructure threatens the return of infectious diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, etc. All of this is evidence, in my estimation at least, that our schools are outperforming the economy in terms of contributing to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this country.

There's one last telling circumstance related to the poor performance of the American economy. Those individuals in positions that collectively drive the economy, and I'm talking about people like, for example, those at BP who decided to cut corners in the gulf, or the bankers who decided to package bad loans with good loans and then bet on them, or the supreme court justices who in the citizens united case handed the political life of the nation over to multinational corporations—these are all individuals who blew the tops off of school tests. Nothing could make the point more clearly—an education is simply not synonymous with a test score. A test score is a false god if there ever was one. In fact, until we get much, much better at testing technology, building the nation's educational policy around testing is actually counter-productive to the cause of true education.

When compared against health care and against the economy, schools look pretty good. And, regrettably, if we do a similar comparison against the nation's political life, we find the same holds true. To recognize this it is helpful to understand that many of our nation's founders, in particular those who carried the day at Philadelphia's 1787 constitutional con-

vention, had a deep distrust for the concept of democracy. Our constitution wrecks of that distrust, though some of the worst examples have been amended. But we still suffer from things like the electoral college, which allows individuals who lose the popular vote to still win the election—most recent case of this was in 2000. Then there's the nonelected Supreme Court, whose members serve for life, then there's the fact that our constitution is tougher to actually change through popular will than any other modern constitution in the world. Worse, the constitution was written to purposefully minimize citizen participation in government. Our political lives, from a constitutional standpoint—amount to no more than coming out to vote once every two years—and then only if we feel like it—which, by the way, we generally don't. We have the lowest voter participation rate of any of the world's top 25 democracies (Dahl, 2002). Unbeknownst to the founders, the system they created was ideally suited to corruption by wealth, which is to say, in the context of the 21st century, ideally suited to the near-complete takeover by corporate interests.

With our government so blatantly in the hands of corporate interests, it is no wonder why voter apathy is so rampant. People don't bother to vote because neither party cares much about citizen concerns. You get elected and stay elected by serving corporate interests. Our schools were initially created to give citizens the wherewithal to play a political role with their lives, but that goal was dropped at the height of our Social Darwinist era when we decided that certain human groups were less



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evolved than others and so shifted the purpose of schooling from political to economic wherewithal—a shift which had the added benefit of differentiating the curriculum: college prep for rich white kids, vocational preparation that including shoe-polishing, for minority kids.

But even having had to shoulder and ultimately throw off that Social Darwinist legacy, educational performance in this country demonstrably outperforms other large societal enterprises such as health care, economic policy, and political policy. Recognize that I am sparing the defense industry—an enterprise that has been synonymous with waste for decades. Make no mistake about it, compared to the rest of the nation's largest policy arenas, schooling is the very least of our problems, and probably the most effective of any of them.

Sad to say, but the Race to the Top strategy will share the fate of all federal educational reform efforts. Remember Goals 2000? And then, America 2000? These were federal initiatives designed to meet eight broad goals by the year 2000, among them "being first in the world in math and science." We did not meet a single one of those goals. Not a single one. So the Bush administration created a new federal strategy—something called No Child Left Behind. Nine years after that bill was signed it is clear that we are leaving many more behind, just using drop-outs as an indicator, than we were before the law was passed. You'd think this kind of dramatic failure, really seismic-level failure, of federal education policy might create some reflection, might generate serious questions about whether Congress is too far removed from classrooms

to be making policies that affect the classroom. Instead we're going to subject ourselves to yet another federal education strategy doomed to failure, another federal strategy that will very likely make things worse than they are today.

Conclusion

Schools were not always designed to serve Postman's god of economic utility. At their very outset in the 1830s and 40s schools were intended to provide the literacy and numeracy skills required of a public capable of shouldering the burden of democracy. Any benefit to the economy that might come from establishing free schools for all was thought to be a residual only, something that paled in comparison to the importance of the larger task. In other words, schools were not designed to serve the public, but rather to create it. Common school founders like Horace Mann understood that the wide distribution of liberty and justice required literate citizens who could make and evaluate arguments based on evidence, who could participate in earnest debate about policy options, who understood the necessity of compromise, and so on. Schools serving the concept of democracy by creating citizens who can wield it, is what is desperately needed in the 21st century—a century that has already witnessed ample evidence suggesting that reckless allegiance to the idea that economics is the central characteristic of the human condition will in fact destroy the prerequisites for human life on the planet. To secure a future on earth we need to slay the god of economic utility and liberate schools from mindless standardization and the needless and harmful standardized testing that goes with it.

