

A Talk with Gene V. Glass: The Status of U.S. Public Education

Interview by Marsha Lewis
Graduate Student, The Patton College of Education

Introduction

For its launch of a new occasional paper series, the Patton College's Institute for Democracy in Education is fortunate to talk with Gene V. Glass, Research Professor and Senior Researcher at the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In his distinguished career as a statistician and education researcher, Glass's contributions have been numerous and diverse. He introduced the technique of meta-analysis in the 1970s as a research tool and pioneered many other statistical techniques and research methods. He created the influential open access journals, *Education Policy Analysis Archives* and *Education Review*. His 2008 book, *Fertilizers, Pills & Magnetic Strips: The Fate of Public Education in America* looks at the forces impacting public schools in the U.S. Glass spoke to Patton College graduate student Marsha Lewis about his current perspective on the status of U.S. public education.

Where do you see public education in the next decade?

Back in early 1990s when the Internet was coming into being, I started an online discussion forum that evolved into an online policy journal which still exists (*Education Policy Analysis Archives*). One of the participants in that discussion back in 1993-94 was Tom

Green, a philosopher of education at Syracuse. He was absolutely brilliant. He died about five years ago. He said in one discussion that the assumption that public education is always going to be around in America is untenable. He could see a future for the country in which public education exists only for the poor and the minorities. I thought he was crazy. I didn't know how in the world he was coming up with this idea. Now looking back, he was seeing things that the rest of us are only seeing now. If you can manipulate the system through such things as tuition tax breaks, open enrollment, and the like, you can then produce an almost private form of public education for the middle and the upper middle class at public expense. Private education used to be the province of the Catholic Church. That is dwindling and disappearing; parochial school enrollments are down nearly 20% in the last ten years. What you are seeing emerge in more affluent communities is a "private-like" education paid for by the public.

The increase in U.S. population from the 2000 to the 2010 Census is almost all ethnic minority. The public doesn't want to fund their education. Minorities will be left in deteriorating traditional public schools while the middle and upper classes will depart for publicly funded quasi-private schools.

Contact Information:

Address:

The Patton College of Education
Ohio University
McCracken Hall 218
Athens, OH 45701

Phone:

740.597.3364

Email:

Democracy@ohio.edu

Can you talk about the impact (good or bad) of state-level education policy shifts such as recent Wisconsin and Ohio collective bargaining change attempts that affect public school teachers?

These state policies are a reflection of all of the trends addressed in my book, *Fertilizers, Pills and Magnetic Strips*. Almost every education policy you see being debated these days is aimed at lowering the cost of providing public education and favoring the white middle and upper classes. What we are observing as a result of the economic and demographic trends is the hyper-politicization of education policy like never before. At the heart of that is the fact that the position of state superintendent of public instruction is a separate election—as opposed to gubernatorial appointment—in 14 out of 50 states. This tends to be truer in the South and West where unions are weaker. We are seeing the whole business of education politicized like never before because the stakes have grown so high.

What is happening is that for the last 100 years the U.S. economy is shifting from manufacturing to service. And this is particularly true in the United States. Whereas 100 years ago the economy was driven by growing and making things, now it is driven by services like teaching, nursing, police, and fire protection. This is a result of technological advancements in production. What happens is that, decade after decade, people see the service industry, education being part of it, eating up more of the GDP. You can build a widget tomorrow cheaper than you can build a widget today because you keep refining the methods of production. There aren't such economies to be had in service industries. So the cost of services keeps rising year after year. Consequently, people, working through their elected officials, attempt

to control the cost of services or hold down the cost in order to save money. This is being acted out in states all over the country and in service industry after service industry.

People in education have a tendency to think that all measures to reduce the cost of education are a personal affront and directed only at them. But in fact, in every area of the service economy, people are feeling the same kinds of pressure—medicine, police, fire, parks and recreation, all of them are under the same pressures. They all speak the same language about program evaluation, zero-based budgeting, etc., that has become too familiar and obnoxious to educators.

What are your views on the near- and longer-term impact/ or pros and cons of teacher pay-for-performance?

Pay for performance is smoke and mirrors and another way of trying to de-skill the teaching profession and reduce the cost of providing competent and qualified teachers. People say we need to pay teachers based on the amount the kids learn. Here is the problem with that. There aren't tests for 75% of the professionals in the school. There is no test for the music and PE teachers; you can't even get people to agree on the content of a social studies test. One common solution used in the past is to move the criterion for value-added to the level of the school. So it becomes "school pay for performance." Then the entire school has to make last year's achievement gain plus one month in order for the whole school to get this \$1,000 bonus per teacher. This system can't go on for many years because the criterion for the bonus is last year's gain plus some increment—you pretty soon run up against the ceiling of these tests, just like we are seeing with NCLB with the academic progress measure. There is a prediction out of the Obama Administration that,



in two more years, four out of five elementary schools in the country will be labeled failures under the AYP criteria because they are running up against the ceiling of the tests. So the Administration has started to issue waivers to states to save face for all parties involved.

In the few places where they have tried “teacher pay for performance” they have found that you get cheating and corruption. In July 2011, the front page news was all about teachers and administrators cheating on the state tests by erasing wrong answers. Years ago, the Superintendent of Schools in Houston was a guy named Rod Paige. The principals saw all the teachers in their schools getting bonuses. So the principals went to the superintendent and said, “Look we are the instructional leaders here, why aren’t we getting bonuses?” Then the program changed to where, if the school made gains, the principal got rewarded \$10,000 to \$15,000. It wasn’t a year or two before they found a couple of these guys erasing answer sheets in their offices and changing answers in order to get the bonus. I know of few professionals put under the pressure of having to function with an unfair and ridiculously flawed system like “pay for performance” who would not look for such an out.

The reality is that these so-called pay for performance systems are really just a replacement for the cost of living adjustments. It is a bait and switch process—what used to be yearly negotiations for pay increases is now called “merit pay bonuses.”

What about the trends in the teacher workforce--preparing teachers, alternative paths to certification, etc?

All of these efforts are working to de-skill the teaching profession so that you can pay them less. Teach for America, etc. If you can train teachers in a

6-weeks summer program, then why would you expect to pay them a professional wage?

What do you see as the prospects for the profession? What could be done to stop these de-skilling trends?

Prospects are horrible for the profession. You see it in all of the lobbying that is going on with Teach for America. Charter schools hire uncertified teachers and pay them peanuts. “Alternative certification” programs are being offered online by profit-making private companies. It’s crony capitalism at its worst. When you have been around as long as I have you start dropping these futile hopes that something is going to come along to change it. It’s economics at the bottom of it with politics driving it.

I am interested in your research on the inequity of the current system of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.

AP and IB programs are inequitable mainly because poor and small rural schools can’t afford to offer them. For the IB program, the school pays a hefty price. So poor districts, whether rural or urban, do not tend to offer them. The AP program is becoming very popular because there is a chance for parents to save money on college courses. But the rising number of kids taking the AP tests isn’t matched by a rising number of kids passing. Surprisingly, Hispanics are proportionally represented among AP test takers, but the proportion passing is much lower for Hispanics than for Anglos. The reason is that they are in schools that can’t afford to offer the AP courses. The AP program brags about offering scholarships for poor and minority kids to take the test. But that doesn’t do any good if they aren’t prepared to pass. Then the question is how good are these online programs that of-



fer AP courses and pipe them over the Internet to rural schools? To my mind, it is hard to put together a first-rate course in physics, chemistry, biology and the like over the Internet. Where is the dissection demonstration in the biology class, for example? So there are inequities top to bottom in the AP and IB programs.

What is missing from the research community that would provide good information to inform the current policy debate?

Nothing. Research is used by both sides to legitimate their political points. People think it is “science.” What is needed isn’t the research. What is needed is a leveling of the field of debate. The creation of the Right wing think tanks in the past 30 years has been very successful. They outnumber Left wing think tanks 10 to 1. The conservative Right has invested a lot of money and work into getting their message out. And it helps that the media itself are controlled by corporations so they have a Right-wing bent to begin with. Slowly we are seeing more investment in Left-wing progressive think tanks that are learning the methods of communication. What is needed to level the playing field is more investment by the progressives in how to communicate their message and use research.

What about universities?

Universities lack incentives. And they don’t know how to get the message out.

What do you see as the public value of the public school in America now and going forward? How can the concept of the public school remain relevant?

It is a very grim prospect. The big money to be made these days that corporations are waking up to is in virtual schools. There are half a dozen companies that are big into that business.

I’ve had three phone interviews this week on virtual schools, with the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times* and *Mother Jones*. Journalists are all waking up to this movement and trying to get a handle on it. Jeb Bush is traveling all around the country to get state legislatures to promote the growth of online schools. And they do it through going into a state and paying lobbyists and legislators and allowing the formation of charter schools that are entirely online and that buy their coursework and other services from the corporations.

So what is your sense of what the education community ought to be doing?

They are up against a lot of money and hard working profit-seeking companies, so the odds of winning on the side of research aren’t that great. This question connects to the earlier question about progressive think tanks. They have to come from universities. The problem with universities is that the professions, out of necessity had to sell out to the major disciplines, such as the hard and even the social sciences instead of seeing themselves more engaged with real world problems, like journalists, trying to communicate messages that advance the cause of their profession. Instead, they are trying to get NSF grants and run studies to test theories, the things they see their colleagues in other parts of the university doing. There is an enormous amount of wasted effort that could be better directed. Educationists see themselves as scientists, theory testers, publishing in research journals that have no impact on anything. And it is not productive to theorize about any of the stuff going on in education. Educationists could be working to build institutions to compete with these Right-wing think tanks.

One model is the one here at Boulder, the National Education Policy Center.



It is very active, popping up in Google Alerts every day, and reaching media and journalists all over the country.

What has been the public reception of your book?

I continue to get emails from both sides. The book has sold well as a book of this type. Now that it is on Kindle I can see passages that were highlighted the most often by Kindle readers. The most often highlighted stuff was about the argument that there has been a false impression of crisis created in order to justify Right wing reforms. This is an old message though. People also highlighted passages that encapsulate the whole thesis of the book that there are extremely strong economic and demographic forces driving education reform and anyone would be a fool to underestimate their power.

What are your current projects?

I am just finishing up a brief on online charter schools. This whole area is just booming. One of the biggest ones is *K12 Inc.* out of Herndon, Virginia. They have been lobbying state legislatures to allow charter schools. They are opening these online schools like crazy. They have very slick commercials. *K12 Inc.* is on the NY Stock Exchange.

In closing, what role can communities themselves play in fighting for decent public schools?

I don't see these forces reshaping public education as being surmountable. For

instance, some of the most Right wing groups out there have been educating like-minded citizens to run for school board. This is seen as the first step in their political career. In many districts students must pay fees to participate in any activity. The public is being taken out of public education. This trend will be extremely difficult to reverse.

Conclusion

In the concluding chapter of *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips* (2008), Glass states his hope that the book offers readers:

...a realistic view of how we have come to this state of affairs in education. ..If indeed the motives driving school reform are as selfish as is here claimed, can good consciences be awakened? There are no likely solutions to problems possible without knowledge of causes, even if it is only partial knowledge (p. 249).

The Institute for Democracy in Education is grateful to Professor Glass for sharing his thoughts on the larger societal forces impacting public education and challenging the education community to work harder to find solutions that will improve the education system for all students. We hope that the readers of this article, whether they agree or disagree with Glass's conclusions, have been provoked to think differently about the fate of public education in America.

Reference

Glass, G.V. (2008). *Fertilizers, Pills, and Magnetic Strips: The Fate of Public Education in America*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

