Making Public Schools Business-Like . . . Again

by
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> A contracting firm in New York City employed 4,900 skilled mechanics direct from Europe, paying them fifty cents per day above the union rate, because it was impossible to secure such valuable workmen in our greatest industrial center. We must not depend on Europe for our skill; *we must educate our own boys* [original italics]—Report of the Committee on Industrial Education, National Association of Manufacturers, 1905[1]

> "Education . . . is a major economic issue," wrote John Akers, chairman of IBM, in an advertisement in the *New York Times Magazine* (1991). "If our students can't compete today, how will our companies compete tomorrow?" he asked.

Throughout the 20th century, business-inspired reform coalitions, driven by a deep belief that strong public schools produce a strong economy, have changed school goals, governance, management, organization, and curriculum. In doing so, the traditional and primary collective goal of public schools building literate citizens able to engage in democratic practices has been replaced by the goal of social efficiency, that is, preparing students for a competitive labor market anchored in a swiftly changing economy.

Akers and other business leaders, past and present, have not been alone in their new emphasis. In August of 2001, for example, then Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools Harold Levy—himself a corporate lawyer—had this to say about his goals for the public schools:

> That's the bottom line. Business has profit and loss. The school system has students and . . . there is nothing more important than our getting the children up to the levels of reading and math so that they can get through these exams and go on to successful careers. That's what this system is about. The minute we take our eyes off that we begin doing something wrong. (*New York Times* 2001)

As a teacher and local superintendent as well as a researcher, I have worked in schools for more than four decades and, recently, have studied this past century's business-inspired reforms. Pushed by a broad coalition of business executives since the late 1970s, public officials, union leaders, and educators, the policies, mirrored in an array of reports and commentaries as well as legislation, are chiefly rooted in the following assumptions: [1]

> a. According to national and international test results, American students have insufficient knowledge and skills, and this mediocre performance imperils U.S. economic performance;
>
> b. These student deficits have occurred because local school boards and practitioners are hostile to competition, have been unaccountable for student outcomes, have little managerial expertise, and have relaxed academic standards. They lack both the political will and a grasp of the larger economic situation to solve these problems;
>
> c. More authority over schools must therefore be shifted to state and federal agencies, to develop uniform academic standards, require more tests, and hold local schools accountable while promoting parental choice and school competition.[2]

The trouble with these assumptions, advanced by the business-inspired reformers who have dominated education policy since the 1970s, is that they are mostly mistaken.

That students from other countries outstrip U.S. students at certain ages on particular tests is well known. The results for the last three international tests in mathematics and science, though, were mixed: U.S. students were ahead of both European and Asian counterparts in some areas and in some grades. For the past three decades, moreover, results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress also have been mixed, with alternating gains and losses in reading and mathematics performance (National Assessment of Education 2003; Amrein and Berliner 2002). These test scores suggest, however, that U.S. students do have a spotty record on school-learned knowledge and skills as compared with pupils in other industrialized nations.

The problems begin, however, when public school critics link test scores to worker productivity and the national economy. In 1991, for example, a U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education said that "faltering academic achievement between 1967 and 1980 sliced billions of dollars from the U.S. gross

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national product." Support for such a linkage is conspicuously underwhelming (Finn 1991).

Consider the lack of substantial evidence in three areas: (1) the assumed connection between test scores and productivity; (2) the reliance on a theory of mismatched worker skills and employer demands to explain wage differentials among jobs and youth unemployment as well as labor productivity; and (3) the tie between workers' supposed skill deficits and America's global competitiveness.

1. Test Scores and Wages

Economists connect standardized test scores to hourly wages by taking gains in the scores and computing corresponding increases in dollars earned. They also use broad supervisory ratings of employees (high, medium, and low) to estimate worker productivity. Both measures are, of course, proxies for actual productivity, and they certainly stretch reality. Using standardized achievement tests, for example, assumes that these instruments measure the analytic, creative, and practical skills and positive attitudes valued by employers. Gauging the results against hourly wages assumes that pay is set by equals, by employer and worker negotiating in fully competitive markets. Furthermore, the measures require complex manipulation of data and substantial interpretation and contain many methodological problems. Little wonder that experts disagree on the worth of such data in estimating worker productivity. Yet conclusions are put forward as unadorned facts.[3]

2. Skills Deficits

In this argument, not only low worker productivity and decreasing global competitiveness but also youth unemployment and a widening gap between high-salary and low-wage jobs all stem from inadequate knowledge and skills that high school graduates bring to the workplace. The skills-deficit argument first appeared in the late 19th century, when industrial leaders also were deeply concerned about global competition, at that time from German and British manufacturers. In 1898, for example, the president of the National Association of Manufacturers told members at the group's annual conference:

> There is hardly any work we can do or any expenditures we can make that will yield so large a return to our industries as would come from the establishment of educational institutions which would give us skilled hands and trained minds for the conduct of our industries and our commerce (Kliebard 1999).

As a result, a broad coalition of civic, business, labor, and education leaders pressed district, state, and federal policymakers to introduce vocational curricula so U.S. students would be better prepared for the industrial workplace. By 1917, federal policy makers decided to subsidize high school industrial arts and home economics courses, while states and districts adopted vocational education and guidance in all schools (Kantor 1982; Lazerson and Grubb 1974).

Through the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and Vietnam, moreover, vocational education received enormous political and economic support from business and civic elites. Yet youth unemployment, of course, still rose and fell, remaining especially high among minority populations—and even in flush times, employers grumbled that high school graduates were unprepared for the workplace (Kliebard 1988).

Unfortunately, those who complain of skills deficits rarely specify what knowledge and skills are needed to succeed in an information-based economy, and they generally overlook the wealth of evidence showing that employers are far more concerned about applicants' attitudes and behavior than about their school-based knowledge in math or science. In fact, the supposed mismatch between worker skills and employer desires has little evidence to support it other than sturdy popular and media-amplified assertions. It is thus simply rash to suggest that students who are pressed by centralized, standards-based reforms to take more math and science courses or who do well on standardized achievement tests will succeed in entry-level jobs or in college.[4]

3. Global Competitiveness

Finally, the prior claims snowball into the assertion that insufficiently educated workers have slowed U.S. productivity and threatened America's position in global markets. This assertion is flawed. For one, it ignores how the United States enjoyed nearly a decade of unbroken prosperity in the 1990s. For another, U.S. productivity rates have increased (not decreased) over the past decade. For a third, even with the weaker U.S. economy of 2000–2002, the World Economic Forum found that the United States had the world's second most competitive economy, after Finland. In short, few economists or public officials doubt the predominance of the U.S. economy today.[5]

In light of such prosperity and competitiveness and the pivotal role that student achievement is supposed to play in U.S. economic performance, one might reasonably have expected public schools to be commended for producing graduates who contributed so much to this remarkable record. Yet no such praise has been uttered by corporate leaders, governors, policy analysts, or Oval Office occupants. Perhaps economic gains do not depend so heavily on student test scores as public school critics contend. This has, indeed, dawned on various observers. As economist Kevin Hollenbeck of the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research has put it, "The evidence seems to suggest that mediocre educational results do not threaten economic performance" (Hollenbeck 2001). In this regard, note what historian Lawrence Cremin wrote in 1990 about where responsibility does lie for economic challenges:

> American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade and industrial policy, and of decisions made by the President and Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the federal Departments of the Treasury and Commerce and Labor. Therefore, to contend that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by education reform, especially education reform defined solely as school reform, is not merely utopian and millennialist, it is at best foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness and to lay the burden instead on the schools (Cremin 1990).

To the list of those responsible for economic performance one should add inventors of technologies that contribute significantly to improved productivity and managers (or mismanagers) of U.S. businesses, including CEOs who have been issuing so many fanciful numbers in recent years.

Competing with the list of those who directly influence national economic performance, however, is another list of those business-inspired reformers drawn from civic and

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economic elites, educators, union officials, and others who, for the past 30 years, helped shape the current purpose: insuring that public schools are little more than boot camps for future employees. Well-intentioned civic and business leaders have done what so many other reformers have been accused of in past decades: they have experimented on teachers and students for over three decades without showing much evidence of success.

The issue is *not* whether schools should prepare students for productive labor. They should. The issue is that the single-minded pursuit of preparing all students for college and high-paying jobs has narrowed the far broader and historic mission of civic engagement. Historically and presently, schools have been and are still expected to instill civic, social, and humanitarian attitudes and skills that will shape our democracy and influence how graduates lead their lives in their communities. Schools are expected to build student respect for differences in ideas and cultures. Schools are expected to be decent and livable places for the young to spend a large portion of their waking time. These historic and contemporary aims of public schools often have been neglected in the mistaken rush to turn schools into engines for the larger economy (Labaree 1997; Goodlad 1984).

Even more damning are the questions that have been omitted from the current economic and political agendas shaped by business-inspired reformers.

Consider a few of the missing questions:

*Do schools geared toward preparing workers also build literate, active, and morally sensitive citizens who carry out their civic duties?

*How can schools develop independently thinking citizens who earn their living in corporate workplaces?

*When the economy hiccups, unemployment increases, and graduates have little money to secure higher education or find a job matched to their skills, will public schools, now an arm of the economy, get blamed—as they have in the past—for creating the mismatch?

These basic questions, unasked by business-inspired reform coalitions in the past three decades, go unanswered today.

Notes

1. For details of the formation of this business-inspired coalition concentrating on school reform, see Thomas Toch, *In The Name of Excellence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Larry Cuban, *Why Are Good Schools So Hard To Get?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003). Gordon Lafer maps a sequence of events in the same quarter-century where employers focused on workers' lack of skills and the need for more training and education to equip employees for the future workplace. See *The Job Training Charade* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Economists and widely respected analysts also produced best sellers in these years that judged schools as failures in teaching students to think and solve problems. See Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker, *Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991); and Lester Thurow, *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle among Japan, Europe, and America* (New York: Morrow, 1992).

2. For a brief history of the movement towards standards-based reform with its accountability and testing, see Richard Elmore, "Building a New Structure for School Leadership," winter (Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, 2000).

3. An example of connecting tests to wages and productivity is John Bishop, "Is The Test Score Decline Responsible for the Productivity Growth Decline?" *American Economic Review*, 1989, 74(1), 178–197. Bishop's answer to his question is "yes." For those who doubt these assumptions of test scores and worker productivity, see Henry Levin, "High-Stakes Testing and Economic Productivity," in Gary Orfield and Mindy Kornhaber (Eds.), *Raising Standards or Raising Barriers? Inequality and High-Stakes Testing in Public Education* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2001), 39–49; Robert Balfanz, "Local Knowledge, Academic Skills, and Individual Productivity: An Alternative View," *Educational Policy*, 5(4), 1991, 343–370.

4. Levin, "High Stakes Tests and Economic Productivity;" John P. Smith, III, "Tracking the Mathematics of Automobile Production: Are Schools Failing To Prepare Students for Work?" (1999), 835–878. Also see Lafer, *The Job Training Charade*, chapters 2 and 3, for a comprehensive summary of evidence revealing how workplace demands are inconsistent with the theory and beliefs of those who argue for more well-trained graduates from high school and college. Critics of using standardized test scores as the only or best indicator of improved teaching and learning have often referred to other important measures that are either ignored or missing because of measurement difficulties. These include the quality of intellectual work in school, the linkages between classroom teaching and assessment, and other measures of student performance. The work of Lorrie Shepard is best in this regard. See "The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture," (2000), 4–14.

5. For growth in productivity in the 1990s, see Louis Uchitelle, "Big Increases in Productivity by Workers," *New York Times*, November 13, 1999, B1; Hal Varian, "The Economic Scene," *New York Times*, June 6, 2002, C2; Michael Porter, Jeffrey Sachs, and John McArthur, *Global Competitiveness Report 2001–2002* (New York: World Economic Forum, 2002).

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