From Checker's Desk

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Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Education in Iraq

Iraq is blessedly free today, but it's also a mess in need of reconstruction. Not least among the many challenges facing those now tackling this massive project is creation of a new education system.

Once upon a time, Iraq had a well-functioning, if less than universal, 1920s-style British-style education system, consisting of primary and secondary schools and eight tertiary institutions, including a well-regarded medical school in Baghdad and one of the oldest Islamic universities on earth. After becoming a republic in 1958, Iraq strove to expand education access and boost literacy levels. The Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, however, like all totalitarian governments, reshaped the system in its own image and, while technical training remained solid and contributed to Iraq's development (including its prowess with nasty weapons), the rest suffered mightily, including the notion that education should teach children to think and reason for themselves and to possess accurate information about their country and their world. All teachers had to join the Baath Party. And the curriculum was devoted to what a ***Washington Post*** correspondent termed "martyr building," with hyper-nationalistic and militaristic lessons that glorified Saddam while demonizing the west in general, the United States in particular. An Iraqi émigré recalls her teacher giving a lesson on Hitler's greatness "because he put the Jews in a room and burned them."

This perversion of an education system was further degraded after the Gulf War as economic sanctions, brain drains, inter-group conflict, and the grim state of Iraqi domestic affairs caused schools to crumble, teachers to quit (or go unpaid), attendance to plummet, tuition charges to be instituted, and everything to be in short supply. U.N. statistics indicate that the average Iraqi boy over fifteen has less than five years of schooling and nearly half of Iraqi girls have none. Recent

weeks of bombing, looting, and burning (including the education ministry headquarters) have administered the ***coup de grace*** to the old system—and created a golden opportunity to build a new one.

Who will do the building, however, remains in dispute (along with much else about Iraq's postwar reconstruction) as sundry U.S. agencies, Iraqi exile groups, and international organizations vie for leadership roles, even while asserting that important decisions ought to be made by the people of Iraq. The U.S. State Department has hosted at least one meeting of an education working group, made up of Iraqi-born scholars and educators. The Pentagon has been calling around in search of suitable U.S. experts to advise the new education ministry. And the Agency for International Development has just let a $62 million contract to a private Chevy Chase firm called Creative Associates International (CAI) to help rebuild Iraq's education system. Sundry United Nations agencies are also stirring on the education front, along with a host of nongovernmental outfits.

Besides working through the leadership confusion and finding means to begin meeting Iraq's urgent infrastructure needs—food, water, law and order must precede even education—some immense issues will need to be resolved as Iraq's postwar education system takes shape. Six seem especially vexing.

First, will that system be modeled on another country's or shaped indigenously? There's no point in needlessly reinventing wheels—and Iraq could do a lot worse than to emulate one of the world's successful education systems. Yet many people are skittish about outsiders—especially the United States —"imposing" an outside model, as we more-or-less did in Japan and Germany after World War II. (People who tend toward such skittishness conveniently overlook the fact that both of those conquered lands went on to prosperity, democracy, and functioning civil societies.)

Second, how will it deal with Iraq's many factions and ethnicities? Modern Iraq was a nervous mix of Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turks, "marsh Arabs," and other subpopulations even before Saddam pitted them against one another. This will lead some to favor a pluralistic, perhaps federal-style education system with a lot of local control, rather than a single, centralized "ministry" approach. Others, no doubt, will argue that "nation building" demands a common curriculum and shared institutions.

Third, how will it balance Islam against secular, modern "scientific" education? Those who recoil from the madrasas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim lands, with their emphasis on religious fundamentalism and anti-Americanism and their inattention to math and science, will push for secularism and probably for government-run schools, but the appetite of many Iraqis for a strong religious influence will be keen and, especially until there are robust secular institutions to counteract that influence, it may prove insatiable.

Fourth, how will the new education system deal with the legacy of the old one—the hyper-politicized textbooks,

the Baathist teaching staff, the Saddamized bureaucracy? It's so laborious, costly, and slow to start afresh that there will be a mighty temptation to recycle what's left of the old system's assets, such as they are.

Fifth, will the world's loopier educationists be turned loose to substitute Dewey, Freire, multiple intelligences, expanding environments, and whole language for Baathist militarism? More benign, yes, but not necessarily a wise course of action if one cares about children actually learning. CAI may do fine work—they're already an Agency for International Development contractor in Afghanistan and other lands—but their education team is less than overwhelming and they have relied on the ed school at George Washington University for policy wisdom. (The Iraq project will reportedly use education specialists from American University—another scary prospect—and Research Triangle Institute.)

Moreover, the federal request for proposals to which they responded asked for bidders to "promote child-centered, inquiry-based, participatory teaching methods." In other words, for constructivism-on-the-Tigris. Not only does this version of schooling run afoul of many Mideastern cultural patterns and education traditions—it's not even very effective in the West, popular as it is amongst educationists. If dubious ideas and their purveyors end up shaping Iraq's post-war education system, it could easily turn out to be a disappointment—and the U.S. taxpayer's money won't be well spent.

Sixth and finally, will anyone think creatively about what a brand-new education system might be—and how it might differ from our primordial assumptions? What about "virtual" schooling, for example, instead of endless bricks and mortar? What about the choices that might be built in from the start for families and communities that don't all see the world identically? What about educating parents as well as children? What about outsourcing instead of bureaucrat-run schools and colleges? Education in Iraq is indeed a massive challenge, but in its present collapse can be glimpsed the outlines of something very different. That isn't likely to happen, however, if the usual suspects end up in charge and the usual ideas end up in their usual places.

—April 17, 2003

Budget Woes and Whines

Nobody likes having their budgets cut or income diminished. But my gracious, what a lot of griping, blaming, and gnashing of teeth there has been in recent weeks with regard to public-school budgets. A blizzard of articles has chronicled the fiscal agonies of school systems whose revenues are pinched by the present downturn in state and municipal tax collections. This week, The ***New York Times*** reported that a dozen states have issued layoff notices to teachers, that there will be no summer school in San Francisco and that students at two Kansas elementary schools "emptied their coin jars to keep nurses and foreign-language teachers."

The Washington Post recently quoted school officials predicting that "the reductions would take a toll on student performance as districts increase class size, pare teacher training programs, and cut services…" and that "the Bush administration's signature effort to raise the performance of all students could be in jeopardy if the budget crises persist another year or two."

That, in any case, is the conventional wisdom in education land. And nobody denies that belt-tightening is painful. Yet the conventional wisdom sometimes harbors fallacies and illusions, too. Half a dozen such may be at work here.

First, school spending keeps rising in many places, if not as fast as before. The Census Bureau reports that the average per pupil outlay in U.S. public schools in 2001 ($7,284) was up $448 from the previous year, despite the recession's onset. True, some states and communities are actually ***reducing*** their school budgets. Yet the basic trend line remains upward, as it has for decades—and today's cuts are typically being made in increases that occurred only yesterday.

Second, despite the passage of almost four decades, our public-education system has not yet internalized the central lesson of James Coleman's famous 1966 report and a million subsequent studies: there's no reliable link between the resources going into schools and the learning that comes out. Here and abroad, some superbly effective schools operate on cramped budgets in shabby facilities, sometimes with enormous classes, even as too many generously funded schools in fancy digs are places where children learn very little. (Think of Catholic schools as examples of the former; the school systems of Newark, Kansas City, and the District of Columbia as specimens of the latter.) The big question about U.S. schools is not whether we're spending enough on them but whether we're getting our money's worth.

Third, observe the tendency to seize upon budgetary stringency as a rationalization for achievement gains that may not materialize. Especially worrisome is the habit that many state and local officials (and more than a few Congressional Democrats) have slipped into: proclaiming that No Child Left Behind is toast unless Uncle Sam antes up billions more to pay for implementing it. Because they will always find the billions too few, they seem to be stockpiling an excuse for later education failure. How much easier to blame skinflints in Washington than to undertake the heavy lifting needed to change one's school system into a high-performance enterprise.

Fourth, in too many town meetings and legislative hearings, the budget pinch is also becoming a sneaky, self-serving way for the public-school monopoly to strike out at charter schools and other unwanted rivals. This takes the form of scapegoating the competitors as thieves that pilfer scarce dollars from the "real" public schools—and as a luxury that perhaps the state or community might experiment with in flush times but cannot afford when money is tight.

Fifth, we see signs of the "Washington Monument gambit;" that is, the threat by the National Park Service that, if it doesn't get more money, it won't be able to keep one of the capital's foremost tourist attractions open for visitors. Its counterpart in public education is to say that, if we don't get more money from (take your pick) the county, the state, or the federal government, we'll have to (take your pick) eliminate sports, increase class size, abbreviate the school year, scrap gifted education, end after-school programs, curb college counseling, close the school library, etc., etc. That's how school systems think about budgets: in terms of "programs" and "services," not efficiencies, productivity, or such tradeoffs as personnel versus technology.

Sixth, that's because public schools have a terrible time coping with budgetary adversity. They put nearly all their money into salaries and benefits—80.6 percent of school operating budgets, says the Census Bureau—and they keep hiring more people and giving them across-the-board raises. Then they confer tenure and enter into contracts such that it's nearly impossible to let anyone go, much less cut their wages.

Yet the regular world isn't like that. Airlines faced with the threat of bankruptcy have been renegotiating contracts, slashing salaries (from mechanics and cabin attendants up to top executives) and laying off thousands. So do most organizations outside government—including, when necessary, private and charter schools. But when did you last hear a school board talk about pay cuts or contract re-negotiations? Of laying off less productive and higher-priced workers? (Most public-school reductions in workforce take the form of scrapping entire programs or activities rather than pink slips for individuals.) What about introducing distance learning and teacher aides in lieu of more full-fledged teachers with ever-smaller classes?

To be sure, airlines can eliminate flights while schools cannot eliminate students needing to be served. Many schools, however, are being paid for youngsters whom they're not actually serving. State aid in Ohio, for example, is based on the number of pupils carried on a school's rolls, not the number that attend—yet a pending proposal to shift the basis from "average daily membership" to "average daily attendance" has been met with howls of outrage. (In some school systems, absenteeism runs as high as 15 percent on a typical day.)

Airlines also opt for smaller planes and lower-salaried pilots when they must. Technology replaces baggage handlers and check-in people. The Internet substitutes for reservations offices and staff. Why can't public education think that way? Put some of its creativity into devising cheaper ways of doing things? It could, of course, but so far it seems to prefer whining, scapegoating, slamming rivals, threatening to shut down its most popular offerings and explaining that any shortfalls on the student-achievement front are nobody's fault but the taxpayer's.

—April 24, 2003 ■