
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.

Why Pay Twice?

Public schools in Oregon closed three weeks early this year and the Michigan Legislature may allow that state's school systems to operate four days a week. Across the land, the "budget crunch" is hitting education hard.

To mitigate the impact on primary-secondary schooling, some states are whacking their higher education budgets, reducing the subsidy to public universities and raising tuitions, thus transferring more of the cost to students, families, and providers of financial aid.

Meanwhile, the largest single such aid provider, Uncle Sam, is beginning the laborious process of reauthorizing the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). At a May 13 hearing, House education committee chairman John Boehner cautioned colleges (and, implicitly, states) not to assume "that they can raise their prices until they are able to pay for what they need, and then rely on the federal government to

step in and provide enough funding for every student to attend."

In fact, however, a strong case can be made for boosting public-college tuitions to reflect the true cost of attendance, then aiding students who need help with those fees. That rearrangement would level the higher education playing field between state colleges and private campuses. It would also concentrate public subsidies on those who need them rather than using the tax dollars of Detroit cab drivers to subsidize the children of Grosse Pointe stockbrokers enrolled in the University of Michigan. From the standpoint of both market efficiency and progressivity, that would be a good way to steer our policies.

Perhaps the cash crunch will cause some such steering to happen, but not because its wisdom has been widely accepted. Rather, it will occur in spite of outraged protests by higher education leaders who have made low tuition a sacred principle, the easier to

fill some 15 million student slots on their campuses year after year.

It's common knowledge that, outside of a few hundred selective schools, many of those slots get filled by any available warm body, regardless of academic prowess or preparation, that can muster the price of admission. So long as the price stays low, enormous numbers of people are available to enroll—even more so in a tight job market. Whether they will complete college is a matter best not investigated, nor is the question of what they'll learn after they matriculate. Those are things their institutions don't want to know too much about—and that they fiercely resist being probed by outsiders. They cite academic freedom and institutional differences as reasons why postsecondary education should not be held to account for its results in anything like the way K-12 education is in the era of No Child Left Behind. They fight all forms of external audit and assessment—a battle now raging in Florida, where the lay Board of Governors that oversees eleven state universities is considering a new higher-ed accountability system and campus presidents are having a hemorrhage.

It's barely possible that the forthcoming HEA reauthorization will take some action on this front. (A tiny step was taken last time around when ed schools were required to report their pass rates on state teacher exams.) Perhaps stirred by their own boldness in the name of K-12 accountability while wrestling with NCLB, a few members of Congress are murmuring about press-

ing for new forms of higher-ed accountability, too. Despite predictable apoplexy at One Dupont Circle, where college lobbyists hang out, astute observers of that sector know there's a problem. As Charles Miller, chairman of the University of Texas regents, said at the recent House hearing, "We don't know what's being taught and what's being learned." He went so far as to say that Congress might legitimately require colleges to provide a "data set" about their performance and acknowledged that better measures of student learning are needed, particularly for freshmen and sophomores. (My long-standing suggestion is to re-administer 12th grade NAEP exams to students at the end of their sophomore year to see whether they know any more than at the end of high school.)

Underlying all this is a painful truth: American education is so expensive in large measure because we pay for it twice. We send kids to high school to pick up the knowledge and skills they ought to have learned in elementary school. We send them to college to acquire a decent secondary education. And if we really need someone with a "higher" education, we're apt to look for people with postgraduate degrees.

How incredibly more efficient and economical it would be to get it right the first time—to expect people to have a proper elementary education by the conclusion of 8th grade, a serious secondary education by the end of 12th, and a bona fide college education by the time they collect their sheepskins.

In such a world—dream on, you say—fewer people would feel compelled to attend college because fewer employers would require college degrees, knowing that a high school diploma signified a full measure of knowledge, skills, and work habits. And if fewer people went to college, education wouldn't cost society as much, even though everyone would wind up knowing as much as (or more than) they do today. Better still, the savings might be used to improve teaching, invest in new technologies, make pre-school universal, and other education desiderata that we can't today afford because so many billions are needed for each level of the system to backfill what the previous level ought to have done.

Hold on to that thought as you observe the widening protests against high-stakes tests for high school exit—and the test-failure rates that trigger such protests. If K-12 education did it right the first time, many more young people would pass those tests. That they haven't yet passed (and in many states the passing score isn't very high) means someone needs to pay yet again to put them through the education process another time. How much better it would be for them—and the taxpayer—if they only had to do it once.

—May 29, 2003

Affirmative action: a tale of two countries

"We expect," wrote Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, on behalf of a 5-4 Supreme Court majority okaying race-based affirmative action in the recent Michigan cases, "that twenty-five years from now the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today." The "interest" to which she referred was, of course, the achievement of "diversity" in university enrollments.

There's been much discussion in education-land since the Court's ruling as to what must change, particularly within the K-12 system, in order for O'Connor's expectation to come true. That is, what must happen for affirmative action to wither away because so much education equalizing would have occurred that diversity can sustain itself without special preferences and double standards in college and grad school admissions. It's a worthy goal, certainly, as well as the rationale for No Child Left Behind's focus on universal academic "proficiency." And it poses the greatest single challenge facing our education system and those who lead and work in it.

But is it realistic to think that affirmative action can ever fade away? Is it a temporary prop for those who need it, or a basic restructuring of societal assumptions that moves away from people denominated by their individual accomplishments and toward a land of group identity and privileges?

Two countries with long histories of group-denominated preferences offer strikingly different pictures of what the future might hold. India and Malaysia are both highly diverse nations, with many races, languages, and religions—and tensions among them. Decades ago, each country began to reserve places in its universities (and government employment and other prized benefits) for groups deemed to be disadvantaged or in need of special help. In India's case, quotas for "untouchables" and indigenous tribes date back to 1950. Malaysia has been struggling at least since the early 1970s (when I first visited) to ensure that its Malay population gets as many of that society's advantages as the higher-achieving Chinese population. (The third big group in Malaysia is Indians, but there are also many indigenous tribal members, immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines, etc.)

What's happening in those lands today, after decades of affirmative action?

In India, nearly universal "preferences" are fast arriving, a spoils system in which every single group and faction vies for its own guaranteed piece of the action. The *Washington Post* recently reported that the list of "backward" classes is growing to include even such improbable candidates as prosperous landowners and high-status Brahmins. (Roughly equivalent, in U.S. terms, to affirmative action for landlords and Episcopalians.) Nationwide, about half of India's population qualifies for affirmative-action quotas. In the once-princely state of Rajasthan, 78 percent are eligible. Says a leader of the quest

to extend the quota system to upper-caste people, "Not a single politician dares to stop this thing. It's a big, big joke."

On the other hand, when revisiting Malaysia recently, I was surprised to read (in the Sarawak *Sunday Tribune*) that raced-based admission to higher education is on its way out. Meritocracy is in. The government has decided "to admit students into local universities on the basis of their public examination results and not race. With the enforcement of meritocracy, the public is led to think in good faith that the previous race-based quota system used for registering university students has now been discarded. It appears to be so...."

Is this happening because the race-based system was leading to balkanization and divisiveness in a country that yearns to foster unity? Or because affirmative action succeeded and the Malays are now doing as well as the Chinese? Or both? I do not know. But it's clear that Malaysia is finding that undoing a long-established preference system is touchy. It turned out, for example, that the latest medical school class at the University of Malaya contains just one Indian, a situation that was promptly denounced by Indian political leaders on grounds that it's not a "fair representation" of the country's demographics. This and "similar cases that have gone unreported" led the Sarawak columnist to wonder whether "the recently introduced system of meritocracy" ought not be rethought "given the complexity of our country's racial myriads [sic]."

He went on to note, in the spirit of Justice O'Connor, that if meritocracy is to determine university admissions, then the lower education system also needs an overhaul. Malaysia's primary and secondary schools are, in effect, segregated, with each of the "myriads" having its own separate institutions with distinctive curricula (and languages of instruction), uneven standards, and distinctive assessments. The columnist remarked that changes will be needed before such a balkanized primary-secondary system can feed into a single, meritocratic tertiary system.

The most striking thing about Malaysia today, aside from its evident prosperity, is its preoccupation with national unity and nervousness about inter-group tensions. Yes, every town sports a government-financed mosque and the country is generally perceived to be a Muslim nation. But it's also a real melting pot and lots of people—and especially its rather overbearing government—want its many subgroups to coexist equably. Is that why they're undoing race-based affirmative action?

Meanwhile, back in India, along with the continuing poverty of many millions, what is most apparent to the visitor and newspaper reader is that this once-secular democracy that strove to bridge its ethnic, religious, linguistic, and caste differences is now balkanizing before one's eyes. And the government is doing more than a little to foster that unhappy development. Thus we keep reading about Hindu-Muslim fights, the murder of Christian missionaries, and continuing caste conflicts. To what extent is affirmative

action to blame? I can't be certain. But what must happen to a country where nearly everyone eventually qualifies for "preferences"? Doesn't one's group identity become the prized key to all valued services and benefits? Isn't one then bound to grow resentful of other groups? In time, aren't the essential building blocks of democracy itself—individual rights and equal opportunity—sure to be weakened?

Which direction is America headed?

—July 17, 2003

The Social Studies Mess

With schools re-opening, daily attacks in the Middle East, and the second anniversary of 9/11 hard upon us, teachers can expect another round of nonsense from experts who think it's more important to boost children's self-esteem and tolerance than to instruct them in the history of their own and other countries, the wellsprings of citizenship, and the price of defending freedom.

Worse, the bad advice from such quarters as the National Council for the Social Studies, National Education Association, and National Association of School Psychologists, telling educators what to teach about September 11 (and terrorism and Iraq), is only the tip of the crumbling mountain known as "social studies." It begins in the early grades with a dreary curriculum called "expanding environments" that acquaints children with "community helpers" (e.g., "your friendly postal service worker") but neglects to introduce them to the great tales of patriotism

and treachery that make history so gripping. It continues in middle school with a multicultural piñata from which the world's foods, holidays, and quaint customs shower down on youngsters who possess no foundation in basic chronology or geography. It finishes in high school with a quick dash through U.S. history and perhaps a civics course that nowadays may be replaced by semi-politicized volunteer work called "service learning."

No wonder our kids cannot find Baghdad or Jerusalem on a map, have little or no understanding of how today's world came to be the way it is, and are clueless about why—and even when—the Civil War was fought. Social studies is a deeply boring, intellectually muddled, and politically correct mess, taught by people who themselves have not studied much history and ruled by statewide academic standards that often consist of present-minded "themes" and pop-psych "strands" but little serious academic content.

For a long time, this field's decline resembled that of the Roman Empire: protracted, inexorable, and sad, but not something one could do much about, even as evidence mounted that youngsters were emerging from high school with scant knowledge of history, geography, civics, or economics. Evidence also mounted that the movers and shapers within social studies had little respect for Western civilization; a disposition to view America as a problem for mankind rather than its best hope; a tendency to pooh-pooh history's factual highlights as "privileging" elites; a

tendency to view geography in terms of despoiling the rain forest rather than locating Baghdad on a map; a notion of "civics" that stresses political activism rather than understanding how laws are made and why they matter; and anxiety that studying economics might unfairly advantage the free-market version.

So intractable and hopeless was the social studies problem that serious education reformers tended to forget about it and hope this empire would quietly decline until it fell. Other issues—phonics, testing, vouchers, etc.—absorbed people's attention.

Then came the 9/11 attacks (and their counterparts from Yemen to Nairobi to Riyadh) and an immediate dilemma: what to teach children about these horrific events. The establishment answer was teach them to feel good about themselves, forgive their trespassers, not blame the perpetrators (lest this foster hatred or prejudice), laud diversity, and consider the likelihood that America was itself responsible for the evil visited upon it.

Teachers were *not* urged to explain why bad people and tyrannical regimes abhor freedom; why America is repugnant to those who would enslave minds, subjugate women, and kill people different from themselves; why the United States is worth defending; and how our forebears responded to previous attacks. Avoid teaching such things. They are jingoistic, pre-modern, dogmatic, wrong. So signaled the mandarins of social studies.

And thus they also showed that their field was no harmless, crumbling

wreck but a mischievous force within our schools. In 2003, we urgently need our children to learn what it means to be American, to understand the world they inhabit and the conflicts that rock it, and to grasp the differences between democracy and totalitarianism and between free and doctrinaire societies. Yet the subject we rely on to teach youngsters such things has actually become a hindrance to their learning.

What to do? Exposure may help. Sunlight usually does. One source is test results and their continuing evidence of what U.S. students do and don't know. Yet many states don't even include social studies in their testing programs, few test history per se, and practically nowhere do the results count. Although the National Assessment of Educational Progress intermittently probes history and civics, its results are not reported for states or districts and don't count in the No Child Left Behind Act (which focuses on reading and math).

If it's true that "what gets tested is what gets taught," then testing students' knowledge of U.S. history (and geography, civics, etc.) would provide a boost to teaching and learning these subjects. Making such scores count for promotion and graduation—and school and state "accountability"—would help more. It would also oblige governors, superintendents, and journalists to focus on social studies rather than entrusting this field to its mandarins.

Yes, testing would help. More than that, however, we need to bring the

basics back into social studies. Start with a few simple curricular tenets: that democracy is the worthiest form of human government and that we cannot take its survival for granted. Rather, it depends on our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans—and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders established to fulfill that vision.

Jefferson prescribed education for all citizens "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." This is truer today than ever.

Welcome back to school, boys and girls.

August 21, 2003

The Trials of NCLB

The No Child Left Behind rubber is hitting the education road, where it's producing a lot of screeching brakes, skid marks and, especially, honking. A flock of noisy Canadian geese makes less noise than American public education griping about NCLB, the changes it is forcing, the injustices it is said to be inflicting, and the difficulties of implementing it as Congress intended. To wit:

- The National Education Association has declared war, via the courtroom, voicing many grievances centered on the law's "unfunded mandates," i.e., the claim that NCLB will make schools do things for which Washington is not fully compensating them.

- The annual Kappan/Gallup survey appears to show wide public discontent with many NCLB strategies and assumptions, beginning with the enlarged federal role itself.
- Some states are gaming the “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) system and other NCLB monitoring-and-accountability systems, rigging their goals, manipulating their measurements, fiddling with their standards, and reworking their definitions.
- As a News Hour segment with John Merrow made plain the other evening, one state after another—this one focused on Maine—is griping that NCLB is making them do things differently, asserting that all was hunky dory without this federal intrusion, and demanding waivers and special conditions.
- Summer’s end revealed wide discrepancies that have more to do with where states have set their standards and how they measure performance than with “true” differences. Just 400 of Florida’s 3,000 public schools, for example, made AYP in 2002-03, but only 144 of Minnesota’s 2,000 schools did NOT. Similar contrasts are to be found in state reports on how many schools are persistently dangerous. (Under NCLB, children may exit such schools.) Ohio found none last year and New York only two. Tell that to the parents of Cleveland and the Bronx.
- Confusing gaps are emerging between which schools are doing OK according to NCLB and which are satisfying their states’ pre-existing accountability schemes. It’s easy to find schools that the state says are in “academic emergency,” but that NCLB says are making adequate yearly progress—and vice versa. Florida’s “A+” system, for example, designed by Jeb Bush, gives honor grades to a bunch of schools that are flunking according to the NCLB system designed by his brother.
- As in fall 2002, NCLB’s cramped school-choice provisions are proving exceedingly hard to put into practice, particularly in places that need them most. A quarter million Chicago pupils, for example, are now eligible to transfer to higher-performing public schools, yet the city has only 5,000 available places in such schools.
- State officials report widespread confusion over what exactly is entailed in trying to comply with NCLB’s “highly qualified teacher” requirements—and whether it’s even going to be possible. Rural states and communities are especially unhappy.
- There’s widening concern that NCLB’s single-minded focus on reading, math, and science will unintentionally marginalize such subjects as history and civics—and shield them from needed public scrutiny.

This list could easily lengthen. But how much is just honking and which

are real problems that somebody should be solving? I see five things going on:

First, NCLB expects big changes across a wide spectrum of ingrained practices and entrenched assumptions. It's a deeply behaviorist law, meant to alter behavior via a series of incentives and punishments. But people, institutions and—especially—bureaucracies don't like to alter their behavior, no matter how badly the old practices have failed—or how much better the changed practices may work. Keep in mind, too, that the griping isn't coming from kids. It's from grown-ups. The well being of America's children is the reason for changing but, at least in NCLB's early days, the law's most profound effects are on adults and institutions that resist changing.

Second, NCLB's authors loaded an awful lot into it. That's why the law runs a thousand pages, of course. But was this really the best place to deal with, say, school safety as well as student achievement and teacher quality? NCLB expects people to dance and cook and fly and yodel at the same time. That's hard to do well.

Third, NCLB's authors invited discrepancies when they layered a uniform nationwide accountability system atop fifty different sets of state standards and tests, and when they left key definitions (e.g. dangerous schools, fully certified teachers) to states while micro-managing others (e.g. the disaggregated demographic categories according to which AYP must be measured).

Fourth, some of NCLB's built-in political compromises have hobbled its effective implementation, such as giving kids the right to exit a bad school for a better one while limiting that selection to other public schools within the same district.

Fifth, Americans are of two minds about much of this. People crave better schools and higher achievement but don't want to be pushed around by Washington. They want better teachers yet adore Ms. Jones. They believe in "the basics" but hate it when their kid doesn't get music. They want Johnny to succeed in school but grump when someone tells them he needs to work harder. Because of this ambivalence—much of it shared by educators—it's not hard to manipulate survey questions and poll results to "prove" just about anything. (The recent Kappan/Gallup survey did an especially deft job of biasing the findings by how it phrased the questions.)

The word in Washington—from executive branch and Congress alike—is grin and bear it, stay the course, don't even dream of changing NCLB, it'll be worth it in the end. There's no political stomach for re-opening this complex statute, particularly in an election year. The bipartisanship that is perhaps NCLB's greatest asset would crumble. If amending is needed, that process can start in January 2005.

Which may be just as well. It's obvious that the country would benefit from some fine-tuning of NCLB based on experience with it. Every major government program needs that. Congress

never gets it exactly right the first time around. But much of the current squawking has to do with start-up difficulties and confusion, the friction of changing familiar practices, and the pain of stretching long-idle tendons. Another year of experience will see some difficulties resolving themselves, states and districts (and schools and educators) beginning to grow accustomed to doing things differently and, perhaps, more imagination in resolving implementation problems. Mainly, though, it's important for everyone to recognize that a new day has dawned in American education and that it simply won't do to go back to sleep.

September 4, 2003 ■