

**GLOBALIZATION AND THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN WORKERS**  
*Are We Living in a Fool's Paradise?*

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## (I) Introduction

Here's a sunny question when considering the future well-being and prosperity of American workers in a global economy that, by definition, grows more intricately woven – and, for some, increasingly unforgiving – shift by shift and by the day.

What if our *current* state of educational affairs – the good, the bad, and the middling – proves to be too-close an approximation of the *future* state of American schools?

What if, in other words, American educational performance is permanently stalled? Not necessarily stuck in the way everything is frozen at absolute zero, but showing scant evidence of bubbling up or charging ahead any time soon. Since we're in Minnesota, think of a fleet of '58 Chevys, many still triggered by their original batteries, all hood-deep in snow in International Falls . . . with the nearest jumper cables a mighty mush away in Winnipeg. Getting at least some of those Bel Airs and Impalas galloping along is doable, but it will take some kind of trek. And at the end of hard days, do we really want to make it? Do we really have what it takes to make it?

Reports from prestigious panels, of course, have been released nearly every other week since the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, each warning that if some facet or another of American education doesn't improve pronto, we're all going to be in a major heap of economic and other trouble. But what if all these reports and alarms continue amounting to very little, just like the famous "Nation at Risk" report 22 years ago – the one that spoke of a "rising tide of mediocrity" – led to very little?<sup>1</sup>

The core test, by the way, for these and future studies and recommendations is narrow and straightforward: Not how many budgets they cause to be increased, or speeches they inspire, or editorials they compel, but whether American kids are learning significantly more; whether they're learning nearly enough.

Staying with the thought, what if, while continuing to do some things exceptionally well – such as offering many of the best graduate programs in the world -- American education continues to do other things very poorly, such as educating a large proportion of low-income and minority boys and girls?

What if, moreover, the academic skills of American kids in general continue to deteriorate relative to the academic skills of their counterparts around the world, the older they get and the longer they spend in U.S. elementary and secondary schools?<sup>2</sup> Think about that one for an extra moment: The longer American boys and girls spend in school, measured in years, the *worse* they do in comparison to their soon-to-be international competitors for good jobs.

Or what if, for one last introductory example, vast proportions of college freshmen continue needing remedial help in subjects and skills they should have mastered years earlier?<sup>3</sup>

Mixing artistic metaphors, what will it mean for American workers – what will it mean for the United States overall – if this current portrait lingers as landscape?

One possible and encouraging answer – and to a sage observer such as the British historian Paul Johnson, apparently a more realistic one – is that not much of anything new or terrible is likely happen. According to this view, the United States – because of our many other talents and gifts – will continue to thrive, even while other countries munch on our educational lunch.

Johnson, for instance, recently wrote in the *Spectator* (of London): “The plight of Europe is such that, whenever I have the chance to talk to young people now, at any age from 12 to 20, I always urge them to make their future in America, particularly if they are clever and energetic, qualities essential for a vigorous life over there. America has everything Europe lacks. It has the world’s most dynamic economy, making impressive gains in productivity while expanding the number of jobs at the rate of a quarter or a million a month.”<sup>4</sup>

Putting aside that Johnson made reference to the plight of Europe and not that of a more propulsive Asia, and that we don’t create a quarter of a million jobs *every* month, we’ll get to the possibility that the United States really doesn’t have much to worry about when it comes to worldwide competition; that despite all our educational limitations, we’re ultimately in good shape. But for now, permit me to continue holding forth under a dark, rather than fluffy, cloud. And please keep in mind that my focus here, and throughout these remarks, will sometimes be on the academic performance and occupational prospects of highly educated men and women, sometime on poorly educated men and women, and sometimes on the nation as a whole. I’ll try to keep clear track of the bouncing ball.

## **(II) Comparisons**

Let’s go right to international comparisons, already teased, starting with results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (known by the shorthand TIMSS), between 1995 and 2003.

Writing in 1998 about the 1995 administration of the test, and focusing first on American twelfth graders as well as other older students around the world enrolled in advanced mathematics and physics classes, Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, the nation’s preeminent scholar regarding international educational comparisons, concluded this way<sup>5</sup>:

The U.S. average score in mathematics was the lowest obtained by the 16 nations participating in the testing. For the group enrolled in physics classes, the average score of the U.S. students was the lowest, except for that of Austria, obtained by any of the participating countries.

Writing of all students tested, not just those in advanced courses, Stevenson concluded this way:

It is clear that the U.S. ends up in the untenable position of producing students who, by the time they are ready to leave secondary school, are below average in both mathematics and science. This conclusion holds whether the whole range of students is considered or only those who have taken advanced-level courses in physics or mathematics.

What might the most recent version of TIMSS show?<sup>6</sup>

Scores reported for the 2003 examinations cover only fourth and eighth graders. But consistent with the pattern of U.S. students doing worse in comparison to the rest of the world the longer they spend in school, American fourth graders did pretty well on the math and science tests, with eighth graders in this country doing less well.

More specifically, in a field of 24 nations, American fourth graders ranked sixth in science, behind Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Japan, Hong Kong, and England. Not a bad showing.

By the eighth grade, however, American science students had fallen to tenth in the world, albeit among 46 nations this time. In addition to the nations mentioned right above, led by Singapore, countries scoring ahead of the United States now included the Republic of Korea, Estonia, Hungary, and the Netherlands.

The home story was weaker in mathematics.

Among 24 nations, American fourth grade boys and girls ranked twelfth in math, with American eighth graders falling to fifteenth in math, although that field of older children included 45 nations.

In a summing up statement about TIMSS that subsumes kids of several ages and grades, Stevenson wrote this in 1998: "The only nations that the U.S. students outperformed in both mathematics and science were Cyprus, Iran, Lithuania, and Portugal – hardly the countries whose educational systems would seem to be competitive with [that] of the U.S."<sup>7</sup>

The hard – which is to say, hard-to-take – data, continue.

Robert Herbold is a retired executive vice president of Microsoft and a current member of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. He gives a speech in which he cites statistics and trends like these:

-- Among 24-year-olds in the year 2001 who held either a B.S. or B.A. degree, only five percent in the United States were engineers, compared to at least 19 percent in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and 39 percent in China.

-- In terms of actual numbers (not just proportions of college graduates), China is now producing three times as many engineers than the United States.

If folks were hell-bent on scrounging for the bright side of this picture, perhaps they could argue that in the same way that churning out immense numbers of lawyers has not been an unqualified economic blessing for the United States, maybe graduating immense numbers of engineers won't prove an absolute economic blessing for China and other Far Eastern countries.

Regarding doctorates in engineering and the physical sciences, Herbold reports that American citizens were awarded 4,700 of them in 1987 compared to only modestly more, 5,600, to Asians that year.

By 2001, however, the U.S. figure had dropped to 4,400, while the Asian figure had exploded to an amazing 24,900 Ph.D.s in engineering and the physical sciences. In other words, while the number of Americans receiving Ph.D.s in these fields fell, the number of Asians increased by more than a factor of four in only fourteen years. Herbold calls it a "dramatic shift." No, sir, it's well beyond that. He goes on to quote R. E. Smalley, a Nobel laureate from Rice University, who predicts that by 2010, "90 percent of all Ph.D. physical scientists in the world will be Asian living in Asia." Simply extraordinary – and frightening.<sup>8</sup>

One last set of data about how American education – for all the things we do right, and there are plenty – is nonetheless flailing in key areas.

Abigail Thernstrom of the Manhattan Institute and her husband Stephan Thernstrom of Harvard are authors of *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*,<sup>9</sup> released in 2003, the best and most comprehensive book on this tough subject. In a 2004 American Experiment speech, Abby – who is also a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights – reported that the "typical black or Hispanic student at age seventeen is scoring less well than at least 80 percent of his or her white classmates" on the National Assessment for Educational Progress, known in the trade as NAEP.

In more concrete and practical terms, especially given this afternoon's purpose, this means, Thernstrom said: "The employer hiring the typical black high school graduate (or the college that admits the average black student) is, in effect, choosing a youngster who has made it only through eighth grade."<sup>10</sup>

### (III) Economic Growth

Why – beyond what our collective gut tells us – should evidence and numbers like these, ranging from international gulfs to interracial chasms, give us pause? For one uncomplicated yet nuanced answer, I turn to one of my two favorite education economists, Eric Hanushek of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

One of the most important contributions of Hanushek and his colleagues over the last number of years has been to focus on the connection between education *quality* and economic growth – not merely on the link between education *quantity* and economic growth, which has been the research case traditionally. As Hanushek puts it: “The typical study finds that quantity of schooling is highly related to economic growth rates. But . . . it is unlikely that what is learned during 6<sup>th</sup> grade in a rural hut in a developing country equals what is learned in an American 6<sup>th</sup> grade.”<sup>11</sup>

In light, Hanushek, along with his colleague Dennis Kimko, incorporated four decades of international math and science testing into equations of economic growth. More specifically, they combined student scores into a single composite measure of quality and then introduced it into models used to explain differences in economic growth rates across nations from 1960 to 1990. As to be expected, factors such as levels of income, population growth rates, and the quantity of schooling explained (in Hanushek’s words) a “substantial portion of the variation in economic growth.” But he also concluded (here’s the nub), that, “[T]he *quality* of the labor force as measured by math and science scores proved to be extremely important [emphasis supplied].”

Given this finding, Hanushek asks a fundamental question: “In the international exams of math and science that have taken place since 1970, the United States has been at best in the middle of the pack, at worst well below average. At the same time it has become the world’s superpower. How to reconcile these diverging trends?”

His obvious but sound answer is that while labor force quality is important, it’s only one aspect of economic vitality, and that the overriding factor in explaining American economic strength is the “openness and fluidity” of our markets and the *comparative* lack of governmental intrusions. Think of free markets and their associated institutions and conditions as compensating for what Hanushek describes as the “deficits of our education system.”

But he also goes on to talk about how days of reckoning may be approaching. His warning, as well as his just cited points, is from his very good 2002 essay, “The Seeds of Growth.”

Education expansion in the United States, he points out, outpaced that of the rest of the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We opened secondary schools to all our citizens. We enlarged higher education remarkably by further developing land-grant universities, adopting the G.I. Bill, and funding grants and loans to students. Compared with other nations, the U.S. labor force came to be better educated, even after accounting for the lesser achievement of our graduates. In other words, Hanushek argues, “more schooling with less learning each year has yielded more human capital than found in other nations that have less schooling but where students learn more in each of those years.”

This approach, however, he sums up:

appears on the verge of reaching its limits. Other nations of the world, both developed and developing, have rapidly expanded their schooling systems, and many now surpass the United States. In a comparison of secondary-school completion rates in 1999, the United States trailed a large number of other countries and fell just slightly below the OECD average completion rate. The United States gains some by having rates of college attendance above the typical OECD country. Nonetheless, U.S. students are not likely to complete more schooling than those in a significant number of other developed and developing countries. Thus, going into the future, the United States appears unlikely to continue dominating others in human capital unless it can improve on the quality dimension.

So how to do that? How to significantly improve the quality of American education especially when so much energy, and so many dollars, have been expended over the last generation in the quest, with so little progress to show for all the gyrations and expense?

#### **(IV) Things to Do and Not Do**

This, obviously, is neither the time nor place for an education reform disquisition, as luncheon litanies of the sort almost always degenerate into beseeching clichés. So let me just suggest a few points quickly, starting with two things we should *not* do.

We ought not to fall into the trap of assuming that spending more money on K-12 necessarily translates into improved learning. The same holds with its corollary: We must not assume that smaller classes inevitably lead to better achievement.

Yes, I know, most politicians and others in public life deny doing these things, claiming instead to be more interested in effective and accountable practices and not merely on gross financial and class-size measures. But it's hard not to

escape the conclusion that at the ultimate core of most legislative and other public debates about education in the United States is this equation: Increasing spending on education by a *lot* leads to kids learning more than does increasing spending by not quite as much. At the very least, “big” education budgets are instinctually presumed to be more accurate proxies for moral seriousness than are education budgets that are slightly less big, albeit still giant-sized. This is the case, never mind the fact that spending on public education in the United States has exploded since the 1960s, while educational achievement has remained largely flat.

Writing in 1999, Joseph Viteritti of New York University, for example, pointed out that: “Since 1950, per-pupil costs for public education at the elementary level in the United States have quadrupled, even after adjusting for inflation.” Nevertheless, he also pointed out, “This dramatic increase in costs has not been accompanied by any notable improvement in pupil performance.” And that when “all is said and done, the preponderance of the research evidence continues to support the findings that [James] Coleman uncovered more than thirty years ago: there is no consistent relationship between education spending and student achievement.”<sup>12</sup>

As for teacher-pupil ratios, the nation’s most acute education critic, Chester E. Finn Jr., recently wrote that while the number of pupils in U.S. schools grew by about 50 percent over the past half-century, the number of teachers nearly tripled.<sup>13</sup>

Hanushek, who has done more than anyone else to demonstrate the weakness of the connection between spending and learning in American education, has gone so far, in his review of educational performance internationally, to write: “If anything, we found relatively better performance in those countries that spent less on their schools.”<sup>14</sup>

None of this should be interpreted as a brief for stiffing schools; personally, I would like to see most teachers paid better. But our education problems stretch well beyond money, and we would be better off if public debate and policies more accurately reflected this fact of life and learning.

For another day, in the interest of both time and diplomacy, is any dwelling on the political and bureaucratic obstacles to reform posed by teacher unions and other members of what Bill Bennett lovingly calls the “Blob.” Instead, permit me to throw out a half-dozen motley ideas, questions, and recommendations pertaining to global – but especially American – workplaces issues before bringing matters to a close.

**1. Remediation.** The first point I would make is that remediation and improvement in education are routinely more difficult than most people, both in and out of the field, regularly assume. We’ve already talked about how the

academic performance of American students has essentially been flat for decades. This has been documented not only by the aforementioned series of tests conducted by the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, but also by examinations such as NAEP and the Young Adult Literacy Survey.

As I've noted, this stagnation has run concurrently with massive increases in K-12 spending. Perhaps less regularly cited, however, is the fact that the educational performance of American boys and girls has remained nearly soldered in place at the very same time that the percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education programs, including Head Start, has skyrocketed.<sup>15</sup>

In 1965, for example, 16 percent of four-year-olds attended preschool. Today, the rate has more than quadrupled to 66 percent.

In the matter of three-year-olds, only 5 percent of three-year-olds attended preschool in 1965. Today, the rate is almost *eight* times larger at 39 percent.

As advocates are quick and correct to point out, not all early childhood education programs are created equal, as not all are considered to be "quality" programs. Nevertheless, one would assume that if enrichment programs for very young children are as inherently effective in preparing them for a lifetime of learning as partisans claim them to be, that the performance of American elementary and high school students over the last four decades should have been appreciably more impressive than it has been.

From another angle, it's illustrative, if sardonically painful, to recall that when President Bush the Elder and 49 of the nation's 50 governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia to talk about education in 1989, they vowed that American students would score first in the world in science and math, a mere 11 years later, in 2000. Suffice it to say, this has not happened.

The current virtuous but impossible dream, as mandated by "No Child Left Behind," is that tantamount to all children meet or exceed state standards for academic achievement by 2014.<sup>16</sup> Yes, I understand the value of high expectations. Yes, there is emerging evidence suggesting that NCLB is working as designed to prod and hold schools and children accountable for stronger performances. (I'll return to that promising point in a moment.) And yes, I appreciate the power of the argument that goes: If you don't believe all students can succeed, whose children, exactly, are you willing to give up on?

But while aiming to have American girls and boys top the world in math and science, and having virtually all of them become academically "proficient" just nine years from now, are lovely egalitarian *and* meritocratic thoughts, they are also metaphysical impossibilities – especially given our hobbling track record for many years now.

At the risk of a little too much skepticism, perhaps by the time everyone in this room dies, and if everyone really works hard, American twelfth graders will have jumped all the way, say, to eighth place in some international category.

In fairness, and as I teased a second ago, the Council of the Great City Schools announced in March 2004 that, “In the first year of the federal *No Child Left Behind* law, students in the nation’s big-city school systems have advanced substantially, posting significant gains in math and reading on state-mandated assessments . . . .”

For example, 47.8 percent of urban school students in the study scored at or above “proficient” in fourth-grade reading in 2003, compared to 42.9 percent in 2002. This was an increase of 4.9 percentage points. The improvement was even steeper in fourth grade math, as 51 percent of students scored at or above proficient in 2003 compared to 44.2 percent in 2002, for a 6.8 percentage point gain.

Eighth grade students also improved their performance in reading and math, but at much lower rates.

A statement in the Council’s report, “Beating the Odds,” is a remarkable testament to the importance of outside pressures and political leadership. After acknowledging it was the “standards movement” that provoked the change and improvement, the report said, “The public reminded educators – particularly those in cities – why they were in business in the first place and what they were being held responsible for delivering.”

The Council of Great City Schools is a coalition representing 65 of the largest urban school systems in the United States. Let’s hope it continues having good news to report. Even better, let’s hope it’s someday able to refute the arguments in this paper to shreds.<sup>17</sup>

**2. Demanding work.** Here’s a question: What does it mean that American workers (as measured by things such as short vacations) work harder than many people around the globe, but that much less is expected of American children (as measured by things such as short school years and ridiculously easy high school exit exams) than is demanded of many of their counterparts around the world?

The prolific Harold Stevenson reported a trend in 1998 for which my 14-year-old-daughter is living proof: “It is increasingly common,” he wrote, “in both middle schools and high schools in the U.S., that homework is done in school and simply represents work that teachers expect to be done before the next class meeting. Teachers may provide class time for this activity, and students may make use of study halls, lunch time, and other free time to complete their assignments. Accordingly, statistics describing the amount of time spent on

homework need not indicate time [actually] spent after school or at home on this activity.”<sup>18</sup>

The Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* two weeks ago ran a headline declaring: “State’s Schools Meet the Test.”<sup>19</sup> Why the excitement? It seems that Minnesota students had improved their performance on the math and reading tests they need to pass in order to graduate from high school. For that, my applause. But I thought you might be interested in a few sample questions from the type of math exam used by state officials. The ones cited here are all multiple choice questions. Please keep in mind that I’m not making any of this up.<sup>20</sup>

“The amount of fat in one fish stick is 8 grams. What is the best estimate of the total amount of fat in 48 fish sticks?”

“Consuela has \$1200 in her savings account. How much is left in her account if she removes 25% of the money?”

“The temperature was -32 [degrees Fahrenheit]. Over the next three days, the temperature rose by 6 degrees, rose by 12 degrees, and then fell by 8 degrees. What was the temperature after these changes?”

It’s indeed true that these are called “basic” skills tests as opposed to “advanced” skills tests for a reason. And it’s also true that Minnesota kids have first crack at them when they’re only in eighth grade, so it’s unreasonable for questions to be terribly tough. But the fact is students have to pass such tests in math and reading – and a similarly elementary test in writing – in order to graduate from *high* school. Somehow I don’t see teenagers in Singapore getting off so easily.

In fairness, an official of the state Department of Education is reporting that increased rigor is on the way for high school exit exams. But as of the moment, this is the lowdown in Minnesota.

A quick if crude way of grasping this kind of flabbiness is to consider how American education is often sharply alert to what it mistakenly believes to be the very fount of the most esteemed goal for kids, something called “*self-esteem*.”<sup>21</sup> Self-esteem is typically conceived to be the product of helping young folks “feel good about themselves,” which enthusiasts seek to accomplish by not taxing anyone – at least anyone short of Army age – dreadfully much. Meanwhile, of course, Asian kids are studying the socks and sneakers off most of their American friends, who, not incidentally, are also their future workplace competitors.

I concede this analysis tastes of caricature. And I readily agree that millions of American students work extravagantly hard, pushed to do so by the adults in their lives – as well as by visions of someday enrolling in the college of their dreams. But on balance, we’d be better off if we more accurately understood

that real self-esteem (I personally prefer locutions such as “self-respect” and “self-worth”) is much more likely to result from sweat-drenched work than overly-sensitive sensibilities.

A pertinent research finding: Harold Stevenson and his colleagues have found that when asked to explain their children’s success or failure in math, American mothers are likely to cite innate ability (e.g., “My kid is just not very good in math”), whereas Asian mothers are more like to cite effort extended (“My kid is just not working hard enough in math”).<sup>22</sup> Just think of the implications of this cultural difference when it comes to the possibilities of academic improvement. Whereas Americans are likely to defer to genetic fates, Asians are more likely to do nothing more complicated than work harder.

**3. Cultural and social hurdles.** Talk about self-esteem begs more discussion about the very culture we breathe and sometimes trip over. I’ve long wondered what makes anyone believe that American young people can do nearly well enough academically and socially given that upwards of a third of them are born out of wedlock? Or that their parents divorce at a higher rate than is found, quite possibly, anyplace else in the industrialized world?

These data speak to the nation as a whole. Situations, as you know, are far worse in specific communities. Do we really expect, for instance, African American children to do well enough in school as long as about two-thirds of them come into this world outside of marriage?<sup>23</sup> I pose the question no matter how well we come to manipulate public policies and no matter how much money we come to spend on education. In a not dissimilar vein, do we really expect black children to eagerly excel academically when the price for doing so can be accusations by their peers of “acting white”?<sup>24</sup> I don’t think so.

**4. School choice.** I’m reasonably confident the day is not far away when we’ll look back and wonder how we ever, in good conscience, forced low-income parents to send their children to schools that not one single person in this room would willingly send their own children to.

This is another way of saying that I’m reasonably confident that the day is not far distant in which millions of additional parents than is now the case have a feasible chance to send their daughters and sons to schools that best meet their needs, be those schools public or private, religious or not.

Which is further to say, I see the drive for real school choice to be irresistible, especially when it’s further demonstrated and better understood that low-income black children in particular tend to do better in private and religious schools than in public ones<sup>25</sup> – and that competition, such as the kind wrought by vouchers, benefits all students, be they enrolled in private or government-run schools. For evidence on this last point, I would urge people to read my *other* favorite education economist, Caroline Hoxby of Harvard.<sup>26</sup>

**5. Hiring teachers.** I'm also reasonably confident that someday we'll wonder why we ever prevented superintendents (and preferably principals) from hiring potential teachers who know a lot about various subjects, especially math and science, just because they have not spent years taking pedagogical courses of often questionable value in colleges of education – which themselves, are often of suspect academic value and strength.<sup>27</sup>

A group called the National Commission on Math and Science Teaching provides the disconcerting data this time. Twenty-seven percent of American high school students taking courses in math, the commission reported in 2000, were being taught by “out-of-field” teachers; meaning teachers who had neither majored nor minored in math in college. Bad as that number was, it was much worse in physical science courses, where 56 percent of high school students were being taught by out-of-field teachers.

Obviously, this is the case in large measure because men and women trained in math and science usually can make more money in jobs other than teaching. Which is why I assume – or at least hope – we'll someday wonder why we allowed union contracts to prevent districts from paying teachers in hard-to-fill subjects (like calculus) higher salaries than teachers in easier-to-fill subjects (like social studies). Talk about self-defeating policies.<sup>28</sup>

**6. Higher education.** On hindsight, I've described the quality of American schools and educational performance as a wave. Young boys and girls, in the main, start off in school pretty well when compared to their small colleagues around the world. Their achievement, however, steadily declines comparatively, and by the time they're high school seniors, they stand up poorly relative to much of the planet. But then there's college, and while far too many American students require remediation in reading, math, and other subjects upon matriculating, the point has been made many times that while millions of international students have flocked to American colleges and universities over the years, very few of their parents have been equally excited about sending them to this country for ninth grade. And then the United States really does it up right with its graduate and professional schools, which are routinely regarded as the best in the world.<sup>29</sup>

This latter evaluation and boast about post-secondary education are the good news. The not-so-good news is that, as a society, we have been taking American higher education for granted for several decades, especially in the public sector.<sup>30</sup> The reason, I would argue, has had less to do, paradoxically, with any particular discontent towards the academy,<sup>31</sup> and more to do with higher education's stronger performance over this period compared to that of elementary and secondary education. In other words, reform and, therefore, the financial focus of the nation and the states, have been on K-12, plus several other metastasizing fiscal responsibilities, health care, most notably.

I'm not arguing that universities should use their prestige and weight to knock other state programs and responsibilities to the rear of funding streams. They couldn't do so even if they tried. I *am* arguing that places like the University of Minnesota are as important and as magnificent as human-made institutions rise to be, and that we risk our wealth and fairness as a nation by snubbing the fact. This is especially the case in what, for many who toil among us, is a frightening new world.

## (V) Conclusion

I opened by asking what the consequences might be if education performance in the United States remained equiposed – as in stuck – for the foreseeable future. The curiosity was prompted by a remarkable, albeit unfortunate consistency in academic achievement by American students over the last several decades.

In answering, I'm split between responding as someone who believes blindly in American exceptionalism, as opposed someone who also thinks it's generally advisable to err on the side of reality.

The fervent exceptionalist in me says, come virtually what may, the United States will continue to thrive and prevail. Divine intervention might well have something to do with it, but at the very least, our allegiance to freedom, free markets, and the rule of law . . . plus our creativity and entrepreneurialism . . . along with our superior research and graduate programs . . . all made more potent by an uncommon faith the future, each other, and belief itself, will keep our country in generally good stead.

But a “generally” good stead can hide tons of trouble; much more trouble than presently afflicts us. It's not hard, in fact, to imagine an American future in which macro measures keep rolling along, but in which growing numbers of individual and very real men and women come to flounder because they are educationally ill-prepared for the occupational demands ascending before them.

I should add that the exceptionalist in me also is compelled to grant that any nation in which growing numbers of people are failing and hurting is no longer exceptional, much less unique.

A decade ago, in challenging various shibboleths about income inequality in the United States, I readily acknowledged that making a living and supporting a family was growing increasingly difficult for young and poorly trained men and women. Certainly it had been relatively easier one and two generations earlier for “ill-equipped breadwinners to actually win, or at least scrape by,” than had come to be the case. This, I wrote, was but “another way of saying that the economic premium on a decent education has unsurprisingly . . . grown over time.”<sup>32</sup>

The only thing that has changed since 1995, I'm afraid, is that every word has come to be more harshly true and increasingly likely to keep good people sleepless from Seattle to Syracuse with an overnight in San Antonio. Reinforcing the point is this recent finding by Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: "Twenty years ago . . . the average value of a college degree [defined as either a four-year or advanced degree] over a high school degree, was worth 40 percent more in terms of lifetime earnings. Today that premium has grown [to] over 70 percent, and we think it is still growing."<sup>33</sup>

Without keeping track, I've drifted into the more sober portion of the conversation that seeks to err on the side of reality. Here's an apropos quote for the occasion. Contrast it, if you will, with what Paul Johnson had to say about America's superior competitive relationship with Europe. It's by Steve Shank, who spent a lot of time in the Far East as a Minnesota CEO.<sup>34</sup>

"Every time I would come back to Minnesota," he has said, "I would actually be scared about how we were going to sustain our standard of living and our society." Given that he no longer saw manufacturing prowess as America's strength, he concluded, "Knowledge, education, and the advanced skills of our people are the only competitive advantage that we have." His implication being, of course, that we were losing it.

I would respond this way: What will we do when China not only has millions more scientists and engineers than the United States, but when it also has millions of more people who speak English than we do (as the day may be coming)? For that matter, what will we do if President Bush is really successful in inspiring democracy in the corners and crevices of the world and China gloriously gets the liberty thing right, too? This last point is simultaneously facetious, welcome, and economically scary.

American education must get better, not that we've demonstrated near-enough wherewithal as a nation and 50 states. And not that I've detailed a path this afternoon other than to argue that school choice would help; as would breaking free of counterproductive constraints on hiring talented teachers who know their subjects powerfully; as would acknowledging and somehow doing something about all the social and behavioral shackles that limit what young people learn no matter the devoted work of their teachers.

This is the summons – substantial improvement is essential – because to paraphrase Harlan Cleveland, a former dean of the Humphey Institute and an old boss of mine, King Canute and all the rest of us will fail, and fail miserably, if we try to turn back the thunderous tide of globalization.

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- <sup>1</sup> *A Nation at Risk*, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.
- <sup>2</sup> Harold W. Stevenson, "A TIMSS Primer: Lessons and Implications for U.S. Education," Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, July 1, 1998, p. 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Officials of the California State University system reported that 59 percent of freshmen entering that system in the fall of 2002 needed remediation in math or English – despite ranking in the top third of their high school classes and having a B average in high school. Terri Hardy, "CSU Freshmen Lag in English, Math," *Sacramento Bee*, January 29, 2003. Also see Sara Hebel, "Cal State Sees Reduced Need for Remediation, But Finds English Skills Lacking," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 29, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> *National Review*, April 11, 2005, p. 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Stevenson, p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003*, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).
- <sup>7</sup> Stevenson, p. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert J. Herbold, "K-12 Establishment is Putting America's Industrial Leadership at Risk," *Imprimis*, February 2005.
- <sup>9</sup> Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Abigail Thernstrom, "No Excuses: Closing America's Racial Gap in Learning," *American Experiment Quarterly*, Spring 2004, p. 46. My colleague Cheri Pierson Yecke has framed data like these in another, equally sobering way. In math and science, she has written, the average black student in Minnesota is starting high school with the skills of an average white fourth grader. Latino students in Minnesota are starting high school with the skills of an average white fifth grader. Cheri Pierson Yecke, *Education Accountability in Minnesota: No Child Left Behind and Beyond*, Center of the American Experiment, September 22, 2004, p. 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Eric A. Hanushek, "The Seeds of Growth," *Education Next*, Fall 2002. For a more technically detailed version of his argument, see: Eric A. Hanushek and Dennis D. Kimko, "Schooling, Labor-Force Quality, and the Growth of Nations," *The American Economic Review*, December 2000, pp. 1184-1208.
- <sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Viteritti, *Choosing Equality: School Choice, the Constitution, and Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1999), p. 42.
- <sup>13</sup> Chester E. Finn Jr., the *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> Hanushek, "The Seeds of Growth."
- <sup>15</sup> Darcy Olsen, *Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers, and Policymakers*, Goldwater Institute, No. 201, February 8, 2005, p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup> I use the word "tantamount," as there is wriggle room in the law: "The plan and the timeline is that 100 percent of all students will meet expectations by 2014; but apparently the law recognizes that schools are successful and should not be identified if 'almost every student in each group' is achieving the stated goals." Yecke, *Education Accountability in Minnesota*, footnote #20, p. 54.
- <sup>17</sup> "Study Finds Urban School Progress Since *No Child Left Behind*," news release, Council of the Great City Schools, March 22, 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Harold W. Stevenson, "A Study of Three Cultures: Germany, Japan, and the United States," *Kappan*, [www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kste9803.htm](http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kste9803.htm), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>19</sup> Norman Draper and Steve Brandt, "'State's Schools Meet the Test: Eighth-Grade Math and Reading Test Scores Rose, with Minneapolis and St. Paul Posting Some of their Best Gains Ever,'" *Star Tribune*, April 2, 2005, p. B1.
- <sup>20</sup> *Minnesota Basic Skills Test: Mathematics: Sample Test (2004)*. Minnesota Department of Education.
- <sup>21</sup> See, for example: Joseph Adelson, "Exaggerated Esteem: How the 'Self-Esteem' Fad Undermines Educational Achievement," Center of the American Experiment, February 1996. Also, Charles J. Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves, but Can't Read, Write, or Add* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
- <sup>22</sup> Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York: Summit Books, 1992). Also, Harold W. Stevenson *et al.*, *Contexts of Achievement: A Study of American, Chinese and Japanese Children* (Society of Child Development, 1990).
- <sup>23</sup> The literature on the effects of father absence and marital breakdown on the educational development of children is voluminous and growing. For just three examples, see: David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless*

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*America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993; *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences: A Report from Family Scholars*, Center of the American Experiment; Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education; Institute for American Values, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example: John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Jay P. Greene, "The Surprising Consensus on School Choice," *The Public Interest*, Summer 2001. Also, John Brandl and J.T. Haines, "Policy for Cost-Effective Elementary and Secondary Education," in *What Works: Stronger Policies for Public Services in Minnesota*, John Brandl, Bryan Dowd, et al., Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, January 2005.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: Caroline Hoxby, "Rising Tide," *Education Next*, Winter 2001. Also, Caroline Hoxby, "School Choice and School Competition: Evidence from the United States," *Swedish Economic Policy Review*, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example: Arthur Levine, *Educating School Leaders*, Teachers College, March 2005.

<sup>28</sup> For a strong and readable analysis of how union policies diminish education, see: Sol Stern, *Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Are American colleges and universities really the best in the world? I would like to think so, not that I truly know. What I do know is that if one Googles the phrases "American higher education" and "best in the world," a fair number of observers show up agreeing with the claim.

<sup>30</sup> Some Minnesota data: Higher education represented 9.1 percent of the state's total general fund budget in 2004-05. This was down from 15.5 percent in 1987. In terms of state tax-funded appropriations for higher education per \$1000 of personal income, the figure in Minnesota in 1978 was \$15.08. It had fallen by FY 2004 to \$7.56. *Trouble on the Horizon: Growing Demands and Competition, Limited Resources & Changing Demographics in Higher Education*, Citizens League, St. Paul, Minnesota, November 2004, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Although rampant and highly offensive political correctness has been known to irritate the heck, as well as diminish the gifts, out of otherwise passionate friends of colleges and universities. Count me in this category.

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell B. Pearlstein, Foreword to "The Truth About Income Inequality," by John H. Hinderaker and Scott W. Johnson, Center of the American Experiment, December 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick, "A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development," DRAFT, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, December 22, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Trouble on the Horizon*, p. 2.