

ARTICLES.

■ GET THE STORY STRAIGHT

Myths, Lies and Public Schools

DEBORAH W. MEIER

It is not hyperbole to say that today's school reform debate is critical to our national destiny. The challenge is a thrilling one: to make every child the possessor of a kind of intellectual competence once available to only a small minority. This inspiring—and new—task means granting all young citizens the conviction that they can have wonderful ideas, invent theories, analyze evidence and make their personal mark on this most complex world. Such a transformation of the idea of why children go to school would in turn transform the American workplace, as well as the very nature of American democratic life.

Yet given the opportunity to join in this exciting debate, the public has offered responses that are often troublingly sour and cynical. Citizens have largely dismissed any hope that their ideas on education might be heard and implemented. Most discussion now takes place within the most narrow professional and policy-making circles. None of this year's Democratic presidential challengers grabbed on to what should be a can't-lose issue. Why?

The answer lies in a story the nation tells itself so forcefully and so often that mere historical fact has little power to intervene: the myth that, in the past, schools taught more effectively and children learned more. And this myth of the past, in turn, props up some equally pernicious myths of the present and hobbles our national discussion of the future. The widely held view that our public school system has declined from some golden past is causing some serious mischief. The ground must be cleared of such myths and lies.

In fact, until World War II the average American did not graduate from high school. Most teenagers were expected to leave school for unskilled or semiskilled work. The average American attended school for only nine years, and 20 percent attended for less than four. On the eve of the war, fewer than 10 to 20 percent of teenagers in many Southern communities were in school at all. A majority of New York City's high school students were unashamedly labeled as either "sub-normal" or "normal." Most were not given an academic, college-bound curriculum. The demanding academic track was reserved for those deemed "talented" and bound for college. In 1950, the term "dropout" did not exist.

The cultivation of scholarship and critical thinking, and the development of sophisticated math and science skills, were possibilities for only a few. And even those few were often poorly prepared by today's standards. In the 1940s, even elite,

"talented" students rarely took more than two years of high school math, science or history, and virtually none took calculus—a college course in those days, but today such a staple of moderately advanced high school seniors that it was a dramatic proof of Jaime Escalante's pedagogic success in the movie *Stand and Deliver*. The hard data concerning what students "used to know" about history and science defy the casual conversational litany—heard on both the right and the left—concerning our ignorant youth. A recent study by Dale Whittington Winter in *American Educational Research Journal* compared how well 17-year-olds from the 1930s until today answered questions concerning the names of Presidents, the dates of wars, the laws of science and other basic information. There was virtually no change in the past fifty years—and what's more, the students tested in those earlier years were overall a far more elite group than today's general student body.

It was not until the 1960s that the nation first acknowledged, at least rhetorically, the obligation to educate all students equally. And rather than accept the idea that educating all children well was a task as complex as going to the moon, and would require enormous financial resources as well as a revolution in the way we organized teaching and learning, the nation quickly turned its back. As Jonathan Kozol recently reminded us in his powerful book *Savage Inequalities*, America created a revolution of rising expectations among those most in need while depriving them of precisely the resources offered those least in need.

The myth of a golden educational past allowed many to ignore the reality of inadequate commitment and crushed expectations for nearly three decades. But some myths of the present were needed as well. If schools are broken, who is at fault? The scapegoats are the usual suspects: teachers' unions, TV, drugs, divorce, "diversity" (read: too many African-Americans and Latinos), welfare, permissiveness, single motherhood, sexual revolution, feminism, relativism, lack of patriotism. The implication is clear: Just toss out those troublemakers, and the task of creating good schools is no big deal. And then there's the equally misleading myth that the alleged decline in educational standards caused America's lack of international competitiveness—as though it were illiteracy on the assembly line that undid Detroit!

If the late 1970s were an era of malign neglect of education, schools were fortunately rediscovered by policy-makers in the 1980s—though not without a heavy dose of myth as well. Former Education Secretary William Bennett's celebrated "Nation at Risk" critique, and a dozen equally dire reports, scared everyone silly with their message of allegedly declining standards. State governments responded with a flurry of "get tough," top-down legislation, which included competency tests for teachers, minimum-grade requirements for sports participation and revocation or refusal of driver's licenses for dropouts. Legislation also included, at times, better compensation for teachers.

By the middle of the decade, governors, private and corporate foundation heads, and state and federal education pol-

icy leaders moved on to broader plans for systematic, structural reform—soon known in the education business as “the second wave.” Privately, though rarely publicly, such leaders and the think tanks behind them—the National Alliance of Business, the Carnegie Corporation, the Education Commission of the States, for example—acknowledged that the problem was not restoring old standards but inventing a new system, making fundamental, “bottom-up” changes. They argued for the need to involve teachers and parents and avoid blame-placing. They revived John Dewey’s pre-World War II proposals for progressive education, dressing them up in new language and quoting new research, focusing on different forms of governance that paid heed to the role of parents and teachers, as well as on students’ critical “higher-order thinking” in contrast to rote memorization.

But the think tankers’ talk of reform played poorly. The proposed changes were generally resisted by bureaucrats, teachers, school boards and unions—and were viewed with suspicion by parents and students as well. Change, it appeared, was not going to happen just because the nation’s leading think tanks and educational gurus had reached an agreement. If anything, many citizens wanted a return to old nostrums. If indeed the old ways had worked, why did we need radical and expensive new solutions?

Given this climate of resistance, two simpler reform ideas arose among educational opinion-leaders—ideas that were seemingly easier to enact but that spoke to a more cynical and despairing vision. One solution lay in increasing the power of professional experts at the state and federal levels to require school reform, whatever local communities might say about it. The other solution was to abandon public control altogether in favor of the magic of the marketplace. Either local control or public control (or both!) must go because, today’s impatient reformers argue, they impede needed change.

By 1950, Dewey’s progressive vision of schools for democracy had lost out and efficiency-driven, rigidly tracked schools won the day. The nation’s schools are now at another such pivotal moment. Holding fast to the democratic promise of education requires a steadfast belief in the process of democracy, warts and all. It requires rejecting both the dictatorship of the marketplace and the dictatorship of the expert.

Those committed to public schools must confront the public’s cynicism head-on. Schools, after all, are but one example of a broader malaise: People are cynical because they feel they cannot influence public life or democratic institutions. Education reformers, regardless of political persuasion, have too often embraced a version of the same cynicism, viewing local school boards as irrelevant or as the domain of conservatives, and thus viewing school reform as a task best accomplished by national policy-makers.

The irony is that schools in fact stand as one of the few remaining institutions that can easily be influenced at the community level. The fundamentalist right has systematically pushed a national school agenda at the local level, aggressively instigating battles over textbooks, sex education, desegregation efforts and other matters. Now it is time for liberals and the educational left to enter this arena. The debate over education reform belongs in local communities. Only such a com-

munity-centered debate will restore the public’s sense that it has a stake in public schools.

Most of all, since democratic schools are impossible without an aware and supportive public, their defense requires us all to tell the public the truth. Schools never did the needed job for many people. Most Americans didn’t get the education they deserved. The nation tolerated it as long as the economy offered the poorly educated a measure of dignity and hope through unskilled or semiskilled industrial work. But the fact remains that schools sold short those Americans who were not members of the elite. Schools did the job they were asked to do—but they’ve never before done what is needed today.

If America can commit itself to this next task—educating all children well—the historic promise of free public schooling will be fulfilled. It doesn’t require a nationalized curriculum backed by a high-stakes testing program that falsely promises order and control; or a privatized market-driven system offering the illusion of freedom and individuality. What it requires is tough but doable: generous resources, thoughtful and steady work, respect for the diverse perspectives of the people who work in and attend our schools and, finally, sustained public interest in and tolerance for the process of reinvention. Nothing else will do it. And this time, let’s get the story straight. □

■ CORPORATE RAID ON EDUCATION

Whittle and the Privateers

JONATHAN KOZOL

A “growing bunch of entrepreneurs,” *The New York Times* reported in a 1991 education supplement, “are suggesting that unabashed capitalism can succeed” in the delivery of education “where bureaucracy and altruism have failed.” If private corporations can achieve what government cannot, the *Times* went on, “why should they not make money in the process?”

A number of corporations are now setting out to do exactly that. Burger King has opened “Burger King Academies,” fully accredited quasi-private high schools, in fourteen cities. I.B.M. and Apple are contemplating the idea of starting schools-for-profit too. Educational Alternatives, a profit-making firm in Minneapolis, now runs a public school for profit in Miami, under contract to Dade County, and recently won contracts to run public schools in Baltimore and Duluth. “It’s open season on marketing,” says the corporation’s president.

But the most ambitious plan to date for profit-making schools are those announced in May 1991 by Chris Whittle, founder and chairman of Whittle Communications, a publisher of upscale consumer-oriented magazines. Whittle has pioneered already in the sale of television news-and-advertising

Jonathan Kozol is the author of Savage Inequalities (Harper Perennial) and Death at an Early Age (Plume).