

Commentary

Public schools' good old days are overrated

By Donald N. S. Unger

I have taught for more than 10 years – middle school to high school to college and beyond, across five states – and I can't mention that fact to anyone over 60 without finding myself on the receiving end of something that oscillates between dour commentary and serious sermon.

"When I was in school . . ." this always begins, leading quickly into a jeremiad on the decline of public education. If only we could return to those days, many people seem to think – banish teachers unions, reinstate prayer, bring back corporal punishment – we could put some starch back into the system, some discipline, some moral backbone, some order. "Back then," people say, teachers worked for almost nothing – compared with people who have similar levels of education, they still do – taught huge classes and achieved great results, with near perfect discipline. People who take this line of reasoning are remembering only select bits of what education was like 50 years ago. And what they are forgetting – or editing out – is worth looking at in some detail.

The United States was one of the first countries in the modern era to institute free, compulsory, public education. The purpose of this policy was to educate the electorate, a prerequisite to democracy. But the percentage of the public whose participation was deemed necessary fell far below the majority mark.

Take women out of the equation, first and foremost; they didn't get the vote until well into this century – and even then, the idea that they needed much education beyond basic literacy was hotly contested. It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that you began to see professional women – doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. – in appreciable numbers.

Take African-Americans out of the running as well. Up until the end of the Civil War, it was against the law in most states to teach slaves to read and write. After the war, there was a period of 10 years or so during which some meaningful reforms were attempted. Thereafter, it was "separate but equal" up through Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954; even after the Supreme Court ruling, it took federal troops, in more than one location, actually to put desegregation orders into effect. And the 40 years since Brown have seen the progressive reestablishment of segregated schools, largely via the phenomenon of white flight.

Prune away anyone with mental or physical handicaps of almost any kind. Through most of our history these people have been shut-ins, either in institutions or in their own homes; up until the 1970s, classrooms were reserved for the physical and mental elite.

In addition to all these subtractions, figure in the job market: Massachusetts' post-industrial cities, Worcester, Lowell, Lawrence, among others, are a good case in point. Up through the 1950s, these places were home to dozens of industries that required little more than a strong back and an ability to follow instructions. The word "dropout" is of recent coinage; in the previous generation, it wasn't unusual for someone with an eighth-grade education to be a reasonably good breadwinner. Never mind college; high school was an educational frill for many, if not most Americans.

What are the public schools like now? In short, they have gone from educating the sons of white landowners – an elite and generally well-prepared group – to attempting to educate, for the first time in our history, really, almost everyone. Why are they failing? Because this is a monumentally difficult job and we have not committed the necessary resources to this battle.

Conservatives often point to – and shunt their children into – private schools as a way of emphasizing how well the market can take care of educational problems. Private schools, private institutions of all kinds, have a number of great advantages over public services: paramount among them, they routinely engage in "cherry picking"; that is, they let in students most likely to succeed, and rapidly expel students unable or unwilling to meet high performance standards, both academically and behaviorally.

Public schools aren't what they used to be – and never were

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The public system, by way of contrast, has legal restraints on when and how students may be expelled. Finally, private and parochial schools – along with their new cousins, the charter schools – by definition have a better motivated population to work with, from the students to the parents to the teachers; all tend to be more dynamic and more involved, tremendously increasing the efficiency of the schools.

What is the secret to the success of private schools? In addition to being very selective about the students they choose to keep, and while paying their teachers substantially less, they radically decrease the teaching load per faculty member. A public school teacher will have five classes of 20 to 30 students, a private school teacher is more likely to have four classes of 15 students or less. Teacher attention, survey after survey

tells us, is one of the best predictors of student achievement; and it's easier to give high quality attention to 60 students than 150. Finally, look at what education costs in the public and the private sectors: across the state, and across the nation, the average per pupil expenditure is in the neighborhood of \$5,000. Private schools easily average twice that amount, a fact that shows in facilities maintenance, in the currency of teaching materials and books, in the degree to which high-tech items such as computers are kept up to date.

Today's public school population is much more diverse and fundamentally more needy. This does not make them less deserving of education. More to the point – particularly in an increasingly competitive job market, both domestically and internationally – we cannot afford to ignore the ongoing and serious failures of the public schools. Increasingly, public schools, particularly those in urban areas, are minority schools.

Fleeing those schools, and fleeing the cities, will not, however, insulate us from the consequences of poorly educating public school students. This is not "someone else's problem." Within the next 25 years, the majority of the American work force will be made up of members of minority groups: African-Americans, Latinos, Asians. Our national productivity and prosperity will depend on the skills of that work force. Payment of Social Security and Medicare benefits, moreover, will rest, in part, on the earning power of that generation.

Conservatives have argued for nearly two decades now that "money isn't the answer," often while they send their own children to richer suburban schools or remove them from the public system altogether, in both cases ensuring that they have smaller classes, better books, more competent teachers, safe and up-to-date classrooms and equipment – all higher cost items that poorer stu-

dents, mysteriously, are not presumed to need.

The anti-tax fervor stoked by conservatives during this same period has convinced a significant portion of the populace, perhaps a majority, that taxes of all kinds are too high and need to be cut, at the expense of public-sector spending including work that our public schools desperately require to make them equal to the task they now face. It is difficult to argue with someone who tells you that you are paying too much money to the government. If we wish public education to survive, however, we had better start making that argument and on more than one front.

For my own part, I would vote tomorrow to have my property taxes doubled. My wife and I own a house in Worcester on which we pay in the neighborhood of \$1,000 per year in property taxes. It isn't enough to support the school system. What does it mean to us personally? Ei-

ther we pay close to \$10,000 per year to send our daughter to private school, or we move to a community where the tax base and the tax rate are sufficient to support a school system to which we would be willing to entrust our child. Further, we both believe that the value of our house – the largest investment we are ever likely to have – rests more on the quality of the schools than it does on the mall, the airport and Medical City combined (all development projects revered by the city's business community).

The second drain on tax revenues nationally was accomplished by the Republicans, with the assistance of Democrats like Bill Bradley: The tax reform act of 1986 drastically reduced progressivity in the federal tax code, shifting the burden from corporations to individuals and from the wealthy to the middle and working classes. Steve Forbes' flat tax, toyed with by presidential candidate Bob Dole, would further that shift. When conservatives bemoan the lost stability of American society in the 1950s, what they leave out is that

they are the ones primarily responsible for defunding the institutions that underpinned that stability.

Finally, a last word on costs and who pays. We are in a frenzy of prison-building nationally, while our public schools are literally crumbling. At this point, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of apartheid in South Africa, we lead the world in imprisoning people, as a percentage of our population. In terms of educational achievement, meanwhile, we are at the bottom of the list of industrialized democracies. We would do far better to invest in education early on than to pay to warehouse a larger and larger percentage of our population.

We cannot afford to keep wasting such a high percentage of our population – read that word any way you want. Proper funding for the public schools is not a frill or soft-hearted response, it is a hardheaded necessity.

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