

COMMENTARY

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dismal for
education

The chief wonder of education is that it does not ruin everyone concerned in it, teachers and taught.

—Henry Adams

As leading figures in Clintonland are prone to do, the secretary of education was congratulating himself not long ago on the great progress American education had made under his humble auspices. "At long last," Richard Riley proclaimed, the country was "moving from being a nation at risk to a nation with a hopeful future." The next presidential campaign is definitely on, if it was ever off.

The only clear thing about such a claim is that the secretary of education needs some educating. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress takes a different view: If math scores were up in 1992, reading scores are down dramatically in 1994. Only a third of the graduating seniors in American high schools can read "proficiently," according to the assessment, while almost as many — 30 percent — score "below basic," which is bureaucratese for functional illiteracy. Of the 2.5 million graduates of American high schools last year, only 100,000 were said to be reading at the "advanced" level, while 750,000 would be doing well to read their diplomas. Frightening, especially in a high-tech economy.

Breaking down the assessment's figures by racial and ethnic composition, only 12 percent of black seniors ranked in the proficient class, less than 1 percent in the advanced category and 54 percent were ranked below basic. The scores of Hispanic students were almost as discouraging: 1 percent were considered advanced readers, 18 percent proficient and 48 percent below basic.

But if you think poor reading is a minority thing, or a problem mainly of the poor, think again. In Montgomery County, with one of the highest percentages of high school graduates in the country, and where 86 percent of them go on to college, seven out of ten graduates needed remedial work in math and half in English.

American higher education continues to get good marks from foreign observers, but our colleges and universities could be turned into mainly remedial institutions if these trends continue.

There is no simple explanation for this dismal performance on the part of American education in general, although Pat Moynihan's analysis remains provocative. The Democratic senator and pixie from New York once theorized that American education declines in direct proportion to distance from the Canadian border. But other than extending Canada down the Mississippi, a most impractical reform, the senator's observation would seem to offer little grounds for making policy.

My own favorite, completely unscientific explanation for the decline of education in these more or less united states is, yes, women's lib. Now that women have more opportunities, the most talented, intelli-

gent and disciplined — the kind who used to make great teachers — wind up as physicians, lawyers and corporate executives rather than in the classroom. No one can blame them for entering other fields where the pay is higher and the conditions better, just as men have done, but what a waste and loss. Their gain is education's loss.

Result: Schools of education try to make up for the dumbing down of teachers by dumbing down the curriculum, and masking the deterioration with the pretentious jargon called educanto.

There is little solace to be found in last year's report on American education from the Paris headquarters of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It concluded that, while higher education remains a "major competitive strength" of this country, "the effectiveness of the primary and secondary education system . . . can broadly be characterized as mediocre."



Richard Riley

And that's with a much greater expenditure on education compared with European countries. Americans spend more per pupil on public education (\$6,010) than all 21 European nations reporting to the OECD. Fewer than half of the people working in American education are actually teachers; the United States remains the only industrialized country in the world where the majority of school employees are not teaching anybody anything. Support staff, it's called.

This heavy overlay of back-up and bureaucracy may help explain why the United States lags in basic education. Meanwhile, the quality of that education seems to deteriorate in proportion to the research grants and general Mickey Mouse out of the Department of Education in Washington.

More teachers and less bureaucracy sounds like the prescription for American education. And more teachers' aides, so the teachers we do have could spend more time teaching instead of collecting lunch money and filling out forms.

Chester Finn, formerly assistant secretary of education, now serves on the board of the National Assessment. His analysis of its latest findings is laden with considerable rue: "We're simply not getting our money's worth. Secretary Riley to the contrary . . . U.S. schools haven't turned any big corners. If we didn't have a vast college and university system to repair some of their graduates' shortcomings (at enormous cost in time, money and efficiency), we'd be in perilous shape indeed."

These figures will doubtless inspire just what American education doesn't need — more expensive studies to find out what's gone wrong; more administrators and organizers and other non-teachers; and more fads after Outcome Based Ed plays out.

Will we ever learn? Not at this rate.

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