

HOLLAND PROFESSIONAL CLUB

Public Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

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I have been a member of this club for thirty years. Now many of you may be thinking that I was recruited shortly after my circumcision, but the reality is that I joined through the sponsorship of Vernon TenCate shortly after I came to Holland in 1976. One of the best decisions I ever made.

During my tenure with the club, I have delivered several papers dealing with education. The reason for my interest in education goes back to my father, who graduated from Holland High School; went to Hope College; and graduated from Harvard Law School. My father was a lifelong learner, often sitting in his living room after dinner reading theology while 7 children created chaos in our home. Our dinner discussions were a study of the Socratic Method, and he firmly believed that education for children did not end when the school bell rang, but continued at home.

Today, America, in my opinion, is at a cross-roads regarding education. There is not a serious politician, who views the landscape, who is not talking about the need for America to re-define itself and the educational process. The process of re-defining has become a mantra in the State of Michigan where the shift to the international economy has eliminated good paying manufacturing jobs which were once almost a birthright in this state. With the high visibility on education, unfortunately education has also become

a political football, hence the name of this paper: Public Education, the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

We cannot begin our discussion tonight without looking at the environment of education today. In 2002, the much-heralded and maligned “No Child Left Behind” legislation was passed. This controversial educational law established a series of standards for schools and states to meet and a variety of penalties for falling short. In the years since 2002, special interest groups have fought over whether this legislation is “working” or not, and what the term “working” really means.

There are many nuances to the No Child Left Behind legislation, but the primary goal of this legislation was a pledge to eliminate, in just 12 years, the achievement gap between black and white students and the gap between poor and middle class students. By 2014, the pledge was that African American, Hispanic, and poor children, like all American students, would achieve 100% proficiency in both math and reading.

So how has this pledge and goal prospered? The most recent reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which tests of 4th and 8th grade students are not reassuring. In 2002, when No Child Left Behind went into effect, 13% of the nation’s black 8th grade students were proficient in reading. By 2005, that number had dropped to 11%. Reading proficiency among white 8th grade students dropped from 41% to 39%. The gap between economic classes was also not disappearing. In 2002, 17% of poor 8th

grade students (measured by eligibility for free or reduced price school lunches) were proficient in reading. In 2005, this number fell to 15%.

The most promising data was found in 4th grade math results, in which the percentage of poor students at the proficient level jumped to 19% in 2005 from 8% in 2000. For black students, the number jumped to 13% from 5%. For white students, the percentage rose to 47% in 2005. What was disconcerting was how far these numbers were from the goal of 100%.

In view of the statistics, the debate about the achievement gap has focused on two (2) issues. The first is about causes; the second is about cures.

Well, what are the causes for this gap? Where does it come from? Why does it exist, and why does it persist? The academic community has demonstrated that there are deep and ingrained intellectual and academic disadvantages that poor and minority students must overcome to compete with white and middle class peers. There has been evidence, for a long time, that poor children fall behind rich and middle class children very early and stayed behind. But what were the reasons for this divergence? Did rich parents have better genes? Did they value education more? Was it that rich parents bought more books and educational toys for their children? Was it because they were more likely to stay married than poor parents? Or was it that rich children ate more nutritional foods? Moved less often? Watched less television? Got more sleep?

The first scholarly work which attempted to identify a specific cause was the work of two scholars, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, who were child psychologists at the University of Kansas. In 1995, they published an intensive research project on “language acquisition”. These scholars had recruited, ten (10) years earlier, 42 families with newborn children in Kansas City, and for three (3) years they visited each family once a month, recording absolutely everything that occurred between the child and the parent or parents. What they found was that vocabulary growth differed sharply by class, and the gap between the classes happened very early. By age 3, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1100 words, and children whose parents were on welfare had vocabularies of about 520 words. The children’s IQs correlated closely to their vocabularies. The average IQ among the professional children was 117, and the welfare children had an average IQ of 79.

Hart and Risley found that what caused these variations was one simple factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child. In professional homes, parents directed an average of 487 “utterances” to their children each hour. In welfare homes, the children heard 178 “utterances” per hour.

Hart and Risley also analyzed the nature of the words and statements that children commonly heard. The most basic difference was the number of discouragements a child heard. By age 3, the average child of a professional heard about 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. For the welfare child, the situation was reversed, and they heard an average of about 75,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements. As the

number of words a child heard increased, the complexity of their language increased as well, blossoming into discussions of the past and future, of feelings, of abstractions of the way one thing causes another, which stimulated intellectual development. These studies concluded that language exposure in early childhood correlated strongly with IQ and academic success later in a child's life. Hearing fewer words, and a lot of prohibitions and discouragements, had a negative effect on IQ; hearing lots of words and more affirmations and complex sentences, had a positive effect on IQ. Their bottom line conclusion was that while wealth does matter, child-rearing style matters more.

Since this initial study, there have been several modifications of the data originally developed by Hart and Risley. Jeannie Brooks-Gunn, a professor at Teacher's College in New York, has conducted hundreds of interviews of parents and hours of videotaping the relationship between parents and children. Children from well-off homes tend to experience parental attitudes that are more sensitive, more encouraging, less intrusive and less detached, all of which tend to increase IQ and school readiness. Another researcher named Annette Lareau found that parents that engaged their children in conversation as equals, treating them more like adults and encouraging them to ask questions, challenge assumptions and negotiated rules created more successful academic children. In 2003, Lareau wrote a book entitled "Unequal Childhoods", in which she concluded that "concerted cultivation" was the building-block to successful academic children.

If intangibles like the language that parents use and the attitudes toward life that they convey are the building blocks for success, how in the world can this be translated into

the American educational process? The analysis which has been done by Douglas Harris, a professor of education and economics at Florida State University, has concluded that the best indicator of a school's achievement scores are the race and wealth of its student body. A public school that enrolls mostly well-off white kids has a 1 in 4 chance of earning consistently high test scores, while a school with mostly poor minority kids has a 1 in 300 chance.

So is the end result of this debate without any success? There have been schools which have been successful in delivering higher results with a population that generally consistently achieves lower results. Most of the schools are charter schools which have taken on this mission by a focus population of ethnic and lower class students. In other words, these schools have stratified their student population. These students have achieved the most impressive results by following three practices. First, they require many more hours of class time than a typical public school. The school day starts early, often at 8:00 a.m. or before, and often continues until after 4:00 pm. Additional tutoring is offered after school as well as classes on Saturday mornings, and the summer vacation usually lasts about a month. Although these schools attempt to integrate music classes, foreign languages, trips, and sports, the vast amount of their time is spent on reading and math.

The second practice is that these schools set explicit goals each year, month, and day of each class, and principals have considerable authority to re-direct and even remove

teachers who are not meeting those goals. Frequent testing is done; however, the emphasis is on team-building, cooperation, and creativity. Teachers put in long hours.

The third common theme is the conscious effort to teach what is called ‘character’. Using slogans, motivational posters, incentives, encouragements, and punishments, the schools direct students in the principle of team-work, the importance of an optimistic outlook, the nuts-and-bolts of how to sit in class, where to direct their eyes when a teacher is talking, and even how to nod appropriately. The bottom line is that these schools are a combination of hard work, touchy-feely idealism, and intense discipline.

The most influential of these schools are the ones run by KIPP, known as “Knowledge is Power Program”. KIPP’s founders, David Levin and Mike Feinberg, met in 1992 when they were college graduates enrolled in Teach for America working in inner-city public schools in Houston.

In 1994, Levin and Feinberg started a middle school in Houston; later moving to New York and starting a second KIPP school. Today, these schools offer an extended day and an extended year that provides KIPP students with about 60% more time in school than most public school students. Two principles of behavior were emphasized: “Work hard” and “be nice”. Today, there are 52 KIPP schools across the country. The network is run on a franchise model, with each school principal having considerable autonomy.

What these schools have found is that lower income and diverse students have to be taught not only academically but a technique called “learned optimism”. Several studies have been conducted which demonstrate that attitude is just as important as ability in measuring the success of a student. Non-cognitive abilities like self-control, adaptability, patience, and openness, which are often qualities which middle-class parents pass on to their children every day in subtle and indirect ways, have a huge, immeasurable impact on a child’s future success in school. Students who are well-behaved, hard working, and respectful get higher marks in school and better jobs after school.

One of the common themes of this approach to education is that the old American principle of “separate but equal” has a new twist to it. An “equal” education is not good enough. Low income and diverse students need a better education, because they need to catch up. So how successful has it been? At a school called North Star, 93% of 8th grade students were proficient in language arts, compared with 83% of students in New Jersey as a whole. In math, 77% were proficient, compared with 71% of students in the state as a whole. The statistics have shown that these schools, with longer days, directed education, and a focus on character and discipline have consistently produced higher test scores than state averages. What has been shown at these schools is that the old saying “you can’t educate these kids” must now be “you can only educate these kids if there is more time in class; better trained teachers; and a curriculum that prepares them psychologically and emotionally for the challenges which lie ahead.”

So how does America address no child left behind? First let us look at where are the best teachers teaching. In studies which have been done by the Educational Trust, they found that majority populated white schools rarely had bad teachers with 11% of the teachers in the lowest quartile. In schools without white students, 88% of the teachers are in the worst quartile.

Unfortunately, government spending does not compensate for these inequities. It often makes it worse. This problem has been labeled “education apartheid”. In states with poor children, per-pupil spending is lower. In Mississippi, per-pupil expenditure is \$5,391 per year. In Connecticut it is \$9,588 per year. Without making a more serious commitment to educate poor and minority students, the concept of no child left behind is really a national undertaking on the order of a “moon landing”.

As I indicated earlier in this paper, public education has also become a political football, and one of the most malignant elements of the no child left behind legislation was that it permitted states to achieve proficiency by allowing each state to individually define proficiency. There is no national standard or required test to determine proficiency. Mississippi, which has declared 89% of its 4th grade students to be proficient readers, the highest in the nation, must be compared with the tests administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which shows that only 18% of Mississippi 4th graders know how to read at an appropriate level – the second lowest of any state. Recently, Arizona, Maryland, Ohio, North Dakota, and Idaho have all followed

Mississippi's lead and slashed their standards in order to allow themselves to label uneducated students "educated".

The reality of the no child left behind legislation today is that even the best, most motivated educators, given 6 hours a day and 10 months a year with nothing more than the typical resources provided to a public school teacher, are being unfairly asked to close the gap between higher and lower poor and minority students.

Although the statistical data and the political environment invites pessimism and skepticism, there is a growing number of successful schools which have adopted methodologies which work to make poor minority students achieve. We need to create a different system for these students, which would likely include the structures and practices which I have generally discussed in this paper; high quality early childhood education as well as incentives to bring the best teachers into the worst schools. It will take a concerted approach, not only by educators, but also by the politicians who use the political process to determine educational policy. We need to realize no child left behind was an ambitious but not an attainable goal. The question is, can we design an educational model with a high national priority and fund it appropriately? Only the future will tell.

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