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# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

## *The Perpetual Reform of American Education*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

There are two remarkable things about the movement to reform U.S. schooling that began in the early 1980s. The first is how long the campaign has lasted. "I think it's caught everybody by surprise," Gary Sykes, a professor of education at Michigan State University, remarked after the movement's first decade. A key reason for the effort's staying power has been the support of American business. Many CEOs are convinced that they will not get the educated work force they need without a major overhaul of the nation's schools.

The second remarkable thing about the reform drive is how little real difference it has made in educational performance. Despite a host of modest changes and much talk about—and some action on—more radical structural reforms, from "professionalizing" teachers to "empowering" parents, the tide of mediocrity decried a decade ago in a government report has not receded. The suspicion grows that the fault for this may lie not just with the schools but with the culture itself.

Evidence of educational failure continues to accumulate. American students are still outperformed by their counterparts abroad, as University of Michigan psychologist Harold W. Stevenson reports in *Scientific American* (December 1992). That conclusion is by now familiar, but other findings from studies by Stevenson and his colleagues at schools in Minneapolis, Chicago, Beijing, Taipei, and Sendai, Japan, are more surprising. They include the following:

- While Chicago children spent nearly twice as much time as Beijing children watching TV, Japanese students spent even *more* time. The difference, Stevenson says, is that Japanese children are more likely to watch TV *after* they finish their homework. "American children were reported to spend significantly less time than Asian children doing homework and reading for pleasure—two pursuits that are likely to contribute to academic achievement."

- The longer school day in Asia is mainly a result of frequent recesses, long lunch periods, and after-school activities. These take up about two hours of the eight-hour school day. "Play, social interaction and extracurricular activity

may not contribute directly to academic success, but they make school an enjoyable place," Stevenson writes. "The enjoyment likely creates cooperative attitudes."

- Asian teachers spend much less time than their U.S. counterparts in front of classes. "Beijing teachers were incredulous after we described a typical day in American schools," Stevenson reports. "When, they asked, did the teachers prepare their lessons, consult with one another about teaching techniques, grade the students' papers, and work with individual students who were having difficulties?" Beijing teachers are responsible for classes for no more than three hours a day. The situation is similar in Japan and Taiwan.

The *Economist* (November 21, 1992) adds in an interesting international survey of education that East Asian schools are inching away from rote learning. "Hence a current Asian fashion for such things as creative writing."

Despite all the criticism of America's public schools they are not doing any worse than they used to, according to Deborah W. Meier, principal of Central Park East Secondary School, a public high school in New York City. Writing in the *Nation* (September 21, 1992), she cites a recent study that found "virtually no change" over the past 50 years in how accurately 17-year-old students answered questions concerning the names of presidents and other basic in-

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formation. Yet the 17-year-olds tested in earlier years were "a far more elite group." Our problem today is not so much that the schools have declined, she contends, as that they now are being asked to educate all students equally for an economy that expects a higher level of education.

During the 1980s, reformers first sought simply to raise standards in schools. Many states increased testing, raised course requirements for high-school graduation, and strengthened curricular guidelines. A "second wave" of educational reform was launched with the publication in 1986 of reports by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy and by the Holmes Group of about 100 education-school deans. The goal was to transform teaching into a full-fledged profession. Teachers who mastered the specialized knowledge about teaching touted by advocates of professionalization would be entitled to much more say over how they do their work, but they would have to submit to more rigorous preparation, certification, and selection. The oft-derided undergraduate major of education would be eliminated. Prospective teachers instead would get a broad liberal education and then acquire their professional training as graduate students.

Not everyone thinks this is a good idea. Writing in *Harvard Educational Review* (Summer 1992), David F. Labaree, a professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, fears that such reforms would increase the power of the professoriate and lead to the bureaucratization of classroom instruction, reducing education to a "technical matter that must be left in the hands of certified experts."

Reform of a diametrically opposite sort is under way in Chicago, whose schools then-Secretary of Education William Bennett called the "worst" in the country in 1988. His appraisal was far from unfounded, notes Katherine Boo in the *Washington Monthly* (October 1992). Half the students dropped out before graduation and high-school achievement scores put the schools in the bottom one percent in the nation. After a 1987 teachers' strike, writes journalist David Moberg in the *American Prospect* (Winter 1992), an unusual coalition of reformers, business leaders, and community representatives pushed through a new state law that "radically decentralized power to the local school level, giving parents and community representatives primary responsibility to hire and fire principals, set budgets, and approve school plans." In effect only since the fall of 1989, the law has not yet yielded any obvious

gains for Chicago's young.

The stakes, University of Pennsylvania historian Michael B. Katz asserts in *Teachers College Record* (Fall 1992), are high. The Chicago reform stands as "the major alternative" to the "school choice" idea long favored by conservatives. "If [the Chicago reform] fails," Katz declares, "the advocates of 'choice' across public and private schools will inherit the field."

A limited school-choice plan proposed by the Bush administration did not fare well in Congress, but public support for choice appears to be growing. A 1991 Gallup Poll found 50 percent in favor of vouchers (up from 38 percent two decades earlier) and 39 percent opposed (down from 44 percent). A voucher system, entitling parents to choose any public or (in some versions) private school for their children, would introduce competition into the system, forcing schools to improve, according to proponents such as Ernest van den Haag in *National Review* (August 3, 1992).

A voucher system may be crucial to the success of entrepreneur Chris Whittle's \$3-billion Edison Project, the private sector's most highly publicized contribution to reform. Whittle—who has recruited former Yale president Benno Schmidt to be the project's CEO—envisioned a huge network of private, for-profit schools, and hopes to raise \$1.2 billion for the first 200 of them by 1996. Even if he can hold tuition to \$5,000–\$6,000, observes Denis P. Doyle, a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, in the *American Enterprise* (July–August 1992), that "is a lot of money for most families." To make the project work, Doyle figures, "Whittle will need either vouchers or school districts that will sign contracts with him to run their schools." Where others have failed, Whittle and his high-powered investors may be able to persuade states to go for voucher legislation.

It is not clear that parental "choice" would necessarily mean better education. More than 80 percent of the American mothers interviewed by Harold Stevenson and his colleagues expressed "a high level of satisfaction" with their children's current schools. And American parents, the researchers found, are much more likely than Asian ones to believe that success in school depends largely on innate ability, not on effort. When asked to name the most important characteristics of a good instructor, the most common response from Chicago teachers was "sensitivity to the needs of individuals." Improving American education, it appears, may require more than school reform; it may take a radical change in American culture.