

THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: What Ails It? 75 Years in the Belly of the Beast

Warren Scharf, PhD

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My involvement in the American educational system began in the autumn of 1934, and I am still involved, though somewhat peripherally. Hence my claim—rhetorical, I admit—to three quarters of a century. My wife Maggie started at the same time and still holds adjunct professorships at both Cleveland State and Baldwin-Wallace. Between the two of us, we've seen a good bit of the beast. We've both taught full- and part-time and at both public and private institutions. Maggie also taught for fifteen years at Western Reserve Academy, and I for a while headed the accrediting agency for music in higher education. We've had kids in the public schools, in parochial schools, in private boarding schools, and in private colleges and universities. We've gotten reasonably well acquainted with this particular beast.

It's not difficult to find evidence that our educational system is in trouble. And I'm not going to spend time trying to prove that there's trouble in River City. I think we all know that. My starting point here is that our educational system is not in good condition. Let me go directly to what I see as the reasons.

An underlying popular assumption is that our schools (and here I'm talking mainly about primary and secondary education, with some digressions into the undergraduate college years) should solve our most basic societal problems, including racial and economic inequalities. A second popular assumption is that everyone is educable and that all, or nearly all, should go to college. To accept these two assumptions is to assign to the schools an impossible task, at the same time virtually guaranteeing not only that they will fail in that task but that in attempting it they will fail in their *primary* task: educating those who want to learn and are capable of doing it.

A third popular assumption is that more money will equal better education. Granted that funding is necessary for good educational programming, it is nevertheless true that more money never can be taken as a guarantee of better quality. Yes, schools in more affluent neighborhoods normally excel those in poor neighborhoods, but it is difficult to prove that the principal differentiating factor is the level of school funding. The prevailing home, neighborhood, and societal conditions are undoubtedly far more influential.

Teachers' unions, I believe, bear a share of the responsibility for failing schools. The emphasis on job tenure and the reluctance to engage in systematic teacher evaluation are major obstacles on the road to improved schools. It has always seemed odd to me that teachers (and this includes all levels, including collegiate) devote a fair amount of

their effort to the process of evaluating their students, and yet can assert, with straight faces, that it is really impossible to evaluate teaching. I just don't get that!

Another factor is the decline of the neighborhood school. When Maggie and I moved to Cleveland in 1969, the Cleveland public school system had an excellent reputation. Then came bussing, and within a relatively short span of years, the system had crashed. Gone was an excellence and cohesiveness of earlier years. In its place was a spreading chaos and discontent. The aim was laudable: the achievement of equal opportunity for all citizens, without regard to race or economic status. The problem was that a more level playing field was achieved, but that the level itself was substantially lowered for all.

Now we face disorder and crime in the public schools, just as in our cities, coupled with an inability to maintain behavioral standards conducive to learning. This inability is closely coupled with the decline in family life that has been observable in America in recent decades, as well as the general decline in behavioral standards throughout society. The traditional nuclear family was a stabilizing element in a child's life, from kindergarten onward. The idea that there were accepted standards of behavior, and that some things were simply not tolerated, was rooted in family life. Parental authority was a given, and by extension, so was the authority of the teacher. In this connection, I recall an incident from my own childhood—junior high, I believe. We had a new, male social studies teacher. He was not a commanding figure, and two or three of us boys decided to give him a hard time. Nothing dramatic, just sharp questions in class, a bit of whispering, and some giggling behind our hands. Very shortly we were called into our vice-principal's office, where Mr. Fulton McKay made it very clear indeed that our misbehavior would cease, and that right quickly! The message had its intended effect, partly because we knew that if we reported the incident at home, we'd catch merry you-know-what. In those days it was assumed that teachers automatically had the backing of parents.

Also, in those days (no snickering, please) it was rare for a teacher not to have control of her (note the pronoun) classroom. Part of the reason was that misbehavior got nipped in the bud. Example: During our Nebraska years, Maggie and I had some students from one-room schoolhouses. (By the way, we never found them to be handicapped in the slightest by that experience, perhaps because we already had a soft spot for one-rooms because Maggie's dad taught in one when he was a young man. One of our favorite Nebraska students, Elaine Chard, now a brilliant colleague and a close friend with whom we spend time every year, tells this story. One day, in third grade, she so forgot herself as to chew on the eraser at the end of her pencil. This was forbidden behavior. The teacher spotted her. Her punishment was to stay after school for thirty minutes. Doesn't sound like much, does it? Well, think again. Her home was a mile and a half away, and she and her older brother, Bill, walked to and from school. Her detention was of course also Bill's, since it was unthinkable that he would go on ahead and leave her to walk home alone.

A pity they didn't think to call the ACLU! I dare say quite a case could have been made. Imagine the dangers they were subjected to in their walk home! Imagine the humiliation! The unfairness of it all! The injustice! The inequity! Television—pervasive and frequently mindless--and the rest of the entertainment industry have a great deal to answer for in this matter. It brings violence, raw sexuality, and contempt for authority and values into every home, for the youngest child to see. The general level of TV programming and the way in which life is portrayed both there and in the movies does not, one would have to say, really encourage the practice of civility. And without civility, it is extremely difficult to operate a school successfully. (The same, of course, could be said of society as a whole.) In general, one would have to say that television encourages and glorifies what might be called lowest-common-denominator behaviors. The idea of a Jerry Springer running for high public office—and that idea's actually being taken seriously in some quarters—is an indication of how television has polluted American behavioral norms. I'm reminded of the late Senator Pat Moynihan's telling phrase, "defining deviancy down."

Still on the subject of behavioral norms, and flying in the face of Philosophical Club orthodoxy, I want to say that the strenuous efforts to purge education (and public life in general) of any religious content or reference—efforts that are, I'm sure, applauded by the majority of our members—these efforts, I believe, have been part of the weakening of the fabric of consensus about behavioral standards throughout society. More about this later.

The idea that a police presence in schools should be necessary is itself a tragedy. In a reform school, maybe—but in an ordinary public school? The very idea is repugnant, and antithetical to the idea of a school's being a place of learning and growth. Again, here we're dealing with a complete breakdown in the idea of civility. That students (or teachers, for that matter) should be fearful in school is a terrible thing—an accusation that we as adults have failed in our responsibility to maintain a society where safety and order are the norms.

Another piece of this puzzle is the deterioration of the family in large parts of the black community. This deterioration is observable in the lower socio-economic segments of that community, where partly thanks to a misguided welfare structure, fathers are often missing from the family unit, and girls become mothers at tragically early ages. Where fathers are missing (and this is true irrespective of race) a mother's task is far more difficult. And when families are nonfunctional, schools are forced to assume responsibilities which properly lie with the family.

Now, back to that word "religion" again. Here I need to be personal for a moment. In spite of having been involved with the Christian church virtually all my life, and in spite of being an organist and choirmaster for much of my life, I probably would have to be classified as "a seeker." I do not subscribe to any creed nor embrace any orthodoxy. At the same time, I would strenuously resist the label "atheist," because I see atheists as people who believe they have found THE TRUTH, just as I see religionists as those who believe *they* have found THE TRUTH. My belief system is rather simple: first, that the

universe is at root a friendly place and, second, that it is governed by some kind of overarching intelligence. If you think you know better, that's fine OK me as long as my position is OK with you. But, what led me to mention religion in the first place is wanting to make the point that churches have played a major role in American education since the beginning. Most of our early colleges and universities were church sponsored. That legacy continues to this day. Parochial schools have been vital parts of the primary and secondary school structure, and they still are. Now, I know that as soon as I mention parochial schools, the horrifying topic that leaps to mind is . . . sexual abuse of children by priests! Yes, we've had that, and yes, it was a really, really bad thing, and yes, the Catholic church handled it not at all well. BUT . . . at the same time it was happening, the Catholic schools were going on educating students and instilling standards of behavior and discipline. And that was a *good* thing. And let's, by the way, remember that sexual abuse is not limited to Catholic schools. It occurs throughout education. Probably always has. Probably always will.

Litigiousness, the American vice, has certainly played a role in the decline of our schools. As far as I can see, the ACLU has never met a student or parental complaint it didn't like! The result has been that teachers and administrators alike are reluctant to take anything that could be called a stand on any issue whatsoever. It appears that there is practically nothing that someone can't take exception to, and if exception is taken, there appears to be practically nothing that the ACLU won't consider worthy of legal action. And if the ACLU won't take up the issue, there's always some lawyer who will.

Finally, there is the impact of women's lib on the public schools. Over recent decades the roles women play in our society have changed greatly. There was a time when the main cadre of teachers was composed of women. The older the student age level, the higher the percentage of male teachers became, but at least through high school, women predominated.

Teaching and nursing were the professions of choice for women before World War II. There were not that many other choices available. Many of those female teachers were married, and therefore not wholly dependent on their teaching income. Of those who were unmarried, a fair number lived with their parents, again not wholly dependent on their teaching income. Another significant cadre taught until they married, then exited the teaching profession while raising children, sometimes returning after their children left home. (Maggie's mom, a normal school graduate who retired from teaching when Maggie was born, went back to Bowling Green State when Maggie went off to the Eastman School of Music, graduating summa cum laude when her daughter was finishing her second year of college teaching.) In all cases, these women were somewhat less in need of income than the working men of the time, a fact which had a salutary effect on school budgets.

World War II and, subsequently, women's lib, changed all that. Gradually, women moved into every occupation and profession. That necessarily meant that fewer of them were available for the public schools, and those that remained were not always the cream of the crop. This major societal shift, while good for women and, in many

ways, for society as a whole, had a major impact on K-12 education. It has depleted the available pool of talent, and it has raised the cost of teachers. It has also resulted in fewer stay-at-home mothers and therefore less parental supervision of children; this in turn has had consequences in terms of juvenile behavior and attention to school homework.

(Now, before any of the women in the room start throwing things at me, I hasten to mention that this point was urged on me by my marital ally. I am also quick to add that I am in no way suggesting that we go back to “the good old days”. I merely point out that a development that has greatly benefitted women, and indeed, society at large, has had some arguably negative effects on the K-12 educational system.)

Back to safer ground. Grade inflation has gotten a grip on education at all levels. I doubt you can find an experienced teacher at any level—K through 12, college, or university—who doesn’t think that grades no longer mean what they used to. It has become far more difficult to give an F or even a D. At one time, an F meant that the student had failed to reach a certain level of mastery of the subject. Now it tends to mean that the student made zero effort to learn the course material. Ds, and even Cs, are often regarded as punitive grades.

A personal anecdote about this topic: Several years back, I taught an honors course in discursive writing at B-W. The eight or so students and I convened in one of the college library’s seminar rooms. The idea was that each student would write a weekly essay on a topic of his choice and I would critique them. When I handed back the first round of papers, there were audible intakes of breath around the table. Surprise was quickly followed by outrage. The students generally felt that their grades were unreasonably low and that I had been impossibly picky. I was in luck, though. One member of the class was a lady who I took to be . . . maybe a little north of 45 years old. After listening for a few moments, she raised her hand, and when recognized, addressed her fellow students. “Didn’t you all sign up for an honors course in writing? Did you expect to learn anything? Or did you expect to get A grades all the way through and wind up writing at the same level at which you started? Didn’t you expect that there’d be high standards in an honors course? What are you here for?” There was dead silence for a moment or two. We then proceeded, and that was the last complaint I had from anyone in that class. I am happy to report that the students did some excellent writing and were unanimously grateful for the experience. At the end of the term, I had the pleasure of taking that lady out to lunch and thanking her for transforming that class. (Kind of reminds you of the old saying that “education is wasted on the young.”)

Well, that seems like enough whining and complaining. So what remedies do I have to propose? Unfortunately, not many, and relatively few that have any realistic chance of implementation.

My first suggestion is that we give up on the idea that everyone should go to college. It seems to me that this concept has led to (1) a dilution of high school graduation requirements to achieve the goal of universal completion of 12 grades and,

therefore, universal eligibility for college admission, and (2) a parallel dilution of college admission standards. As evidence of this dilution I cite the continuing downward revisions of the ACT and SAT.

At the same time, we need to upgrade the quality of education in the public schools. Here several thoughts come to mind. Number one would be the improvement of teaching. To do that will require better and more widespread and thorough evaluation of the work of individual teachers and individual schools. This will not be easy to achieve. Teachers' unions are generally antagonistic to this idea. (It has always seemed to me paradoxical that teachers, part of whose stock in trade is grading, should be so inclined to believe that, while evaluation of students' work is a routine matter, evaluation of teachers' work is difficult if not impossible.)

Evaluation of teaching would naturally lead to new standards regarding pay, tenure, and perquisites for teachers. Merit pay is certainly a desirable outcome. It's my belief, though I cannot prove it, that right now we have a lot of teachers who are underpaid and a fair number who are overpaid. I also believe that tenure should be more difficult to obtain and should require a longer period of successful teaching before it is granted. In twenty-plus years as a college administrator, and after making dozens of accreditation visits, I've seen plenty of adverse effects from tenure.

Any of these steps would of course require that the power of teacher unions be diminished. I believe that that would be a salutary step to take. I don't believe it will happen, though.

I think we should make teaching a more attractive profession. This will require higher pay for the best teachers, recognition of excellence, and removing from the profession persons who fail to uphold standards of excellence in teaching and behavior. It will also require that teachers have sufficient authority in the classroom to maintain the atmosphere required for learning.

Pretty much all of what I have just said falls into the category, easy to say, hard to do. But there are a few things which could be easier to achieve.

The first would be to encourage home schooling and charter schools. Both are to some extent controversial. Regarding the first, I need to say that I am a strong supporter, based on the results I have seen. The college students I've seen who have been home schooled have provided excellent evidence that it can be very successful. My own reservation about this used to be that home schooling might leave kids socially undeveloped. As far as what I've seen, that concern is unwarranted.

Charter schools are, I believe, a helpful development. Breaking the public school monopoly in primary and secondary education can have a salutary effect on the public schools by compelling them to deal with competition. (It will be interesting to see what our new President decides to do regarding charter schools in the nation's capital. Will he

help children other than his own to make a choice? He does, after all, have a keen young female African-American school superintendent who would back such a decision. I'm keeping my fingers crossed!)

My next two suggestions are bound to be unpopular with this group. The first is to take advantage of the large number of successful parochial schools that are already in existence. The second is that we stop worrying that religion will corrupt our youth. If you examine the history of education in America from the beginning, you find that churches, clergy, and religious orders played leading roles in the establishment of schools and colleges. Yes, there was a "selfish" motive: The churches hoped to propagate their respective faiths through education. Religion was not the only thing they taught, however; a liberal education was also part of the bargain.

Parenthetically, I want to add that as a musician, I deplore the banning of Christmas (and other religious holiday) music from the public schools. Some of the greatest music literature in the Western canon was composed for religious festivals. One does not have to accept the tenets of the Nicene Creed to be moved by Bach's B Minor Mass. The ACLU's tenacious opposition to the transmission of such important cultural iconography is, in my opinion, misguided. The corruptive effect of religious art is greatly exaggerated.

My final suggestion is that standards of dress and behavior be set for both teachers and students. Eugene Sanders has it right, I think, when he asserts that requiring students to meet a dress code will have positive effects on learning. My own thought would be that a code would be likewise salutary for teachers. It's easier to act like a bum if you're dressed like one. A recollection that sticks in my mind from thirty years at Old Stone Church on Public Square is how the custodians used to dread the periodic meetings of the Cleveland teachers' union, which were held there. These meetings left behind them vandalized rest rooms, with human waste on the floors. I can remember thinking, "*These* are the people who teach our children?"

I fully realize that to many of you I probably sound antediluvian, out of touch with reality, and hopelessly naïve. BUT . . . recognizing the difficulty of the changes I propose is not the same as considering them impossible. Perhaps we should all just say, "Yes, we can!"