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Are At-Risk Students Being Well-Served by Public School Curriculum?

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What is the overriding purpose of public education today? Before attempting to answer that question, it is helpful, if not imperative, to understand what compulsory education was meant to achieve when it first began in America within the state of Massachusetts in 1852, and eventually expanded to all the other states by 1918. The leading proponents of public education, such as Horace Mann, envisioned universal public education as a way to create good citizens, unite society, and prevent crime and poverty. One could do worse than to make an argument that public education should still embrace these goals today.

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While not minimizing the importance but recognizing that the first two initiatives in our pluralistic society are now broadly interpreted, and perhaps would create disagreement as to the ways and means of accomplishing such goals, the last ideal of preventing crime and poverty is still apt to engender a consensus. Consequently, that implicit consensus appears to be the best place to begin the examination of education reform.

It is important to note that universal education initially applied only to children of elementary age, thus by 1900 only about six percent of the population were high school graduates, as only the affluent and extremely intelligent and exceptionally motivated matriculated to high school and college at that time. In fact, prior to World War II, less than half of our country's youth graduated from high school. Societal norms during the early part of the 20th

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century anticipated and expected adolescents to work, and many did. Dropping out of high school to work was not considered the failure that it is today.

One of the great ironies of the California budget is that although we spend the most money on public education, (approximately 42 percent of the total state General Fund budget) we lack important criteria and data with which to measure success. For example, various reports suggest the high school graduation rate is anywhere from 65-85 percent, depending in part upon whether one considers obtaining a GED a component of the high school graduation figure. Still, we all understand that the high school dropout rate is way too high, with anywhere from a quarter to a third of students failing to complete their graduation requirements within a four-year period. More importantly, these dropouts are at greatest risk to live a life of crime or poverty. Unfortunately, we lack empirical data to guide us in how to address the dropout rate, although logic would suggest that students having success in school are much less likely to leave prior to graduation. However, just spending more money on this endeavor may not alter the results, if the assessment of UC Berkeley Education Professor W. Norton Grubb in his recent book, *The Money Myth*, is correct. Grubb opines that “money may be necessary for school improvement, but it doesn’t guarantee that improvement takes place.”

Education data that appears to have a bit more accuracy is the college graduation rate in the United States, which has held fairly steady over the past 30 years at around 25-30 percent for those obtaining a baccalaureate degree or higher, and approximately 10 percent obtaining an Associate of Arts degree. Obviously, this means that the majority of youth are not obtaining a college degree, despite secondary school curriculums that are increasingly geared towards moving students into college. There are a litany of arguments made as to why this is happening. Some contend that if we just had better public school teachers and administrators, we would experience better results, and therefore, pursue performance-based systems to evaluate school staff. Others argue that funding is insufficient, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, and the inability to attract and retain better teachers through higher compensation. Critics of the high dropout rate also point to the breakdown of families, poverty, and other cultural changes that inhibit academic success, noting that the poor and certain minority groups are particularly affected by these afflictions. Some point out that the high cost of college limits access to college for many poor students or forces some students to quit for financial reasons. One might even argue that we should copy educational methods of certain countries we compete against economically, which have higher percentages of students graduating college, although even the best of them rarely crack the 50 percent mark, and of-

ten are much smaller and more homogenous, thereby making comparisons to the United States' results less obvious. Ultimately, regardless of the merit of whichever arguments one might accept, one is still left to conclude that all of the programs and resources devoted over the past generation have not materially changed the U.S. college graduation rate. Therefore, at some point is there a need to reassess whether our goal of increasing spending of scarce public funds for the purpose of sending more youth to college and as a byproduct increasing college graduation rates serves the goal of reducing crime and poverty? Moreover, is obtaining a college degree congruent with the aptitude and interest of a significant portion of our youth? And, if not, what should be done?

A recent speech by President Obama stressed the need to train 500,000 community college students for industry related jobs for at-risk youth, in part through the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act. This initiative coincides with a drive by the National Association of Manufacturers "... to establish standardized criteria at community colleges across the U.S. with the goal of preparing students to qualify for certification in industrial skills ranging from welding to cutting metal and plastics."¹ Given that nearly a quarter of the estimated 2.7 million manufacturing employees are 55 or over, these proposals to train the next generation of industrial workers seem fitting.² But, are they occurring at the right place and time?

The average juvenile delinquent has his first contact with the juvenile justice system around 14.5 years of age. By the time these at-risk youth are of age for community college at 18, their destiny is frequently set. Similarly, most high school dropouts have long left the educational environment by age 18. To spend substantial funds to entice these youth back into community college for at least an additional two years until age 20 or beyond seems highly unpromising. Simply put, community college is too late to begin to address workforce preparation for those youth at greatest risk to drop out of high school or engage in criminal behavior. Furthermore, California's current proposed budget recommends reducing community college spending by about five percent, in addition to the cuts that have taken place over the past several years, making it problematic for these colleges to take on additional programs and services.

If high school were to become the time and place to initiate workforce preparation, how could it be effectively implemented? Historically, controversy has arisen over educational tracking systems in the United States that purported to separate students by academic ability, but were often criticized for segregating students by race, or social class. As a result, executing a successful workforce preparation curriculum might require certain caveats. For example, entrance into a school or program focusing on workforce preparation would need to be voluntary with the

consent of parents and guardians as well as the student. In addition, students could opt out of a particular vocational choice after each school year, recognizing that a certain vocation might not meet either the aptitude or interest of the student. Also, besides allowing students to move within various vocational training modules, students would be provided the opportunity to return to the college preparation curriculum annually.

Perhaps the most successful program of this nature occurs in Germany. Under the German system, public education is partitioned as summarized below:³

- **Hauptschule**—the least academic through elementary school (ages 9-10). Students generally matriculate to a **Realschule** (ages 12-13) and after passing an exit exam, move onto a vocational school (**Berufsschule**). The vocational schools have students split their time between working at a company and school. This approach is intended to provide knowledge of theory and practice. Companies are obligated to accept apprentice students. During the apprenticeship, the student receives a part-time salary. After passing exit exams, usually around ages 18-19, a certificate is awarded and the student is ready to enter the workforce on a full-time basis.
- **Realschule**—is a more academic program, and apprentices often work in professional institutions such as

banks, attorney, or physician offices performing technical or paralegal work in these positions. A separate exit exam is administered for these students.

- **Gymnasium**—These schools provide a curriculum for those students heading toward a university education. Students are typically required to pass an exit exam qualifying for university (**Abitur**) although the system does allow for certain exceptions.

Germany's education system is not without its own challenges. Similar to America, minority students from poor neighborhoods are the least likely to attend a **Gymnasium**, and therefore matriculate to a university. German achievement for 15 year olds in math, science, and reading skills ranked 13th, 20th, and 18th respectively, according to a 2006 assessment coordinated by the **OECD**, which conveyed that only science skills ranked significantly above average. The system also requires a mandatory private-sector contribution to provide ongoing apprenticeship opportunities for students. The willingness of private-sector businesses in California to afford these types of paid training opportunities could be difficult and would likely require a level of subsidy or be of a voluntary nature.

Other deviations from the German model would probably need to occur as well, such as the aforementioned voluntary nature of allowing parents and students to choose a

Margo: Are At-Risk Youth Being Well-Served by Public School Curriculum

vocational schooling option, and allowing “late bloomers” the annual option of reentering the college track secondary school system. In addition, geographical considerations would need to be addressed for those areas where vocational desires exceed apprenticeship opportunities, as well as other logistical issues. The establishment of “magnet” or charter schools, similar to what has occurred to entice high achieving students to public schools geared toward math, science, music, and arts could be an incremental approach to testing the validity of this concept. In addition, these workforce preparation schools would need to be dynamic, allowing flexible curriculum that reflects changing labor requirements of the economy. But, the idea of having an educational system with a workforce preparation curriculum at the high school level that is more likely to meet the employment needs of the majority of our youth and in particular, those most at risk to commit crime or drop out of high school, appears to be a more cost-effective usage of California’s public education funds, recognizing that many of these students are unlikely to attend let alone graduate from college. And the sooner we start towards this goal, the better.

² *Ibid.*

³ The following information is taken from Wikipedia, Overview of the German school system.

Notes

¹ *Wall Street Journal*, “Industry Puts Heat on Schools to Teach Skills Employers Need,” June 7, 2011.