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Follies

Education Reform and the Promise of Technology

Nicholas Paleologos

This article offers an overview of forty years of American education and suggests why technology may save us from ourselves.

Good times and bum times,
I've seen 'em all and, my dear,
I'm still here.
Plush velvet sometimes,
Sometimes just pretzels and beer.
But I'm here.

— Stephen Sondheim, “I’m Still Here”

Millions of teachers now inching their way toward retirement can certainly identify with Carlotta’s proud refrain from the 1971 musical *Follies*. After all, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) — that thirty-three-page time bomb packed with wonderfully apoplectic phrases like “rising tide of mediocrity” and “unilateral education disarmament” — is more than ten years old. Indeed, it was the first time that America’s public school establishment was ever rocked to its foundation by a mere federal report.

In the fifties, the Soviets (remember them?) had to lob Sputnik into the stratosphere to cause a similar furor. Those were the days when education reform actually meant something. More science. More math. And how about those unforgettable air raid drills immortalized by comedian Robert Klein: “Two lines. Button your lips. No talking. I want an *orderly* nuclear holocaust!”

Today, a report card on America’s education reform movement might well be called *Decade of Dabbling*. After all, *Newsweek*’s May 1983 cover — which screamed “Can Our Schools Be Saved?” — would seem perfectly relevant if it appeared on newsstands next week. It should now be apparent that the “rising tide

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of mediocrity" has managed to engulf not just our schools but those who would reform them as well.

Sadly, all major initiatives since Sputnik — like so many waves crashing on the shores of the body politic — have managed only to further erode public support for the public schools. This is truly an amazing feat.

In fact, the Sputnik scare of the late fifties was probably the last time the education reform movement was focused on education. Whatever you may think about the "new math" of the early sixties, two things about it were undeniably true. It was new, and it was math.

Then along came busing. Racial integration of urban America's schools suddenly became the single dominant education issue from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies. It was so divisive that in Boston during that turbulent period, the racial balance of the city's public school system flip-flopped from two-thirds white to two-thirds minority, with no corresponding shift in the city's general population.

Where did all the white kids go? Those who could afford to sought refuge from the tumult behind the walls of private and parochial schools. They weren't the only ones abandoning the Boston public schools. With the state's help, black parents also loaded their kids by the thousands onto school buses bound for the suburbs thanks to the great-granddaddy of school choice programs, Metco.

As a result, in less than a single generation the political base of support for the Boston public schools was virtually wiped out. As for the three R's, you had teachers reading pink slips, students writing graffiti, and about the only folks doing arithmetic were school department bureaucrats vainly trying to satisfy arbitrarily imposed racial quotas. In short, the three R's eventually became race, race, and race.

By the mid-seventies things changed again. The movement to "level the educational playing field" abruptly shifted its focus from race to class. Spurred by lawsuits in California and Texas, the reformers argued that most of the money for public schools came from local property taxes, causing kids born in poor communities to be placed at an enormously unfair disadvantage. Why, they asked, should a child be condemned to an inferior education because of an accident of birth? The remedy they sought also changed. This time, instead of busing poor kids to rich schools, states would be asked simply to give the poor schools a little more money and hope for the best.

In 1993, Massachusetts became the latest state to have its Supreme Court make a similarly dramatic declaration. If the track records of the other states are any indication, however, Massachusetts is in for a rude awakening. When the dust of the other court suits settled, a disturbing pattern emerged. The bus, as a symbol of reform, gave way to per pupil spending charts while legislators battled endlessly over whose districts would get a larger slice of the school-aid pie.

Unfortunately, most legislators don't live in poor cities. Consequently, in state house after state house, altruism lost out to me-tooism, leaving the poorest communities, once again, with only crumbs.

For nearly twenty years, buses and money had dominated the school reform agenda. When we weren't spending more money on buses, we were busing kids to schools that were spending more money. On balance, by almost any measure, both approaches have been a dismal failure. Equalizing education opportunity never cost so much or accomplished so little. To this day, however, education finance reform continues to thrive as a hot-button issue. As recently as March 1994, 70 percent of

Michigan voters approved the nation's most dramatic shift in public school financing — away from the property tax to that state's sales and income taxes.

But let's return to the spring of 1983, when our nation was declared to be at risk in a government report whose tough talk and military metaphors became a blueprint for the back-to-basics thrust of the early Reagan years. Discipline, we were told, not money was the real problem, and if we could only get those kids to sit down, shut up, and learn, American schools might once again reign supreme.

During that period, singing the praises of Japanese schools was all the rage — with one interesting twist. While magazines like *Newsweek* were regularly publishing gushy little stories extolling the virtues of education in Japan, the Japanese were trying to figure out why, during the previous forty years, their vaunted school system — in the combined fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and economics — had managed to produce only four Nobel laureates compared with nearly 140 in the United States.

Ironically, these same Japanese experts, in a 1986 blue-ribbon report, characterized their own schools as an educational wasteland. "We must," they wrote, "face the harsh reality of the problems in our schools and the serious state of dilapidation and desolation of our educational system which they signal."

Meanwhile, here at home, in somewhat of a backlash against the first wave of stifling state legislation inspired by *A Nation at Risk*, a loose coalition of progressive reformers, buoyed by all the renewed interest in education, again began steering the discussion from class to classroom. They challenged the basic assumptions underlying just about every aspect of school as we know it. Instead of imitating the Japanese system, they sought to reinvent the American one. They had no manifesto, no spiritual leader, and no institutional support. About the only things they shared were an unwavering commitment to the principle of free, universal public education and an obsessive compulsion to ask "Why?"

Why are we still averaging only 178 school days a year? Why is the school day made up of a half dozen or so forty-minute periods? Why do we compartmentalize academic disciplines instead of showing how they interconnect? Why do we train, evaluate, and pay teachers the way we do? In short, why can't we make "school" a more interesting and engaging place both for those who learn there and those who earn there?

Some of the voices crying out in the educational wilderness included Albert Shanker, TheodoreSizer, and Ernest Boyer, to name but a few. They were giving us "break the mold" thinking long before the phrase was popularized by the New American Schools Development Corporation. Their national anthem became known as "restructuring" and, like perestroika, it was beginning to reawaken, among even the most brain-dead bureaucrats, the possibility of transcending — at long last — what had become a chronic and mind-numbing debate on the nation's never-ending education problem.

Of course, this was not exactly what the *Nation at Risk* hard-liners had in mind. To them, a longer school year, better-trained, higher-paid teachers, and all that touchy-feely, interdisciplinary gobbledygook could only mean one unimaginable thing: more money.

Educators, excited by the restructuring rhetoric, didn't have to be lip-readers to figure out that there were simply too many savings and loan executives in the federal funding line ahead of them for new education money to materialize any time soon.

As a result, “school choice” — the hard-liners’ counterattack on the public schools — is now front and center as the reform debate’s flavor of the week. The flaw, of course, is that being asked to choose between public schools the government won’t support and private schools that most parents can’t afford, even with vouchers, is patently unfair.

So thirty-five years after Sputnik ushered in the age of technology, the school-reform debate is stalled somewhere between *Blackboard Jungle* and *Stand and Deliver*. Through it all, those two great goals of “equalizing educational opportunity” and “school restructuring” have yet to be achieved. Worse still, we find ourselves reduced to picking over the carcasses of long-dead issues like tenure and vouchers because this is the stuff that still preoccupies our politicians.

No wonder Benno Schmidt and Chris Whittle have decided to go off on their own to build new schools from scratch by putting state-of-the-art technology in the hands of teachers and kids. They see something that public policy wonks have missed. They see the future.

In the four years since my daughter was born, the Berlin wall crumbled, the Soviet Union collapsed, and America’s two-party system was turned on its ear by a guy who made \$4 billion selling computer software and is pushing something he calls teledemocracy. Meanwhile, these and other astonishing events, seen live on television, are being soaked up by eager young college students all over the world.

George Gilder nailed this phenomenon in *Microcosm* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), which chronicles the short but incredible history of the computer chip and the telecommunications revolution it has spawned. He writes,

The new industrial revolution is a revolution of mind over matter. We live in an epoch when desert-bound Israel can use computerized farming to supply 80% of the cut flowers in some European markets and compete in selling avocados in Florida; and when tiny islands like Singapore and Hong Kong can far outproduce Argentina or Indonesia.

He further notes that both information and money are currently sent “flashing down fiber optic cables and caroming off satellites at the speed of thought rather than of things. Geography has become economically trivial.”

Except, of course, in public education. The implications of the technology revolution for our schools would seem to be obvious. Instead of spending millions of dollars on clumsy and complicated schemes to level the playing field between rich and poor communities, we should be creating a telecommunications highway that would give all of America’s children easy and instant access to one another’s resources as well as to the world’s great libraries, museums, and universities. That’s just for starters.

Instead of pouring more money into special programs within a school, or special schools within a community, we should be investing in the technologies that will allow students of different backgrounds, interests, and abilities to reach their maximum potential side by side in the same classroom. Volumes have been written on the benefits of “active learning” through “hands on” problem solving. Technology is rapidly making such an approach both available and affordable for everyone. The marriage of equity and excellence is at hand, and none too soon.

Let's face it. The way we educate our kids has not changed substantially in two hundred years, let alone in the past ten. What has changed is the way we live our lives. Not since the industrial revolution has such a profound technological transformation occurred in such a relatively short a period of time. For virtually every aspect of American life, with the glaring exception of the public schools, the future is now here.

Think about it. When was the last time you bought a record album? Or dialed a telephone? Or made a bank withdrawal from a real live teller? Or reheated a meal in a regular oven? Or watched a TV program all the way through? Or were truly amazed at live pictures of astronauts in space, Parliament in session, or a war in progress? The money we spend on Nintendo cartridges alone, for heaven's sake, could revolutionize public education in America!

Instead, most classrooms don't even have a telephone jack and their donated, outdated computers sit in separate rooms collecting dust because the teachers don't know how to use them. For the few teachers who, on their own time and with their own money, have already made the leap of faith into the information age, the results have been impressive.

In the new world of interactive multimedia, all students will move along at their own pace, constantly challenged by teachers who are liberated from the drudgery of correcting papers and filling out forms and are therefore better able to focus on giving kids the help they need, in the areas in which they need it.

So the next time you hear some futurist waxing poetic about education in the twenty-first century, what that person really means is, How useful will my nine-year-old daughter's high school diploma be? For today's fourth-graders who will graduate in the year 2000, the most effective way to master the three R's will be through the artful combination of the three T's: teachers, technology, and telecommunications. There is no question that the three T's can become a powerful engine to enliven classrooms and erase the disadvantages of being born in a poor community. The only real question is, Why is it taking us so long to act? Japan promises that it will be wired for fiber optics by the year 2010, which means that they'll probably finish the job by 1995. What's worse, they'll probably use our technology to do it.

By contrast, America's education establishment and the political leadership presiding over it seem utterly incapable of responding favorably to any bold and coordinated national education technology strategy — even if we had one, and we don't. The real shame is that it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what must be done. What's missing from the picture is sustained, imaginative, action-oriented leadership to put the industries of tomorrow — computers, software, and telecommunications — to work on behalf of public education today. Such an approach would revitalize both our schools and our economy.

There are some hopeful signs. Boston will soon become the home of the nation's first public school to be run by Project Edison (Whittle and Schmidt) under a special charter granted by Massachusetts secretary of education Piedad Robertson. The new facility (tentatively called the Boston Renaissance School), the brainchild of the Boston-based Horace Mann Foundation, is slated to open its doors in the fall of 1995.

At IBM, technology guru James Dezell has embarked on a dramatic quest to use the miracle of interactive multimedia, or what he calls knowledge navigation, to

breathe new life into literature. If IBM can excite kids' curiosity about a poem like Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses," the sky is no longer the limit.

In *The Children's Machine* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), Seymour Papert expands on some of the groundbreaking work he and his colleagues are doing at MIT's Media Lab. "Imagine," he writes, "being able to visit electronically with [another] school . . . Imagine schools from across the world collaborating on projects. Such images suggest opportunities . . . that go far beyond anything known in the past."

Unfortunately, initiatives such as these — and there are many others like them — are proceeding too slowly, in part because their main clientele — the public school establishment — has been totally incapable of getting its act together.

Some states have recognized the potential of technology to completely restructure schools and level the educational playing field at the same time. Kentucky, Florida, and Texas have become national leaders in this arena. While all their efforts are commendable, a national strategy is desperately needed.

During the past year or so, virtually all the major communication and computer companies have either locked elbows, or have been elbowing each other out, in an attempt to gain electronic access to you and me and our kids. They are spending countless millions on management "retreats," trying to figure out what will replace the television, telephone, and personal computer as the gadget of choice in the new millennium. It will eventually be up to Congress and the Federal Communications Commission to sort it all out. In the process, they have a golden opportunity to clear a few lanes on the technology highway for children and their teachers.

In the final analysis, our country should be doing much more than simply relying on Chris Whittle and Benno Schmidt to set up a couple of hundred high-tech alternative schools. It is America's responsibility to bring all its schools into the twenty-first century, because free public education is the cornerstone of a successful and prosperous democracy. But forget Thomas Jefferson. To paraphrase the legendary bank robber Willy Sutton, who, when asked why he robbed banks replied, "Because that's where all the money is," the public schools deserve our attention because that's where all the kids are.

In his 1992 campaign treatise *Putting People First*, President Bill Clinton identified telecommunications as one of four critical areas on which to focus national attention. Vice President Albert Gore, while a senator, had been a lonely voice on this subject. By calling for "a national information network to link every home, business, lab, classroom, and library by the year 2015," they seem to have a much clearer view of the nation's responsibility to drive this agenda. Further, they promised "to expand access to information" by putting "public records, databases, libraries, and educational materials on line for public use."

That's a little more like it. How serious are they? How quickly do they actually intend to move? The answers to these questions are still very much up in the air.

For teachers in the trenches, hope springs eternal. But our children are another story altogether. Absent any action, these kids will be taking yet another step closer to an uncertain future for which most of them are hopelessly unprepared. Whatever you might think of Whittle and Schmidt, they at least understand the urgency of the problem. More important, they're *doing* something about it. The time has come for the rest of America to step up to the plate. It's only common sense. But as Voltaire observed, "Common sense is not so common" ("Self-Love," *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 1764). ♣