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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

What is education for? Is it to ensure that we have productive workers in the twenty-first century when the emphasis on adjustment to an ever changing technological landscape requires workers with high levels of adaptability to new situations? Or are we talking about inculcating values that are the foundation of support for civic responsibility, and if so, whose values are we talking about?

One of the most problematic quandaries educators and policymakers face is the absence of a clear-cut definition of what precisely education is, and what larger purpose reform serves, if indeed there is a larger purpose. As a result, conclaves of opinion develop; they create their own fiefdoms, haul up the drawbridges, and remain under siege, unwilling or unable to yield an inch in the pedagogical struggle.

In this special issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, we explore some of the more perennial but nonetheless substantive issues involved in the ongoing debate about the shape educational reform should take from different points of view, and seek that most sought-after and elusive alchemist, common ground.

School reform is an issue for the ages. It has been scrutinized, analyzed, and categorized; subject to endless debate, impassioned argument, and countless experiments, it is one of the few items the public would pay more taxes to improve, yet one of the few issues the politicians eschew. Some put responsibility for reform on local government, others point to state governments, and still others would hold the federal government accountable. However, despite the attention focused on it, reform remains immutable in the face of change, impervious to the new demands made on it, and seemingly inadequate to prepare our children for the future.

Volumes have been written about it. Learned books and academic treatises roll off the printing presses at an impressively monotonous rate, and there is no shortage of ideas about what should be done. (For example, year-round learning: some sixteen hundred schools across the United States have abandoned the traditional three-month break in favor of staggered vacations — in many cases this has helped to raise test scores, and in many cases it has not; site-based management: shift major decisions on curriculum, staffing, and budget away from a central school board to individual schools governed by a council composed of principals, teachers, and parents.) As with many controversial problems over which professionals compete with “ordinary” people about policy, process takes precedence over purpose. The original question, What is education for? remains unanswered.

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Massachusetts enacted its latest version of reform in 1993. The major element of the Education Reform Act is to give more state aid to local governments. Over five years, \$1.8 billion in new aid will be distributed to local systems. Along with this new money comes an obligation for local governments to maintain funding at a certain level. In other words, a municipality cannot cut its contribution to school spending because the state is contributing more. This is all intended to set a level of "foundation spending" — currently set at \$5,500 per pupil — that each district must provide. The idea is to help equalize spending between a town like Dalton, which allots around \$4,000 per pupil, and a town like Weston, which allots more than \$8,000 per pupil.

Other provisions of the reform act include:

- Technically eliminating tenure for teachers, although in practice teachers have other job-guarantee protections that accomplish the same thing tenure does.
- Removing principals from teacher-bargaining units, theoretically making the teachers more independent.
- Reducing the power of school committees on day-to-day management issues and giving more power to superintendents.
- Ordering school site councils (for school-based management and decision making) for each school in the commonwealth.
- Setting up as many as twenty-five charter schools that will operate independently of local schools and union rules.
- Making it possible to remove disruptive students from classrooms through expulsion.
- Developing curriculum guidelines about what students should know, which should eventually translate into standards for graduation.

These reforms will have varying impacts on schools, depending on how enthusiastically local systems implement them. There are no sanctions specified if schools fail to implement the provisions of the act, so there will be few repercussions for systems that fail to comply.

However, despite the plethora of ideas and the profusion of resources, standards of education stagnate. In the past ten years, real spending on education has jumped 25 percent to approximately \$5,000 per student; with the exception of Switzerland, the United States devotes more money to K–12 education than any other country. Yet math and reading scores are no higher than they were.

Surprising? Hardly. Not when you remind yourself that a student does not have to be literate in order to graduate from high school. Our public schools, by and large, do not set academic standards that pupils are required to meet before graduating to higher levels or from school itself.

Recently, the official National Commission on Time and Learning delivered the report on its two-year study of school hours and academic performance. One of its conclusions is that instead of children's sitting in class for a fixed period of time and then being graduated no matter what academic standard they attain, they should be required to sit in class for longer hours, if necessary, to attain a fixed standard. It

seems obvious. But despite the obvious, the commission says that “secondary school graduation requirements are universally based on seat time.”

The commission says that the average American pupil spends only six hours a day and 180 days a year in school. Usually, half a day or more of the school day is devoted to a proliferating range of nonacademic school subjects, such as personal security, driver training, AIDS and drug awareness, pregnancy counseling, and so forth.

As a result, the commission found that pupils in competitor countries — Japan, Germany, and France — spend, on average, at least double the amount of time on *real* academic learning that their American peers do. The result of this system is that nearly half of American adults — 90 million people — read and write so poorly that it is difficult for them to hold a decent job.

Our public schools have failed to keep pace with the higher educational requirements for jobs in today’s international economy. This shows up in tests of math and science ability, where American students lag behind those from other industrialized countries, and in public school dropout rates, which are substantially higher in the United States. The combination of these two factors adds to the differential between other industrialized countries and the United States — the United States has a higher infant mortality rate, a higher rate of child poverty, a higher proportion of its population in prison.

Statistics may lie, but they rarely belie the truth. Some of the harsh and often-repeated, but in-your-face facts:

- In Boston, which has by no means the worst school system in the country, one of every three freshmen is expected to drop out before graduation, and 73 percent of high school students do worse in reading and math than they did the previous year.
- According to a report issued by the state Department of Education, “an estimated two million Massachusetts adults are functioning below the educational level expected of a high school graduate.” The national figures say that nearly one-half of the 4.4 million adults in the state have some literacy problems.
- Worker training, which is increasingly the key to raising productivity is also relatively underfunded in the United States. Only \$48 billion is poured into training, less than half per capita of the amount Germany and Japan spend.
- The decline in the percentage of the electorate with children in public schools — in 1980 close to 40 percent, today close to 20 percent — means that public schools have no constituency — a child in the United States is now six times more likely to live in poverty than an adult more than sixty-five years of age.
- Only 57 percent of students who have been served by special education finish high school with either a diploma or a certificate of graduation. Only 14 percent of students who have had special education go on to post-secondary education. And only 49 percent of students who have had special education can find full-time or part-time employment within one or two years of leaving school.
- The unsettling trend in recent years: between 1965 and 1989 the arrest rate of juveniles for murder almost tripled, the arrest rate of juveniles for aggravated assault tripled, and the arrest rate for weapon-carrying juveniles increased two and a half times. Increase in crimes by juveniles is responsible for most of the increase in violent crime.

- A Massachusetts Department of Education study found that one in five Massachusetts students carry guns to school (in Boston the figure is 42 percent) and one in three consumed five alcoholic drinks in a row on one or more occasions in the preceding month.
- An estimated 525,000 attacks, shakedowns, and robberies occur in public high schools *each month*. Each year nearly 3 million crimes are committed on or near school property — 16,000 per school day. About 135,000 students carry guns to school daily; one-fifth of all students report carrying a weapon of some type. Twenty-one percent of all secondary school students avoid using the restroom out of fear of being harmed or intimidated.

The problem is not that students can't read or write; it is far more serious: increasingly students can't tell the difference between right and wrong. They are living in a moral vacuum, without a set of values to establish the parameters of moral behavior, anesthetized by the constant intrusion of the global media, which bring to them, live and in color, the horrific carnage in a Bosnia or the genocide in a Rwanda. Such news is delivered with a benign neutrality and a cheery sign-off, with no allusion to what might be right or wrong. The thirty-second sound bite erases all distinction between good and evil. We are left with the banal explanation that different cultures do things in different ways.

"Difference" becomes an all-encompassing, convenient buzzword; it empties the conscience, asks that we suspend our judgment lest we offend. Since our children cannot know what they have not been taught, why should they be disturbed when one twelve-year-old shoots down another? After all, is it not just a more animated version of Sega Genesis?

"The larger community," says TheodoreSizer, "must set an example in the way of those habits and values we most care about imparting to our children." And, he concludes, "if we Americans want potent schools and thoughtful youth, we must start by looking in the mirror: Do we in our lives sincerely exhibit those qualities which we wish the young to value? If we do, the rest will be remarkably easy."

Alice Halsted and Joan Schine believe that service learning is at least part of the solution. "Before we can fix our schools we must fix our sense of community." They write, "Adolescents who help to care for and teach young children, assist those with handicaps, tutor their peers, visit the aging, clean up a stream . . . are filling that void." Community service becomes service learning. And, once again, studies show that students who participate in service learning have better academic achievements and "a carryover in positive attitudes toward community involvement over a lifetime."

But community service learning does not end at the secondary school level. Jodi Raybuck states, "To teach our children the habit of getting involved, thinking critically about social issues, and working to help find solutions is perhaps the most valuable thing a college can do. Indeed, it is a competence students must have if we are to prosper as a nation."

Nor is money the problem. One of the more prevalent shibboleths of our times is that there is a correlation between school expenditure per pupil and educational achievement. Despite mounting evidence that the assertion is not correct, politicians, teachers, and the educational establishment continue to indulge themselves in that belief. As a result, much of national reform over the last decade has sought to equalize and increase outlays per pupil.

Take Massachusetts: between 1982 and 1987, Massachusetts increased per pupil expenditure by 74 percent — 34 percent above the national average. In constant value terms, Massachusetts today spends three times more per pupil than in 1960.

Recent research by Robert Gaudet explodes the myth that money maketh the student. He found the following:

- The levels of spending and achievement in [Massachusetts] cities and towns reveal great variations in per pupil costs and performance with little apparent relationship between the two.
- Clear evidence that there is more to high achievement than high spending.
- Some of the state's highest-achieving systems spend less per pupil than the state average, and some of the poorest-performing systems spend more than the state average.
- Underfunded urban schools can compete with suburban schools.
- Educational achievement is a function of local characteristics.

Obviously, other factors are at play. In their study of performance in mathematics in Massachusetts public schools, Ronald Hambleton and Sharon Cadman establish that:

- Parents of students in Massachusetts and the Northeast tend to have more education than those in the country as a whole.
- Seventy-four percent of grade 4 black students and 68 percent of grade 8 black students in the state are performing at a below basic level.
- In advantaged urban communities, where the majority of the students' parents had professional or managerial careers, only a small percentage of students were performing at below basic level, while one out of ten were operating at advanced level. In contrast, in the disadvantaged urban communities where a high proportion of the parents were on welfare or unemployed, students were five times more likely to register a below basic level than their white counterparts, and only one in a hundred achieved an advanced score.
- The relationship between parents' education and student achievement showed a strong positive correlation between the two: the percentage of students who were below basic was at least three times higher among children with parents who did not graduate from high school compared with those whose parents graduated from college.

Harold Horton is scathing on the question of African-American education. "The issue," he says, "is not school choice, busing, racial balance, vouchers, vocational education, school-based management, or any such notion, but always equality of education, which has never been made available in urban schools." He points out that although minority students comprise nearly 80 percent of the enrollment in most U.S. urban schools, 87 percent of all teachers are white, and only 8 percent are black.

Parents. The word crops up again and again in many articles. Frances Gamer and Kathleen Mastaby: "Education is a very human partnership depending on how teachers and parents relate to each other's adult needs. . . . Crucial to all restructuring efforts is an active parental involvement. . . . The most payoff comes from teachers

involving parents in helping their children at home. . . . Parents are the first and the best teacher a child will have.”

Moreover, in studies of young people who were very successful in their fields, it was found that the underlying common characteristic of their educational experience was enthusiastic and involved parents. This cut across race, ethnic group, and socioeconomic status.

At the far end of the spectrum, we have the children who live in single-parent homes. According to Paul Walsh, more than 70 percent of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes. He draws attention to a number of scholarly studies which found that even after controlling for differences in income, boys from single-parent homes are significantly more likely than other boys to commit crimes and wind up in the criminal justice system.

“The formula for success is no mystery,” writes Deborah Prothrow-Stith. “Research shows that schools with strong principals, schools that are not too large, schools where discipline is fair but firm, schools where teachers are imbued with high expectations for every child, schools where parents are drawn into the educational orbit, are schools where learning takes place.” The problem: how to get parents involved in their children’s education. And the second problem: how to bring teachers around to understanding that parental involvement is not an intrusion on their turf.

Ronald Edmonds, whose work is cited by Byrd Jones and Robert Maloy, came to similar conclusions when he identified the characteristics of an effective school: positive leadership; agreement on goals and objectives; an orderly environment; a continual monitoring of students’ learning. In an effective school, staff and students know their goals and they cooperate in order to achieve these goals. “Unless we can work together toward common goals that give meaning to people’s lives, no effort or money will significantly improve schools.”

These are the challenges that face us as we edge toward the twenty-first century. There were, of course, other pressing considerations, primarily with regard to the impact of new technology and information systems on education and the marketplace.

Lester Thurow cites some grim statistic to show what has been happening: in 1980, 18 percent of young males eighteen to twenty-four years of age could not earn a poverty-line income; in 1990 that figure had jumped to 40 percent. Among young female workers in the same age bracket, the percentage earning a poverty-line income or less, despite full-year work, rose from 29 to 48 percent during the same period.

“A good high school education by itself,” he says, “buys you very little in terms of higher wages. It is necessary but not sufficient.” The problem: “There is simply no system of post-secondary education for the non-college bound in the United States.” And here we come to the nub of the challenge: “No one can say what must be done in the American high school until such a post-secondary education system for the non-college bound has been built. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the two systems have to fit together. . . . If everyone completed college, most college graduates would have to fill low-level jobs. Put bluntly, most of the skills America will need in the twenty-first century are not going to be learned at college.” However, in the United States “the vocational track has become a second-class course. It has to be made into a first-class track if wages are not to fall.”

And fast. The results of our skewed educational system are already in evidence. A recent government commission, led by former labor secretary John Dunlop, found

that America is moving toward a two-tiered society with a growing underclass of low-wage earners. The commission also found that wage distribution in America is the most unequal among developed countries and warned that “a healthy society cannot continue along the path the U.S. is moving.”

The report said that the real hourly compensation of American workers, once inflation had been taken into account, stagnated in the past two decades and actually fell for male workers, a development it said was “unprecedented in the past seventy-five years in this country.” And, it concluded, “the stagnation of real earnings and increased inequality of earnings is bifurcating the U.S. labor market, with an upper tier of high-wage, skilled workers and an increasing underclass of low-paid labor.”

Nothing less than a complete overhaul of the entire educational system will suffice, Jones and Maloy assert. “As American education struggles to achieve new competencies for an emerging information age,” they write, “popular reforms remain locked in industrial-era metaphors. Testing for basic skills, teacher professionalism, and school-business collaboration assumes that schooling prepares workers for predictable roles.” But information technologies are transforming possibilities in school and workplace, mutual adjustments are frustrated by differences in purposes and governance.

Jones and Maloy explore the passing of industrialism as access to low-cost information reshapes productive competencies and work roles. They argue that effective schools, teacher professionalism, and business approaches to quality and efficiency through teamwork and shared cultural values have much in common. “New meanings of learning and earning through cooperation, choice, and shared purposes reconnect effective schools to productive workplaces.” In short, schools must stop teaching students skills that are obsolete by the time they graduate.

Ernest Lynton addresses the same problem from a somewhat different perspective. He argues that an excessive emphasis on research as the dominant measure of institutional as well as individual prestige and values has created a critical mismatch between the activities of American and societal expectations. He articulates the urgent need for basic changes in university priorities at a time when teaching and professional service have acquired both new importance and new complexity.

He, too, makes the pivotal connection between levels of employment and the fact that employment in a knowledge-intensive society requires ever increasing levels of skills. “The importance of meeting this heightened pedagogic challenge has itself changed in recent years. In our postindustrial, knowledge-based society, there is much greater need, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for a highly skilled workforce, with a steady increase in the required educational level. Either the university must adapt or lose a great deal of its relevance to the future. A knowledge-driven economy requires effective dissemination and rapid application of new ideas, discoveries, and knowledge, especially in view of the accelerating rate of technological, political, and social change. We must take a different view of the role of universities from that of the insulated, inwardly oriented ivory tower.”

Thus the state of our schools and our students. Many problems require urgent attention. But there is one problem that is beyond the scope of education: How do you fix broken homes? 🐼

“Between 1982 and 1987, per pupil spending increased by 35 percent nationally and by 51 percent in Massachusetts. Yet despite legislative interest, there was not much improvement in terms of student performance when the decade ended. What happened?”

— Bob Gaudet