

File
College Board

EDUCATING THE CLASS OF 2001

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"Educating the Class of 2001: Speeches from the 1988 National Forum
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In talking about tomorrow's schools, we first need to ask what our schools are like today. If the image is positive, then we can imagine merely improving what is already working pretty well. On the other hand, if the image is negative, if what we have is not meeting our needs, then we need to imagine a school that is radically different.

The best information that we have today tells us that what we need is a radical transformation. For example, let's look at NAEP results for recent years, and specifically the results for 17-year-olds. The toughest part of the writing exam asks the student to write a letter to a manager of a near-by supermarket, convincing him to hire the student. Only 20% of these 17-year-olds could write what was considered an adequate letter, which itself does not meet a very high standard. The number of 17-year-olds who could determine which train to catch in Philadelphia to arrive in Washington at a certain time is 4.9%.

And that's not all. According to these NAEP results, in science and math only about 5% of high school graduates are really ready for college-level courses. And we have all seen the numbers that indicate the percentage of youngsters who can't find the United States or the Atlantic Ocean on a map, or know in which half of the century World War II was fought.

Note that I did not mention anything intellectual among these assessments. There is no Shakespeare or Dickens; there is no algebra or trigonometry or probability theory. These are only the kinds of things that one would expect a fairly well educated citizen, not particularly intellectual, to know or be able to do.

We must conclude that we are educating 10% of our youngsters, or maybe 15 or 20 or 25%. I doubt that anyone could honestly stand up and say, "I think we are educating 45 or 50% of our kids." If only 90% of the products of an automobile plant were turning out pretty well, the critical comment might be, "It's a pretty good system...let's just tighten up the quality control." But if the turnout was about 80% lemons, we certainly would question the entire process of production.

I suggest that this is precisely what we need to do with respect to schools. Before moving on, I must distinguish myself from Bill Bennett and others who embrace the notion that once upon a time we had a school system that educated everybody. Then along came John Dewey, teacher's unions, television, drugs, broken families, and we find ourselves in the present. I disagree. I think that we're probably doing better with more kids than we've ever done before, but better isn't necessarily enough.

The automobiles that the United States produces in 1988 may be better than the automobiles we produced in 1950, but nobody buys an automobile today because it's better than the 1950 models. Remember also that in 1950 there were no Japanese automobiles. That our 1988 cars may be better than 1950 cars makes no difference; the only difference is that our cars are not better than the Japanese cars available to the customer today.

Our problem with education is not that we are worse than we were, but that we are not measuring up to what we must do to deal with the problems that we face today. The question is, are we really only reaching 25% of our kids? If someone wants to argue the point that really we are educating 60 or 70% of our kids to a reasonable level and put forth materials to support that point, I would love to see them. But if correct, then we have to ask why? and what is happening? Is it that God only made 4.9% of us smart enough to read the railroad timetable? Or 12% of us smart enough to order a set of fractions? And remember, these are of the 75% still in school, not of the whole group.

I think that if each of us looks at what schools look like from the point of view of a child, we will get a good picture of what's wrong and why the results that we get are less shocking than predictable. We ask children to do something that most adults can't do--sit still and keep quiet. If I were to ask my kids at home to sit still and keep quiet while I stood in front of them and lectured for five hours, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children would come and take me away. If I do the same thing to 25 or 30 kids in school, and if the kids move around a little, they don't take *me* away, they take the restless *kid* and put them into Special saying that something is wrong with them because they can't sit still and be quiet. Likewise, many people, certainly when they are children and most as adults, can't learn by listening to someone talk. They don't take in the words, they don't remember the words, and they can't make the words into images or anything else.

Imagine if the medical profession operated as our schools do. You would go to the doctor, and he would give you medicine for your problem. You'd go back a few days later and say, "Doc, your medicine didn't cure me, and, as a matter of fact, it even had this bad effect." If the doctor were an educator, he'd shake you, angrily saying, "You've got one hell of a nerve not responding to my medicine. Double the dose!" Of course the doctor wouldn't say that. The doctor would say, "I'm sorry." He would not blame you, the patient. He would then say, "I gave you something that helps most people, but it didn't help you." Acknowledging that we're all different, he would give you something else and say, "If that doesn't work, come back and we'll try something else."

In school, what we say to kids is, "You're going to learn in one way. You'll learn by listening to me, or maybe you'll learn by the words in the book. You're going to learn in these ways or you're not going to learn at all."

We don't give them a variety of ways to learn. We call on them, we ask them questions.

Some of the students are very good. They love to come to school every day because they can get up in front of the other kids and show how great they are. There are some kids who can do this some of the time, and others who never get the answer right. The latter sit engaged in an unconstitutional act, praying that I not call on them.

I have to call on these kids, and when I do, what am I doing? I am humiliating them in front of their peers, and humiliation is not a very good motivator. If ever I was humiliated as a kid, I would simply decide that I wasn't going to do whatever it was that had humiliated me.

What we have in schools is a fundamentally flawed analogy: that we teach the kids; that the teachers are the workers pouring the knowledge into the kids. As I go from school to school I hear this phrase over and over: "I taught them, but they didn't learn it." What does that mean? Imagine a construction worker saying, "I built the building, but I don't see it. It isn't there." There is no relationship between the action and the product.

A British management guru named Charles Handy (he writes Peter Drucker-types of works) says exactly this: that education is not something that can be delivered to or poured onto someone else; education is the product of the work that one does. We are all self-educated; teachers, schools, books, and materials all make it easier for us to educate ourselves, or can confuse us. But basically education is the result of the work that the *student* does. Mr. Handy asks what kind of work is it? Is the work that the students do the work of brick layers or auto workers? Handy says that the work that they do is most like office work in the outside world.

A classroom is like an office: you read and write reports, you give oral reports and you listen to them, you move numbers around and you move words around. Now, imagine working in an office that operated like a school. I hire you, then I tell you to sit right here at your desk, and I say, "Al, there is your manager, and in a few minutes he will give you some work to do. Now, there are 25 other people like you sitting in this same office, all sitting at their desks. They are doing exactly the same work that you're doing but the rule here is that you are never to talk to them, and they are never to talk to you. You must do the work that you are assigned.

"It is possible that when you are about to get the hang of it a bell will ring. When this happens, leave your work and got up to Room 409, where you will be given totally different work, have a totally different manager, and 25 other workers doing the same work that you will be doing. Again, you cannot talk to the others. Every 45 minutes we are going to change your manager, your work, and the 25 others you work with."

An office organized in this way would not last very long. Different people take different periods of time to get used to work. It's confusing to get a different kind of work every couple of minutes; it is difficult to relate to different bosses.

This model makes perfect sense only if we view the student as an inanimate object being moved along in an assembly line, i.e., for 45 minutes the English teacher screws English onto the student; for the next 45 minutes the math teacher hammers math into the student. But if we expect to engage the student, it makes no sense at all.

Moreover, we are going to organize this assembly-line school system on an annual basis, so if the kids don't have someone pounding away at them at home, they will fall behind. How many people, if they start work in September knowing that their work review will be given in June, would really go home and do the work that night with 10 months--10 whole months--to do the work? That is a very important characteristic of a kid's school environment; most adults don't have it in their workplaces, but we organize schools in such a way that students feel they have plenty of time before they fall behind.

We know that students learn at their own rates, but we expect them to learn at the rate that the teacher talks. We know that we have a system in which one-third of the kids is going to be bored because they already know what I'm saying, while one-third will not understand because they don't have the background necessary to understand. And of the third in the middle that I'm trying to teach, half will be looking out the window, not following what I'm saying anyway. So, we have a system that delivers largely through teacher talk and reaches maybe 3, 4, 5, or 6 kids out of 25 or 30. And we wonder why we get the results that we do!

Is this the only way to organize a school? If you had said to somebody in the automobile industry a few years ago: "Look at all these lemons that you're recalling," they would have responded: "That's the nature of mass production. You've got an assembly line, you've got workers...there are a certain number of errors that happen." Then the Japanese came along with a new concept of quality control. Our concept of quality control is to manufacture the product, sell it, recall it, and build it over again. In education, that method is called compensatory education. And remediation. The Japanese have learned that it is cheaper and much better to get it right in the first place.

The central analogy that we need to recognize is "students as workers." If students are workers, then the teacher is not really a person pouring knowledge into the kids; the teacher is a manager. Like the manager of a company, a teacher must ask some crucial questions: how do I get my workers to come here wanting to work? How do I get them to do the work? How do I really get them to manage and be interested in the quality of their own work?

What we are finding out in business today is that there is no management system capable of monitoring everyone, rewarding and punishing everybody. Any mass system is going to depend upon the workers in that system accepting norms; that you have to work and do a good job and it makes a difference.

How can we make students understand this? Anything that makes them want to stay in the game and work well, and want to produce well, *that* is effective teaching. Anything that makes kids feel that they're stupid or no good, or that says you can only do something in one way and if the students are unable to do it then there is something wrong with them, not the teacher--anything that pushes the kids out in that way is wrong.

How do we get effective teaching? How do we create it? This is where I see something very exciting and interesting in terms of the schools of 2001 and beyond. A few years ago in Dade County, the superintendent of schools and the head of the union met with principals and teachers and asked: "How many of you think that you could do a better job of running your school if you didn't have the state rules, the Board of Education's rules, and some parts of the union contract? In other words, if you could run the school yourselves, with your own rules and regulations, how many of you think you could do a better job?" When almost everybody raised their hands they decided to have a competition.

Any school wanting to participate had 5 or 6 months to come up with two things, the first being a plan for governance. How would they govern themselves if no one else handed down the rules to them. Second, what substantive changes would they make. They set up independent committees and forty-two schools were selected as those with the best plans. Their prize was self-governance; they are out from under the rules and regulations.

Now, how could such changes come about? I listed things wrong with our schools. How do we get modifications? Well, consider how you would go about building a house. You might list the essentials, according to your family's lifestyle. You might then go to three architects and get three sets of plans, all of which would be responsive to your wants and needs. So, to drastically and radically modify this institution with the participation of those who work within it, we need to put out a list.

We would like to have a school where at least some teachers will be paid very substantial sums of money. We would like a school in which all the kids are not forced to learn in the same way. We'd like a school in which kids who can't sit still all day and listen to someone all day are still able to learn because we've thought about other ways to teach them. We'd like a school organized so when kids talk to other kids and ask for their help, it isn't called cheating, but cooperative learning. We'd like a school in which the teachers don't have to invent everything for themselves. We need to extricate teachers and move them away from the lecturing, get the kids

involved in doing the work and allow teachers to talk and develop colleague relationships.

In other words, what we really need are a set of specifications, not a plan. The faculty of individual schools should be empowered, enabled to draw up different plans, but in accordance with a set of principles: namely, a view of what is wrong with the schools and where we need to go. We have a number of schools that are on the way--they are doing just that. This, I believe, is the hope of 2001 and beyond. For the first time in 50 or 70 years we are able moving away from the factory model and toward a model in which students are raw materials and teachers think as managers. Where teachers realize that they are working not with inanimate objects, but with people; where we offer systems of incentives for good work, not only for teachers, but for the young people as well.

There has been tremendous excitement not only in Dade County but in Rochester, Toledo, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh. These first groups are going to have to work very hard. They will have to look for five different ways to teach the kids, the first hour this morning. They will make a lot of mistakes, and it is out of these mistakes that the essential structure will emerge.

One of the major reasons that changes have not occurred is the political structure of the schools. School Boards have to be responsive. The Chief Executive Officer of a school system meets in a public meeting to discuss all the schools' problems. But what does a superintendent do? The superintendent says to all of the principals, (if not formally then informally) "Look, there are no rewards in this system but you've got hell to pay if you make a mistake." No bad news; and that's the word all the way down: no bad news.

What we need now is a structure that allows schools to be independent. In the next few years, we will see legislation in a number of states that allows school systems and school boards to contract with their own faculties. And, in accordance with a plan devised by those faculty members, these teachers will be enabled, maintaining their independence from the central authority for years, provided that those schools are of choice; namely that they can keep their customers. You can't force parents and children to remain in a school that is under this self-guidance system without direct elected control.