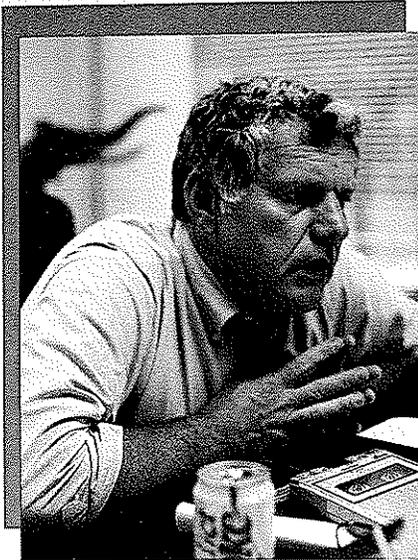




William J. Bennett has served in several key national posts. President Reagan appointed him US Secretary of Education in 1985, then, in 1989, President Bush named him director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy ("drug czar"). A native of Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Bennett had taught in a number of universities before becoming president of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. In 1981, President Reagan selected him to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, where he served until becoming Secretary of Education. Currently a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a public policy research organization in Washington, and a senior editor of National Review, Dr. Bennett has written extensively on education.



THOUGH EDUC

We don't need another study to tell us what's wrong. The Japanese child spends 20 hours more a week doing homework than the American child. Multiply that by ten years, and you see the difference in time spent on learning.

① It certainly should begin at home with parents. Not every teacher is a parent, but every parent is a teacher—the child's first and indispensable teacher.

When professional teachers are asked what would most improve American education, something like 80 percent of them say greater involvement of parents.

The parents to whom you are born make a great deal of difference, in terms of what you will learn both before and after you go to school. Perhaps most important is the attitude they give you about education.

We found out through research that it wasn't the parents' educational background that made a great positive difference, it was their attitude toward education. A poor and illiterate parent can impart something invaluable to a child by incessantly stressing the importance of education.

② At an awful lot of points. We can say, I think, that we do a reasonably good job from kindergarten through grades one and two, maybe even grade three. The real differences begin to emerge after that between our efforts and the efforts in other countries.

The gap begins around grade four and widens steadily, until, by the time they're seniors in high school, our kids are way behind.

Why? Because we have the greatest amount of disagreement in those middle grades about what to teach, what school is for and what the purposes of education are. And we get confusion, sloppy curricula, diminishing homework.

③ One, more Federal involvement. Two, give parents more say in the schools their children attend. Three, some kind of national assessment with consequences—that is, children must perform at a certain level or, as someone has proposed, they will not get money from the Federal government to go to college. We also need to overhaul curricula; get back to basics.

The biggest obstacle is the education establishment itself, primarily the teachers' unions, primarily the National Education Association, which acts for the most part like a political animal rather than an educational animal.

④ At its best, American higher education is the finest in the world. There's no field in which American scholars are not at the cutting edge. The problem is that a lot of our college-level education is mediocre, and much of what passes for higher education should have taken place in high school.

And there's no accountability in higher education. We don't know what students learn morally or intellectually as a result of going to college, because colleges will not submit themselves to any kind of evaluation.

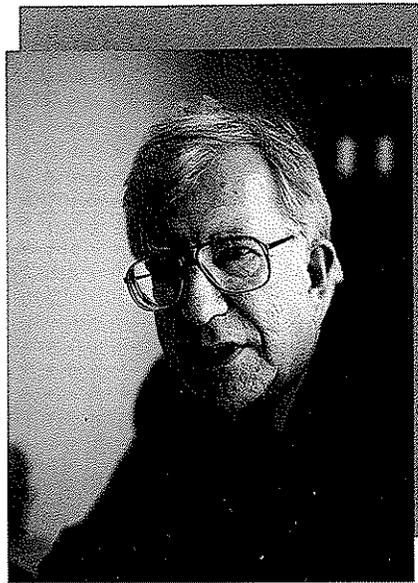
Right now, there are serious problems in colleges—such as the politically correct business, the enforcement of orthodoxy on campus, faculties in humanities and social sciences that are biased toward the left. If universities are not free market-places of ideas, they will collapse of their own weight.

1
When does—
or should—
education begin?

◆
3
What are the
remedies?



HTS ON ATION



Albert Shanker, long a force in public education, has been president of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, since 1974. In 1978, he was elected president of the International Federation of Free Teachers' Unions, the first American to hold this post. A vice president of the AFL-CIO and chairman of its International Affairs Committee, he serves on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the President's Education Policy Advisory Committee, and the President's Council on Competitiveness. Shanker has taught at the elementary and high school levels, as well as at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Where We Stand," his weekly New York Times column on education, is in its 21st year.

teaching, we still wouldn't be able to put one qualified teacher in each classroom.

Another problem is the constant meddling in educational affairs by unqualified people at every level. And education here is very political. School board members need name-recognition to get reelected, and they get it by digging up the dirt in the system and going public with it. We've got 15,000 school districts in this country and it's very hard to think of five really outstanding superintendents. And that's because it's basically a job of political juggling.

Another problem in education is that students don't have to work. Why should they, if they know they can graduate from high school and go to college without working?

③ The remedies? We need to apply the great new consumer products we've created—like video and audio tapes, computers and VCRs—to reaching youngsters educationally.

We need to alter the politics of education radically. We have to allow each school to be an independent entity, almost like a business. We need incentives for both adults and students; rewards for those who succeed, and penalties for those who consistently fail.

④ We should establish a ten-year period in which to move up to world-class admission standards in our colleges and universities.

Right now, the highest dropout rate in the country—over 50%—is in colleges, not in public schools. What we've been doing is taking a lot of kids who are semi-literate and semi-numerate, giving them an education they should have gotten in junior high and calling it a bachelor's degree. And more than half of them can't even cut that, so they're saddled with huge loans and they've gotten nothing out of it.

I think we need to announce today that ten years from now our standards for getting into college here will be the same as they are in France, England, Germany, Canada, and then begin raising them gradually. We'd end up with more of our kids qualified. They'd stay in school, and we'd have more college graduates than we have today.

And I wouldn't allow those kids who didn't make it to go on through life without any further education. We need all sorts of strong vocational education out there.

2

At what point does public education go wrong?



4

How could higher education best be improved?

① The foundations for education begin with parents at home. Each infant needs to have at least one adult who spends a tremendous amount of time caring for it. They learn to communicate, and eventually that leads to talking and reading stories to the child.

You can't get that if a child is abandoned in the home, as many are in low-income groups. You can't get it through the system of babysitters that's often used in upper-income homes where both parents work. It has to be one on one—parent and child.

② It goes wrong at many points. For one thing, we have a model of a school that never worked for most people and still doesn't work—unless you have a society like Japan. It works there because mothers are willing to spend enough time, and everyone is putting so much pressure on the kids to conform. But there's no question that other societies will never do that, and we don't know how much longer Japan will do it.

Another place we go wrong in this country is that we have the lowest standards for teachers in the industrialized world. We treat schools mainly as custodial institutions. Since most of our colleges have no standards for admissions, we're not getting top-notch teachers. If we had all the top college graduates in the country going into



⑤ It all depends on what you mean. One of the beauties of the American system is that we are committed to educating everyone as best we can, and we should

not hedge on that commitment. But we should not be embarrassed to give outstanding and talented students every opportunity and not hold them back. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency to reduce education to the lowest common denominator.

Magnet schools are springing up all over the country. They attract students with special talents and abilities. It's a very good idea and we should encourage it. We have special education programs that have been blessed by everyone for kids who have problems; we should have similar programs for kids who have exceptional talents.

⑥ Yes, but for the most part the education business should belong to parents and teachers and principals. Corporations should help, but when they help they should ask for something in return, attach some strings by insisting on strong performance by the schools.

I know of one company that gave a school a computer for every child—but math courses weren't required past the tenth grade.

⑦ Very important. Most of the education establishment hates standards and hates testing, because those are the ways you get accountability, and when that happens some people may lose their jobs. Every civilized country has standards. We have been woefully negligent in this area. The power of the unions is a big part of it.

⑧ President Bush's education proposal involves more than choice, but choice is an important part of it. Public funds should be for the public; public education funds should be for the education of the public. Students use public money to attend private, parochial and public universities. They should be able to use these funds in the same way at the elementary and secondary levels.

The reasons for it are clear, and a majority of Americans agree. Choice will give parents more say, will increase competition among schools, and will provide greater educational opportunity for the children of the poor—those whose parents can't afford private or parochial schools.

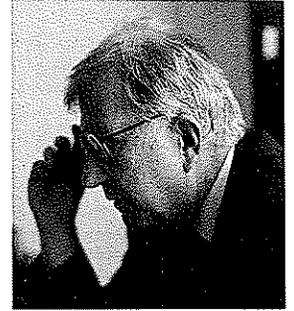
Good public schools will have nothing to fear from such competition; poor public schools will have much to fear, and they should.

5. Is "elitist" education to be avoided or encouraged?

6. Do corporations have a role to play in education?

7. How important are educational standards?

8. Is the Bush Administration's main proposal for overcoming our education crisis—using public funds to send children to private and parochial schools—a sound one?



⑤ If elitist means that only rich people and white people should have access to higher quality education, the answer is that it should be discouraged. But if it means that there ought to be reading, writing, mathematical and cultural standards for admission into universities, then it's absolutely to be encouraged.

My point is not to limit things to an elite, or to reduce the number of people who are learning, but to give everybody the maximum amount of education they can possibly take, but at an appropriate level.

⑥ I think they do. For instance, education in this country is terribly mismanaged, and that's an area that people in business know something about. A sharing of their ideas and skills could be very important for public schools.

Instead of crying about the poor nature of schools, business could send a very strong message by asking everyone who applies for a job, "How are you doing, or how did you do, in school?" There's nothing stronger business can do than let people know that what they do in school is going to follow them.

⑦ Extremely important. How you set standards is crucial. A single standard for everyone means you'll be operating at a very low level. What you need is a set of standards that says to every kid, "You can be better than you are now."

Testing is very important, and you get what you test. In Europe, there are essay questions and long oral exams, instead of true-or-false and multiple choice. Is it surprising that their kids know how to read, write and even think better than ours?

⑧ It's unsound for a bunch of reasons. For one, it's been shown that private and parochial schools are doing no better than public schools in teaching youngsters.

For another, once you give money to one religion you've got to give it to all of them. Do we really want taxpayers' money going to racists to set up their own schools? Do we want immigrant schools where kids don't have to be taught the English language? I think the administration is sacrificing reality to ideology this time.



⑨ It's a very hard thing to know. But one of the reasons is that the public—although it doesn't know it—is being pretty much systematically deceived

about the performance of their kids in school. The deception is not malicious, but it's there. The national data show pretty clearly that we're not performing as a nation, but when parents get information from the schools, what they get tends to suggest that everything's fine—when it's not.

Why? Conflict-avoidance, for one thing. Principals and teachers like to avoid trouble, and the more they criticize kids, the more trouble signs they raise for parents and the harder they have to work. But there are certain kinds of trouble we ought to have.

Another reason why it's not easy to improve education is that a lot of people in the schools don't know any more what school is for. They don't know how to evaluate whether Johnny or Mary is really doing very well. Every time I go to a conference of educators, I realize that we're talking in an entirely different universe. I believe schools exist in order to teach kids how to speak, write, read, count, think; and to help them develop reliable standards of right and wrong.

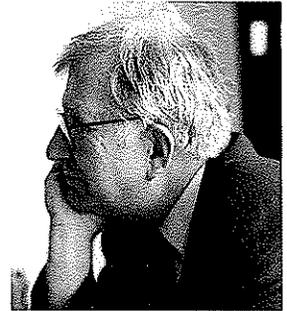
But what do the educrats say school is for? "To help prepare kids for the 21st century"—whatever that means. "To help them live in an increasingly interdependent world"—and I don't know what *that* means. "To help them understand and tolerate people with different ideas"—sure, I guess so.

But those things don't lead you to a curriculum. So you end up with "be nice, feel good, feel good about yourself," and not a whole lot more. The attitude is, "Hell, everybody who wants to go to college will get in anyway, so what's the beef? And everyone who wants a good high school education gets one." Sure they do; some just get it after they finish college.

⑩ Utopia? What we need to do for all schools is what we do for some right now. It's not as if we don't know what makes good schools.

Ten percent of our schools are very good, and you find them in all sorts of communities. They're always the same: They have strong principals, camaraderie among the staff, high expectations of students, strict and clear rules about order and discipline, basic curriculum and a no-nonsense attitude.

That's the way to utopia. It's pretty clearly marked. □



⑨ We've got a lot of problems in this country—the economy, the deficit, health care costs—and I think we've lacked the will to make some very painful decisions. And that also goes for education.

We've avoided decisions like raising standards and removing the politics from the system. We need a national dialogue to decide what we want in our curriculum, instead of making believe that each of 15,000 school districts can develop a separate mathematics curriculum or that it's not important for our kids to learn history.

Those are not the views of most people. It's just plain silly to say that we value local control so much that we don't believe all our children ought to be learning pretty much the same thing.

If we want to maintain our standard of living we have to be able to do the kind of work that commands top dollar in this high-tech world, and that means essentially brain work with cutting-edge technology. We're going to have to bring huge numbers of people to that level, or we're going to move downward very, very rapidly. We *can* improve things, and we'd better.

⑩ In utopia, things are constantly improving. What you don't have in education, and need, is the principle of self-renewal. To be utopian, schools have to become centers of inquiry and have an ongoing drive toward improvement.

But the schools we have today are basically the same as George Washington had—a teacher standing in front of a class talking, a blackboard, and a textbook. Computers are used like textbooks now. There's been very little real change. We haven't been very good at devising new ways to reach kids. We need a system that's critical of itself and capable of thinking about itself and making itself better.

Our schools are supposed to be teaching people to think, but they haven't thought about what makes people learn, what could improve teachers, how you encourage kids, and equip them to function in the real world. There are important things, like creativity and imagination, that can be taught but aren't. Our schools are narrowly limited in what they teach, and they teach it in an artificial environment.

That's not how it would be in utopia. □

9. Why is it that we can't seem to make things better in education?

10. What is your vision of an educational utopia?