

Student Effort: The Key to Higher Standards

Recent reformers have overlooked the simple truth that to learn more, students have to work harder. With proper support and an understanding of what's at stake for them, they will.

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Despite 25 years of enormous amounts of time, effort, and money spent on behalf of school improvement, the problem of underachievement has become a national emergency of first order. To be sure, we have made important progress. Test scores of minority children have improved significantly; we have succeeded in raising the average basic skills competence of poor children. And despite our concerns about dropout rates, we have dramatically boosted the proportion of blacks who complete four or more years of secondary school from 50 percent in 1965 to 83 percent today. This rate is now only slightly different from that of whites, who also improved during the same period, from 73 percent to 86 percent. (Ogle and Alsalam 1990, p. 22).

Yet we remain concerned because the achievement of children at all levels of ability and background is still far less than it should be. Why has so much time, effort, and good will produced so little improvement?

The list of suspects is long and familiar: poor teachers, poor textbooks, poor policies, poor pay, and poor people. Still, all of these putatively responsible features were popular complaints at a time when the educational product of the nation was substantially higher than it is today. Something else is afoot that is defeating our attempts to boost academic achievement through educa-

tional reform, and we think we know what it is.

Effortless Reform

If we look carefully at the reforms that have been implemented over the past 30 to 40 years, two general strategies may be discerned:

1. *Higher achievement (output) will result from higher quality instruction (input).* Better textbooks, better teachers, better resources, and the like will boost achievement, presumably by either "penetrating" the learner more effectively or efficiently and/or by inspiring (motivating) learners to work harder due to the enhanced interest or satisfaction that results from this experience. The strategy implies that because the instruction is better, the students will learn more with the same level of effort or that they will learn more because they will be inspired to study harder (or both). This strategy, which has captured the lion's share of our attention and resources, holds the schools responsible for the shortfall in learning because of poor teachers and dull subjects. Accordingly, students are held harmless from personal responsibility for their learning.

2. *Higher achievement will result if the standards and expectations for student achievement are raised.* This strategy usually embraces higher graduation

requirements and can take the form of more rigorous course content, more required courses, higher standards of performance (higher GPA, higher test scores), and the like. The strategy assumes that students will work harder to meet the higher standard, and because of it, the average level of achievement will rise. No assumptions are necessarily made about improved inputs aside from greater rigor or more content. Once the instruction is delivered, the students are responsible for the effort necessary to master the material and meet the higher standard of performance.

In 1983, when *A Nation At Risk* offered a program that tapped both of these strategies, many educators and advocates claimed that higher standards unfairly ascribed responsibility to the students and would only drive more of them from the schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education). That view and its consequences, we think, are part of a larger and longstanding problem of student motivation that has burdened the reforms of the '70s as well as the '80s. We believe this view helps account for the continued shortfall in academic achievement among U.S. students.

To explore the causes and consequences of this situation, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement held a conference on academic effort and academic motivation in Washington, D.C., in late 1990. Four major conclusions summarize the sense of the discussion (Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1991):

1. *Despite growing numbers of chronically underachieving children, the reward systems of most schools deliver a majority of their benefits to high-achieving children.* If effort is implicitly recognized in grades and test scores, the labor of low-achieving stu-

dents is seldom acknowledged by these rewards. Perversely, children of modest or low academic aptitude, who need to work harder for smaller accomplishments than those of higher aptitude, have the least incentive to do so. Many students find this relationship between grades and effort unrewarding and unacceptable, to be evaded if possible, often by indifference to learning, some-

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times by disruption and deception.

2. *Many public policies at federal, state, and local levels and many school and classroom practices have worked unwittingly against the best interests of learning.* Some of these policies and practices (for example, reduced or special college admissions criteria, elective high school curriculums [general/vocational education]) allow students to evade difficult academic tasks. Others undermine the need to make the effort (for example, teaching to the test, providing answers to test questions); still others merely substitute the appearance of educational attainment for its substance (for example, "seat time" diplomas, "special" schools for alienated or indifferent students). Students at all levels of ability have taken advantage

of these educational gratuities, virtually all of which were well-intentioned steps to boost the educational progress of the nation's neediest students.

3. *Peer pressure may exert great influence for good or ill on the academic behavior of students.* In most schools, this pressure defines the stance students will take toward academic achievement and academic effort. Typically, pressure is exerted to stay in school and graduate; but some student crowds and cultures actively reject academic aspirations, and strong social sanctions may be imposed on high achievers. In these instances, effort is hostage to peer pressure, and students work to meet their crowd's expectations rather than those of their teachers or parents.

4. *There is a great deal of confusion about the concept of expectations.* Shall children's academic limits excuse them from hard work and higher expectations, or shall they be expected to meet a standard of effort that will lift them to the limits of their ability? Currently, some children's perceived academic limits and fear for their self-esteem lead many teachers to excuse them from hard work and higher expectations, thereby assuring their failure to acquire the necessary academic skills. How teachers deal with this issue can go far toward setting children's expectations of themselves and the standard of learning they will meet.¹

The Fallacy of Effortless Learning

For fear of blaming the victims for their failure to learn, educators have been loath to endorse reform strategies that require hard work from students as a condition for learning, especially effort outside the classroom. This concern antedates *A Nation At Risk* and has been an active influence on practice since it became clear that school integration alone was not going to equalize the achievement of minority children. Consequently, for the past 20 or 30 years, schools and reformers have vigorously searched for school improvements that

would boost academic achievement without necessarily requiring additional effort from the students themselves.

Regrettably, many of their efforts, while well intentioned and humane in purpose, were counterproductive; for example, reduced graduation requirements, less rigorous curriculum and course content, reduced or abolished core course requirements, and greater discretion for students in their choices of courses as well as the terms of their agreement to behave in class and try to learn. All of these practices and policies made school easier, of course, and graduation rates rose in response. But they did not make it easier by improving school quality. Rather, they did it by making it easier to avoid hard work and difficult courses.

Plainly, the boost in school completion—an ostensible success story—was purchased at the expense of substantive accomplishment. The truth of the matter was quickly discovered by colleges, where "remediation" replaced admission standards. It was also observed by business, which complains about high school graduates who are academically unfit to work. And it was reflected in standardized test scores, which for the past 10 years have remained mired near their historic lows for whites, even as they have haltingly improved for black and Hispanic minorities.

If the signs of underachievement are a cause for concern, so are our indicators of effort. The 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, reported that 71 percent of our high school seniors study for one hour a day or less and just 10 percent spend more than two hours a day on homework. Similarly, 62 percent of our 8th graders and 56 percent of our high school seniors read 10 or fewer pages a day in all their classes together (Mullis et al. 1990). This pattern, which also hasn't changed much in 10 years, goes far to explain the dismal performance of our students compared to those in other countries, as well as the collapse of our test scores.

The fallacy in our thinking and consequent practice is well expressed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who observed that

it has turned out that mass literacy is not as easy to achieve as educational reformers had anticipated. . . . The implicit hope is that, if we discover more and more rational ways of selecting, organizing, and conveying knowledge, children will learn more effectively. . . . Yet it seems increasingly clear that the chief impediments to literacy are not cognitive in nature. It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish to.

However, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) have shown us that when students get into the "flow" of something—when they find something they really like and are good at—they can rise to heights of great accomplishment. We note, however, that the examples of these heights are invariably limited to those that tap the students' talents, are enjoyed in performance, and are strongly reinforced. Regrettably, one skill does not an education make, however well and willingly it is performed; schools must tap several dimensions of life and intellect.

Other observers have been less charitable. Heynemann (1990), in comparing the behavior of U.S. educators and their students to those in other countries, observed that

education in the U.S. is different from developing countries and from many of its industrialized partners; the difference is the attitude of the American student, and his lack of motivation. . . . This quest for student motivation creates an atmosphere of pleading by U.S. education officials, as though their only purpose was to gain a student's interest, and their only success depended on

whether a pupil wanted to go to school and tried hard in class.

Is it fair to expect students to try to learn? Do they have a duty to themselves and society to make an effort? Following an extremely careful discussion of student responsibility, Ericson and Ellett (1990) have sought to define the conditions in which students can and cannot be held responsible for their learning. While cautioning against holding students responsible when they have had no real opportunity to develop their capacity for rational action and judgment, they close their analysis with the following adjuration:

There are situations in which students and educators have made a "bargain" whereby students disengage from learning. . . . [I]f one properly understands the responsibilities of such students, then one should regard these "bargains" as

fool's bargains. In such situations educational reformers should not make the mistake of excusing the foolish student for the student's unreasonable waste of [some] valuable opportunities. . . . For education as a right in a democratic society also obliges a sense of responsibility: the responsibility to cultivate rational judgment and action.

Taken together, the sense of these positions is that U.S. students are working far below their potential because they experience no reason to do otherwise. They are not turned on by school, although they may be by some part of it. Unlike Third World students, they do not feel deprived of school; on the contrary, they are by law required to attend. Neither are they pressed to fulfill cultural expectations for high achievement, much less the imperatives that confront Japanese students; indeed, America's ambivalence about hard work and high



When students invest personal effort in learning, the joy of discovery is one of the many rewards.

expectations is nowhere better expressed than the constant war between the "egalitarians" and the "elitists" about the proper role of education.

Motivating Students to Succeed

What is left that will motivate all our children enough to result in higher achievement all around? Can we lead

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this horse to water and make him drink? Surely. While students may not work hard in school if they think they don't have to, they will if it's in their best interests and if they know what those interests are.

A case in point. Lerner (1991) reports that, almost without realizing it, we have found a steady and uncomplicated way to overcome student resistance and boost achievement. She observes that starting from the '60s, of all the reforms to date, the only documented success has been the minimum competency movement of the '70s. The high school exit tests that were created at that time to assess and assure that high school students met a minimum standard of literacy and basic skills competence were responsible for the noted improvement in the performance of minority and disadvantaged students.² Lerner also thinks that the reforms of the '80s—the excellence

movement—have so far failed to improve achievement because, unlike minimum competence, no standard of high achievement has been, or perhaps can be, set and enforced.

High standard or low, the important lesson is that students graduated better prepared after the institution of the test than before. That minimum competency is insufficient to enable the nation to meet the challenge of other developed countries should not deter us from developing an instrument that will encourage similar efforts in the remaining majority of American students. While we might like it better if students chose to study out of love of learning, that they can be persuaded by more common incentives ought not be dismissed. The lesson has not been lost on other nations, most of which have developed assessment practices that serve to motivate as well as gauge achievement. Indeed, the United States is one of the rare developed nations without a high-stakes exit examination for its high school students. The time for change appears to be upon us, however; and the nation is rapidly taking steps to improve the level of achievement among all of its students.

Among several strategies that have emerged in the aftermath of the 1989 summit meeting between President Bush and the governors, one in particular appears to represent a profound and unprecedented change in the public's call for educational accountability. For the first time in history, citizens endorse the concept of a national examination, one that would allow comparisons between our students and those in other societies, as well as initiate a process of annual accountability of educational progress (Elam and Gallup 1988).

To date, moreover, a number of groups, both public and private, representing a cross section of educators, policymakers, and businesspersons, have recommended that we develop an entirely new approach to assessment, one that will allow us to gauge a far broader array of talent and accomplish-

ments than current standardized tests permit (Rothman 1991a). Educate America, an advocacy group organized to advance the goals established at the 1989 education summit and chaired by former New Jersey Governor Tom Kean recommends the development of an achievement test that would be taken by every high school senior and that would assess achievement in all the basic subjects (Rothman 1991b). The Carnegie Foundation's National Center on Education and the Economy has sponsored a blue-ribbon commission that has proposed an even more ambitious program of education and assessment (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce 1990). The suggested program would recognize the value of schoolwork and study, create examinations that would assess "thinking-based achievement," and allow the accumulation of achievement records rather than relying on single test events to gauge performance.

Learning for All Our Students

Our task now is to develop a better understanding of the circumstances that foster and support the academic effort necessary to take the nation into this new territory. Plainly, the obstacles to learning far exceed those imposed by the limits of student ability and background. Left to their own devices and absent any incentives to do otherwise, many students will treat learning as but one of many things to do—and among the least pleasant of the alternatives. But if we are to significantly improve achievement, we must accompany changes in the schools with changes in the level and quality of effort that students invest in learning.

Accordingly, we as a nation must act to focus the attention of students on the educational substance that is critical to the nation's future and their own. Likewise, we must define the skills we expect and believe all children can develop. Then we must set these as the tasks that they, with the help of their

teachers, must master. The connection between learning and academic effort is powerful and, with proper support, provides the means to learning for all our children.

The task is a delicate one. Children seek clues about their ability early in school, and their assessment of their teacher's behavior, both its implicit and explicit meaning, is shrewd and sensitive. For example, Graham and Weiner (1990) showed how even well-intentioned teachers may inadvertently discourage children from trying to succeed. Their research showed that when children are offered sympathy for academic failure, praise for modest accomplishments, and help that is unrequested, they take it to mean they lack ability. These messages are particularly difficult for disadvantaged minority youngsters, whose teachers often feel great sympathy for them and concern to protect their self-esteem. Consequently, they may offer a diet of praise and help that children know is not deserved or wanted and, however well-intentioned, implies inability and stifles the hard work and enterprise so necessary to learning.

We would note that the advent of the minimum competency movement was almost coincident with the development of the "effective schools" conception, a nationwide movement that offered an academic diet of basic skills and high expectations in an atmosphere of orderliness and focused effort, a sure recipe for improved basic skills achievement.

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