

Bill Gates, If You're So Rich, How Come You're Not Smart?

Point of View Essay

by

Gerald Bracey
Associate Professor of Education
George Mason University

Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)
Education Policy Studies Laboratory
College of Education
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Box 872411
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

March 2005

EPSL | EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY
Education Policy Research Unit

EPSL-0503-104-EPRU

<http://edpolicylab.org>

Bill Gates, If You're So Rich, How Come You're Not Smart?

March 9, 2005

Gerald Bracey

<<<>>>

The "wealth clock" that tracks your net worth currently reads a little over \$60 billion, but if you had applied the same level of critical acumen to Microsoft's 1975 business plan as you recently applied to education while bashing American schools, Microsoft would have gone belly-up in 1976 (your focus was the high school, but you kept jumping illogically around to 4th graders and 8th graders, too).

You and the governors were quite vague about what makes the schools obsolete or what to do about it. What is it, exactly, that schools are not teaching that they need to?

Let's consider reading, math and science. Are schools obsolete because they teach these topics? International comparisons, I notice, assess...reading, math and science. You and the governors chose your statistics from these comparisons to put America in the worst possible light. I can't imagine leaders of any other country doing that, but you were wrong in any case.

For instance, in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 11 of 24 nations scored significantly higher than the U. S. in math at the fourth grade, but only 3 scored higher in science. At the eighth grade level, only 9 of the 44 countries scored significantly higher than the U. S. in math and only 7 scored higher in science. If American schools are obsolete, many other nations' schools are more archaic.

You claimed that our kids were at the top in fourth grade, but at the bottom by 12th. To make that statement, you had to uncritically accept one of the worst comparisons in education history, that from 1995's Third International Mathematics and Science Study, Final Year Report. That study took extreme care to point out how very different that final year of secondary school is in different nations. Alas, the U. S. Department of Education presented this study as if it were an apples to apples comparison of high school seniors around the world. Apples to aardvarks is more like it. If you examine the scores of comparable students, U. S. students are average, as they were in eighth grade.

You said to the governors, "When I compare our high schools to what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our work force of tomorrow." Really? My guess is that

when you travel abroad, your hosts, wishing to impress you, do not take you to average or below average schools. Visit some good schools here and your terror will abate.

Schools teach general knowledge and skills. Certainly that's true in the college preparatory curriculum you and the governors want for all children, but jobs require highly specific skills. You have to teach these on the job. We often can't even imagine what those skills will be in the future. But advances in technology makes life simpler, not more complicated. Think digital camera vs. the manually operated SLR of 30 years ago. In 1986, my secretary was ecstatic when I replaced her IBM Selectric III typewriter with a word-processing personal computer. Imagine being able to revise a manuscript without retyping the whole document!

Of course, for this change to go smoothly, we had to provide our clerical staff on-the-job training, something that American corporations are loath to do. Research in the Nineties found that compared to companies in other nations, when it comes to developing employees, American corporations are real cheapskates. And, in contrast to companies abroad, which developed low-skilled and high-skilled employees, American companies invested almost entirely in employees who were already highly skilled.

You say our workforce is at risk. The World Economic Forum, which you have addressed, doesn't agree. Among 104 nations, it ranks the United States second in Global Competitiveness and sees no future decline. We used to be number 1, but the WEF has not been pleased with the Bush tax cuts, our ever-increasing debt, our ever-increasing trade deficit and the endless parade of indicted CEO's (lowers our score on the WEF's "corruption index").

I do congratulate you for focusing some attention on economically deprived schools. Alas, you and the governors appear to think that school reform can, all by itself overcome their problems. But poor students arrive at school behind their middle class peers. As measured by tests, they learn the same amount during the school year, but lose the gains over the summer, leaving them farther behind. You and the governors should look for ways to eliminate the factors that cause poor children to lose ground during the months when the schools are closed.

Good luck.

Gerald W. Bracey
Alexandria, VA

Gerald W. Bracey is an educational researcher and writer in Alexandria, VA. He is author of *Setting the Record Straight: Responses to Misconceptions About Public Education in the U.S.* (Heinemann 2004) and *On the Death of Childhood and the Destruction of Public Schools* (Heinemann, 2003).