

Faulty Predictions, Flawed Diagnosis: A Response to William Bennett's "The State and the Future of American Education"

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In a March 13, 2000 speech on "The State and Future of American Education" that the Heritage Foundation has recently been circulating, William Bennett repeats themes he brought to the nation's attention during his years as Secretary of Education during the Reagan Administration: schools fail to educate large numbers of American children, they are inefficient, their failure threatens the American economy, they promote immorality, and they constitute a public monopoly. School choice in the form of vouchers or charters and the adoption of national standards and testing continue to be Bennett's reforms of choice. Added to his list of remedies is the 21st century potential of the Internet: a new curriculum he is helping to develop and market that will enable parents and interested schools ". . . to teach, tutor, and test their children with a comprehensive, world-class, on-line curriculum, whose design I will oversee." He asserts that technology venture capitalists believe schools are a domain ready for further development, and they are poised to act.¹

What is curious about Bennett's observations is that his rhetoric is virtually identical to what it was in the 1980s, even though the nation's schools have been engaged for more than a decade in an effort to establish many of the reforms he advocated. Although he points to examples of enhanced student performance in Texas, Florida, and Chicago, the overall level of student achievement in the country as a whole remains unacceptable to him. This is despite the fact that, according to his own report, 47 states have adopted standards for reading and math achievement, and 20 states have passed legislation allowing for greater school choice.

Also perplexing, in light of the warnings of those who pronounced our education system a disastrous failure less than two decades ago, is the fact that the nation in 2000 is in the midst of the longest period of economic growth in U.S. history. The central claim of "A Nation at Risk" - the landmark 1983 study that for many kicked off the education reform wave that has consumed much of the nation's energies since, was that poor school performance would jeopardize U.S. productivity. Bennett attempts to wish this disparity away by claiming that people learn outside of school the skills and knowledge they need to perform on the job and that an influx of skilled professionals from other countries has offset poorly trained American workers. He ignores entirely the role America's system of higher education might play in this process and the fact that it is the envy of the world. Also ignored is the robust proportion of American students who, regardless of their supposedly inadequate K-12 education, are able to take advantage of this opportunity in ways that significantly enhance the contribution they are able to make to our collective life.

What seems to underlie Mr. Bennett's remarks is not a close examination of the actual state of American schools but a deep disregard for any form of public education at all. This becomes especially apparent in his inclusion of a number of anecdotes regarding patently immoral behavior of a small number of teachers and students. Implying that this behavior is common rather than exceptional, Bennett suggests that schools are guilty of corrupting minors.

This kind of hyperbole is aimed at nothing less than delegitimizing the institution of public education, a necessary step if more and more people are going to invest in the offerings of the market in which Bennett himself is now participating. By turning education into little more than another commodity, however, Bennett and his colleagues at the Heritage Foundation risk doing to education what the market has done to medical care: transform it into an institution that provides exceptional service to those with money and little support or care for people unable to afford the increasingly expensive insurance policies that undergird the entire health industry edifice.

Near the end of his speech, Bennett says: “Once people get used to choosing their own education system and paying for it, the old methods and the controversies surrounding them become irrelevant.” The operative phrase here is “paying for it,” the long-standing strategy for perpetuating social discrimination and maintaining privilege.

But is education nothing more than a commodity? Few earlier societies would make this claim. Education is that range of experiences that draw children into full membership in the human community. When it is distributed in a differential manner, the integrity of that community is itself threatened.

For the past 150 years, people have chosen to tax themselves to assure that public schools assist in the process of integrating children into the increasingly complex and demanding economic and political institutions of modern societies. This is not to say that public schools have succeeded in this mission, for clearly, education has not been distributed equally. Public education has, however, helped to weaken the hold of social elites on the distribution of those goods and assured that a broader range of people have become able to participate in the shaping of our common life. Relinquishing this process to market forces is a recipe for intensifying inequity and marginalizing the voices of those without the ability to pay.

Mr. Bennett argues that standards and vouchers will provide more opportunities for populations that have been underserved by public schools. Higher failure and dropout rates for poor and minority students in places like Texas,² coupled with the questionable impact on student achievement of voucher experiments such as that in Milwaukee,³ suggest, however, that these appeals are largely a Trojan horse, aimed at winning support for a strategy that in the end will reduce opportunities and increase discrimination.

Public education is a work in progress. It has serious flaws, not the least of which is its tendency to perpetuate inequities in the broader society. Focusing on these flaws and then subjecting schools to market forces are strategies aimed not at improving public education but at supplanting it. This approach will exacerbate the growing rift between rich and poor and move our country even closer to the class-based divisions that once led many of our ancestors to seek out the more economically open and democratic possibilities of North America. The conservatism espoused by William Bennett is aimed not at conserving these possibilities but at conserving the privileges of the few.

Endnotes

1. William J. Bennett, "The State, and Future of, American Education," Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, March 2000. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/leadership/lectures/bennett.html>
2. Donald B. Gratz, "High Standards for Whom?" *Kappan* 81:9 (May, 1999), p. 684.
3. John F. Witte, "The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *Kappan* 81:((September, 2000), pp. 59-64.