

Public Education in the USA

My lifelong interest in education has prompted me to delve into today's abysmal state of public education. One main source of information is my daughter, Lisa, a third grade teacher at Winterhaven School. It is a science and math oriented school.

The other source is my nephew, Larry Bacnik, a long-term special education teacher who is retired from the Milledgeville, Georgia, school system. He is now a professor in the education department of Georgia State University.

Both, Lisa and Larry, have been excellent teachers and consistent innovators. They say that excessive testing and infinite recording of imposed reporting are part of our bureaucratic public school system. Their colleagues are looking forward to retirement in order to escape from today's schools. Lisa and Larry tell me that my innovative system of teaching would be almost impossible in present schools.

Our national low scores on the international testing program are evidence of inferior results. For three consecutive years we rank below twenty other countries in reading, math, and science tests in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), which were given to 15-year-old students.

Federal policies must assume some responsibility for the students' low scores. They have imposed their own programs on American teachers in the forms of "No Child Left Behind," and recently the "Common Core." They also have supported individuals and corporations to create charter schools. I support the charter schools organized by a group of teachers but not those which are profit-oriented. Among dedicated educators a looming menace is threatening to undermine the public school system. It is the corporate world taking over our public schools.

Diane Ravitch, an ex-teacher who has become the leading American historian and analyst of the USA's public school system, has published her book "The Reign of Error (The Hoax of the Privatizing Movement and the Danger to American Public Schools)." Ravitch is asking educators to boycott the newest federal education "baby," the Common Core Program. "Reign of Error" would also defend the American education system from the privatization of public schools.

Ravitch was an assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush and also helped to develop national education under President Bill Clinton. At that time she advocated creating charter schools—institutions run by private entities, sometimes for-profit companies that receive public money. She also promoted using student test scores to measure teacher performance.

Ravitch regretted her former ideas for improving education and in "Reign of Error" apologizes for her former views. Now she is disturbed and writes about "How testing and choice are undermining education." Ravitch has become one of the leading critics against modern reform movements, especially those advocated by Barack Obama, and his

education secretary, Arne Duncan. They seek to tie teacher salaries to student test scores, recruit young teachers and inexperienced college graduates to teach in struggling schools, and fund programs to allow students to use public funds to attend private schools.

Ravitch says that it would benefit poverty-area schools to have a doctor or nurse available in order to help those children to achieve optimum health and thus to improve learning. She recommends keeping at-risk students in the classroom and off the streets with additional afterschool programs.

Though Ravitch wants to stop the drive toward privatizing public schools, she promotes using certain private schools such as Sidwell Friends in Washington and Phillips Academy in Andover as models. She thinks that Finland's public school system could also be used as a model.

A positive decision by the U.S. Department of Education is the creation of a new group comprised of fifteen Teaching Ambassador Fellows, five from Washington and ten others scattered throughout the country. They are dedicated to finding ways to improve public education and are asking teachers and students to answer their first major question: "What is the biggest challenge facing education today?"

One teacher wrote, "The biggest problem today is turning out students who are balanced mentally, spiritually, emotionally, physically and financially. The present national curriculum deals more with academic studies and information than developing a well-rounded person. European schools generally have better curricula. Only the academically talented go on to universities. The others go to trade schools."

Another popular topic was the astronomical cost of advanced learning. They stressed future adults being perpetually in debt, a debt which nationally already exceeds one trillion dollars.

One group agreed that we should learn from top-ranking education systems and encourage our most able academic students to become public school teachers and pay them as well as in those countries.

Another popular theme of discontent was the national imposition of testing on students rather than having classroom teachers evaluate their students.

So what are the prospects for improving our schools? The outlook is on the dark side. Other industrial nations have federal governments funding schools. In the USA we have a mélange of local, state and federal funding, which usually is at financially low levels. In Europe, college and trade school students pay minimal or no money to attend those higher institutions of learning.

If our national unions don't revive and help the middle class move out of their present near-poverty state, the future remains dismal. Since I'm the eternal optimist I predict that in about ten years we will see a tremendous improvement. Our millennial generation will

rise and lead the nation on the road to revival of our governmental and financial institutions. The Occupy Movements were practice scrimmages before the real revolution of change. Those changes will lead to the improvement of public education.

Emil Abramovic 12/21/13