



## U.S.A:

### *Universal Student Abandonment*

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*[New York, 20 December 2008]*

Education is the silver bullet that can slay the werewolf of inequality and inequity in our time. It is what takes us from a state of dependence to one of independence. And never is this more true than when speaking about populations underserved and underrepresented in our society. And never has this been more prescient than now.

Early education in colonial America focused on literacy so that people would be able to read the bible. Religious dominations established most of the nation's universities, which became our Ivy League. By the middle of the nineteenth century the United States had a literacy rate of over 95%, and a century before women were granted universal suffrage 55% of females between the ages of five and fifteen attended primary schools (and all the while education in the country was largely private).

And then education reformer Horace Mann called for public education, and our modern day system was born. By 1870, the literacy rate for the entire US population had dropped to 80% (only 20% of the black population was literate). Over the next half century literacy indeed improved to over 95% for the entire population and just short of 90% for blacks—along with a reconsideration of how we defined literacy to be more than mere reading and writing and a measure of our functional literacy in how well our ability to read and write would enable our functioning in the world. And at around the same time the world changed in the wake of the Second World War and the birth of globalization. Just as a High School diploma has become an insufficient degree in our modern day market place, literacy alone became an insufficient skill in the world we now inhabit. As our children must now compete for jobs with not only their fellow Americans living across the street but with their fellow global citizens across continents, education has never been a more critical issue than it is today.

The US was uniquely reminded of that this past week with the results of the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), an annual global study in math and science proficiency with almost 60 nations participating. The results released on December 9, 2008 reflects a moderate rise in US achievement scores with fourth and eighth graders in math, and no increase in science. (The US ranks 11<sup>th</sup> with fourth graders, behind such countries or regions as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, Kazakhstan, Russia, England, Latvia, Netherlands and



Lithuania; the US ranks 9<sup>th</sup> with eighth graders, behind Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Hungary, England and Russia.) But a little reported result is worth a second glance: Iranian 4<sup>th</sup> graders beat US 4<sup>th</sup> graders and North Korean 8<sup>th</sup> graders beat US 8<sup>th</sup> graders in average score improvement in mathematics between 1995 and 2007.

The students of two nations who are supposed to be among the axis of evil beat their US counterparts in achievement gains in mathematics in the last twelve years. (Yes, it bore repeating.)

Some will argue these results suggest the standards imposed by No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—President Bush’s 2001 education reform legislation—are working, that NCLB should be reauthorized in 2009 to support continued improvement in our global standing. Some will suggest that the methodologies of teacher colleges and the standardization of classrooms are responsible for our rise in these global rankings. Some will argue that although these rankings suggest targeted improvement, sustainable advances in such global academic achievement can come only if the US makes greater efforts at attracting and retaining qualified teachers, and they will cite such measures as increased teacher salary and the promotion of teacher certification by nationally recognized boards while denouncing non-traditional methods of teacher certification such as Teach for America programs as top priorities. And some will take comfort in the fact that the US remains among the top ten industrialized nations.

But we are still quite a distance from feeling good about our academic standing in the world, as our global dominance wanes, as the achievement gap between the privileged and the poor widens within our own country, and as nations that our government deems dangerous and threatening surpass our own in achievement gains. And no one wants to stray too far from the model(s) that has (have) failed us for over half a century in their approach to alleged reform. It seems even the admitted reformers being offered a voice in the last several Presidential administrations are fearful of what actual reform would mean. Perhaps Clint Eastwood said it best in a recent interview. We are a nation of weakness, he argued, although he used a more colloquial expression than “weakness.”

*We live in more of a [expletive] generation now, where everybody’s become used to saying ‘Well, how do we handle it psychologically?’ In those days [the 1940s/50s], you just punched the bully back and duked it out. Even if the guy was older and could push you around, at least you were respected for fighting back, and you’d be left alone from then on.*

He furthered his criticism of how American has changed.



*Look how fast—seven years—people have been able to forget 9/11. Maybe you remember if you lost a relative or a loved one. But the public can get pretty blasé about stuff like that. Nobody got blasé about Pearl Harbor.*

We are sure Mr. Eastwood’s criticism of America’s strength was referring to, in part, our educational structure where recent amendments to common practice include the elimination in some districts of red corrective ink and the letter “F” grade out of a concern for the social stigma that may affect the receiving student. Education in America has become more about the feelings of our students than their actual comprehension of basic subject matter. One need go no further than a conversation with a third grade student who is able to recite in detail the biographical facts of Miley Cyrus (a.k.a. Hannah Montana) but is able to answer neither who was the first, current, or newly elected President of the United States.

**Table 3. Average mathematics scores of fourth- and eighth-grade students, by country: 2007**

Grade four		Grade eight	
Country	Average score	Country	Average score
TIMSS scale average	500	TIMSS scale average	500
Hong Kong SAR <sup>1</sup>	607	Chinese Taipei	598
Singapore	599	Korea, Rep. of	597
Chinese Taipei	576	Singapore	593
Japan	568	Hong Kong SAR <sup>1,4</sup>	572
Kazakhstan <sup>2</sup>	549	Japan	570
Russian Federation	544	Hungary	517
England	541	England <sup>4</sup>	513
Latvia <sup>2</sup>	537	Russian Federation	512
Netherlands <sup>3</sup>	535	United States <sup>4,5</sup>	508
Lithuania <sup>2</sup>	530	Lithuania <sup>2</sup>	506
United States <sup>4,5</sup>	529	Czech Republic	504
Germany	525	Slovenia	501
Denmark <sup>4</sup>	523	Armenia	499
Australia	516	Australia	496
Hungary	510	Sweden	491
Italy	507	Malta	488
Austria	505	Scotland <sup>4</sup>	487
Sweden	503	Serbia <sup>2,5</sup>	486
Slovenia	502	Italy	480
Armenia	500	Malaysia	474

TIMSS 2007 Average Mathematics Scores by Country



**Table 4. Trends in average mathematics scores of fourth- and eighth-grade students, by country: 1995 to 2007**

Grade four				Grade eight			
Country	Average score		Difference <sup>1</sup>	Country	Average score		Difference <sup>1</sup>
	1995	2007	2007-1995		1995	2007	2007-1995
England	484	541	57*	Colombia	332	380	47*
Hong Kong SAR <sup>2</sup>	557	607	50*	Lithuania <sup>3</sup>	472	506	34*
Slovenia	462	502	40*	Korea, Rep. of	581	597	17*
Latvia <sup>3</sup>	499	537	38*	United States <sup>4,5</sup>	492	508	16*
New Zealand	469	492	23*	England <sup>4</sup>	498	513	16*
Australia	495	516	22*	Slovenia	494	501	7*
Iran, Islamic Rep. of	387	402	15*	Hong Kong SAR <sup>2,4</sup>	569	572	4
United States <sup>4,5</sup>	518	529	11*	Cyprus	468	465	-2
Singapore	590	599	9	Scotland <sup>4</sup>	493	487	-6
Scotland <sup>4</sup>	493	494	1	Hungary	527	517	-10*
Japan	567	568	1	Japan	581	570	-11*
Norway	476	473	-3	Russian Federation	524	512	-12
Hungary	521	510	-12*	Romania	474	461	-12*
Netherlands <sup>6</sup>	549	535	-14*	Australia	509	496	-13*
Austria	531	505	-25*	Iran, Islamic Rep. of	418	403	-15*
Czech Republic	541	486	-54*	Singapore	609	593	-16*
				Norway	498	469	-29*
				Czech Republic	546	504	-42*
				Sweden	540	491	-48*
				Bulgaria	527	464	-63*

TIMSS 2007 Trends in Mathematics by Country

Our world has dramatically changed in the last half century, but Mr. Eastwood accurately summarizes our reaction to that change as one of weakness instead of strength. While education should lead our reaction to the dynamic nature of the global market place and be used as our weapon of choice in battling for a place of preeminence on the world stage, it has come to represent a lagging indicator of our inability to compete. Education must be the most dynamic of all our industries, not only adapting to ever changing societal and market conditions, but forecasting societal and market conditions and proactively retooling itself in order to provide our future leaders with the most advanced academic curriculum in the developed world.

We no longer live in a predominantly agricultural or even industrial society, and yet our educational framework is still designed as if 8% of our GDP is agriculturally derived and the most likely career path of our graduating students will be the one job they maintain until retirement when a gold watch and a pension are among their departing gifts. We no longer live within the American landscape that required and benefitted from industry unionization, and yet the National Education Association (NEA)—the largest labor union in the country—is permitted the awesome power of determining which education reforms, if any, are allowed to reach of level of serious



debate in this country—let alone become the subject of viable change in education. While unions have participated in the elimination of child labor, the securing of universal suffrage for women and blacks, achieving improved and vastly safer working conditions, and made all but nonexistent Triangle Shirtwaist Factory-like horror stories, it has single-handedly hijacked any reform to a system of education that seeks the benefit of teachers over the betterment of children. The fact that every president of the United States since the 1930’s has been elected thanks in part to the actions of labor unions is in no small part reason for their continued existence.

### Farming’s changing role in the Nation’s economy

**1900**

41 percent of workforce employed in agriculture

**1930**

21.5 percent of workforce employed in agriculture;  
Agricultural GDP as a share of total GDP, 7.7 percent

**1945**

16 percent of the total labor force employed in agriculture;  
Agricultural GDP as a share of total GDP, 6.8 percent

**1970**

4 percent of employed labor force worked in agriculture;  
Agricultural GDP as a share of total GDP, 2.3 percent

**2000/02**

1.9 percent of employed labor force worked in agriculture (2000); Agricultural GDP as a share of total GDP (2002),  
0.7 percent

Source: Compiled by Economic Research Service, USDA. Share of workforce employed in agriculture, for 1900-1970, Historical Statistics of the United States; for 2000, calculated using data from Census of Population; agricultural GDP as part of total GDP, calculated using data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

And it is for that reason we drag our feet on the following reforms, allow the teachers’ unions to block all significant progress on the following reforms, and limit any practice of the following reforms to pilot programs that are restricted to negligible quantities of students:



- Adopting of non-traditional certification models (all practical professional skill sets are developed through real world experience, not from textbooks). For example, 91% of Teach for America members return for a second year, which is 8 percentage points higher than first year teachers in low income communities and 5 percentage points higher than first year teachers regardless of communities.
- Extend the school year, eliminating the traditional summer vacation, and increasing the quantity of classroom time in order to prepare our children for the globally competitive world that awaits them. Extending the school year addresses the weeks teachers spend in the fall reminding students of what they forgot over the last three months of classroom-less time; eliminates the burden on scores of families that incur unnecessary cost of child care during the three months their full time jobs do not allow for childrearing, and which hurts low-income families the hardest; and prepares students for a professional environment where employees are lucky to receive two weeks of vacation, far from the three months to which we spend over a decade of schooling adapting.
- Structure a financial risk/reward model for students. Despite our lack of trust in our current financial system, America's business model has created all of our strength and value as a nation: accountability, reward for calculated risk, encouraging creativity and intelligent risk taking. Such a financially-based rewards program for students has been modeled before, based on economist Roland Fryer's program called "Spark" in New York City and "Capital Gains" in the District of Columbia, both pilot programs.
- Expansion of school vouchers to all school districts. Vouchers create an incentive for schools to compete, enable parents the freedom to choose how their education tax dollars are to be spent on their own children, and allow failing schools to fail (what the business community refers to as market clearing). In a conversation about the livelihood of our children and their ability to compete in a global marketplace, failing schools should not be entitled to continue failing our children.
- Expansion of charter schools, an initiative supported by both Presidents Clinton and Bush (43), designed not to replace our public school system but to supplement it. The competition between organizations who claim to have the best interests of our children at heart should not be something feared by competent administrators.
- Elimination of unions in education.
- Elimination of tenure.

Tenure is defined as a status granted an employee, usually after a period of probation, indicating that the position or employment has been made permanent. While supporters of it in education claim its viability based on a teacher's ability to put forth unpopular or controversial ideas without



fear of retribution, its solitary purpose is to maintain union ranks, and thus union dues. Call it employment welfare: the conferring of societal benefit without respect to contribution.

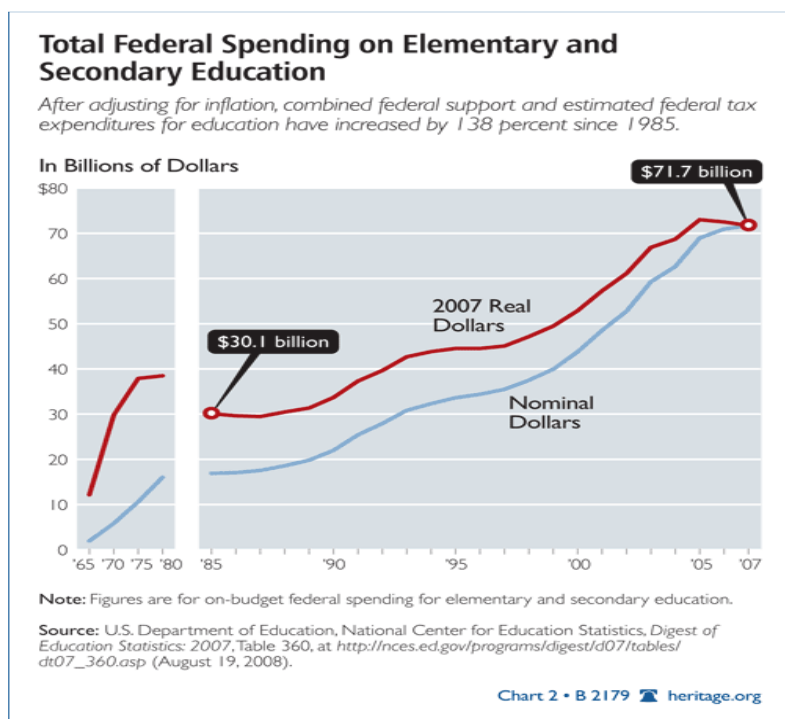
Without hesitation we call for the ouster of the CEOs and board members who permitted the collapse of Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers, and unquestioningly vilify the government leaders who facilitated the largest financial collapse in our memory, but we accept teacher tenure in an industry that has been in freefall for a half century. While we justly accept lifetime appointments for federal judges in order to ensure their impartiality and freedom from undue influence, what social or educational benefit comes from the equivalent in the area of education? If students are the constituents of the educational world, how are they better served by the lifetime appointment of mediocre if not poor teachers? And absent their altruistic and moral sense of duty to our future generations, what incentive does such a practice provide to good teachers as they see their efforts and exceptional skills go no more rewarded than their lesser counterparts?

Imagine if Christopher Cox had tenure, or Ben Bernake or Barney Frank, three of our government leaders most responsible for abdicating their governance and contributing to our current financial crisis. Or for our liberal-minded audience, what if President George W. Bush had tenure? What if all public CEOs were granted tenure, or their corresponding governing boards or their senior management teams? Imagine a world where once an individual achieved a professional position they could not be removed from that position regardless of productivity gains (or lack thereof) and significant changes in market conditions or market demands? Imagine the absolute stagnation that would result from inefficient occupants of those positions coupled with the lack of productive incentive for the potentially gifted occupants within the same industry. Imagine how insignificant such industries would become in a global marketplace where competitors were not burdened with similar restrictions. But one need not use his or her imagination to create the requisite visionary landscape, for it already exists in our public education establishment, and our embarrassing position on the world's educational stage is the unfortunate product of a dreadful imagination-turned-reality.

When discussing health, the conversation is not about doctor pay, job security for practitioners, or when and how a doctor becomes chief of medicine. The national debate is about the patients, as it should be. Medical professionals compete in their profession as do professionals in most other industries, and understand that they chose to pursue a profession unique to most others in that healthcare is a societal requirement in the continued existence of our species, our culture and our global standing on the world's stage. Therefore, when we debate healthcare reform we focus on the recipients' best interests, not the providers'. We fail as a society in that debate when the focus shifts from patient to provider. Similarly, we lose the debate on public safety when we focus



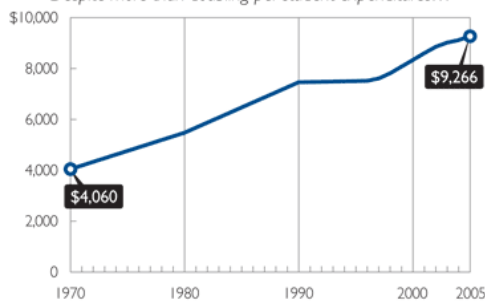
more on the rights of criminals and terrorists than on the tools and resources required by our law enforcement officials. Public safety must not be about the rights of terrorists just as healthcare must not be about employment rights of medical practitioners or insurance company profit streams. And yet, when it comes to our national debate on education reform, our children are left out of the conversation, replaced with an emphasis on what teachers and their unions deserve. Politicians allow themselves to become beholden to the teachers' union lobby and forget that our next generation of scientists, military leaders, politicians—teachers—are being failed everyday in our public school classrooms. Until our children are the focus of our proposed education reforms, until their best interests supersede the interests of the teachers who self-selected the profession, the unions who control all current output, and the politicians who make education nothing more than a campaign issue, education reform will remain what American hegemony may soon become: an empty phrase without basis in fact, but rather in fiction.





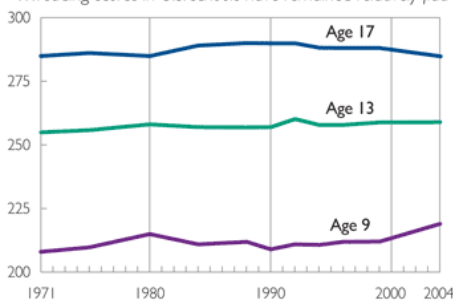
### The "Link" Between Education Spending and Student Performance

Despite more than doubling per-student expenditures...



Per-Student Expenditures in American Public Schools, 1970–2005, in Constant 2006–2007 Dollars

...reading scores in U.S. schools have remained relatively flat.



American Student NAEP Reading Scores, 1971–2004

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, "National Trends in Reading by Average Scale Scores," updated July 6, 2005, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ltr/results2004/nat-reading-scalescore.asp> (April 14, 2008), and Digest of Education Statistics: 2007, Table 174, at [http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/d07/tables/dt07\\_174.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/d07/tables/dt07_174.asp) (August 19, 2008).

Chart 4 • B 2179 heritage.org

Before we spend any more money on a failing system, should we not explore alternatives in our moral commitment to serving our children? Can we not be rational about what is best for our students, and be honest about what is self-serving to teachers and their unions?

Don't we owe more to our children than throwing more good money after bad?