

U.S. Educational System Destined for Failure

The University of Georgia Column

George M. Gazda, Distinguish Professor of Research, Associate Dean College of Education, Past

President ACA, APA

All thirty or more national reports on education beginning with the “Nation at Risk” in 1983 shared concerns, among others, over lower Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) scores, high dropout rates, illiteracy, and low rankings in math and science of U.S. students compared to students from other major countries. Most of these reports considered the quality of teachers to be significantly related to student performance, but none really questioned the philosophical and structural underpinnings of our education system. Many, if not most of the reformers, are suggesting that we do “more or the same” but, of course, do it better. Doing more and better is usually translated into improving *proficiency* on objective tests such as the SAT or some form of objective assessment test. Carnoy and Levin in the *Journal of Education* (168:36-46) have characterized these reform proposals as reflecting “the shift of commitment away from equity for bilingual, economically disadvantaged, racially isolated, and handicapped students in favor of a work force that would be more highly qualified to meet the needs of the U.S. industry. Indeed, the reports make a point of justifying their recommendations on the basis of the crucial role that the schools must play in making the work force internationally competitive in a world of high technology” (p.43)

Outlined below are major features of our current philosophy and structure of education as *practiced*.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

- Learners are unknowing, passive recipients who must be “forced” to learn the 3 R’s from more knowing, expert teachers.
- Learners are motivated by *external* rewards of the system. Namely letter grades from A to F, but including other rewards from gold stars to the Dean’s List.
- Rote memorization of “facts” and the ability to demonstrate the learning through short-answer, objective exams represent the *dominant* teaching/practices.
- Teachers teach their subjects areas to learners to qualify them to take the next higher level course-almost as if the learner plans to become a teacher of the subject matter rather than a user/consumer.
- Conformity in *how* one learns is expected to relate to how the teacher teaches.
- Competition produces the climate for learning, and learning involves winners and losers.
- Speed of learning is given a very high if not the highest priority by teachers and the system.
- Standards are determined by the percentage of learners who do *not* pass an assignment, a course, a grade level, a program, etc.
- Learning is most economical/effective by dividing the experience into: grade levels on the basis of chronological age; grading periods on the basis of pre-set time periods, e.g., fifty-minute classes, six-week, quarter, semester grading/course periods; diploma/degree periods, e.g. elementary, middle, and high school, bachelor’s master’s and doctoral degree.
- If this outdated “factory model” of education based on the practice of producing so many units (graduates) with a *guaranteed* percentage of failures (rejects) over a specified period

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

of time – following the practices outlined above – continues, we can expect to see a *greater* disinterest in learning by students at all levels and even more dropouts. The inherent defects of the factory model of education were not so apparent when we were educating the upper one-half of the population who could overcome many of the system’s weaknesses. When the system employs the factory model to educate virtually everyone, the serious limitations become evident.

No Band-Aids applied to or tampering with our current factory model educational system will provide significant and long-term positive changes. A radical philosophical and structural change seems necessary for meeting the educational needs of the masses, and only with the most comprehensive education of the masses can the U.S. hope to remain the world leader.

Some general guidelines for implementing a new system of education for the masses are outlined below. Many educators will recognize that these guidelines, beliefs, etc., are not new. What may be new or unique is the position taken here that they must be operationalized in a comprehensive fashion if we are to see significant, long-term improvements in our students’/learners’ academic and social (life) skills. The general philosophy and practices recommended to replace the current philosophy as practiced are as follows:

- Assume that all individuals are innately eager to learn and will assume responsibility for learning if permitted and encouraged.

- Learners are best motivated by the *internal satisfaction* that comes *mastery* of learning tasks that have obvious application to environmental mastery and self-enhancement.

- Learners are best served by “learning how to learn” (learning processes) that are applied to relevant problems. That is, teachers must teach their subject matter with a keen understanding

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

of the numerous applications it has to the day-to-day lives of the learners in addition to the prerequisite mastery that leads to higher order learning/mastery of the subject matter.

- Learners assume responsibility for learning and behavior when they take part in the process of determining what, why, how and how fast, when and where they are to learn.

- Cooperation among learners should be emphasized rather than competition.

Competition with one's self to achieve one's potential should drive learning – not “winning”/achieving at someone else's expense.

- Standards are best determined by the number of learners who achieve *mastery* of an assignment, course program, etc., not how fast it is achieved based on an arbitrarily imposed time limit.

- Learners should be allowed to fail, but they should not be routinely placed in positions where failure is their only option.

- The parameters of the model just outlined would call for a very different philosophy of education. First, the responsibility would be placed on the learner where it must reside. Teachers would be the experts who would be the experts who would need to determine the fundamental information or “facts” that are absolutely essential to survival in an age of exploding information and knowledge and where one must be highly selective to master the fundamentals. Teachers would also be experts on how best to organize material for learning (learning specialists). They would also need to be excellent communicators and facilitators combined with a keen sensitivity to and knowledge of group dynamics. In other words, they must become applied specialists in interpersonal communication, learning, and group dynamics in *addition* to being knowledgeable in their subject matter specialty. Concurrent with the emphasis on mastery learning, students

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com

should have opportunities for counseling and guidance in discovering their assets, liabilities and vocational options. To illustrate the need for continuous counseling and guidance, the average time for students to complete a bachelor's degree at U.Ga is now over four and one-half years. Frequently this extra time is needed to search for an *area* of study where one can succeed and sometimes the student is managing his or her schedule of classes to help ensure success in the courses taken during a given quarter. College students learn to control somewhat the rate or speed of learning on which the factory model is based, but elementary and secondary school students ordinarily do not have the same flexibility.

Arbitrary division of students by age into grade levels would need to be virtually abolished and it could be if a mastery model of education were fully implemented. (Computer technology is now capable of managing the complex record keeping that would be necessary.) Speed of learning (the lack of which leads to so many failures today) could also be significantly reduced in importance as could the use of letter grades, among other external reward symbols. Diplomas and degrees could still signify standards of accomplishment, but they would represent a culmination of progressive mastery of well-defined subject matter/skill areas rather than accumulation of credit hours.

Timothy D. Evans, PhD
2111 W. Swann, Suite#104
Tampa, FL 33606
813.251.8484
tim@evanstherapy.com