

America's Failing Education System: It Can Still Be Fixed

By Dr. Frank G. Splitt

If the ways of God are inscrutable, the path of man has become incomprehensible. Modern man, despite the wonderful body of knowledge and information he has accumulated and the means to apply it, appears to be muddling ahead as if he were blind or drugged, staggering from one crisis to another.
—Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King, *The Club of Rome*, 1977

Preface – A clear, present, and future danger faced by the United States is its failing, if not broken, education system. It is now twenty-six years since the publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education that found poor academic performance at nearly every level. The report warned that America's education system was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity." Today, the system is still faced with serious unresolved problems of crisis proportions—amounting to an unannounced national scandal, perhaps a national disaster. But there is now some hope that the system can be fixed.

On March 10, 2009, in his first major statement on education policy, President Obama said America must drastically improve student achievement to regain lost international standing, further saying: "The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens. We have everything we need to be that nation ... and yet, despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we have let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher's quality fall short and other nations outpace us."

The situation is certainly not improving as yet, but the President and his Administration are well positioned to bring about change. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has centered the Department of Education's policy around high education standards and its mission on promoting student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. He has set an ambitious goal of getting America back on track with the help of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the so-called 'Obama Effect'—returning America to being number one in the world in high school and college graduation rates, school readiness, academic achievement, college matriculation and retention, and completion rates.¹

It is my understanding that Secretary Duncan plans to hold listening sessions across the country later this spring to solicit feedback from a broad spectrum stakeholders—individuals concerned with issues surrounding America's educational system. This essay expresses opinions that will hopefully be considered part of that conversation.

A Troubling NAEP Report – According to the government's most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report,^{2, 3} U.S. high-school students haven't achieved any significant gains in reading or math for nearly four decades. U.S. Secretary

of Education Arne Duncan called the long-term trends for high-school students "especially troubling." Susan Traiman, director of public policy at the Business Roundtable, an association of chief executives, called the high-school NAEP scores "unacceptable and really reinforce the fact that high-school reform is long overdue." President Obama has said boosting high-school-graduation rates is a key element of his yet-to-be-detailed education agenda.

The NAEP report is but the most recent indicator that our nation's education system is failing—coming at a time when colleges and employers are complaining that too many students earn diplomas without learning the skills needed for college or the workplace. Simply stated, America's education system is not positioned to provide world-class K-College educations for its citizens. If the future indeed belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens, then unless corrective action is taken, America is doomed to a bleak future with an uncompetitive workforce and loss of its leadership position on the world stage.

Are We Rome? – Why does America have a failing education system? It's because corrective action for the failing system has all too often required political will and abundant courage to change the status quo. Unfortunately, politicians of all stripes and levels have avoided getting in front of issues when there was no political capital to be gained—and possibly much to be lost, for example, loss of donations and loss of political office. So major issues have gone unresolved or ignored while the public is distracted from glum news about crises of the day such as terrorism, economic uncertainty, and pandemics, by games of all sorts—once again prompting the question: Are we Rome?

In his classic 2000 book, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*, Murray Sperber coined the term beer-and circus—a take off on the political, bread-and-games strategy of early Roman emperors aimed at distracting the populaces from foreign and domestic policy failures—saying it is the best description he has found for the party scene connected to big-time intercollegiate athletic events and its effect on many undergraduates at large public research universities.

Jared Diamond's 2005 book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, along with Cullen Murphy's 2007 book, *Are We Rome: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, and Adrian Goldsworthy's recently published book, *How Rome Fell*, provide a more expansive view of the circumstances and behavior patterns preceding the decline of powerful government states and nations that apply to failing education systems as well.

An Early Warning – Apparently, the afore-listed books and the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) report, *A Nation at Risk*, have been no match for the formidable economic, political, and legal forces that have been mustered to defend the status quo. When coupled with extant greed, corruption, incompetence, deceit, and denial, these forces have impeded significant corrective action in America's educational system—this, no matter how eloquent and lofty-sounding the warnings, pleas and rhetoric about the need for change.

It is of interest to note that it is exactly 26 years since the White House ceremony at which then President Ronald Reagan took possession of the NCEE's report that found poor academic performance at nearly every level and warned that the education system was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity."

The report famously stated: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves." Education historian Diane Ravitch⁴ called *A Nation at Risk* "the most important education reform document of the 20th century."

More on *A Nation at Risk* – Notwithstanding the merits of the NCEE report, the National Education Association's executive committee assured its members that the report was "just another passing fad that would fade like the morning haze."

The *Nation at Risk* report was followed by muddling ahead with much tough talk about public schools and reforms in many publications and at many conferences. The Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind* law followed some 19 years later. This inadequately funded law pushed schools to improve students' basic skills or face ever-tougher sanctions, but has produced only modest results as can be seen in the NAEP report.

Many other K-12 reform initiatives have been blocked or restricted by teacher's unions—most recently, vouchers⁵ and the privately-funded *Teach for America* program that sends college grads into America's poorest school districts for two years.⁶

No expense seems to be spared to create the illusion that students in America's inner-city K-12 schools are receiving the level of education reported by the schools; see the transcript of the *Bill Moyers Journal* program with guest David Simon, Executive Producer of the HBO Program *THE WIRE*.⁷ The transcript provides valuable insights not only into inner-city education, but also insights that are largely applicable to the education of the NCAA's so-called student athletes. It should be required reading for all who are serious about fixing America's education system.

The Higher Education Gap – Over the years, the athletics-over-academics and win-at-any-cost operating strategies employed by colleges and universities to compete successfully in big-time, revenue-producing sports has led to the current mess in professional college sports—none the least of which involves the loss of integrity and academic primacy in our institutions of higher education.

This mess—when coupled with the American public's lack of understanding of the long-term consequences of our nation's obsessive behavior with respect to professional college-sports entertainment and government policies that enable big-time college sports to thrive as a business that operates minor league teams for the NBA and NFL⁸—has the characteristics of a national scandal, perhaps a national disaster when seen in the light of President Obama's claim that the future will belong to the nation that best educates its

citizens. Several negative consequences of the above are readily apparent, including but not limited to those listed in the appended NOTES.⁹

All of this is to be contrasted with the obsession of our nation's foreign competitors with high quality education at all levels and has the makings of a serious education gap—a high price to pay for professional college sports entertainment.

Resistance to College Sports Reform – Efforts to restore academic integrity in our colleges and universities have been blocked by the NCAA and its member institutions that receive aid and comfort via America's obsessive sports culture....a culture that values athletics over academics.

Colleges and universities supporting big-time football men's basketball programs continue to cheat—using easily gamed statistics ('juking the stats'), investing in expensive jock-only academic facilities, and other mechanisms to create the illusion that their professional athletes receive a legitimate rather than a pretend college education.¹⁰ The schools also strongly resist reform measures that would expose their cheating.

In a recent meeting with representatives of the credit-card industry, President Obama called for reforms that would provide more clarity and transparency to the industry. This is essentially the same call his administration has made to the banking, insurance, and investment communities, but not to the education community—certainly not to the seemingly untouchable, greed-driven college sports entertainment industry that not only operates behind a veil of secrecy, but also has no functioning system of accountability and no independent oversight.

Resistance to K-12 Reform – As with professional college sports, K-12 reform measures are stubbornly resisted to protect the status quo—leading to another perspective on America's Education Gap that, for the sake of credibility, the gap must not be ignored by President Obama and his administration. This perspective comes from Jay P. Greene who says "It's time for reformers to increase pressure on politicians bending to the will of the unions and close the new education gap—the one between what Mr. Obama and Mr. Duncan say about education and what they do."¹¹

Concluding Remarks – All of education and its problems are connected beginning with pre-school on up though post-secondary schooling. Stanton R. Cook, Retired Chairman, Tribune Company and Life Trustee at Northwestern University, captured the essence of the present situation when he said: "I'm staggered at the complexity of the total problem.... I believe that achieving the stated goal (of reclaiming academic primacy in higher education) would not only be a boon to colleges and universities in the long run, but would also provide a tremendous, and needed, national challenge to primary and secondary education. The challenge would be to improve the quality of their graduates, and in the process, enable many school districts to emerge from a morass of continued mediocrity."¹²

Nonetheless, as challenging as the problems may be, President Obama and Secretary Duncan can begin fixing America's failing education system that is encumbered by

parasite-like organizations that feed off this educational system at all levels—thwarting reform efforts as they defend the status quo and their vested interests. Some thoughts and guidelines that may be useful in the fixing process are as follows:

1. Work to dispel the notion that the Obama Administration is beginning to develop a credibility gap—between what they say and what they do in education. It is effective action rather than words that brings about change.
2. Recognize that fixing America's education system goes far beyond the classroom—involving family values as well as neighborhood and cultural circumstances. For example, see the transcript of *Bill Moyers Journal* program with guest David Simon.⁷
3. Recognize that although K-12 teachers, administrators, and union representatives must be part of the fixing process, they need to forego obstruction mechanisms and become part of solutions.
4. Solutions in the form of best available practices should be aimed at what is best for the students in their particular set of circumstances.
5. Recognize that these solutions may very well involve creative destruction of components of the failing system as opposed to job creation and retention.
6. Conduct independent assessments of voucher systems and charter schools to determine their fit in a matrix of best practices and circumstances.
7. Pressure colleges and universities to provide outcome assessments of their graduates.
8. Get America's colleges and universities to focus on education rather than athletics by working with the Congress to restrain the uncontrolled growth of their college sports entertainment businesses.
9. Use the Recovery Act's State Fiscal Stabilization Fund to hold a state's schools (colleges and universities as well as high schools) accountable for funding academic rather than athletic projects.
10. Call for transparency, accountability, and oversight at all levels of America's education system.

In view of the above and President Obama's Education Policy Statements, the time has never been better for the President and Secretary Duncan to take a bold first step—mandating transparency, accountability, and oversight at all levels of America's education system.

In any case, action will speak much louder than words.

May 3, 2009

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TDG, is a national network of volunteers—college faculty, administrators, coaches and concerned citizens. Since its founding in 1999, TDG has worked to reclaim academic primacy in higher education—defending academic integrity in the face of the commercialized college sports entertainment industry. TDG believes that academic integrity has been compromised and higher education's academic mission subordinated by this industry, more specifically, by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions. TDG also believes President

Obama's recent remarks on education policy reflect breakthrough thinking—directly applicable to its mission, for example see TDG's open letter to the president.¹³

AFTERWORD

Shortly after the May 5, posting of above essay, a flurry of related pieces were published in *The Wall Street Journal*. They tell a sad story reflecting a growing perception that the Obama Administration has developed a credibility gap re: its education policy—the difference between what it says and what it does. To the best of my knowledge, the *Journal* is the only major newspaper that covered the story.

Taken together with the May 5, editorial¹⁴ and William McGurn's *Mainstreet* column,¹⁵ former Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao's op-ed¹⁶—on the Obama Administration's attempt to limit disclosure—paints an ugly picture of political payoff at work in America's system of education.¹⁷ It also illuminates the Administration's expanding credibility gap.

George McGovern, a former senator from South Dakota and the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate, put it well in an op-ed,¹⁸ saying: "But while the Democratic majority in Washington confers the power to reward our loyal supporters, today's problems require solutions that transcend party politics. Even when that means taking unpopular stands."

Capping all of the above was a scathing opinion piece by Jason Riley, a member of the *Journal's* editorial board. Riley laid it on the line with a headline "A President and His Priorities" and subtitle, "Obama's education crimes and misdemeanors" that served as a harbinger for a critical account of the of the inconsistencies in the Obama Administration's different-strokes-for-different-folks approach to resolving contentious issues.

This scenario brings to mind the following comment by Warren Buffett: "It takes years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

Surely, President Obama and Secretary Duncan must realize that those concerned with improving America's education system—in the sense that it will do what's best for its students and the nation—will now be looking to what they do, not what they say.

Hopefully President Obama and Secretary Duncan will do things differently and so maintain their reputations as education reformers and avoid being remembered for so-called education crimes and misdemeanors.

May 12, 2009

NOTES

1. The Department of Education Progress Report, accessible at <http://www.ed.gov>
2. Information about the NAEP report is available on the U.S. Department of Education Website, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>
3. Tomsho, Robert, "Few Gains Are Seen In High School Test," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2009
4. Dianne Ravitch has also been one of our nation's top education officials. She was my guest as the keynote speaker at the 1992 SUPERCOMM Conference in Chicago at which time she was the assistant secretary for educational research and improvement at the U.S. Department of Education.
Although Ravitch was optimistic about the prospects for change, she said it would not come easily, willingly, or quickly, an opinion that was shared by Denis Doyle, a fellow advocate for educational reform and co-author with David Kearns of the 1989 book *Winning the Brain Race*.
Lamar Alexander, (then) Secretary of Education, remarked that Kearns and Doyle have advanced a six-point program for reform which includes allowing students to choose the schools they wish to attend, opening schools year round, abolishing traditional grading structures, and raising academic standards for graduation, this important book offers "... a radical agenda, a perestroika for American schools."
5. It appears that politics trumped educational freedom in the District of Columbia where a voucher program covering 1,700 poor, inner-city children was discontinued. *The Wall Street Journal* has opined that Senator Durbin is a leader in the campaign to kill vouchers at the behest of teachers's unions, ["Democrats and Poor Kids: Sitting on evidence of voucher success," *The Wall Street Journal*, REVIEW & OUTLOOK, April 6, 2009].
Secretary Duncan responded (indirectly) to the above and Jay Greene's Journal pieces with his own op-ed, "School Reform Means Doing What's Best for Kids, [The Wall Street Journal, April 22, 2009], calling for an honest assessment by states of key issues like teacher quality, student performance, college-readiness, and the number of charter schools. For more see Robert Tomsho's article. Demand for Charter Schools is High, Seats Are Few: Obama wants to Expand the Alternative Program, but Laws, Labor Unions Will Make That Hard to Achieve," [The Wall Street Journal, April 23, 2009].
6. Editors, "Teach for (Some of) America: Too talented for public schools," *The Wall Street Journal*, REVIEW & OUTLOOK, April 25-26, 2009
7. Transcript of Bill Moyers Journal program with guest David Simon, April 17, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04172009/transcript1.html>.
8. Barra, Allen, "Pro Football's College Tuition Bill: It's time to give back to the institutions that produced our pro athletes," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2009.
On might ask why are there no complaints from the revenue-producing NCAA and its member colleges and universities. The answer is no doubt related to the government's subsidization of college sports via favorable tax policies—including the tax-exempt status of the NCAA's professional sports entertainment businesses and weak enforcement of the Unrelated Business Income Tax Law. Besides, why would the NCAA and the schools accept payments from the NFL and NBA with the attendant risk of reopening the 2006 Congressional scrutiny concerning the justification for their tax-exempt status? [This note formed the basis for the letter, "College Sports System Suits NCAA, Leagues," published in the May 8, 2009, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*.]
9. Some of the negative consequences of professional college sports are listed below. Also see "Are Big-Time College Sports Good for America," http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Good_for_America.pdf.
 1. Reinforcement of America's athletics-over-academics culture and value system,
 2. The lost potential of academically qualified students denied access to schools that provide costly 'scholarships' to academically unqualified athletes,
 3. The lost potential of academically qualified athletes who seek to earn a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) disciplines, but, instead, are "clustered" into majors that ensure their athletic eligibility at the expense of their intellectual talent/academic interest.
 4. The loss of American "brain jobs" jobs to foreign competitors, and the ultimate erosion of American industrial competitiveness with its negative impact on America's future economic well-being and position on the world stage.
 5. The prevalence of "beer-and-circus" campus environments,
 6. The deterioration of academic values in America's sports-focused high schools with increasing reliance, by ever younger athletes, on performance enhancing drugs.

10. When read in the light of NETWORK, Paddy Chayefsky's 1976 Academy Award-winning satirical screenplay about what TV people do for ratings— Susan Blum's book, *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture* provides valuable insights into the cultural and financial foundations of student cheating that, in turn, provide the foundation for today's college sports TV and cable entertainment industry.

Unfortunately, students are usually cast as the violators of academic integrity—missing the fact that the greatest violators of academic integrity are the colleges and universities that support big-time football and men's basketball programs. Some more than others are quite skilled in the arts of deceit and deception—lying and cheating to recruit and maintain the eligibility of professional teams for their sports entertainment businesses—a fact not lost on the students. This modus operandi seriously compromises institutional credibility.

Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, abolished football at the university in 1939 saying: "To be successful, one must cheat. Everyone is cheating, and I refuse to cheat." As former Tufts University Provost Sol Gittleman opined "A Robert Hutchins comes only once in a lifetime."

11. Greene, Jay P., "The Union War on Charter Schools: As New York shows, they want to kill any education choice," *The Wall Street Journal, Opinion*, April 16, 2009.

12. Splitt, Frank G., "Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education: A Brief," See commentary on p. ix, December 31, 2003, http://thedorakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primacy.pdf

13. Otto, Kadence and Splitt, Frank G., "An Open Letter to the President and His Administration," March 18, 2009, <http://thedorakegroup.org/Obama.pdf>.

14. Editorial, "Arne Duncan's Choice: 'What works' for some kids, but not for others," May 5, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124148314511885437.html>.

15. McGurn, William, "School Choice for the Few: The New do-as-I-say double standard," *The Wall Street Journal, Mainstreet*, May 5, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124147923132785121.html>.

16. Chao, Elaine, "Obama Tries to Stop Union Disclosure: No more sunshine on how worker dues are spent," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124157604375290453.html>

17. The Drake Group has been working since 1999 to bring disclosure/transparency requirements to collegiate athletics, specifically to the sports entertainment businesses franchised by the National Collegiate Athletic Association to its member colleges and universities. We have said many times that there will be no reform in these businesses without disclosure. So it was disappointing to see the Obama Administration ignore the sunshine 'rule' governing serious reform.

18. McGovern, George, "The 'Free Choice Act Is Anything But," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124165379013293871.html>.

19. Riley, Jason L., "A President and His Priorities: Obama's education crimes and misdemeanors," May 8, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124174149602398935.html>