

Why our educational system lags behind

BY ELIZABETH PERELSTEIN

My family relocated to London for three years when my children were in grade school. Shortly after returning, my ninth-grade daughter came home from her well-regarded Westchester public school and said "it's not cool to be smart here." At the end of the same year, my academically minded seventh-grade son emerged from the school's award ceremony empty-handed and tearful; the awards all had been distributed based on athletic excellence. This well-endowed suburban school district had been awarded the coveted and highly selective National Blue Ribbon for Excellence.



How can we compete with India and China when we value athletic prowess, fashion and trendy music above education? Nothing reveals societal preferences more clearly than salaries. The sports, fashion and entertainment industries produce some of our highest-paid celebrities, yet teachers struggle to live in the communities where they work. Compare the average \$1.4 million salary of an NFL player to the \$50,000 average salary of public school teachers.

According to New York City Chancellor Joel Klein, "Those countries that are doing best are recruiting their K-12 teachers from the top third of their college graduates. America is recruiting our teachers generally from the bottom third... I pay teachers, basically, based on length of service... I can't, by contract, pay math and science teachers more." (The Wall Street Journal, Oct. 26, 2009).

Unintended results

Throughout U.S. history, we have instituted periodic educational reforms, largely in response to crisis and generally by introducing standards. The panic during the Sputnik era (1957) produced unanimous recognition that we needed better schooling to compete against Russia, but subsequent reforms focused on bringing up the floor rather than challenging advanced students. In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education released a report called "A Nation at Risk," causing another wave of reforms targeting the underperforming, with the intent of removing barriers to access and bringing the least able students up to speed. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) similarly targeted weaker students. I worked with a mother who removed her kindergarten son from a top-rated public school after inquiring what he was learning in reading group. His response was "she doesn't teach us read-

ing; she teaches the kids who don't know how to read." The attitude that smart kids will be fine without instruction has cost us the motivation of some of the nation's top talent.

Following No Child Left Behind, teachers throughout U.S. public schools began "teaching to the test" in order to improve evaluations and certain states actually lowered standards hoping to flaunt better performance. Statewide examinations to measure achievement cannot reasonably assess students at both ends of the bell curve, and therefore max out at scores that require only minimal competency of the most capable learners. Meanwhile, programs addressing lower achievers often limit the critical thinking skills that top students require. As long as the district performs well on assessments, the absence of challenge for top students goes unquestioned.

The concept of "equality" also can be an issue. Our democratic system has positioned education as the great equalizer. Equality

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of education has long been considered a vehicle to foster the equal occupational and financial opportunities intrinsic to our democratic values. Confusion between equality of curriculum, racial equality and equality of outcomes, however, has obfuscated our educational goals.

According to "Genius Denied," by Jan and Bob Davidson, pursuit of equality at all costs has driven our educational system to mediocrity. Instead of providing all children, regardless of race and socioeconomic status, with equal opportunity to education that best equips them to use their minds, the concept of "gifted education" has been equated with racism or classism. High achieving students need flexibility rather than standardization to pursue their interests in depth, participate in enriching programs and use their creativity.

For the most part, education for advanced learners has been uninspired — a poor attempt to develop inquisitive minds. Public school gifted programs rarely identify chil-

dren before third grade, by which time some already are lost. Generally, gifted programs consist of pulling students out of class, or scheduling before- or after-school classes totaling only a few hours per week. In the actual classroom, high-achieving children are most often given more work — rather than more interesting work — to keep them busy and enable the teacher to focus on those who "need attention."

Strangely, fear of pairing instruction with ability is not echoed in other aspects of society. Athletes and performers are encouraged to achieve their potential and specialized resources are provided to those expected to become great. Reluctance to do the same in

academic settings prevents able students from setting and achieving high standards,

and taking the risks necessary to advance our nation to improved levels in math, engineering, science and other subjects.

Value gifted learners

Not only does our educational establishment fail to inspire academic superiority, classes grouped heterogeneously in accordance with our "democratic ethos" overlook the social needs of gifted learners. These children crave opportunities to interact with intellectual peers as many have poor social skills and find little in common with schoolmates in mixed-ability environments. Some try to hide their intelligence and pursue more socially acceptable activities, believing that they can successfully "fit in" by foregoing interest in learning. Another family we worked with had a son with an IQ of 165. In elementary school he read Scientific

American and became a chess champion. Chasing popularity during adolescence, he abandoned these pursuits in favor of football. His teenage years were marked by failure classes and behavioral difficulties as he tried to be someone other than himself. Peer pressure causes children to sink to the least common denominator, rather than cultivating the brightest minds.

The loss to society by failing to develop our most talented students is acute. Unsurprisingly, our country recognizes intelligence as a positive attribute and feels comfortable fostering our highest achievers regardless of race or socioeconomic class, the United States cannot compete with countries that identify and train their brightest to accomplish their utmost.

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