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Sunday, February 27, 2005

A rare education post

This is about the nation's high schools being broken and not challenging enough. As someone who's teaching high school, though, I'm going to pass the buck. Instead of all the focus on what we're not teaching high school kids, how about some focus on what they're learning in middle and elementary school to prepare them for high school? High school can't prepare kids for college if those kids don't have the proper foundation when they get to high school.

Now, I come from a very particular background on this: the kids in my school are unselected, in a sense. Had they done better in middle school, they might have gotten in to high schools with tougher admissions requirements. That's not to say that we don't have smart kids, because we do have some students who should go on and be very successful in college and life beyond that. What we don't have is enough of those kids, and what the city doesn't have is enough of those kids.

I think Bill Gates is right about something: the system might need to be torn down and rebuilt from the beginning. My professor this summer was adamant, and somewhat convincing, in his belief that the nation's mandatory education system grew out of a need to keep kids out of the labor force, for economic reasons. This meant that schools were essentially babysitters, time-occupiers to keep kids doing something semi-productive while the parents were free to have jobs. Supposing this is true, perhaps the way school works ought to be re-thought from the perspective that everybody actually needs an education. Even supposing it isn't true, if our schools aren't working, we can't be afraid of radical change.

What kind of radical change? Look around at various alternative schools in the country: small classes with mixed ages; curricula driven by skills and abilities, rather than by rote knowledge; less textbooks, more hands-on work; more art and music, particularly with respect to appreciation of those subjects; cross- or inter-disciplinary work; meaningful, real-world questions and problems in classes, rather than knowledge-based exercises and ridiculous hypotheticals; etc.

Some of these ideas are slowly gaining traction in the mainstream educational world (though they're often poorly implemented because they try to compromise with the old ideals rather than realizing that the old ideals ought to be completely replaced), but not enough of them and not quickly enough.

My path from traditional public-school student to non-traditional private college student to traditional public-school teacher has disillusioned me in some ways about the educational system, but I do have some hope. I do think things can be changed. They can't be changed effectively from the front lines, the teachers, not with the top-down systems being implemented, but there are places where change can be effected.

Posted by jason in Education at 18:58

Your insight in the world of public education is interesting and thought-provoking to say the least. One of the key issues in education today that has been put on the back burner, is tracking. Many of the issues we see in high schools today is students that have been tracked at early grade levels and are left with a lack of motivation to excel, since in their minds they are "stuck" taking certain courses.

What educators both in K-12 and higher education are faced with today is standards-based education, one of the most controversial methods to educate youth. Adding to the pot, the fact that schools are struggling financially, doesn't make the situation any better.

An author you may of come across, Bell Hooks, provides an unique insight on many of these same issues to the table and has had sparked many heated debates of how we should educate today's youth.

Great to see an education submission Jason!
Anonymous on Mar 2 2005, 19:55

Thanks for the comment, Julio. Didn't know you were a reader!

There are definitely issues with tracking that I'm seeing already even within my school. As I mentioned, we don't have that many strong kids, and now, the strong ones we do have are being placed in different classes from the other ones. I happen to have drawn one of the weakest ninth grade classes this year, I believe, though, since it was apparently based only on reading level, I do have some kids whose mathematics ability is quite good. That said, it's an incredibly tough class to manage because many of them gave up on school and being able to do well a long time ago. With few real peer role models in class, there's nothing really driving them forward toward any level of success.

Anonymous on Mar 3 2005, 08:32