

# EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: September 30, 2014

Published in Print: October 1, 2014, as **K-12 Schools Need More Steve Jobs and Less Bill Gates**

## COMMENTARY

# K-12 Schools Need More Steve Jobs and Less Bill Gates

By **David Bernstein**

Few voices have been more influential in recent education debates than that of Microsoft co-founder and mega-philanthropist Bill Gates. At a gathering of teachers last March in Washington, **Gates repeated his endorsement of the Common Core State Standards**, arguing that having academic standards in the United States will promote classroom innovation and help students compete globally. Using the analogy of the nonstandard electrical outlet, he explained, "If you had 50 different plug types, appliances wouldn't be available and would be very expensive." A universal plug type, he said, encourages product competition and variety, and cost parity.

We have a tendency to revere the counsel of successful business leaders on public-policy issues, as if the know-how to turn a profit in a particular industry at a specific time gives them superhuman insight and the ability to handle any challenge that comes their way. Business leaders, however, can't agree among themselves about what works best when it comes to commerce, let alone public policy, which is one reason there's a new business book released every week contradicting the last one published.

In contemplating the future of education, we'd do well to countenance the voice of a man with an equally impressive business pedigree, that of Gates' sometimes friend, sometimes nemesis, and fellow college dropout: the late Steve Jobs.

Gates' views on education and the economy clearly grew out of his experience at Microsoft, whose successful standardization of the PC's operating system—Windows—could, like the uniform electrical outlet, also make the case for standardization in education. Gates' business model is that of a large company that dominated an industry, similar to the dominance of such entrepreneurial titans of the past as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. These men also influenced the development of the modern education system, patterned after the factory itself.

In this decidedly 20th-century outlook, big companies were the engines of economic growth and required large, skilled workforces to power them. The purpose of education then was (and, I believe, still is) to prepare young Americans to receive the mantle from business leaders of

[← Back to Story](#)

Personalized, Student-Centered  
Math Instruction for Grades 6–12

Built from research and proven to  
nearly double a typical year's worth  
of learning.

Carnegie Learning >



—iStockPhoto

corporate entities, such as Microsoft today, to carry them into the future.

But a different philosophy emerges from the story of Steve Jobs.

While he never publicly argued a particular view on education policy, Jobs made clear in his biography by Walter Isaacson that school was never a good fit for him. “[Schools] came close to really beating any curiosity out of me,” he told Isaacson. Jobs possessed a very different sensibility for business and human nature, which has played out in the competition between Apple and Microsoft.

**"Standardization and testing are not a platform for innovation, contrary to Gates' argument."**

In his **2005 now-famous Stanford University commencement address**, Jobs noted that after dropping out of Reed College, no longer having to take “the normal classes,” he decided to take one on calligraphy. “Much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on,” he said. “[T]en years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. ... If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it’s likely that no personal computer would have them.”

For Jobs, education was not an orderly process of acquiring a defined set of skills. It was a personal journey of exploring interests and following passions. Jobs’ relatively few public remarks on education are a far cry from Gates’ comprehensive road map for education change. Instead, they provide an alternative framework for thinking about K-12 challenges and the health of our economy.

America’s economy is shifting rapidly right beneath our feet. With the globalization of labor, American workers, as we can see from vacant factory buildings across the country, have been steadily losing out to lower-wage earners in China and elsewhere. Years ago, global competition left its ugly mark exclusively on lower-level factory jobs, but now it wreaks havoc on higher-skilled information-age jobs as well. A computer programmer in China or India may be able to do the same job for a fraction of the cost of the average American programmer.

If we educate American kids on the same defined set of skills that China’s education system imparts, as Gates insists we do, one could imagine the day when the salary of lower-paid workers in the developing world are more competitive than those of higher-paid American workers.

For the United States to be competitive, it must offer—and educate for—something that cannot be produced at a lower cost elsewhere. That something is innovation.

#### MORE OPINION



[Visit Opinion.](#)

How do we create a generation of innovators? Standardization and testing are not a platform for innovation, contrary to Gates’ argument. They produce competent workers in a stagnant and aging industrial economy. The real platform for innovation is a highly diversified, stimulating educational environment—one that encourages students to explore their curiosity and pursue their passions.

Now is the time to double down on diversification, *not uniformity*; on creativity and innovation, *not one-size-fits-all skill sets*; on innovation and entrepreneurship, not competence. It is these attributes that will set Americans apart in the global economy. The industrial mindset of Bill Gates is the wrong one for educating the next generation in our shifting economy. We could really use

Steve Jobs' wisdom on education right now.

---

*David Bernstein is the executive director of the David Project, a Boston-based nonprofit that seeks to educate high school and college students about Israel. The opinions expressed in this essay do not reflect the views of the project. Follow the author on Twitter: [@DavidLBernstein](#).*

Vol. 34, Issue 06, Pages 24-25