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American Schools in Crisis

By **Diane Ravitch**

If you read the news magazines or watch TV, you might get the impression that American education is deep in a crisis of historic proportions. The media tell you that other nations have higher test scores than ours and that they are shooting past us in the race for global competitiveness. The pundits say it's because our public schools are overrun with incompetent, lazy teachers who can't be fired and have a soft job for life.

Don't believe it. It's not true.

Critics have been complaining about the public schools for the past 60 years. In the 1950s, they said that the public schools were failing, Johnny couldn't read, and the schools were in a downward spiral. In the 1960s, we were told there was a "crisis in the classroom." For at least the past half-century we have heard the same complaints again and again. Yes, our students' scores on international tests are only average, but when the first such test was given in 1964, we were 12th out of 12. Our students have never been at the top on those tests.

The critics today would have us believe that our future is in peril because other nations have higher test scores. They said the same thing in 1957 when the Soviet Union sent its Sputnik into orbit and "beat us" by being first. At the time, the media were filled with dire predictions and blamed our public schools for losing the space race. But we're still here, and the Soviet Union is gone.

Maybe those tests are not good predictors of future economic success or decline. Is it possible that we succeeded not because of test scores but because our society encourages something more important than test scores: the freedom to create, innovate, imagine, and think differently?

We should, as President Obama said in his 2011 State of the Union address, ignore the naysayers because "America still has the largest, most prosperous economy in the world. No workers are more productive than ours. No country has more successful companies or grants more patents to inventors and entrepreneurs. We are home to the world's best colleges and universities where more students come to study than any other place on Earth."

Since the 1840s, our public schools have been a bulwark of our democratic society. Over time, they have opened their doors to every student in the community regardless of that student's race, religion, language, disability, economic standing, or origin. No one has to enter a lottery to gain admission.

With this openness, there is a price to be paid: Our public school teachers have one of the most difficult jobs in society. Their classes include children who are recent immigrants, many of whom don't speak or



In the days before standardized tests, teachers had the freedom to tailor their curricula to encourage students to create, innovate, imagine, and think differently. "Norman Rockwell Visits a Country School" (November 2, 1946). © SEPS

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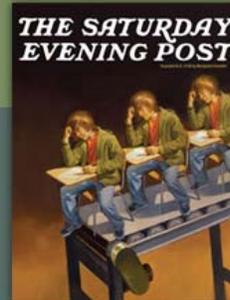
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read English; they include children who have social, emotional, mental, and physical disabilities; they include children who live in desperate poverty.

Let's be fair to our schools and our teachers. As our society has changed, the schools have had to deal with escalating social problems. Compared to schools today, the schools of the 1950s were tranquil. Teachers were uncontested authorities in their classrooms. They were free of the mandates now regularly issued by Congress, the courts, and state legislatures. If students misbehaved or failed repeatedly, they were likely to be suspended or expelled. Only half of the students who started ninth grade eventually graduated high school, and responsibility for their success or failure was shared equally by family and school.

In the mid-20th century, most children lived in two-parent families; today, single-parent families are the norm in many communities, and many children come home to an empty apartment or house. Our popular culture has changed dramatically, too. Television, cell phones, and the Internet have connected children to the outside world, and the outside world often sends messages that contradict parents' efforts to create sound values and a work ethic.

In the years after World War II, the American economy grew steadily, and there were plenty of good jobs for people who did not have a high school diploma. Now most of those jobs, whether clerical or in manufacturing, have been replaced by new technologies or by outsourcing. Back then, it was no shame to leave school without a diploma. Today, it is expected that everyone must graduate from high school, and anyone who does not is stigmatized socially and economically.

The good old days were not that good if you were black or disabled. Public schools routinely excluded children with disabilities, and schools in many parts of the nation were racially segregated, either by law or by custom.

Our schools are now expected to educate all children, whatever their condition. In 1975, Congress mandated special education for children with disabilities. It promised to pay 40 percent of the cost but has never followed through. When politicians complain about the high cost of education, they fail to acknowledge that most of the new money spent on the schools has gone to pay for services for children with physical, mental, and emotional problems.

Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which banned racial segregation in the schools, the basic principle of American education has been equality of educational opportunity. Starting in 1965, Congress passed legislation to send extra resources to districts that enrolled the poorest children—resources that benefited children of all races. Meanwhile, as white and black middle-class families moved to the suburbs, urban districts had school systems characterized by heavy concentrations of students who were both racially segregated and impoverished.

In 2001, after the election of President George W. Bush, Congress passed a law called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which changed the federal role in education. Instead of seeking equitable funding, Congress decided that it would impose a massive program of school reform based on standardized testing. The new law required states to test every child in reading and math from grades three through eight. The theory behind NCLB was that teachers and schools would try harder and see rapid test score gains if their test results were made public. Instead of sending the vast sums of money that schools needed to make a dent in its goal, Congress simply sent testing mandates to every school. It required that every child in every school must reach proficiency by 2014—or the schools would be subject to sanctions. If a school failed to make progress over five years, it might be closed or privatized or handed over to the state authorities or turned into a charter school. There was no evidence for the efficacy of any of these strategies, but that didn't matter.

Educators knew that the goal of 100 percent of the students reaching proficiency was wildly unrealistic, but no one asked their opinion. So they kept their mouths shut. Over the past decade, districts and states have committed billions of dollars to testing, test preparation materials, and data systems. The results have been meager. Test scores have gone up in some districts and states, but federal audit tests do not reflect the same rate of improvement. That's because most state tests have lower standards than the federal tests, and some states have since lowered their standards in an effort to show the kind of improvement the federal government has mandated.

NCLB was a radical plan of action, particularly because there was no reason to believe that annual tests—coupled with fear and humiliation—would produce the miraculous goal of 100 percent proficiency, a goal not reached by any nation on earth. The law treats public schools as though they were shoe stores: Make a profit or else. If you don't, you might be fired, you might get new management, or you might be closed down. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently predicted that more than 80 percent of our public schools would be declared failures by next year based on federal standards.

Setting an impossible goal, providing inadequate resources to pursue that goal, and then firing educators and closing schools for failing to reach it is cruel and unusual punishment.

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In 2009, the Obama administration launched its own radical school reform plan called Race to the Top. In some ways, it is worse than NCLB. Like NCLB, it assumes that higher test scores mean better education, even when those scores have been purchased by intensive test-prep activities. (What's misleading about this kind of gain is that aggressive test-prep activities may lift scores without improving students' knowledge or skills. In fact, some districts have seen scores and graduation rates rise while college remediation rates remained the same.) More than NCLB, Race to the Top blames teachers if student test scores don't go up, which has demoralized millions of teachers. The program dangled nearly \$5 billion in front of cash-hungry states, which could become eligible only if they agreed to open more privately managed charter schools, to evaluate their teachers by student test scores, to offer bonuses to teachers if their students got higher test scores, and to fire the staff and close schools that didn't make progress.

Again, not one of these policies—not one—has any consistent body of evidence behind it. The fundamental belief that carrots and sticks will improve education is a leap of faith, an ideology to which its adherents cling despite evidence to the contrary.

Charter schools on average do not produce better academic results than regular public schools. As charters proliferate, regular public schools lose students and funding, and many charters try to avoid the students who are most costly and difficult to educate. Merit pay has failed again and again. Most testing experts agree that it's wrong to judge teacher quality by students' test scores. The promise of Race to the Top is that billions more will be spent on more tests, and districts will reduce the time available for subjects (like the arts and foreign languages) that aren't tested. Piece by piece, our entire public education system is being redesigned in the service of increasing scores on standardized tests of basic skills. That's not good policy, and it won't improve education. Twelve years of rewarding children for picking the right answer on multiple-choice tests is bad education. It will penalize the creativity, innovativeness, and imaginativeness that has made this country great.

What the federal efforts of the past decade or more ignore is that the root cause of low academic achievement is poverty, not "bad" teachers. Children who are homeless, in ill health, or living in squalid quarters are more likely to miss school and less likely to have home support for their schoolwork. The most important educators in children's lives are their families. What families provide in the way of encouragement, experiences, expectations, and security has a decisive effect on a child's life chances. The most consistent predictor of test scores is family income. Children who grow up in economically secure homes are more likely to arrive in school ready to learn than those who lack the basic necessities of life.

Of course, no school should have any bad teachers. But bear in mind that administrators usually have three to four years to decide whether to grant due process rights (often called "tenure") to teachers. In the years before a teacher gets due process rights, the teacher may be fired without any reason or cause at all. After a teacher wins due process rights, it doesn't mean life tenure—it means that teachers have the right to a hearing before they may be fired. Teachers don't hire themselves, don't evaluate themselves, and don't grant themselves due process rights. If there are bad teachers, we should ask why administrators are not doing their jobs, and the district should demand speedy resolution of any charges against teachers.

Most of what is called school reform these days consists of privatization and de-professionalization. The charter industry is growing rapidly and competing with regular public schools; it has ample resources to air television commercials and print ads to attract new "customers." This competition has not proceeded on a level playing field because the charters frequently have smaller proportions of English-language learners and children with disabilities than the neighboring public schools. In addition, many charters are subsidized by additional millions of dollars in private donations, which enables them to market their wares and provide services that regular public schools cannot afford such as tutoring and mandatory summer school.

Some conservative governors—such as Mitch Daniels in Indiana, Scott Walker in Wisconsin, and Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania—have taken privatization to the next level and are pushing voucher programs, which will send public dollars to private and sectarian schools, possibly even to home-schoolers. This will divert many millions of dollars from the regular public schools.

At the same time, some states are lowering the standards for entry into teaching, ironically under the banner of improving teacher quality. Some, such as New Jersey, are proposing to remove certification as a requirement for teaching; others, such as Florida, are removing any stipends for experience. In Texas, a person can become a teacher by taking courses online. Still other states seek to make it easier for novices to become not only teachers, but also principals and superintendents.

Two major reports were released in spring 2011 that showed what a risky and foolish path the United States has embarked upon. The National Research Council (NRC) gathered some of the nation's leading education experts, who concluded that incentives based on tests hadn't worked.

In other words, the immense investment in testing over recent decades, the NRC commission said, were based on intuition, not on evidence—and faulty intuition, at that. The other report, by the National Center on

Education and the Economy, maintained that the approach we are now following—testing every child every year and grading teachers by their students' scores—is not found in any of the world's top-performing nations.

It's important to remember that this is not simply an abstract matter for ivory tower policy wonks to be nattering over. Our present course endangers one of our nation's most precious institutions: our public schools. Surely they need improvement, but they don't need a wrecking ball. Our policymakers' obsession with standardized testing has proven to be wrong; not only does it lack scientific validation, but any parent or teacher could have told the policymakers that a heavy reliance on multiple-choice tests crushes originality, innovation, and creativity. As the federal government ratchets up the stakes attached to the tests, they become an even greater burden on students, teachers, and the quality of education. In addition, the higher the stakes, the less reliable the tests become as measures of learning. When everything rides on test scores, schools will encourage "teaching to the test" and even cheat to avoid being closed.

We are now at a fork in the road. If we continue on our present path of privatization and unproven market reforms, we will witness the explosive growth of a for-profit education industry and of education entrepreneurs receiving high salaries to manage nonprofit enterprises. The free market loves competition, but competition produces winners and losers, not equality of educational opportunity. We will turn teachers into "at will" employees, not professionals, who can be fired at the whim of a principal based on little more than test scores. Their pay and benefits will also depend on the scores. Who will want to teach? Most new teachers already leave the job within five years—and that figure is even higher in low-income districts.

What we will lose, if we move in that direction, is public education. Just as every neighborhood should have a good police station and firehouse, every neighborhood should also have a good public school.

If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we should make sure that every pregnant woman who is poor has good prenatal care and nutrition and that every child has high-quality early education before arriving in kindergarten. The achievement gap begins before the first day of school. If we mean to provide equality of educational opportunity, we must begin to level the playing field before the start of formal schooling. Otherwise, we will just be playing an eternal game of catch-up—and we cannot win that game.

It is worth remembering that the reason we first established public education was to advance the common good of the community. It began in small towns, where communities agreed that all the children should be educated for the good of all and the sake of the future. Public schools have a civic mission: They are expected to prepare young people to become citizens and to share in the responsibility of maintaining our society. As political forces tear them apart, creating opportunities for entrepreneurs and for profit, it diminishes our commonwealth. That is a price we must not pay.

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