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1 – INTRODUCTION (EDITOR'S NOTE FROM ROGER SELBERT)

It has been exactly two years since I last devoted an entire issue to trends in education and education reform (November 2005). In that issue I wrote about positive and negative trends in K-12 education, and about the No Child Left Behind Act (concluding it was an admirable, if overly ambitious, effort). I wrote about positive and negative trends in higher education (concluding the American system of higher education is the best in the world, but still has considerable problems and weaknesses). I also wrote about the important trends of online education (distance learning), and the privatization of the educational sector (the education market is a multi-billion-dollar industry).

In the past two years many books, articles, reports and studies have of course been written and published on these subjects. I had intended to review several in this issue, but I changed my mind.

What is the state of education in America today? In such a vast area of human activity, there are of course widely divergent trends, but when I was asked this question at a recent speaking date, I answered that the state of education is a mixed bag, marked by paradox:

1. K through 12 educational achievement is far lower than it could, should or what we would wish it to be. Racial/ethnic achievement gaps are evident.
2. This is not due to a lack of resources (money, time, effort, attention).
3. Median and average performance levels may be flat or declining, yet somehow the system still

manages to produce some number and percentage of high-achieving, outstanding performers.

4. At the university level, undergraduate achievement also leaves much to be desired, but graduate level performance, especially in research and development, is outstanding.
5. The economy, productivity, income and widely diffused wealth have grown dramatically and continue to grow. The US maintains a global lead in innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity and invention. The quality and variety of goods and services available continue to increase, suggesting rising competencies and levels of performance across various industries and professions. Employers report worker, skill and candidate shortages at low- and mid-skill occupations, yet every employment position requiring high skill levels attracts a goodly number of qualified candidates.

What are we to make of these paradoxes? How can the economy keep improving if the educational system is declining? Isn't our economy dependent on an ever more educated workforce? Isn't education the key to our future competitiveness? That is what we are told by countless commissions, councils and committees.

Perhaps we need to think about education in new and different ways, through a new prism, with a different perspective. Toward that reframing, in this month's issue I excerpt three recent essays.

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2 – READING FIRST (SOL STERN, CITY JOURNAL)

After a century and a half of universal public education, and despite the highest per-pupil expenditure on public elementary and secondary education in the world, 40% of US fourth-graders are reading below the minimally acceptable level. For minority students in inner-city schools, the reading failure rate is a shocking 65%. This educational failure bodes ill: children who don't read by fourth grade almost always fall behind in all other subjects, often wind up in costly special education programs, and, as adults, have higher rates of drug addiction, incarceration, and welfare dependency.

Making the situation more tragic, 19th-century American children learned to read very well, thank you, in one-room schoolhouses, with nothing more than a single determined teacher wielding Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* and the McGuffey readers. Even before a public school system existed in America, Alexis de Tocqueville had marveled at the country's extraordinarily high literacy rates.

The converging scientific evidence confirms what our great-grandmothers knew intuitively. The most effective reading instruction for most children – especially for those from disadvantaged homes – begins by training them to recognize the relationship between letters and the sounds they make (phonemic awareness), moves on to teaching them how to sound out whole words (phonics), and then focuses on fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Unfortunately, reading science is a mortal threat to what E.D. Hirsch has called the "Thoughtworld" of American education – the system of "progressive" beliefs about classroom instruction promulgated by the ed schools that monopolize teacher train-

ing. The Thoughtworld has a cult-like attachment to a Romantic theory of reading instruction called "whole language," which recently morphed into "balanced literacy" to make it sound more reasonable to dubious parents. Balanced-literacy true believers claim that to subject children to the "drill and kill" of direct phonics instruction is a form of child abuse.

The balanced-literacy cultists believe that learning to read is a natural process and that most children can intuit the alphabetic principle and the meaning of printed words with a little guidance from a teacher and through pleasant cooperative classroom activities such as "shared reading" and "reading circles." Basically, this approach says that kids can learn to read by reading – by immersing themselves in print. And for some children from literate homes, where print and articulate conversation abound, this approach can work.

Progressive educators don't cite scientific research to support their approach, however, because none exists – not one study based on randomized field trials.

The National Council on Teacher Quality, a mainstream public education advocacy group, recently surveyed ed schools and found that 85% of their elementary education classes don't teach the principles of phonics and scientific reading instruction. "The resistance from many educators to [teaching phonics] has been palpable," the report concluded. Of course, interests other than pedagogical are at stake. If a major shift occurred in teaching methodologies, tenured jobs and professional development contracts from the \$500 billion-plus education industry would suddenly be up for grabs.

3 – THE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP (FREDERICK HESS, PHI DELTA KAPPAN)

To an unprecedented degree, this is the era of educational entrepreneurship. Dynamic new thinkers have waded into the world of K-12 educational, founded

influential organizations, and shattered familiar conventions. They have developed new models for delivering instruction and recruiting teachers and at

Consulting in:

- Market and industry analysis
- Strategic business direction
- Growth dynamics

Providing:

- Trend identification and analysis
- Keynotes and presentations
- Proprietary research and reports

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the same time have applied old-fashioned practices with newly inspired fidelity. While their efforts constitute a still-minuscule portion of schooling, they are responsible for many of the most exciting developments in twenty-first century education.

Educational entrepreneurship, ignored for so long, is now gaining our attention for three reasons.

First, American schools today confront challenges that our education system was not designed – and may not be equipped – to handle.

Second, in the United States today, it is estimated that more than a thousand new business ventures are born every hour of every working day. In education, changes in policy, including charter schooling and the relaxation of teacher licensure restrictions, have made schooling more hospitable for entrepreneurs.

Finally, the advent of educational accountability has made entrepreneurship newly feasible. For nontraditional schooling or services to prove practicable, the providers must be held responsible

for the results of their handiwork. Prior to the spread of sophisticated testing and benchmarking systems, the necessary tools simply did not exist.

Since the 1974 publication of education historian David Tyack's seminal *The One Best System*, much analysis has proceeded from the premise that the factory-inspired urban school systems we have inherited need to be redesigned. Many efforts have centered on devising "best practices" that could provide a new, improved template. In many ways, the struggle has been to replace the "one best system" of the twentieth century with a new model for the twenty-first century that incorporates the "best" instructional practices, staffing patterns, reading programs, and governance arrangements.

The entrepreneurial presumption rejects that aim. Rather than determine what schooling "should" look like in 2030 or 2040, it recommends a system that continuously welcomes talent, focuses on results, rewards success, purges failures, and does not stifle the emergence of better solutions.

4 – THREE SIMPLE TRUTHS (CHARLES MURRAY, WALL STREET JOURNAL)

The first simple truth: Half of all children are below average in intelligence, and our ability to improve the academic accomplishment of students in the lower half of the distribution of intelligence is severely limited.

This is not to say that American public schools cannot be improved. Many of them, especially in large cities, are dreadful. But even the best schools under the best conditions cannot repeal the limits on achievement set by limits on intelligence.

That says nothing about the quality of the lives that should be open to everyone across the range of ability; the importance of IQ in living a good life is vastly overrated. It is true that many social and economic problems are disproportionately found among people with little education, but the culprit for their educational deficit is often

low intelligence. Refusing to come to grips with that reality has produced policies that have been ineffectual at best and damaging at worst.

The second simple truth: of children in the upper half of the intelligence distribution – those with IQs of 100 or higher – far too many are going to four-year colleges.

A bachelor's degree in a field such as sociology, psychology, economics, history or literature certifies nothing. It is a screening device for employers. The college you got into says a lot about your ability, and that you stuck it out for four years says something about your perseverance. But the degree itself does not qualify the graduate for anything. There are better, faster and more efficient ways for young people to acquire credentials to provide to employers.

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Growth Strategies newsletter was formerly published as *FutureScan*.

The good news is that market-driven systems eventually adapt to reality, and signs of change are visible. One glimpse of the future is offered by the nation's two-year colleges.

Advances in technology are making the brick-and-mortar facility increasingly irrelevant. Research resources on the Internet will soon make the college library unnecessary. Lecture courses taught by first-rate professors are already available on CDs and DVDs for many subjects, and online methods to make courses interactive between professors and students are evolving. Advances in computer simulation are expanding the technical skills that can be taught without having to gather students together in a laboratory or shop. These and other developments are all still near the bottom of steep growth curves. The cost of effective training will fall for everyone who is willing to give up the trappings of a campus. As the cost of college continues to rise, the choice to give up those trappings will become easier.

The third simple truth: Our future depends crucially on how we educate the next generation of people gifted with unusually high intelligence.

People with IQs of 120 or higher occupy large proportions of positions in the upper reaches of corporate America and the senior ranks of government. People in the top 10% of intelligence produce most of the books and newspaper articles we read and the television programs and movies we watch. They are the people in the laboratories and at workstations who invent our new pharmaceuticals, computer chips, software and every other form of advanced technology.

Combine these groups, and the top 10% of the intelligence distribution has a huge influence on whether our economy is vital or stagnant,

our culture healthy or sick, our institutions secure or endangered.

We live in an age when it is unfashionable to talk about the special responsibility of being gifted, because to do so acknowledges inequality of ability, which is elitist, and inequality of responsibilities, which is also elitist. But among those obligations, the most important and most difficult is to aim not just at academic accomplishment, but at wisdom.

The encouragement of wisdom requires a special kind of education. It requires first of all recognition of one's own intellectual limits and fallibilities – in a word, humility. The encouragement of wisdom requires mastery of analytical building blocks. The encouragement of wisdom requires being steeped in the study of ethics, starting with Aristotle and Confucius. The encouragement of wisdom requires an advanced knowledge of history.

All of the above are antithetical to the mindset that prevails in today's schools at every level. The gifted should not be taught to be nonjudgmental; they need to learn how to make accurate judgments. They should not be taught to be equally respectful of Aztecs and Greeks; they should focus on the best that has come before them, which will mean a light dose of Aztecs and a heavy one of Greeks. The primary purpose of their education should not be to let the little darlings express themselves, but to give them the tools and the intellectual discipline for expressing themselves as adults.

The government, economy and culture are run by a cognitive elite that we do not choose. That is the reality, and we are powerless to change it. All we can do is try to educate the elite to be conscious of, and prepared to meet, its obligations. For years, we have not even thought about the nature of that task. It is time we did.