

The Toxic Effect on Children of a Degraded U.S. Society, Family, and Educational Context: How Will This Nation Respond?

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship among conditions in U.S. society and families and U.S. educational achievement data. Such information, along with related data from 30 OECD countries, shows a marked decline in the U.S. as a context for child development and learning. The focus of the paper is on indicators of decline. Data from the *2008-2009 Measure of America* Human Development Report of the Social Science Research Council, as well as related economic and educational data, are highlighted. A point elaborated throughout is that schools are but a microcosm of society, and that they alone cannot rectify educational deficits. In the concluding section questions are posed about the will of U.S. citizens and representative institutions and groups to engage in serious change efforts.

Keywords: Achievement rates, American competitiveness, human development, literacy, school drop-out rates, foreign competition

Introduction

When one reads the latest Human Development reports, related economic data, and various reports on the problems of U.S. educational systems, our decline as a country is apparent. This decline is no longer in the future as some might claim but is our present and worsening condition. If we temporarily set aside the 2008 global financial crisis and its immediate effects, markers of this society's deterioration have been with us for some time. The overall context for child and adult development, good health, learning, and economic sustenance is in trouble. In this brief article, I focus on indicators of decline in educational achievement, societal markers of deterioration, and the degradation of the family as the child's bedrock for growth and development. A complex relationship exists among social and family conditions, children's needs for nurturance, structure, examples of deferred gratification, and a work ethic, deteriorations in public education, and the skills needed by the American workforce. All are essential to national development. Yet together they paint a picture of elapsed achievement needs and toxic, troubled waters for our children and society.

Two overarching points anchor this article. First, we live in a criticizing society, one in which it seems that blame must be cast on one institution or another. As Erik Erikson (e.g., 1968, 1975) held, adult humans are the moral and moralizing subspecies. Too quickly, we judge individuals and groups, failing to first ask what observed behaviors mean. When we judge, criticize, blame, and propose remedial help as the first order of business, we fail to study and grasp the complete phenomenon and its meaning. In the process adults often project their own feared deficits onto other individuals, groups, and institutions (e.g., Hoare, 2002). With respect to public education, some experts have too easily separated institutionalized educational endeavors from other



contributing factors, and have been far too quick to blame schools alone. Other experts have recognized the panoply of externally induced disorder but believe that the school can remediate society's and the family's problems. The American public school, with more on its plate each year (e.g., immunization clinics, custodial after school child care, security requirements) has its share of difficulties. Yet it alone is not responsible for U.S. problems nor can the school alone solve them.

Second, each nation's children are a mirror to their society, to its current condition, achievements, promise, and deficits. Along with the elderly, poor, and disenfranchised, youth comprise the vulnerable among us, those who most need protection and nurturance. Children are our future, those whose gift of innocence shows adulthood as but a deficit condition, especially lately. In his last book, the late Urie Bronfenbrenner (2005) cautioned, "The major social changes taking place recently in modern industrialized societies, especially the United States, may have altered environmental conditions conducive to human development to such a degree that the process of making human beings human is being placed in jeopardy" (p. xxvii).

In particular, Bronfenbrenner held that the family had largely become a "chaotic system," one in which "frenetic activity, lack of structure, unpredictability in everyday activities, and high levels of ambient stimulation" are daily experiences (p. 14). At best, such family conditions place youth in serious jeopardy, dimming their ability to concentrate when in school and study well at home. At worst, youth engage in substance abuse and risky sexual behavior. They drop out, run away, and commit suicide. With respect to drug use, for example, Friedman (2006), cited data showing at least a 50% illicit drug use among recent high school completers. Street drugs are now supplemented with illicit parental and internet-obtained prescription drugs. Interpreting large scale national surveys and follow-up interviews with teens, Friedman found that youth drug use meets both their recreational and practical needs. Recreational needs are met with "Pharm" (pharmacological) parties where street and prescription drugs are often combined. Practical needs are met with stimulants to bolster school performance, hypnotics to induce sleep, and tranquilizers to reduce stress. Teens are emulating the behavior of their role model parents and other "adults."

With these points before us, we look to the societal and family problems and effects that place children in jeopardy for achievement and related problems. As for all of us, children live in an ecological niche that variously supports health, learning, and various forms of development. Parents, peers, extended family, neighbors, and others are part of that niche. The school too, with its calm or violent students, clean or debris ridden halls, and caring or cantankerous teachers, is part of youth's overall environment. For a number of good reasons American public education, its professionals and students, is in the limelight. Drop-out rates have risen, precarious conditions exist in "failing" schools, many teachers are substandard or are teaching subjects they have not mastered, and inflated bureaucratic costs curtail actual resources that students receive. These serious problems require sustained attention, but schools do not bear the full brunt of responsibility.

One way of considering a range of data regarding U.S. educational and related conditions is to compare this country with other affluent nations. Another is to examine data within the U.S. alone. We begin here with international indicators and then move to within-country conditions. First, therefore, how does the U.S. fare internationally?

Human Development Indicators: U.S. Comparisons with Other OECD Nations

For a number of years, international human development information has been compiled by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Its data are fundamental to the international comparisons examined in this paper. The SSRC, in its most recent volume *The Measure of America 2008-2009*, largely reports comparisons among 30 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The *Measure* report takes the position that the most frequently used indicators of U.S. development are inadequate. Gross Domestic Product, (GDP), Gross National Product (GNP), stock market performance, consumer spending, international trade performance, and similar indicators provide information about American life and competitive success. But these lopsided, “alienated variables,” important as they are, spotlight fiscal and resource comparisons which incompletely characterize a nation’s overall quality of life (Burd-Sharps, Lewis & Martins, 2008, p. xi). The SSRC looks to a wider array of indicators of the lives of U.S. citizens. These include social, environmental, educational, health, economic, psychological, equality, and other conditions that form the basis of daily experience.

The SSRC uses three broad criteria of individual development: (a) a healthy, long life (e.g., safety, good life expectancy, low infant mortality); (b) access to learning and knowledge (e.g., literacy and high school completion rates); and (c) a decent standard of living (e.g., median income). Using these three major Human Development criteria, the U.S. shows an overall decline since 1980. Among the 12 top-rated countries on the “global” index of Human Development, the U.S. fell from second place in 1980 to twelfth place in 2005. The global rating is based on data showing the effectiveness of countries to convert income into favorable health, safety, educational, and life expectancy outcomes for citizens. In twelfth place with respect to this effectiveness-of-conversion standard, the U.S. is now behind Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Parsing several specific indicators that comprise the global rating, life expectancy, health, safety, literacy, and educational achievement markers are paramount. With respect to life expectancy, personal health is included in longevity. For example, obesity is a key predictor of poor health and diminished longevity, and obesity among U.S. children and adults has escalated dramatically in recent years.

In life expectancy calculated from birth, in 2005 the U.S. ranked 24th (77.9 years) among 30 OECD countries. Japan is first with the greatest life expectancy at birth (82.1 years). Among those same 30 countries the U.S. ranked first in 2005 private and public dollars spent on health care per capita (\$6,401). Japan, ranking first in life expectancy among the OECD nations, spends far less (\$2,358 per capita), ranking 19th in per capita health care expenditures. U.S. health care costs have soared and the return on investment plummeted. Yet 47 million persons in the U.S., about 16% of the population, lack health insurance. Although conditions vary by ethnic and racial grouping, by State, and by Congressional District, among those most at risk, in 2008 African Americans have nearly 97,000 excess deaths per year compared with Caucasians. They have shorter life spans today than all Americans in the aggregate had in the late 1970s.

The SSRC Human Development index of life expectancy includes an assessment of the aggregate population and of racial and ethnic groups. Its life expectancy composite ranking is based on actual life expectancy at birth, percent enrolled in school, percent completing high school, percent with a Bachelor's degree, percent with a professional or graduate degree, and median earnings. Using these combined criteria U.S. Asian Americans rank first, Caucasians second, Latinos third, American Indians fourth, and African Americans fifth. Asian Americans constitute only about four percent of the population but outperform their U.S. peers at all levels. As Abboud and Kim (2006) claim, their success is based on the ways Asian Americans are cared for and brought up and the instillation by their parents of a love and desire for learning.

With respect to safety, homicide rates are one indicator of safe environments. The U.S. homicide rate is nearly five times that of the OECD average. If the U.S. and Japan showed equivalent homicide rates, the U.S. would have had 1,500 homicides in 2003 instead of 15,000. Other data on child safety and health place the U.S. at the bottom of 24 OECD countries. For example, the U.S. infant mortality rate, that is, death prior to the end of the first year of life, declined for five decades but has gone into a holding pattern. Infant mortality rates in the U.S. are now approximately that of Croatia, Cuba, Estonia, and Poland. If the U.S. infant death rate were the same as Sweden's, more than 21,000 babies each year would reach their first birthday.

Literacy of a population is prerequisite to access to knowledge, better health, improved longevity, and a superior standard of living. Across all 30 nations, high life expectancy, good wages, low infant mortality, and low birth rates are the result of high societal literacy rates. Plotting from age 35 until death, each additional year of schooling increases life expectancy nearly two years (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, & Martins, 2008).

Achievements in adult basic education are workforce and life success factors for many individuals. In 2002, 40 to 44 million adults, 21 to 23% of the adult population, functioned at Literacy Level 1, the lowest literacy level of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). At this skill level they cannot add well enough to compute the purchase costs of several items, read a medicine label, interpret bus schedules, or enter personal information on an application. Another 20% function at a somewhat higher eighth grade level (Wedgeworth, 2003, 2004). Assuming a best case 70% high school or General Educational Development (GED) completion rate in this population (Grey, 2008) and 40% who are functionally illiterate, it is clear that secondary school completion does not guarantee literacy.

Low educational achievement among parents (which correlates with low literacy and other substandard skills), is bequeathed by parents to their children. This trickle down effect buckles children's chances in academics, high school completion, and, later, job access and performance. As the scores of third, eighth, and 11th graders show, children of parents without a high school diploma are the poorest performers on reading assessments. Children of high school completers consistently perform better, and children of parents with education beyond the secondary school level perform best. Wedgeworth (2003) found that these relationships have not changed since 1971.

These and other data lead one to conclude what has been clear for some time. Parental participation in literacy programs leads such parents to place a higher value on education than

non-participants. Parents who engage in literacy programs pass educational achievement values along to their children. Increasing literacy due to parental participation in adult education programs also results in increased parental participation in their children's schools, heightened achievement among those children, less school absence, increasing scores on intelligence tests, and higher rates of high school completion (e.g., Wedgeworth, 2003).

In secondary school and college completion, the United States, once first in the world in literacy and graduation rates from high school and college, now lags other nations. In 2004, U.S. high school graduation rates trailed six other countries: Canada, Finland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. The decline in the U.S. is cohort specific. For example, when Goldin and Katz (2008) compared secondary school completion rates of those in the age group of 25 to 34 years against those 55 to 64 years of age, in 2004 the U.S. ranked first among 20 premier OECD nations when the older cohort was considered, but seventh for the younger cohort.

The U.S. is also behind in high school quality standards. As Goldin and Katz hold, international math and science knowledge represent the "gold standard." Results of the 1995 Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) found the U.S. lagging in mathematics and science knowledge at the twelfth grade level. Among 20 nations in the TIMSS, scores of students in 14 other countries were markedly higher than those of graduating seniors in the U.S. In 2003, the Program for International Assessment (PISA) found that 15 year-olds in the U.S. were considerably less knowledgeable in problem solving, math, and science. According to PISA results, the U.S. placed below the average of OECD countries.

Further, although U.S. college attendance has risen considerably in recent decades, that is, from 44% of 20 to 24 year olds in 1980 to 61% in 2003, four-year college graduation rates have deteriorated. The trend has placed the U.S. college graduation rate at the average of OECD nations and behind 12 other affluent countries (Goldin & Katz, 2008). Countries previously far behind the US in 1960, had closed the gap by the early 2000s. By 2004, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Sweden, Japan, and Finland were far ahead of the U.S., while Germany, Denmark, Austria, and New Zealand were almost at U.S. levels.

U.S. Education, Learning, and Achievement

Looking now to within-country data, the recent spotlight on public education began in the 1970s. By 1975, analysts noticed changes in U.S. educational achievement and related indicators. High school graduation rates, which had been on the upswing since 1890, had stalled; college completion rates began to decline. The wage distribution that had been narrowing since 1939 began to widen, in effect erasing the gains of the 30 previous years. Inequality was ticking upward and national economic progress had begun to deteriorate (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, & Martins, 2008; Goldin & Katz, 2008). The wealthy were becoming wealthier and the poor far poorer. Parallels began to be drawn between a beginning economic downturn and declining high school and college graduation rates.

By 1980, muted rumblings were heard about clear markers of the nation's educational and economic downturn. Foreign made products permeated the U.S. marketplace, skills of the American workforce were found deficient, and critics turned their eyes to public schools in full

force. In 1983, a national commission assessing public education published *A Nation at Risk* which catalogued complacency and “mediocrity.” Mediocrity was largely attributed to school failures. School reform efforts of various types were instituted. These continue to the present.

Now, in 2008, educational outcomes among high school and college youth point to grave conditions and an uncertain future. Among the key conditions, high school completion, preparation for college, college completion, and GED equivalency are important. These indicators are substandard in a country and era that require an educated, literate, numerate, and scientifically accomplished work force. Levine (2006), the National Center on Education and the Economy (2007), Goldin and Katz (2008), and many others have warned that the deterioration in school and student achievement means that the U.S. will not long be able to compete successfully in a shrinking global economy. Many hold that U.S. public education systems are largely incompetent.

If we ask what it is that buttresses such conclusions, secondary school completion rates are part of the picture. National data are incomplete and inexact; however, depending on the source, the average high school completion rate in the country is between 66 and 88%. The graduation rate for African Americans and Hispanics is far lower, between 50 and 85% (see, e.g., Heckman & LaFontaine, 2008). Further, there is a difference between dropping out and being forced out. A number of secondary school students are now “pushouts,” those who are encouraged by education officials to leave school. When youth are classified in categories that carefully conceal their status, the system’s cleaned up data are shown as better than they actually are. Technically, data then reveal far fewer high school drop-outs than actually exist. For example, Wedgeworth (2003) cites information showing that New York City public schools pushed out 55,000 secondary school students in 2000-2001. If this is anywhere near correct, comparing that number to the system’s approximately 34,000 high school graduates in the same academic year shows unconscionable, unethical behavior among those responsible.

Each year, between 10 and 20% of the high school completion rate is accounted for by GED equivalency certificates. This inflates graduation rates and biases the data in other ways as well. Heckman and LaFontaine (2008) claim that, in the workplace, GED recipients function at the level of high school drop-outs. And, since 2000, even GED equivalency completion has declined dramatically. It is now at levels reached in the last years of the 1970s (Goldin & Katz, 2008).

There is great disparity between student performance in suburban, white schools, many of which show high graduation rates, and student performance in densely populated urban areas where school success is variously valued and graduation rates are low. In 50 major cities in the U.S., the average high school graduation rate is 58%. In 17 of those systems graduation rates are 50% or lower. For example, high school graduation rates in Baltimore (Maryland), New York City, Columbus and Cleveland (Ohio), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Atlanta (Georgia), Detroit (Michigan), and Indianapolis (Indiana) are 35%, 47%, 41%, 42%, 50%, 46%, 25%, and 30%, respectively. Urban decay and impoverished families characterize major parts of those cities. When we compare the graduation rates of, for example, the suburbs surrounding Baltimore, New York City, Columbus, and Philadelphia, the graduation rate exceeds 80% (see Grey, 2008).

The prison population compounds the drop-out picture. The U.S. holds five percent of the world's population but one-fourth of its incarcerated (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, & Martins, 2008). Prison inmates are included in the count of GED recipients. Some claim that the GED has no effect on skills, earnings, or recidivism in this population (e.g., Wedgeworth, 2003). With approximately 110 inmates per 100,000 persons from about 1925 to 1975, the U.S. incarceration rate did not change dramatically. But by 2007, seven in 1,000 U.S. residents were imprisoned yearly. The SSRC found that in many poor communities, direct experience with the criminal justice system is so common that it has become a "normative life experience" (Burd-Sharps, Lewis, & Martins, 2008, p. 142). Those who do not graduate from secondary school are eight times more likely to be incarcerated. By their 35th birthday, 60% of African American high school drop-outs will have been imprisoned for some period of time.

Most of us know adults who are trapped by poverty, pre-literacy, minimal job skills, and consequent marginalization: The elder who works at a fast-food drive-through, the 50-something man who loads groceries at the supermarket, the woman who cleans the mall and restrooms in the evening, the immigrant who goes to a designated street corner in hope of a day's work. Many of these "working poor" are largely invisible amidst great national affluence (Shipler, 2004). They are joined by the invisible poor who lost motivation long ago, adults whose "I have not" learned and developed skills eventually became "I cannot" learn and achieve. Among these we number many immigrants (22% have less than a grade school education), inmates (60% are functionally illiterate), and high school drop-outs (60% are unemployed, most reading at a fourth grade level) (Wedgeworth, 2004).

Among the poor, profoundly poor, and working poor, immigrants are prominent. The 2000 Census showed 31.1 million immigrants in this country. This is twice the 14.1 million in 1980 and three times the 9.6 million in 1970. Wedgeworth (2003) cites data showing that approximately one-third of current immigrants came to the U.S. since 1990, and that one out of five children under the age of 18 has an immigrant parent. Poverty among the total immigrant population is astounding, accounting for 25% of the U.S. residents who live in impoverished conditions. Heightening their burden, nearly two-thirds of second-language immigrants in the age range of 16 to 65 are at the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) Level 1. At this level they cannot read well enough to decode simple, written English material.

College Level Preparation and Success Indicators

Clearly, reading and math skills are mere barebones accomplishments for today's and tomorrow's work force. Literacy for 21st century jobs requires analytical abilities, technological competence, ongoing learning, flexibility, and, for many, superior content specialization. If we use this higher level of literacy than is typical of U.S. standards, Drago-Severson (2004) estimates that 90% of the U. S. workforce likely requires some form of remediation.

With respect to achievement in high school as this relates to preparation for college, only 22 of 50 states require students to pass achievement tests as a condition of graduation. Most of the tests in use employ 10th grade or lower standards (Strong American Schools, 2008). Based on international standards such as those tapped by the TIMSS and PISA, most states peg their high school graduation standards to an eighth grade level of mathematical and English literacy

(National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). The 2008 “Diploma to Nowhere” report of the Strong American Schools group shows the minimal connection between learning in high school and the abilities students need to engage successfully in college courses. Yearly, 1,000,000 aspiring college attendees now fail placement tests, and a full one-third of college freshmen now take remedial courses in college just to develop basic skills. This applies to state universities as well as to prestigious colleges and universities where one would expect to find entrants arriving with stellar pre-college preparation. Since the transcripts of four-fifths of students in remedial college courses show high school grade point averages of 3.0 or higher, high school grade inflation paints a rosier academic achievement picture than is the actual case.

The “Nowhere” Report assigns a cost of \$2.31 to \$2.98 billion per year to U.S. public four-year colleges and universities for remedial work. When remedial courses are required at the college level, taxpayers thereby pay three times, first for kindergarten through elementary school, then for high school, and finally for remediation in college. And American business is paying again at the fourth tier.

Colleges and universities cannot go unscathed in any U.S. evaluation of human and national development. Particularly since 1987 and the firestorm ignited by Allan Bloom’s bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, colleges and universities have been under increasing scrutiny. What, parents and others wonder, is the overall quality of a post secondary degree and the return on investment of what has become an increasingly expensive college education?

Among the latest flurry of books on the subject, Bok (2008) echoes past criticism and declares great portions of college and university curricula “substandard,” and their college graduates “naïve relativists.” With no nationally connected system of education from pre-K to age 18, no national system of adult basic education, and national educational policy that is striking by its absence, college faculties continue to debate whether the aim of college is either vocational preparation or the preparation of graduates with superior analytical skills and great literacy in the liberal arts. While the faculty and administrator are arguing, America hosts a “leaky education pipeline” (National Center of Education and the Economy, 2007). As Hunt and Tierney (2006) found, for every 100 students in the ninth grade, 68 graduate on time from high school. Among those graduates, 40 enroll immediately in college but only 27 of the 40 remain in college the subsequent year. Among those 27, only 18 will earn an associate degree within three years or a baccalaureate degree within six years.

The U.S., with some of the best universities in the world, has difficulty attracting highly competent students who are interested in science and engineering and are capable of stellar performance in these areas. For example, the number of U.S. engineering degrees peaked in 1985 but is now down 20% from that peak. In 2005, 56% of U.S. engineering Ph.D. degrees and 34% of other science degrees were earned by the foreign born. Many foreign nationals with advanced degrees in engineering and the sciences are now returning to their countries where salaries are rising for those who are prepared at post-graduate levels (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

As the U.S. continues its educational and economic decline, citizens across China and India value educational achievement as the road to an improved future. Reportedly, parents and

children in both countries value self discipline and a “hunger” for learning which national leaders in those countries are working to underwrite. Changes in earnings due to America’s decline in competitiveness are beginning to show up. From 2000 to 2004, earnings for college graduates fell 5.2% (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

Between 1967 and 2003, on average, those with college or graduate degrees remained in the middle class or moved up into the top earning deciles. In that same time span, high school graduates moved down, falling below the middle class income of \$28,000 to \$81,000. Some predict that the ranks of the “formerly middle class” will now swell dramatically given the 2008 U.S. banking, housing, and stock market crisis that came on the heels of this nation’s admission to debtor country status (Brooks, 2008).

U.S. Families

Children today live in traditional, blended, single, and non-parental families. The higher rates of disciplinary, motivational, drop-out, and school performance problems devastate the future of many youths who live in broken families. This includes the five million stepfamily children. Comparing single-parent families with two-parent biological or adoptive families, Bronfenbrenner (2005) showed that even in single-parent families with high median incomes, child behavior shows “hyperactivity or withdrawal, lack of attentiveness, difficulty in deferring gratification, poor academic achievement, school misbehavior, and frequent absenteeism” (p. 10). In such families, the context for child development has deteriorated. Citing data from 1996, he held that youth (particularly boys) in many of those families are at substantial risk for what he called the “teenage behavioral syndrome”: “Dropping out of school; involvement in socially alienated or destructive peer groups; smoking; drinking; frequent sexual experience; adolescent pregnancy; a cynical attitude toward work; and--in the more extreme cases--drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts” (p. 10).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2006, told the country of conditions that impoverish youth developmentally. Citing data from 2002, their report shows the correlation among parental educational achievement, teenage sexual activity, child rearing, child support, and poverty. Focusing mainly on males, data reveal that boys who did not live with both parents at 14 years of age were more likely to involve themselves in adolescent sexual activity; 50% of men minus a high school diploma fathered children outside marriage (compared with six percent among college degree recipients); 50% of the men marrying during adolescence separated or divorced within the subsequent decade (compared with 17% of men marrying at 26 years of age or older); one-fourth of the 28 million men with dependent children do not live with those children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Teen pregnancy rates which in 2005 had fallen to their lowest level in 65 years, began rising again in 2006. In 2005, unwed mothers accounted for 40% of all live births, an unmarried-mother tendency that has also risen among young women in their twenties.

In monetary and personal resources, including parental presence, positive role modeling, guidance, nurturance, and deep involvement in a child’s life, on average, the contexts of single-parent, stepfamily, and re-combined families provide poor conditions for child development, including achievement. Inadequate structure and discipline with resulting permissiveness, or

domination without loving care are two forms Bronfenbrenner (2005) described as family conditions of neglect and abuse.

We know that even in competent, loving families, the fact of two working parents has led to difficulties. Between 1977 and 1997, the number of employees working 50 or more hours per week climbed from 24% to 37%, and commuting time also escalated dramatically (Crouter & Bumpus, 2001; Galinsky, 1999). Galinsky asked a representative sample of more than 1,000 children in the third through the twelfth grades what effects they experienced from the fact of their dual-working parents. Many of the children spoke of serious concerns about parental work stress and its effects on them and home life. Parents, they said, were often exhausted and irritable when home. Some children searched for “mood clues” when parents arrived home. Others removed themselves from parents’ presence. Many children spoke of being harried and hurried. As said by Bronfenbrenner (2005), the family is now a “chaotic system.” Yet it is clear that many parents have no choice but to work long hours. In a family of four, with two dependent school-age children, two parents who work full time at the 2008 federal minimum wage have combined earnings that place family income just above the U. S. poverty threshold.

What Can We Conclude?

Schools have become this nation’s dumping ground. Institutions are always easy to target, study, and blame. But schools, the youth they serve, and the results that emanate, are but a microcosm of society and its effects. Public education cannot do other than fail to make up for what parents and a broader society do not provide and insist on. In order for a correction in the course of a declining U.S. nation to take root, families will have to take the first step. It is the responsible among them who must study and emulate successful parenting of nurtured, achieving children. Studies of Asian American families would be a good starting place.

Societal conditions can change dramatically. One wonders if, with the great will of the past as its backbone, this nation can create structures and resources that target disadvantaged and at-risk children and parents, preferably beginning with the pre-natal period. Can the nation establish a national adult basic education system? Will we restructure the pre-K through secondary education non-system into a national system, one with a basis on the very best evidence-based, effective school models? Will curricula and teaching build youth’s cognitive abilities and, with families, inspire intrinsic motivation that propels a love for learning?

By the close of secondary schooling, youth can possess the proven ability to serve as resources for their own ongoing learning. By then, can a national system insure that they are verbally and mathematically competent and have a substantial base of scientific knowledge? Will graduates have analytical and scientific process skills, know how to access and use appropriate information in defining and solving problems, and possess computer expertise? Will they also understand that technologies will change and will they possess the psychological readiness to change their learning style and competence along with changes in technology? Will they have a beginning track record of replacing obsolete knowledge with the contemporary, thus showing a cognitive flexibility that will be the hallmark of ongoing learning competence?

Colleges and universities can alter their preferential way of existing in the world. Will they reduce the potpourri of courses? Will they insist on and insure superior teaching and advisement? Will they structure the curriculum for a liberal arts education and for those wishing a job at journey's end?

As the Human Development Report of 2008-2009 says, it is not just the education system that requires reform. If the U.S. is to progress in its developmental rating, the sustained commitment of all citizens is required. Will parents invest themselves in their children and schools, and, if necessary, storm the school gates when their children are not taught well? Will civic groups, business and public sectors, religious institutions, government officials, the media, and all others work together toward the common, selfless goal of a better future life chance for this nation's children and their children in the twenty-first Century? That future is yet to be, but will be written, with the nation's responses to such questions.

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