

Foreword

The Duke of Wellington famously remarked that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. That was in an elitist age. Today, the battle for America's future will be won or lost in its public schools. Unfortunately, victory is not at hand. Indeed, as this book's powerful indictment of the status quo points out, the battle is being lost.

The evidence of international comparison is now clear. American students lag badly and pervasively. Our students lag behind students not just in Asia, but in Europe and other parts of the Americas. It is not just disadvantaged students or a group of weak students who lag, but also American students from advantaged backgrounds. Americans are badly underrepresented among the world's highest achievers. While there are issues of measurement that warrant further examination and there are some apparent differences across subject area, the overwhelming fact of weak academic achievement among American youth can no longer be in dispute. Here is a metric for gauging education that will be more familiar to many readers than the tests on which the authors rely. I have asked a number of experts the simple question—If every American seventeen-year-old took the math and verbal SAT, what would the median scores be? The question cannot be answered with precision because the experiment is not done, and those who in fact take the test are far from a random sample. But I am convinced on the basis of these conversations and some look at the data that the answer would surely lie in the sub-400 and perhaps the sub-350 range. Of course, half of our working population would perform below this threshold.

The great contribution of this book is to show how much damage is inflicted on our economy. In an agricultural economy nothing is more important than the quality of the land being farmed. In an industrial economy, nothing is more important than the quality of the business organizations involved in production. And in a knowledge economy nothing is more important than the cognitive quality of those who produce goods and services. And so education has become and likely will continue to be even more important for economic performance at the individual and the national level.

There is an additional point as well. In addition to the challenge represented by lagging overall economic performance, the United States is challenged by rising inequality. The share of income going to the top 1 percent and, even more, the top .01 percent of the population has soared over the last generation. The fraction of those who do not and perhaps cannot hold productive employment has risen sharply. Indeed one-fifth of men between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four—are not working today, and the figure is likely to remain close to one-sixth, even when cyclical recovery is complete.

As one would expect, those at the top are disproportionately very well educated. And those struggling very much tend to lack strong educational backgrounds. So strengthening education helps. But there is a more subtle point as well. In addition to absolute productive capacity, the wage for different types of labor reflects relative scarcity as well. As we improve education and make educated workers more abundant and less educated workers more scarce we will tend to change the pattern of wages in an egalitarian way. Our aspiration must be to create a virtuous circle in which improving education supports a more equal society, which in turn supports further education improvement.

Psychological science has confirmed what everyday experience makes manifest. The spur of competition and comparison is a powerful motivator of human and organizational behavior. It is not an accident that no one ran a four-minute mile until Roger Bannister broke the barrier, but once it was broken, many were able to follow. Demonstration that levels of achievement, which seem inconceivable to many American educators, are regularly reached in other parts of the world should and can be a powerful spur to improvement to American education. That is why this book is so important. After its message has been digested, there will still be room for debate about how best to improve American education. But there will no longer be room for debate about whether American education needs to be improved.

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