

Other Countries Are Fast Catching Up to the US Education System. This Is Going to Have Consequences.

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The simple fact of the matter is that the United States of America is in competition with other nations not only in the sphere of business but also in education. The manner in which we teach our citizens is juxtaposed against the manner in which other nation-states do the same. The last ranking by the United Nation's Human Development Index (HDI), the one published in 2013, placed the United States 5th in the world in education prowess behind Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and the Netherlands (but ahead of Ireland, Germany, Lithuania, Denmark, and the Czech Republic). We were 4th in 2010. We were 2nd in 1980.

But if we study the index long enough, we find that education in these United States has improved since the Reagan era, and by a significant degree. But so too have other countries' education systems. Germany, 21st in 1980, is 7th in 2013. Norway, 9th in the world in 1980, is 3rd according to the latest rankings. South Korea 27th in 1980, is ranked 11th according the 2013 HDI. Improvements in education are a global phenomena, and despite our country's significant progress it appears that the competition is nonetheless gaining.

However, for the most part, education has become, sadly, much like any other issue of late, partisan; this is especially true in higher education. But K-12 suffers, too, mostly from the "union" (NEA & AFT) versus the "anti-union" ideology of the GOP. And the contentious Senate tie-vote of Betsy DeVos, no doubt a controversial figure, is merely the exclamation point to growing partisanship over education in America. DeVos's elevation to the Department of Education comes at a time where some are calling for its dissolution. The Cato Institute, for example, recently blogged that federal intervention within the field of education is "dangerous or unwanted," and that the Department of Education should be permanently closed.

This Republican/Libertarian response is, in my estimation, a bit like the ostrich with its head in the sand. Education is, sincerely, a national matter simply due to the reality that education is now competitively international. Simply put, we are no longer alone upon this planet when it comes to educating our citizens. We need a national plan and federal assistance to better develop our youth in K-12, and to maintain and improve the goals of higher education. If this country wishes to remain in the top five of nation-states in educating its citizens according to the HDI, a federal effort is not only warranted but necessary.

History bears the proof of education's importance. Prussia's defeat to Napoleon's armies resulted in a lopsided and embarrassing cessation of hostilities. Frederick William III was forced to surrender nearly half of Prussia's territory to France, ceding a quarter of its population as it did so. The resulting Treaty of Tilsit (1807) was all the impetus the Prussian king needed to turn his attention toward education, though along nationalistic lines. The king tapped Baron Karl von Stein who, in turn, hired Wilhelm von Humboldt to develop an enduring primary education system worthy of the Prussian state. Understanding the conservative nature of Prussia's elitism, Stein and Humboldt chose to decentralize primary education, placing the burden of paying for it upon townships rather than the state. But the Prussian people went wild for it. Education was seen as an opportunity and the Prussian state contributed but less than 10% of the funds to support the local schools. Between state, local, and outside endowments, however, Prussia, by some estimates, spent nearly a fourth of its GDP on education. Prussia thus became the first nation-state to make education compulsory, and by the mid-eighteenth century led the world in education expenditures. By 1870 Prussia was defeating France, and by 1871 Prussia united all of Germany. Seemingly, out of nowhere, Prussia rose to become a predominant power on the European continent. A united Germany had the most universities per capita anywhere in the world and its people began the third industrial revolution in petro-chemicals and electricity. Its scientists were the considered top-notch, and highly sought after across the globe.

The UK, by comparison, did not fully commit to educating all its children until the latter part of the nineteenth-century, after Prussia had united all of Germany. Even then, child labor persisted and the UK became one of the last European nation-states to offer fulltime compulsory education to its children – rich or poor. Measures to educate British youth did occur prior to the *fin de siècle* – the Half-time Laws come to mind – but they were unevenly applied and relied upon the “volunteerism” of the companies that hired children or of private, wealthy benefactors in order to shoulder some of the funding.

A strong correlation exists then between Germany's swift rise upon the European continent and its strong financial commitment to education. Equally, I would argue, that the United Kingdom's subsequent “loss of stature” after the First World War (the financial world moved from London to New York City's Wall Street, for example) and subsequent slow-motion collapse of its empire is traceable to that nation's tepid support of public education.

Nineteenth-century international competition in education was also recognized in France following its defeat in 1870 by Prussian forces, and in Japan post-Meiji Restoration. In fact, Japan mirrored Prussia's education system and swiftly established one of the best compulsory school systems in the world. The United States also borrowed heavily from Prussia in developing a system of compulsory and decentralized schooling after the Civil War (the term “kindergarten” is an enduring example of that attraction).

But education in this country has become immensely politicized. Numerous local school boards challenge not only perceived federal intrusiveness (No Child Left Behind Act), but champion ideological assumptions over science (creationism over evolution is just one example). Defunding the sciences and the humanities in our college and university systems has become a weapon of choice by legislative ideologues on a state by state basis, going so far as to attack and dismantle the tenure system in the process (see Wisconsin). DeVos's rise to the top of the public education pyramid is even more remarkable considering her support of a plan to turn over public

funds to religious schools via a voucher system. Her track record on charter schools is less than stellar (to put it mildly) yet she seeks to undermine primary public education at a time when funds are sorely needed after decades of underfunding. DeVos and others claim that “market forces” are the cure all to America’s education system, that competition between schools will improve whatever ails the current system.

I would counter that unicorns are real and that rainbows supply pots of gold. While I agree that competition is good (debate teams and academic decathlons should be required inter- and intra-every school district in America), “market forces” require a staunch and active federal stance. Do we not subsidize our oil companies and other multinational corporations? Of course we do, because our subsidy policies recognize that if left to globalized “market forces” these corporations could quickly go belly-up. We need that same commitment toward education.

We need federal aid for long-held traditional outlets: a return of the industrial arts (auto, electric, wood shop, etc) for example, where math – taught now in theory – has actual applications. “So, this is what fractions are for!” We need federal oversight to protect science. We need a national plan that recognizes the challenges of teaching poverty-stricken regions of our country whether inner-city or rural, that can then allow local districts to lean upon these plans to raise students AND communities to meet the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Despite decades of underfunding, our system of public education remains one of the best in the world. Moreover, the results of the HDI indicate this country’s continued improvements in educating our citizens. But global competition in the education field is growing and gaining. We simply cannot continue to assault our public education system and disrespect and underpay its educators. We cannot afford politics as usual. Defunding our education system by pulling federal dollars and oversight at a time when both are sorely needed may lead us, as in the case of the UK, to lose our global standing.