

STATESVILLE RECORD & LANDMARK

Why haven't our schools improved?

John Stossel

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Every year, almost every industry improves.

We get more choices -- usually better choices, for less money.

"But of all the products we make and the services we provide, there's one that stands out as an exception," according to the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson. "One activity in which excellence doesn't spawn countless imitators or spread on a massive scale: schooling."

Why not? What can be done about it? These questions are asked and often answered by Coulson's new PBS TV series "School Inc." It's a wonderful three hours, reaching back years to America's first experiments in education and traveling the world to look at schools in Chile, England, Sweden, India and Korea. In Korea, top teachers make millions.

Why haven't American schools improved? The education establishment says, "We don't have enough money!" But American schools spend more per student than other countries. Spending tripled during Coulson's lifetime and class sizes dropped. But test scores stay flat.

"Schools adopted all sorts of new technologies, from projectors to personal computers to 'smart' whiteboards," says Coulson. "None of these inventions improved outcomes ... (E)ducational quality has been stuck in the era of disco and leisure suits for 40 years, while the rest of the world has passed it by."

The main reason for that is that most schools are controlled by government. Government is a monopoly, and monopolies resist change.

Actually, most of us resist change. We don't want to give up the way we've always done things. Certainly, few of us want to work harder, or differently. We get set in our ways.

But when there is competition, we can't get away with that. If we don't adopt better ways of doing things, we go out of business. That forces innovation.

But government-run schools never go out of business. Principals, school boards and teachers -- especially union teachers -- have little incentive to try anything new.

One of the documentary's illustrations of this might be familiar because the story was also told in the movie "Stand and Deliver."

In that film, actor Edward James Olmos played math teacher Jaime Escalante. Escalante taught at California's Garfield High School. The student body was, and is, composed of some of the most

"disadvantaged" students in America. Yet more Garfield High students passed advanced placement calculus tests than did students from Beverly Hills High.

Escalante was the reason. He was simply a better teacher.

Coulson interviewed some of his former students, who said, "Escalante worked as if his life depended on the success of his students."

The results were beyond belief ... literally. His students did so well on the state calculus test that authorities accused them of cheating. They made them take the test again. The students aced the test the second time.

What made Escalante a better teacher?

One student tells Coulson, "He built a relationship with each student, knew them by name, knew their story. ... Students didn't want to disappoint him."

The movie made Escalante famous, but he didn't change. He kept teaching at Garfield, telling students that even though they were poor, "With enough drive and hard work, the sky is the limit."

"The lessons I learned from Jaime, I apply them every day," a former student told Coulson. "With my children I talk about Jaime and about 'ganas' -- desire. Nothing's for free. You have to work really hard if you want to achieve anything."

"Stand and Deliver" has a happy ending, but what happened in real life was no fairy tale.

Coulson says, "In any other field, we might expect this combination of success, scalability, and publicity to have catapulted Escalante to the top of his profession and spread his teaching model across the country." That isn't what happened.

Garfield's union teachers resented Escalante's fame and work ethic.

A former Garfield student who now is a teacher told Coulson, "The problem was that Escalante's classes were big. ... He was setting a precedent, giving the message to the administrator: 'If Escalante can do it, why not you?'"

The union used its organizing power to get votes to oust Escalante as math department chairman. Escalante then quit.

Unfortunately, Coulson did not live to see his TV series finished. He died while completing it. "School Inc." is a wonderful memorial to Andrew Coulson and inspiration to all of us.