

The Passy Press

Letter to the Editor

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Subject: Counterpart to John MacMurray's Essay on US Education

REVITALIZING OUR FAILING SCHOOLS

Dear Sir,

Kudos to John MacMurray for his essay A NATIONAL EDUCATION GOAL AND HOW TO GET THERE. It lays helpful philosophical groundwork for what could turn into a lively discussion on improving America's woefully inadequate K-12 education system. Having spent more than three decades in the classroom in two countries as teacher, department head, and administrator, I'd like to bolster John's theoretical suggestions with some specific recommendations.

Just *how* bad is it? In her excellent recent book *The Smartest Kids in the World*, Amanda Ripley cites scores from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA): in 2009, the U.S. (still strutting its superpower status) ranked 12th in reading, 17th in science, and 26th in math; 90% of international students studying in the U.S. "said classes were easier in the United States." In 1993, Paul Kennedy revealed in *Preparing for the 21st Century* that U.S. corporations spend more than \$50 billion annually on re-educating workers with poor math and English skills. In 2003, William Emmott (then editor-in-chief of *The Economist*) commented that such a "brake on productivity growth" could hinder U.S. international trade competitiveness. Indeed, in *20:21 Vision: Twentieth-Century Lessons for the Twenty-first Century*, he saw our K-12 public education system as America's "biggest potential source of long-term weakness."

And when I gave a diagnostic geography quiz to incoming tenth-grade Modern European History students, I learned that Brazil is the capital of Argentina. And that Iraq lies directly across the Mediterranean from the coast of Switzerland. A book I reviewed for a major newspaper cited an American submarine that had sunk in a training exercise in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Peru. Where did that author--and his editor--go to school?

This is what our tax dollars buy from the U.S. education system, a system snickered at by the rest of the industrialized world.

We need no more high flown rhetoric or promises about tweaks to vouchers, testing, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core implementation. Common Core is a good idea, but if I were still teaching, I would have found the actual definitions in Common Core

unusable--vague, nonspecific, platitudes; what, specifically, am I supposed to *do* with it in my subject area? We need real change, a focus on *specific* measures to improve our broken education system. For starters:

- **Replace local school property tax assessments with a raise in state income taxes.** Fund public school systems (\$11,000 minimum per student) Eliminate those real estate inequities that provide excellent funding and education in one wealthy suburb (over \$17,000/student) but inadequate resources and poor education for inner city schools in a continuing cycle that imprisons each district in its pre-established economic cell. (Meanwhile, parents who demand decent education for their children often move to the suburbs—paying higher annual school property taxes, and often an additional \$20,000 per year to send their child to a private school.)
- **Hire more teachers and build new classrooms.** Cap class size at 20. Allow teachers to *teach* instead of dole out discipline. Smaller classes permit every pupil to participate in discussion, allow teachers to assign and evaluate *frequent* writing exercises so students can learn how to organize, revise, and write a cohesive and persuasive essay.
- **Hire only teachers who have *majored in their subject area--not coaches who happen to have taken some education courses.*** And require that colleges and universities offering education degrees admit students with SAT scores at least "in the top third of the national distribution or lose government funding and accreditation," as Ripley suggests. (Is it too much to require our teachers to have strong backgrounds in their subjects?)
- **Replace local school boards with regional, state-appointed professional panels.** Local control is not necessarily best. Too often village school board members do not have experience appropriate for sound educational judgments shaping lives of the next generation.
- **Put computers in every classroom.** Train students how to use them—for word-processing, finding information on the Internet, organizing data for science and history reports. *And ban the use of calculators below 9th grade:* once again require memorization of the multiplication tables through 12; challenge students with mental math exercises and teach them how to make mental estimates.
- **Enforce clearly delineated and strong core requirements for graduation.** At the minimum: computer proficiency, 4 years of English (writing and literature), 3 years (through at least Geometry and Algebra II) of math, 1 full year of art, 2 years of history (World plus U.S.), 2 years of a foreign language, 2 years (some countries require 4) of lab science. Perhaps this should be the 'Common Core.'

- **Institute *state* competency exams at the end of 8th and 12th grades.** New York State has its Regents' Exam. (And France has its rigorous *Baccalauréat*.) Didn't pass? *Repeat the grade*. End 'social promotion': non-passing students repeat, strengthening skills needed for success in the following grades and avoiding the burden of unnecessary review for other students in next fall's classes.
- **Link local schools with local businesses.** Require students in appropriate courses to conduct forays into the 'real world' to gather and analyze information for course-related projects. Tap these same businesses for leaders willing to visit the school, speak at assembly, provide vacation internship opportunities.

So far, according to Ripley, New York City's Success Academy charter schools seem to have come the closest to the international education standard set by Finland. RIGOR is the name of the game: Success Academy teachers are "trained to overestimate what kids can do, rather than worrying about kids' self-esteem." That may be a start.

Lee Gaillard

A Saranac Lake NY resident, Lee Gaillard worked in publishing, industry, and for more than three decades in independent secondary schools in two countries as teacher, department head, academic dean, and division head. His articles on education-related topics have appeared in *Education Week*, *Teacher Magazine*, *English Journal*, *Independent School*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other journals and newspapers.