

a public policy essay

## Education's Myths and Potholes

by

**Ralph J Massey**

### Equality and Elitism

Over the past centuries governments have used public education to achieve a variety of objectives. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany's Prince Otto von Bismarck used public education to become equal to Austria and France; and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, universal public education was used in the U.S. to bring waves of immigrants into the body politic.

In the last half of 20<sup>th</sup> century the focus of governments shifted from looking at inputs (years of education, expenditures, class size, teachers salaries, and teacher credentials) as measures of progress to looking at outcomes (how much students were learning).

Furthermore, the objective was either -

- Equality in opportunity for every student or
- Equality in academic outcomes.

One source contends that the classrooms of the U.S. were "used by psychologists, sociologists, educationists and politicians as a giant laboratory for unproven, untried theories of learning, resulting in a near collapse of public education."<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, developments in academic testing, data collection and analysis now permit one to sort through these theories and to conclude that those striving for equality of outcomes "inevitably fall short." Those that pursue equality of opportunity by challenging all students to their highest potentials will, in fact, "contribute more to the cause of equity than any of the many reforms now being imposed."<sup>2</sup>

The Bahamian Government after 1967 invested heavily in education to reach the goal of primary and secondary education for all. However, it accepted a drastic reduction in teacher qualifications in order to staff the system; and at the same time it proclaimed an "End to Elitism", it "closed" Old Government High, the premier public high school.

These policies have produced an educational malaise as witnessed in the annual BGCSE scores and have given credence to the repeated charges that the Government deliberately "dumbed-down the system." The adverse consequences of these policies have been covered in detail by the Coalition for Education Reform and the author's two previous public policy essays.

### Spending

Contrary to what one might expect, "on average, the countries with high educational expenditures perform at the same level as countries with low educational expenditures." More spending alone will not produce improved student performance.

The best example of this is the United States. It spent \$125 Billion Dollars from 1965 to 2001 under Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act "to improve the quality of education in high-poverty schools and/or to give extra help to struggling students."

Legally mandated school segregation ended; and the separate-but-not-equal “educational facilities gap” virtually disappeared.

However, in 2001 Roderick R. Page, the Secretary of Education, said - “After spending \$125 billion of Title I money...we have virtually nothing to show for it.” In constant dollars, the funding doubled between 1985 and 2001. Yet...the test scores on academic achievement available in 2001 showed no significant improvement, no measurable increase in academic achievement.”

In economic terms the productivity of American schools declined...that is spending increased and academic achievement as measured in actual test scores did not; in economic terms productivity declined.

In the case of the Bahamas, as in most other countries in the Caribbean, the Government made a strategic policy error. It chose quantity over quality in its education staffing decisions, a policy decision with favorable short-term political benefits but debilitating long-run consequences. The country wasted its scarce resources for 40-years in warehousing school age children. Yes, it kept them off the streets; but the low level in skills actually learned has robbed the country of critical skills.

## Unions

In the case of the United States one can cite many factors that may have caused the decline in educational productivity cited above. However, the biggest change during this period of rapid spending growth was the simultaneous nationwide unionization of teachers and collective bargaining. For example, the National Education Association (NEA) changed from a professional association to an industrial trade union.

Before 1961 collective bargaining by teachers was illegal everywhere. The New York City union representation election of 1961 established a legal framework for teachers’ collective bargaining; and starting in 1964 the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers) launched a national campaign that produced union certification and collective bargaining from coast to coast.

The NEA became the most powerful organization in education and the largest union in the country.

Unionization adversely affected teacher productivity as measured by what students learned, a conclusion supported by valid statistical research and a simple review of

### Objectives of the NEA

1. Impose a single salary pay scale for all teachers based on their years of teaching experience and “teacher education” credits. The subjects taught, grade level, and teaching effectiveness play no role in salary determination.
2. Teacher seniority takes priority over students’ needs in making teacher transfers and assignments. “Since most teachers prefer safer schools, the inner city schools employ a higher percentage of new and inexperienced teachers.”
3. Impose inflexible work rules and regulations that deprive superintendents and principals of the ability to manage. This covers everything from pay, hiring, firing, and promotion to class preparation, lunch duty, hall duty, after-school activities, discipline procedures, etc.”
4. Continually increase the “teacher education” certification requirements, purportedly to raise standards. The actual outcome is to discourage the more talented individuals with non-teacher education backgrounds from turning to public school teaching as a career.
5. Oppose innovations such as vouchers, tuition tax credits, contracting out and home schooling. Most of these give the student an alternative to public schooling thus reducing the funding of NEA unionized teachers.

Source: Myron Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions: How They Sabotage Educational Reform and Why*, Encounter Books, San Francisco, 2000.

the NEA's objectives.

In the case of the Bahamas as in the U.S. the collective bargaining agreement affects productivity; but more importantly the teacher is a public servant "protected" under of the Constitution by the Public Service Commission, its Regulations and the Public Service Board of Appeal. In reality this institutional structure limits what Principals can do and reduces the system's ability to reform.

## **Classroom Size**

Teachers and teacher unions promote the reduction in classroom size to lower the student to teacher ratio and improve student learning. This seems valid intuitively. Unfortunately, there is no convincing proof that this is a successful reform strategy except for the teaching of math and English in primary grades one to five.

In the case of the U.S., one researcher looked at 300 studies on classroom size and academic achievement and found that "a full 85 percent of all of the studies found that reducing class did not improve student performance". In fact, the nationwide average class size fell for decades (from 30 students per class in 1961 and to 23 students per class in 1998); yet there was no overall improvement in student classroom performance as measured by standardized tests.

This result is also evident in the McKinsey study. "South Korea and Singapore employ fewer teachers than other systems; in effect, this ensures that they can spend more money on each teacher at an equivalent funding level. Both countries recognize that, while class size has relatively little impact on the quality of student outcomes, teacher quality does. South Korea's student-to-teacher ratio is 30.1. In contrast, the OECD average is 17.1 student per teacher; yet the OECD countries on standardized tests do not show higher test scores.

Word Count: 1,035

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Sweet, Jr., *Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice?*, 1996, [www.nrrf.org/essay\\_Illiteracy.html](http://www.nrrf.org/essay_Illiteracy.html) - 51k

<sup>2</sup> Ludger Woessmann & Paul E. Peterson, *Schools and the Equal Opportunity Problem*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2007, page 22.