

Superman, Reform & other Inconvenient Truths

Three Essays from the pages of
The Tribune

Chants from the
Knowledge is Power Program

June 2011

This publication is intended for use in connection with public viewings in The Bahamas of the film documentary “Waiting for Superman” that features Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem Children’s Zone. It includes two dramatically different and seemingly unrelated story lines running side-by-side.

On the left side of pages 2, 5, 8 and 11 (the back cover) are the chants, the student commitment and a rule of behavior used in the very successful KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools that are transforming teaching in the inner-city schools of America.

It is an interactive, highly kinetic system developed by Harriet Ball, a body of knowledge that was passed on to two young Ivy League college graduates, Mike Feinberg and David Levin. They had a passion to teach and discover what worked with their kids in their public school classroom in Houston, Texas.

On the right side are three articles that address the “Inconvenient Truths” of education reform that are not only “inconvenient” but seemingly impossible barriers to education reform.

- The first addresses the problem of Government mandated unions in public education using the U.S. as an example. **Inconvenient Truth #1** is that similar institutional barriers in The Bahamas are likely to equal to or even exceed those faced by Geoffrey Canada in the Harlem Children’s Zone.
- The second addresses the complex intersection of education and politics by looking at the the state of New Jersey. “The Cartel: education + politics = \$”, the DVD, contends that the unions, school boards, the New Jersey Department of Education and politicians collude systematically for their gain. This is at the expense of student academic achievement and the state’s financial solvency. **Inconvenient Truth #2** is that The Bahamas also has road hazards at the junction of Education Avenue and Politics Street.
- The third looks at what we know about the acquisition of the basic cognitive skills early in every human’s life...potential near permanent learning impairment and reduced life-time learning and earnings. **Inconvenient Truth #3** for The Bahamas is that the solution, “Identify the most ineffective teachers and move them out of the classroom”, is easy to state but difficult to implement.

As difficult as this may seem, there is a cure for the common scourge of illiteracy and academic failure. Ultimately, the country simply must discover it. A complete roadblock at the junction of Education and Politics will produce grave consequences for Bahamians in The Bahamas.

Superman, Unions & Reform

by Ralph J Massey

You gotta read,
baby, read.

You gotta read,
baby, read.

The more you
read, the more
you know.

Cause
knowledge is
power.

Power is money
and I want it.

A KIPP Chant

Goeffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, states that the way to fix our public schools is "with supermen and superwomen pushing super-hard to assemble what we know that works: better-trained teachers working with the best methods under the best principals supported by more involved parents". That's the formula that he used successfully in 100 blocks of Harlem and is the subject of a documentary released on October first of this year to both national and international acclaim.

BUT...that formula understates the challenge of reform in public education.

Getting Control

Large industrial trade unions in the U. S. developed over the past 80 years. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 supported the establishment of powerful private sector unions by limiting employer activity in order to encourage union formation and mandate collective bargaining. And prior to the early 1960s, there were essentially no unions in Government employment. There were, however, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) that aggressively pushed for collective bargaining and the National Education Association (NEA) that did not. The latter had 32 departments promoting development of everything from Art to Vocational Education.

BUT this picture change dramatically in the early 1960s when the AFT won the first collective bargaining agreement in New York City. By 1972 the NEA's 32 departments disappeared as both unions became locked in a competitive struggle to unionize the 13,000 school districts of the country. The NEA became the largest union in the country with its power extending beyond the negotiation of labor contracts. It is a dominant political power that secures favorable policy decisions at all levels of government.

AND starting in the 1960s with the War on Poverty there was a rapid increase in nation-wide education expenditures and also a drop in student/teacher classroom ratios. Nation-wide expenditures per pupil adjusted for inflation more than quadrupled and the student teacher ratio dropped from 27 to 18.

AND despite this, during the 1960s and 1970s there was a significant decline in the academic test scores of high school students, the measurable output of the system. That decline was followed by a period of stagnation and then some minor improvement in the late 1980s and 1990s.

A political/economic analysis covering 50-years concludes -

1. Teacher unions have been a significant causal factor in the decline in academic achievement because they acquired the power and organizational ability to achieve their primary interests.
2. "Schools as currently set up do not allocate extra resources in a way that matters for academic achievement."

The Nitty Gritty

The unstated union objectives are "eliminate wage competition, restrict entry to the occupation, increase the demand for services provided by union members and weaken rival service providers." Their objectives include -

- Uniform pay scales based on seniority and teacher education courses taken,
- Opposition to frequent teacher evaluations, premium pay for academic specialties, performance based merit pay, educational vouchers, charter schools and home schooling, and
- A fierce defense against teacher job losses for any reason assuring near-guaranteed life time employment...and also "Rubber Rooms" for unfit teachers and the "Pass the Lemon" practice to minimize the impact of poor teachers on students.

In New York state, disciplinary hearings for teachers last eight times longer than the average U.S. criminal case and cost the State \$65 million a year.

The irony of history is that today union membership in state and local governments now exceeds that in the private sector; and two recent events dramatically illustrate the promise and perils of reform.

D.C. Smack-Down

On October 1st Paramount released an acclaimed documentary "Waiting for Superman". The film follows the experiences of five inner city public school students enduring a public lottery, the last step for entry into very high quality, college preparatory schools. Interspersed in this drama are the testimonials by Geoffrey Canada and others who deliver "a uniquely valuable perspective that informs the debate and clarifies the issues, suggesting how much has already been accomplished and the problems that continue to elude solution."

The second major event occurred in Washington D. C., formerly the nation's worst performing public school district. In 2007 Adrian Fenty, a young, well educated, Afro-American "reformer" was elected mayor and immediately appointed Michelle Rhee, a Korean-American, Chancellor of the school system. She recognized the importance of quality teaching and set out to implement rigorous reform.

- Before her first school year began she identified 68 people including 55 teachers who had no discernible duties. She subsequently fired them saving the District \$5.4 million annually.
- She closed 25 underperforming schools out of total of 129 and replaced half of the system's principals.
- In 2008 she offered teachers the option a.) Get a \$10,000 bonus and a 20 percent raise or b.) Get a \$10,000 bonus and a 45 percent raise and possible total earnings of up to \$131,000 if they would forfeit their tenure protections. The union rejected this proposal.
- She announced a program to tie teacher licensing to changes in student grades. The teachers union's claimed that to require a teacher to demonstrate effectiveness in order to remain employed was "dangerous" and "discriminatory".
- The union contested every one of Rhee's 266 firings.
- In 2-years Michelle Rhee raised Washington off the bottom of the national large city public school achievement list.

Although Adrian Fenty fully supported the education reform program, he lost touch with the back-lash against it and, in addition, made a series of unrelated political blunders. In the September 2010 mayoral election the union supported his opponent with \$1.0 million in cash and its community organizing skills. Mayor Fenty lost his re-election bid by a considerable margin and Michele Rhee resigned.

A Lesson for The Bahamas

Geoffrey Canada's reform enterprise is privately funded and operated. He did not have to begin and sustain it under a collective bargaining agreement that would strip him of his ability to manage.

Nevertheless, there are two fundamental truths:

1. Those students having a series of years with poor teachers experience a "near-permanent retardation of academic achievement;" and
2. "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers"

The task of education reform in the Bahamas has all the promise and perils faced by Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty and are far greater than those faced by Geoffrey Canada.

The Bahamas truly needs supermen and superwomen if it is to end the "near-permanent retardation" of a critical portion of its people.

Education + Politics = Illiteracy + Waste

by Ralph J Massey

Teacher: I heard from a li'l ole bird that KIPP was great in math.

Students: No brag. Just facts!

Teacher: Then you can count by nines?

Students: Yes!

Teacher: KIPP, KIPP!

Students: Good as gold, quickly let me see your fingers roll.

Nine, eighteen, twenty-seven, thirty-six, forty-five, fifty-six, sixty-five, seventy-two, eighty-one, ninety, ninety-nine, one-hundred and eight.

Whoomp! There it is!

Unfortunately...the failure of public education in both the U. S. and the Bahamas ranks close to jobs and budget deficits as one of the most difficult public policy issues of the day. The evidence of the public education failure in the U. S. and the Bahamas is clear. However, the average citizen cannot help but be confused about what is wrong and what should be done. The evidence is clearer with respect to the U.S.; but it is relevant to the Bahamas.

Explosive Documentaries

The level of academic achievement in the U. S., the long-standing *status quo*, promises catastrophic long-term economic and social consequences. The 20th Century world super-power ranks behind virtually all advanced Asian and European countries in international academic rating systems. Academically it is under-achieving; and two recently released full-length film documentaries deal with this.

“**Waiting for Superman**” is in limited public distribution; and focuses on a particularly successful type of school that flourishes in urban low-income neighborhoods.

“**The Cartel: education + politics = \$**” is about New Jersey, the state with the highest expenditures per student in America and an unacceptably low academic achievement ranking.

One should note that New Jersey has three types of public schools:

- Regular public schools with teachers in teachers’ unions,
- Magnet public schools that have a specialized curriculum also with teachers in teachers’ unions, and
- Charter schools that are publicly owned but privately operated with teachers who are not in teachers’ unions.

New Jersey Reality

The latter documentary argues that in New Jersey there is a **Cartel** made up of unions, school boards, the New Jersey Department of Education and politicians that collude

systematically for their gain at the expense of students and the state's tax payers. The immediate losers are the students as measured by what they don't know and cannot do on leaving school and a state financial budget that has been out of control.

The documentary describes and illustrates how the **Cartel** works with interviews and hard data...a simply fascinating one hour and thirty-two minute *tour de force*.

One example is a new \$30 million football stadium at Shabazz High School located in a low income district where only 14% of the students get a passing grade in math...a startling contrast of wasteful spending and academic failure.

The Obsolete Paradigm

The obstacle to education reform in large measure is the political power of the New Jersey Education Association (the NJEA, the teachers union). The issue is not the quality of 60 to 70% percent of public school teachers; rather it is the 30-40 percent that are not and cannot be fired for cause.

Teachers achieve tenure after 3 years and one day of service; and they are protected against unlawful discharge by a litigation process that the NJEA zealously uses to block 99.7 per cent of all proposed separations. Because of the costly litigation hurdle, it is virtually impossible to fire a teacher.

And...guaranteed employment-for-life has disastrous consequences:

1. Learning Impairment. Students who get more effective teachers have an extreme advantage while those with poor teachers experience a "near-permanent retardation of academic achievement." Strong evidence supports the conclusion that a good teacher will produce "a student gain of one and a half grade-level equivalents during a single academic year; whereas a bad teacher will produce a gain of only a half year...and...it is likely that the typical student will get a run of bad teachers."

2. Picking Good Teachers. It is extremely difficult to identify those teaching candidates that will produce superior student-learning gains. Unfortunately, "teacher-education courses taken" or a teacher's Intelligence Quotient are not good indicators of future teaching success.

It helps if teaching candidates have under-graduate degrees in specific academic fields; however, Eric Hanushek, the leading education economist, concludes that what happens after a teacher is hired is a more valid indicator of future teacher effectiveness; and he strongly recommends that teacher rewards and promotions should be tied to the measured academic gains registered by a teacher's students.

Such a policy means that a school district must engage in a continual process of hiring, evaluating and firing to acquire a stable of quality teachers. This helps avoid trapping unfortunate students in a series of poor teachers...thus creating a

life-time learning impairment. In this case the “best practice” is the polar opposite to employment-for-life.

The Inconvenient Truth

The **Cartel** documentary, however, identifies a genuine road map to extract New Jersey from the present quagmire...namely, the unleashing of its existing charter school program and combining it with student education vouchers given to all students who redeem them at the public or private schools that accept them.

The past performance record of charter schools maybe viewed differently depending on the analyst. Up until now the New Jersey Charter Schools have been approved and regulated by the **Cartel**; and it is no surprise that the total number of charter school students is very small. This creates an excess number of students applying to charter schools; in this situation the state mandates the use of lotteries to determine who gets admitted.

Teachers unions are diametrically opposed to charter schools since they “drain financial resources from unionized to non-unionized schools”; and thus their objective is to limit the number of such schools.

Progressives and liberals generally favor existing U.S. Government voucher programs like the GI bill and Pell Grants that support college attendance, food stamps and housing vouchers; but they abhor school vouchers. The inconvenient truth is that education vouchers split the funding of education from the delivery of education services. The New Jersey charter schools may produce higher academic achievement and/or a “safer” learning environment; but **The Cartel** prefers to fund regular and magnet public schools. That’s the Inconvenient Truth.

However, the newly elected Governor Chris Christie is on a mission to change this.

The Bahamas

What do we know about public school reform in The Bahamas?

The good news is that the nation has a Minister of Education who is dealing with the Department of Education in an effective way.

The bad news is that he inherited the “New Jersey good teacher/bad teacher” problem; and he must deal with long-standing and deeply-ingrained beliefs that are hostile to the New Jersey reform program.

“Move them out”, A Winning Strategy

by Ralph J Massey

Student Commitment

I will -

- Arrive at KIPP every day by 7:25 a.m. Monday thru Friday.
- Remain at KIPP until 5:00 p. Monday thru Thursday, and 4:00 p.m. on Friday.
- Come to KIPP on appropriate Saturdays at 9:15 a.m. and remain until 1:05 p.m.
- Attend KIPP during summer school.
- Always work, think, and behave in the best way I know how, and I will do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn. This also means that I will complete all my home work every night...

Work Hard. Be Nice

The *Tribune* described the recent visit of Geoffrey Canada, the star of the documentary “Waiting for Superman” and the founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone, the “HCZ”, a monumental accomplishment in urban America. He outlined both the objectives and achievements of the HCZ; and, understandably, this did not include all the insights included in the film.

A less-prominent “Star” of the film is Dr. Eric A Hanushek, a well-known economist, who delivered the one-liner -

“Substantial economic gains can be realized by identifying the most ineffective teachers and moving them out of the classroom”.

The detailed research supporting this proposal is contained in “The Economic Value of Higher Teacher Quality”, a Working Paper of the National Bureau of Economic Research. It merits a closer look.

Knowns and Unknowns

In it Eric Hanushek notes that although an incredible amount of research has been done on learning, much has been false or misleading. He contends that teachers are important; and, in fact, no other element in the education equation rivals it in importance.

But...teachers vary greatly in their ability to impart knowledge and skills to students. “The magnitude of differences is truly large, with some teachers producing one and a half years of gain in achievement in an academic year while others with equivalent students produce only a one-half year gain.” Briefly stated...with the same students some teachers are three times more productive.

However, at this point in time he contends that we don’t know what type of person will be a highly productive teacher in the classroom. Even after

hundreds of studies, social scientists like Hanushek have not identified a statistically valid causal and the likely gains teachers will “produce” in student achievement.

Specifically...

- Class size reduction does not affect student achievement except for the very earliest grades, “and then the expected results are small”.
- Masters degrees “bear no consistent relationship with student achievement” as does experience in the classroom after the first few years on the job.
- “Conventional teacher certification requirements, source of teaching, or salary level are not systematically related to the amount of learning that goes on in the classroom.”
- “Even very intensive professional development to help teachers become more effective after they are already in the classroom has shown little impact on student achievement.”

The above policies are the ones traditionally employed.

The social scientist in this case concentrates on what he knows...namely, that poor teachers can inflict a near permanent learning impairment on their students and this impairment will persist throughout their lifetime. This adversely affects their likely earnings, their economic contribution to the nation and the welfare of the nation itself.

The author then did a “what if” exercise, a bit of “economic modeling”. He started with -

- What is known about the relationship between cognitive skills and earnings; and then asked ---
- “What if a series of outstanding teachers had a class of students through the primary and secondary school years?”...and...“What would be the aggregate lifetime earnings of this lucky group relative to a similar class that had uniformly poor teachers?”
- The difference is enormous. Hanushek contends that these future economic gains should be considered as the economic value of quality teachers.

Many will be skeptical of the Doctor’s statistical correlations and prefer anecdotal evidence, “gut feel” and traditional solutions. However, this at best provides a false comfort to a country like the Bahamas in today’s global economy.

In his *NBER Working Paper* Eric Hanushek further states that -

- **The more effective teachers should be assigned larger classes and the less effective smaller ones.**

- **If teacher salaries reflected teacher effectiveness more closely, then much higher salaries would be economically justified.**
- **“Without that linkage, we should expect our schools to underperform, and we might also expect teacher salaries to lag those in the general labor market.”**

Courageous Strategies

The Bahamas Department of Education (the “DOE”) is not starting from scratch. It does have good teachers; and it has a student testing and evaluation system with decades of experience.

The DOE must put that the data system on steroids. Changes have to be made so that it will track student achievement year by year and appropriately relate student performance to specific teachers. Then the results must have consequences for both.

The DOE should follow the good Doctor’s advice.

Background & Templates

Teacher:

Give me "SLANT"!

Kippsters:

Sit up straight!

Look and listen!

Ask questions!

Nod your head!

Track the teacher!

A Kipp Chant and Rule

Background

Formal work on "Education Reform" in the private sector began in mid-2004 at the initiative of J Barrie Farrington who formed the Coalition for Education Reform. Its objective was to promote a dialogue with the Department of Education to promote useful ideas...ideas that could be used by the Department of Education to help end the scourge of academic underachievement and illiteracy.

The Coalition submitted *Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource* to the Minister of Education in response to the Minister's formal request for "Ideas on Education in the Twenty-First Century", the theme of the Education Summit of July 2005. The Coalition followed-up with a second report two-years later.

These reports were prepared by Ralph J Massey who studied at "The Chicago School of Economics" of the University of Chicago where he was a Harry A. Millis Fellow in Industrial Relations. Subsequently, he had a 36-year business career with four Fortune 500 companies.

He was a founding member of the Nassau Institute and his Essay *The Learning Crisis* was published and widely distributed by the Institute in April 2009.

This publication and the public showing of the "Waiting for Superman" documentary are a continuation of an effort that began seven years ago.

Templates

There are two complementary proven "templates" that may be incorporated by any public education reform initiative.

The first is the Harlem Children's Zone that is the subject of the documentary "Waiting for Superman."

The second is the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) that started in a public school class room in Houston Texas in 1995. Sixteen years later it is a corporation that operates 122 schools in 20 states with 27,000 students.