

## Which Crisis in Education?<sup>1</sup>

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“Crisis” has been the galvanizing metaphor for discussing American education since the early 1980s. My colleague David Berliner got the nation’s attention briefly in 1995 when he argued that this “crisis” was manufactured<sup>2</sup>—a confection created to prop up a political agenda.

I want to argue today that there is a crisis in our education system. But “poor achievement” and “dropouts” is not its name. The crisis is not that our children are ignorant of trigonometry or can’t parse dependent clauses. Far more critical is that our children don’t know that McDonalds, and Phillip Morris, and Anheuser Busch are killing them—not intentionally, but incidentally as a side effect of hooking them on sugar and fats and nicotine and alcohol. But the real crisis is not even about what young people know or don’t know.

We were once not long ago told that the “crisis” was that Japan was eating our economic lunch. Now we are told that young men and women on the Asian subcontinent taught to speak like Nebraskans are taking all of our telemarketing jobs from us—that “outsourcing” is the new crisis that threatens America’s young people.

I submit that this is all baloney. The crisis in education has nothing to do with achievement, test scores, dropouts or any of the other stuff we are being told. Think back to the Presidential debates, still fresh in our memories, where the answer to every economic woe was to test the heck out of second graders. This is a pernicious and ridiculous type of thinking about education that is ruining the lives of children, corrupting the curriculum, and making the profession unbearably demeaning to most teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks delivered at the Fall Forum of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Women’s Studies Department, Arizona State University – West, *Crisis in Education: A Call to Action* on November 6, 2004 at Arizona State University-West.

<sup>2</sup> Berliner, D. C. & Biddle, B.J. (1995). *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

America's schools have never in their history housed such bright, intelligent and high achieving students and teachers. National Assessment of Educational Progress results have never flagged in the 40-year history of that uniquely believable index of student performance. And yet we have been told that our students are nearly the dumbest in the world when it comes to science and math. This is pure poppycock. Of all the nations tested in the international assessments of math and science, the U.S. students were on average at least a year younger than most nations at the time of testing (the "last year" of secondary school comes at different times in different nations), they were the only nation not taught in the metric system (the system used in the tests), and they were one of four nations which chose not to allow the use of calculators. And yet, when you compare Finland to Connecticut—at least a plausible comparison—the U. S. performs at the top of the world.

Let us stop talking about a crisis of academic failure—except that which is self-induced by irrelevant tests with idiotic standards.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the real crisis in American education, we have to go back 100 years—to 1905 and a German chemist by the name of Haber, whom no one now knows. Fritz Haber invented the process of taking nitrogen from the air and combining it with hydrogen to produce ammonia, which immediately became the cheap ready source of artificial fertilizers. This mundane discovery remade the world in the next five decades. Now one farmer by using cheap fertilizers could produce what ten farmers used to produce. Needing fewer farmers, the great rural to urban migration began in Europe and the U.S. Cities burgeoned; tall buildings grew, and suburbs sprawled. But the most important cultural change in all this was that in the first fifty years of the 20th century we shifted from being a "pro-natal" culture to an "anti-natal" culture. Whereas in the 1800s the birth of a child was seen as an economic asset—two more hands to help on the farm—by 1920,

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<sup>3</sup> Glass, G. V & Edholm, C. A. (2003). The AIMS Test and the Mathematics Actually Used by Arizona Employees. <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/EPRU/documents/EP1-0210-122-EPRU.html>

the majority of families considered the birth of a child to be an economic liability—another mouth to feed, teeth to straighten, and school clothes to buy until age 18.

When the “pill” was invented in 1950, we truly gained the wherewithal to limit family size. Societies have used many means of limiting population growth throughout history. When the population strained the food supply, infanticide and homosexuality were practiced to reduce the surface population. We are too enlightened to resort to the former, and our contemporary celebration of the latter is less a badge of our moral maturity—as some would have it—than it is a reflection of the deeply anti-natal value system of the rich industrialized nations.

In 1983, we were told that because of the failure of our schools, we were a Nation at Risk, and the rhetoric of “crisis” took hold of our conversation. Not coincidentally, in the 1980s demographers announced to the middle class descendants of white northern Europeans in America that their birth rate had finally dropped below replacement levels—population growth in America and the Biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply were being upheld by immigrants and poor ethnic minorities. It is at this point that the series of phenomena that some now label the “crisis” in education truly kicked in.

An aging, wealthy, property-owning white middle class in America no longer wishes to support public education. The policy inventions of the past 25 years are all of a stripe: privatize education, make those who send their children to school pay for it themselves...vouchers, charter schools, tuition tax credits. We have No Child Left Behind, and for those in danger of falling behind, there’s money to purchase tutoring from private businesses, owned by white middle class stock holders. And where we—the dominant class—can not cut our expenditures for education, we want to separate our children from the threats we imagine are posed by the children of the underclass. White-flight charter schools are celebrated for their “high standards.” And make no mistake, there are two charter schools systems in this state—one for the rich and one for the poor. Tuition tax credits are used to hold down private school tuition, until the glorious day when vouchers take over the entire cost.

There is a crisis today in American public education, and it is 100 years in the making. The powerful are no longer willing to pay for the education of “other people’s children.” And undeniably, those other people are recognizable by the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes, or the texture of their hair.

The crisis in our schools arises from the loss of the sense that we are all in this together. It is expressed in the growing sense that America is made up of “us”—the well-off—and “them”—the car-stealin’, drug dealin’, non-English speakin’ others. We have lost the belief that ultimately we will be judged by how we have taken care of the least among us.