

# AMERICA'S EDUCATION CRISIS:

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

BY LEON BOTSTEIN



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Since the mid-1970s there has been a great deal of public discussion about the declining quality of American education. The argument is pretty simple: Once upon a time the American school system worked, but something happened along the way. Conservatives argue that the decline began sometime in the 1960s and was the result of rebellion on American campuses and the triumph of a kind of softhearted liberalism that crept into the general culture, including the training of teachers. But whatever the cause, by the mid-1970s there was general agreement that something was quite wrong with the functioning of the American school system and the standards of American education. Today, after twelve years of nostalgia with respect to American education, one would hope that serious consideration will be given to change.

It doesn't make sense to argue that we should fix American education by recreating a past that never existed. Since at least the 1930s, American college educators have been complaining bitterly about the quality of American schooling, about the fact that kids coming out of high school really couldn't do college work. We should also keep in mind that the students they were complaining about were a more elite group than students today; it wasn't until the 1940s that 50% of the young people in America were graduating from high school.

Although people worry today about the decline in SAT scores, we should really be impressed by how little SAT scores have declined, given the growing percentage of the population that takes the test. I would argue that if one had anticipated the massive democratization of the school system that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, one would have predicted a much more radical decline in the scores. So it doesn't help to reenact an imaginary past; rather, one has to find the proper standards against which to judge the present.

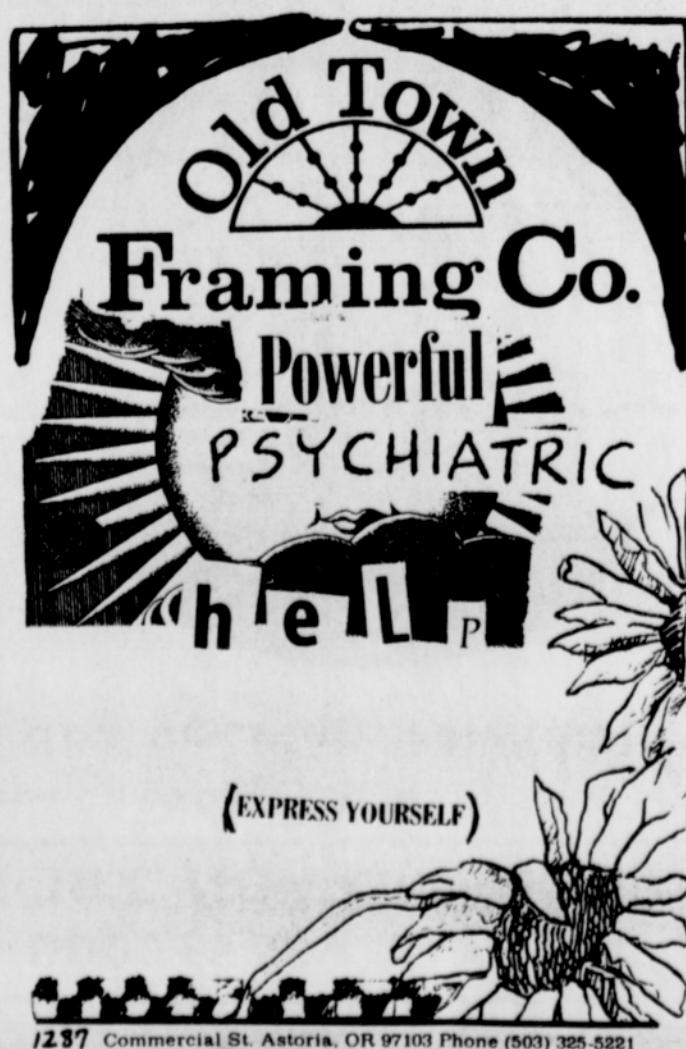
The circumstances in which education takes place have become very, very difficult. Whether kids go to Head Start or elementary school or to high school or to college, they are being educated in a context in which the adult community believes the future will be worse than the present. This may seem irrelevant, but it isn't. Diminishing expectations about the quality of life are inherently related to the ideas of progress upon which our educational system is based. For better or worse, my parents, and the world around me when I was a child, believed that the future would be better than the past. Nowadays every child picks up an inherent pessimism in the adult community: Once upon a time the city was clean, the subway cost a dime, there was no crime, everything was civilized, everything worked. Now it doesn't. And there is absolutely no expectation that it's going to get better.

It is impossible to educate in a climate of cultural pessimism, impossible to cultivate serious motivation. Education demands allegiance to the most archaic conception of time. We tell children that if they get through twelve years -- maybe more -- of school, they'll see the rewards some twenty years down the line. The amount of delayed gratification inherent in education made sense when the society thought in terms of generational time. But kids now grow up in a world in which people change their jobs every few years and their relationships every few months; they assess their success in the

workplace and in the economy by the day, if not by the minute. Children are left with no sense of permanence, and thus no understanding of why they should make a long-term investment in their own education.

The founders of this nation, Jefferson particularly, believed that education was a key to progress, that one could appeal to the rational faculties of people and create a better world rapidly through social improvement. Our belief in education reflected the hopefulness of America.

It is significant that this shared optimism should have begun to come apart just as access to American education became widespread. It was all right as a theory when most Americans never finished high school, but in the postwar period when Americans in large numbers had access not only to high school but to college, people began to worry about whether the system could work. The "education crisis" began. Though the symptoms of the "crisis" were usually expressed in terms of SAT scores and reading levels, elitist fears -- on the Left as well as the Right -- were in fact at its root. On the Right, the "decline of standards" was decried by those who were made uncomfortable by the prospect of the democratization of education. But such people could be found on the Left as well, where "politically correct" -- yet patronizing -- attacks on core curricula and "Eurocentrism" cloaked a perverse and equally corrosive form of elitism.



The real challenge America puts forward is whether one can reconcile equity and excellence, whether a society can have a truly democratic educational system and still educate its brightest children properly. But before we give up on this challenge, as the conservative administrations of the last twelve years essentially did, we've got to remember that we've never really had a democratic educational system. This experiment was not even possible until the late 1960s, when the racial, social, and economic obstacles to democratic education began to fall; as soon as the experiment began, as the difficulties of the project became apparent, people started abandoning ship, declaring its failure. The task has been grotesquely underestimated; the nation has never made the investment that democratic education required.

How do we go about changing the system? First of all, I would simplify the curriculum and focus on a few very basic things: a command of language, reading and writing, mathematical reasoning. Science and mathematics, as opposed to the humanities, should be at the center of the curriculum from the beginning. I take this radical position because what is taught in the humanities -- in reading and writing and history -- has become so politicized that science is the last common ground we have. It is also the easiest curiosity to sustain; every child wants to know how the world works. College is too late to develop a curiosity in science and mathematics; it can only be done early in life.

I would eliminate the American high school, because it is not fixable in its current design. High school is a 19th century structure that has run its course: it is no longer congruent with the rapid development and autonomy of adolescents, their physical maturation, and the independence that society now permits them. I would divide schooling into five or six years of elementary school and then middle school. At the end of what is now the sophomore year of high school, students would feed into the community college system, which works very well by comparison, doing what high school should be doing.

I think we also have to face the fact that we must make teaching a desirable profession. In order to do this, we have to raise teachers' salaries. But more importantly, we have to change the working conditions in our public schools. Why do good people go to private schools to teach, even though salaries are considerably lower than at public schools? Because in public schools the teaching profession is bureaucratized, teachers are not treated as professionals, there is enormous regulation, the conditions of work are horrendous, and there is no professional community. The administration and organization of schools need a radical overhaul.

Particularly now that the disenfranchised part of our population has some reasonable expectation of access to the educational system, our entire society depends on it more than ever before. We have to struggle with our own sense of pessimism as adults and create an environment that is much more about hope.

I want to close with this notion of hope. One of the ugliest changes in grammar that have taken place in the 20th century is the use of the word "hopefully." As you know, "hopefully" is an adverb and is properly used only to modify a verb. Nowadays, however, it is used in common parlance as a surrogate for the words "I shall hope." Why has that usage become acceptable to our ears? Because it fits absolutely with a cultural shift, a tendency to displace responsibility. Saying "Hopefully, the school system will be better" is very different from saying "I hope the school system will be better." Because if you say "I hope," the next question is, What are you going to do about it?

Our politicians have to understand that education is not just another special-interest budget item that adds to the national debt. Education is of primary importance. The Clinton administration has chosen instead to focus on healthcare reform. But the question we must ask is, Healthcare for what? Do I want to live longer and more healthfully in a totalitarian society where there is no free speech because no one thinks and therefore no one has a dissenting opinion? Where intolerance is so rampant that we take any dissenting opinion as a reason to hate the other person? Where language doesn't communicate anymore? Where there is no shared knowledge, no shared experience, no shared discourse, and therefore no democracy? I prefer to skip the immunization.

Education must be at the center of the future of America. The sooner this administration comes up with a serious national education policy, the better off we all will be. We must stop crushing our children with our own ill-earned pessimism. We must learn again to hope.

Leon Botstein is the president of Bard College and the music director of the American Symphony Orchestra. "America's Education Crisis" is from a lecture he gave in May at the 92nd Street Y, in New York City.