

**Remarks by Gerald Tirozzi
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Had Enough?

“I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it any more!”

In past presentations, I have used this infamous line, uttered by Peter Finch in the movie *Network*, to express the frustration, lack of engagement, and blatant disregard that has characterized the non-existent role of educators in school reform. The frustration and indignation confronting educators is further exacerbated by what seems to be a never ending negative onslaught by the business/corporate community, federal and state legislators, and the educational policy gurus – the latter group described by Peter Drucker, “We call them ‘gurus’ because most people cannot spell the word ‘charlatan’!”

Had Enough?

We alone are now blamed for the downturn in the economy, for not adequately preparing students for the work force, and for student achievement falling behind in international comparisons. In effect, there is a cacophony of displeasure with public education – a good portion of which is unwarranted, not always supported by factual data, and that largely avoids the real and complex world in which public schools function-- a world over which educators have little or no control.

Let’s Realistically Look at the Economy and the Impact on Public Education

Is it realistic to fault schools and educators when there is a downturn in the economy – or when the economic outlook looks bleak? Numerous reports from the business community, and exhortations from their corporate leaders, continue to lament that such declines can be laid at the doorsteps of public education. Policy gurus continue their drumbeat that the woes and ills of economic downturns are inextricably linked to poor achievement in public schools.

The irony is that these same corporate critics make little note of the catastrophic mortgage lending crisis, the greed of Wall Street, the significant credit card crunch, and the collapse of major financial institutions. These realities have resulted in billions of dollars in stock market losses and, according to the opinion of many economists, brought the national economy to the brink of recession. And yet, there is a deadening silence coming from corporate leadership, as some of these failing companies and financial institutions have shelled out millions of dollars collectively in compensation to their Chief Executive Officers.

As reported in the news recently:

“Twenty big financial firms that got caught on the wrong side of the credit card crunch suffered nearly \$500 billion in cumulative stock market losses last year. Yet these same firms still managed to shell out about \$215 million collectively in compensation to their CEO’s last year.” (*Arizona Republic*, May 25, 2008)

It is truly ironic that many of the same corporate critics, who promote pay for performance for educators, obviously cannot “practice what they preach.”

Have You Had Enough Yet?

A brief trip down memory lane provides a context within which to frame the discussion around the realistic impact of public education on the economy. In the now infamous 1983 report “Nation at Risk,” the word “mediocrity” became the descriptor for public schools. We were then warned that, unless there was dramatic improvement in student achievement, Japan and then Russia, because of their supposed superior educational systems, would leave us in the economic dust. In effect, to paraphrase, these countries would purportedly “eat our lunch.”

The reality is that, over the past 15 years, the economies of Japan and Russia have, in fact, plummeted. For Japan in particular, the 1990’s have been referred to as the “lost decade.” As educators, we need to remind our critics that during this same time period, the U.S. economy grew and flourished, and America’s productivity increased dramatically. Not surprisingly, the naysayers of public education offered no accolades when the graduates of the same schools that a Nation at Risk decried, were mastering modern technology. As educators, we need to remind the prophets of gloom and despair that not only did the Japanese and Russians not “eat our lunch,” in fact, they were lucky to have picked up our crumbs!

Again, down memory lane...

In 1990, the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce Report stressed that skill development in schools was the major policy lever shaping the economy. The analysis was that “flawed schools” had caused industrial productivity to “slow to a crawl.” The report emphasized that, “Without radical school reform, a condition of permanently low wages could become a reality for the bottom 70 percent of all Americans.”

As researchers Lawrence Mishel and Richard Rothstein have reported, this economic analysis was “spectacularly wrong” as events have proven. The researchers have provided the following reality check:

“Within a few years of the 1990 report’s publication, American’s ability to master technological change generated an extraordinary leap in productivity. This acceleration, exceeding that of other advanced countries, was accomplished by the very same work force that the Commission said imperiled our future.”

They further point out in the period of 2003-2007, while wages of both high school and college educated workers stagnated, productivity grew by an extraordinary 11.5 percent. The significant assertion here is that, while work force skills can spur productivity and growth, and are contributions to economic success and national wealth, such skills cannot determine how wealth is distributed among the nation's work force.

Let's now fast forward to the present...

The new debate focuses on international test score comparisons as representing the valid measures of a country's ability to compete in the global economy. In particular, we have become almost obsessed with concerns about China and India, two countries with rapid growth and which have experienced significant gains in technology. Again, the critics rush to judgment that the economic accomplishments of these countries – and other countries in the industrialized world – can be linked directly to international test score comparisons.

As researcher Iris Rotberg from George Washington University has cogently pointed out:

“The fact is that test score comparisons tell us little about the quality of education in any country. The fact that we can't interpret these test score comparisons has not deterred us from concluding that a country's international competitiveness can be predicted from its ranking on international tests.”

Please consider the following questions, about other countries, when assessing the sampling of international comparisons:

- Which schools and students are selected to participate, and after selection, which ones choose to participate?
- Which regions of the country are represented?
- Are vocational schools included?
- To what extent have children from low income families dropped out of school before the test was administered?
- Are children with disabilities tested?
- Are language minority children tested?

To summarize, the more selective the sample was, the higher the country's average. This sampling reality is brought into clear focus when one considers that in China, less than half of the upper-secondary age group is enrolled in school; while in India, less than one third is enrolled. These statistical realities are probably a main reason why these two countries do not participate in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) – in that the large proportion of children are no longer in school at age 15 (which is the age when the test is administered).

Dr. Rotberg also identifies another major problem in interpreting international comparisons: poverty. She cogently notes, "There is a myth that we can fix our schools without addressing the problems of poverty." She concludes, "We can't!"

She supports her contention by noting that a family's socioeconomic status is the most significant problem in all countries and accounts for about three quarters of the variance in student performance among schools in the United States. Of particular note is her research finding that the U.S. ranks high on two international competitions that we would prefer not to win:

- (1) We have one of the largest income and wealth gaps between rich and poor communities, when compared with other industrialized countries, and
- (2) Our system of school finance is also one of the most unfair.

Consider another important finding regarding the relationship between poverty and international comparisons "A country that has a relatively high level of child poverty, but also encourages low-income children to stay in school will be at a disadvantage in the test score comparisons." (Iris Rotberg)

I would quickly add that while the U.S. may be at such a disadvantage, due to our national committees to educate all children, we, as a nation, are advantaged by such a moral resolve. We, unlike the majority of the countries with whom we are compared, strive to insure that all children receive a high quality education.

Alas, our critics who are so fine tuned in their continued and caustic criticism of public education, are so silent and removed from addressing the concomitant causes of poverty which include: unemployment, housing, health care, child welfare, the unequal distribution of resources between rich and poor communities, and income inequality.

Had Enough Yet?

To make the arguments that we have had enough, I would offer several observations, which you may use to address the critics who want to hold public education hostage for our nation's economic condition:

- (1) Are more U.S. jobs going to other countries because of their educational systems – or rather because such countries (India and Mexico) have low wages, no workers' benefits, and no labor unions?
- (2) Do we truly believe that our problems in economic competitiveness will be solved, or even alleviated, if our students answer a few more questions correctly on international assessments?

- (3) Do we really believe that we can address the serious and complex economic issues of our time by having a myopic focus on school improvement alone?
- (4) Do we really believe that the trade deficits of the U.S. are related to what happens in our nation's classrooms?
- (5) Do we really believe that we, as educators, need to take our marching orders from the business/corporate community who themselves need to "clean up their own houses?" Consider the scandals of greed, excessive corporate buy-outs, and financial mismanagement, which have captured national headlines over the past several months.

May I suggest that, as you debate our critics on the supposed impact of education on the economy, you refer them to this week's edition of *Business Week* magazine, whose cover headline really sums up the problem best: "How Wall Street Ate the Economy" (July 28 2008)

The time has come for educators across the country to remind our critics that public education is not the prescription or "silver bullet" to the demanding challenges of globalization and the myriad and complex economic issues of our times.

In fact, we distract ourselves from the real agenda of addressing the myriad and complex economic issues by placing such a myopic focus on public schools.

Yes, we need to stand tall and issue a clarion call to our critics:
We've Had Enough!

I ask you to go back to your schools and tell your colleagues to, figuratively speaking, throw open their classrooms windows and tell our critics, "We're mad as hell, and we're not going to take it anymore!"

We've Had Enough!