

PRESERVING OUR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LITERACY

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Were Alexis de Tocqueville to make a return visit to this country, he wouldn't need to make extensive revisions to his 1835 commentary *Democracy in America*. Everything is still "in constant motion." Our voluntary and civic sectors remain expressions of "habits of the heart."

As a social philosopher, the young Frenchman recognized that Americans had developed a set of social mores that reflected enlightened self-interest. We hung together because, in the long run, that's how the barns were built. Basically, this same kind of self-interest became the primary reason for the development of the common school: citizens needed to be convinced that paying taxes to educate someone else's children would benefit society as a whole — and so would serve their own interests.

De Tocqueville also predicted that, if the rugged individualism of the American character were not tempered by civic responsibility, we would become a lesser democracy in the eyes of the world. Unfortunately, that decline may be playing out in policies and attitudes toward American education today.

The support for the privatization of education and for public financing through vouchers that can be used in private schools are obvious examples of the erosion of a communal interest in schooling. More subtle is some of the underlying opposition to the kind of accountability that seeks to educate all children well. Excuses easily overcome effort. People would

rather complain about bad assessment systems than learn how to improve them. Most important, if all of us, especially those with the power and influence to make public education more efficient, don't demand higher common standards, we will all end up living in a society with dwindling economic and political power.

The truth is that, when we look at the data on adult literacy — that most important aspect of a viable economy — the U.S. is, as a nation, mediocre compared to other high-wealth countries. Moreover, the United States exhibits the greatest inequality between those who perform highest in literacy and those who perform lowest. We spend more per capita on education than most high-wealth countries. We have the highest level of educational attainment. But our college graduates rank near the bottom in literacy scores. We should be angry about this record. And we should also be very worried about the future, when our population will be composed of even larger percentages of people whom the education system has failed

to make literate.

This information about literacy comes from two surveys — the National Adult Literacy Survey of the early 1990s and the International Adult Literacy Survey of the late 1990s. The Educational Testing Service analyzed the scores from these surveys on several dimensions, and its report, *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and*

inequality, fore shadows in some ways the kind of decline that de Tocqueville foresaw. We are losing concern for others and accepting a permanent low-skills underclass.

Let's consider the data only for young adults, aged 20 to 25, those closest to benefiting from the current education system. When compared to 14 high-wealth countries, our best performance in prose literacy is found among those with 16 or more years of education. Yet our mean score ranks us only eighth of 14 countries on the prose items. For those with less than 12 years of schooling, our highest rank is 13th; for those with a high school education (12 years), we were last on all three forms of literacy — prose, document, and quantitative.

Even our dropouts score lower than dropouts from other countries. Native-born high school dropouts in this country have a mean composite test score 18 points lower than the mean score of dropouts in other high-income countries. The scores of foreign-born adults pull the overall American averages down, but our immigrant adults also acquire our special literacy — or non-literacy — stamp. They do much worse — scoring 16 points lower — than immigrant adults from the other high-income countries.

Our adults at the very highest levels of literacy rank second, trailing only Sweden. Given the much lower ranking of our lowest-performing adults, we find ourselves the world leader, the ETS report points out, in literacy inequality among young adults,

with 60% to 90% more inequality in composite scores than such countries as Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

One might want to be hopeful and say that all of the reforms of the past decade are turning around the performance of young people in this country. However, the evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress tells just the opposite tale. The gap in reading between top and bottom performers on the NAEP tests increased between 1992 and 1998 at both the fourth and 12th grades.

The eroding advantage of the American education system — a decline that gets steeper the younger the age group — is made worse by the improving education systems in other countries. And the efforts of other nations will get more intense if the United Nations

obtains funding for its goal of universal primary education by 2015. Moreover, unless the literacy skills of native-born black and Hispanic youths and of immigrant youths improve substantially, our adults will fall even further behind on future international comparisons.

We have an education system that devotes a lot of money to those at the top of the literacy scale and rewards them further with better jobs and with greater investments in their later development. Our spending on higher education is far above the average for high-wealth countries, but we spend less than other high-wealth countries on adult basic education and job training for the less skilled.

More resources for the neediest schools might help, of course. But it is just as important to consider changing the incentive system, the ETS analysts suggest. For example,

policy makers ought to consider rewarding those students who show that they can work hard and improve their skills. One way to do so would be by funding their further education. For adults, additional literacy education ought to be handled by employers and encouraged through changes in the tax laws.

There is also a larger opportunity to do something on this score, and it is an opportunity shared by all Americans. It is to support, morally and financially, higher standards for all students and to demand accountability, even for schools on the "wrong side" of town. Taking such actions is definitely in our self-interest. It also would prove de Tocqueville right in his observation that Americans judge "the diffusion of knowledge to be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal."

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