

# Our Schools Must Do Better

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## Herbert's Heroes

I asked a high school kid walking along Commonwealth Avenue if he knew who the vice president of the United States was.

He thought for a moment and then said, “No.”

I told him to take a guess.

He thought for another moment, looked at me skeptically, and finally gave up. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know.”

The latest federal test results showed some improvement in public school math and reading scores, but there is no reason to celebrate these minuscule gains. We need so much more. A four-year college degree is now all but mandatory for building and sustaining a middle-class standard of living in the U.S.

Over the next 20 or 30 years, when today’s children are raising children of their own in an ever more technologically advanced and globalized society, the educational requirements will only grow more rigorous and unforgiving.

A one- or two-point gain in fourth grade test scores here or there is not meaningful in the face of that overarching 21st-century challenge.

What’s needed is a wholesale transformation of the public school system from the broken-down postwar model of the past 50 or 60 years. The U.S.

has not yet faced up to the fact that it needs a school system capable of fulfilling the educational needs of children growing up in an era that will be at least as different from the 20th century as the 20th was from the 19th.

“We’re not good at thinking about magnitudes,” said Thomas Kane, a professor of education and economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “We’ve got a bunch of little things that we think are moving in the right direction, but we haven’t stepped back and thought, ‘O.K., how big an improvement are we really talking about?’ ” Professor Kane and I were discussing what he believes are the two areas that have the greatest potential for radically improving the way children are taught in the U.S. Both are being neglected by the education establishment.

The first is teacher quality, a topic that gets talked about incessantly. It has been known for decades that some teachers have huge positive effects on student achievement, and that others do poorly. The positive effect of the highest performing teachers on underachieving students is startling.

What is counterintuitive, but well documented, is that paper qualifications, such as teacher certification, have very little to do with whatever it is that makes good teachers effective.

“Regrettably,” said Professor Kane, who has studied this issue extensively, “we’ve never taken that research fact seriously in our teacher policy. We’ve done just the opposite.”

Concerned about raising the quality of teachers, states and local school districts have consistently focused on the credentials, rather than the demonstrated effectiveness — or ineffectiveness — of teachers in the classroom.

New forms of identifying good teachers and weeding out poor ones — by carefully assessing their on-the-job performance — have to be established before any transformation of American schools can occur.

This can be done without turning the traditional system of teacher tenure on its head. Studies have clearly shown that the good teachers and the not-

so-good ones can usually be identified, if they are carefully observed in their first two or three years on the job — in other words, before tenure is granted.

Developing such a system would be difficult. But it's both doable and essential. Getting serious about teacher quality as opposed to harping on tiny variations in test scores would be like moving from a jalopy to a jet.

The second area to be mined for potentially transformative effects is the wide and varied field of alternative school models. We should be rigorously studying those schools that appear to be having the biggest positive effects on student achievement. Are the effects real? If so, what accounts for them?

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), to cite one example, is a charter school network that has consistently gotten extraordinary academic results from low-income students. It has worked in cities big and small, and in rural areas. Like other successful models, it has adopted a longer school day and places great demands on its teachers and students.

Said Professor Kane: “These alternative models that involve the longer school day and a much more dramatic intervention for kids are promising. If that's what it takes, then we need to know that, and sooner rather than later.”

If American kids — all American kids, not just the children of the elite — are to have a fair chance at a rewarding life over the next several decades, we've got to give them a school system adequate to the times. They need something better than a post-World War II system in a post-9/11 world.