

# Education

By Douglas J Blatt

August 7, 2009

Almost every politician says he or she is “the Education candidate”. Some even have plans and ideas about what they would like to do to reform the educational system in the United States. I guess I am no different in that respect. I do have plans and I think that education is probably the single most important issue. With a proper education we can compete globally...and win.

My grandmother was an elementary school teacher. She taught sixth grade at the school we attended in Eaton Rapids, Michigan. She retired the year before I entered sixth grade, so I never had the pleasure of having her for a teacher. My parents are strong supporters of our education, taking interest in our assignments and making sure we did our homework before watching television. They attended all of the school functions and parent-teacher conferences. The same cannot be said about many of my classmates. While most of my friends had similar parental encouragement, there were some that didn't really have the same kind of support at home.

Neither of my parents graduated from college. My father had a successful career and probably was the last generation to be able to do so without the expectation of having at least a bachelor's degree. My mother was a successful household engineer and chief household administrator. Only about half of my friends had stay-at-home moms; the rest had 2 working parents. Again, they were probably about the last generation to be able to expect such a lifestyle.

I did not graduate from college with a four-year degree right after high school. I graduated with an associate's degree from the local community college and went to work. It wasn't until many years later, at the thought of not being able to stay employed, that I continued my education and completed the other half of my bachelor's degree. It really wasn't until online education became readily available

# Education

and somewhat acceptable to employers that I could find the time and money to finish. I had tried going to a class here and there a couple of times, but it wasn't very easy with my work schedule. After finishing my bachelor's degree I decided to continue on to complete a master's degree as well. I needed to have that extra edge to compete. I still have plans to continue my education with a doctorate of some sort.

Enough about me; let me explain my ideas. The ideal educational system would be free for everyone to continue all the way through graduate school. Ireland offers such a free education to their citizens. That has helped them get quite a few high tech jobs relocated to their country. The problem is that we do not have the collective will to pay for such an endeavor.

I believe that we should make it easier for students that have the desire to continue their education have the opportunity to complete a college education. Not everyone is cut out to get a college degree, but everyone should have the opportunity. We will always need people with technical certificates and people with high school diplomas. Not every job out there requires a degree.

With that said, however, I do believe that everyone needs a high school diploma. We allow our students to quit school at the age of 16. This is outrageous, and far too many kids take advantage of this. Anywhere from 33-50% of our students do not graduate, depending on their location and their ethnicity. We should change the dropout age to 18. If they are quitting to work and support themselves or a family, then we need to figure out a way to keep them in school. If that means offering and/or requiring night school, then so be it. Now days, we could offer them an opportunity to finish their high school diploma with online classes, allowing them to attend while they are gainfully employed.

We should require more than just what is test for on the standardized "no child left behind" tests. A foreign language requirement, most likely in Spanish, French, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, or Arabic would probably be a good thing. A better financial education should also be required. Students

# Education

should be able to leave school and know how to work out the details of a loan, balance a checkbook, and know enough about financial terminology to invest in a 401K or IRA. Critical thinking skills should be added to the K-12 curriculum. The ability to pick apart an article or argument to understand whether the author is trying to use emotional triggers or baseless points would allow them to function better in society and become better citizens.

Those standardized test scores need to be viewed from the aspect of how we can improve that single student's scores and not just how well their school is doing. If a student isn't doing well in math or reading, he or she should get help in improving those scores, regardless of whether the majority of their classmates did well on the same test or not. Stop punishing the school and start encouraging the children.

We have schools that are laying off teachers in one district, county, or state while there are shortages in another. Since all of our educational systems are based on the local school district, we have discrepancies from one school or school system and another. To me, this means that teachers should be employed by the US Department of Education. They should also be paid using nationally standardized pay scales. They should not be forced to move when they are being laid off and there are openings elsewhere, but they should be given the opportunity to relocate and not lose their years of service towards retirement.

This leads me to how the US Department of Education has too little power. They should be the department that sets minimum national standards and enforces them. They should be able to direct school systems to emphasize schools concentrate on weak areas and encourage education in areas where we have shortages of people. The Department of Education should be able to set up a teacher academy similar to the military academies, with students being able to go to school to be a teacher for

# Education

free, with a 5 year commitment in return. We could encourage students to study and teach in subjects that have shortages.

Many people may take issue with having the federal government taking over the education system, but to me it is an efficiency or cost effectiveness issue. While have 51 departments of education; one federal with little-to-no real power and one in each state? Why not combine the administrations into a single department and enjoy the benefits of economies of scale. Yes, there are many that don't believe the government, especially the federal government, can run anything. I quite often hear about the \$600 hammer; but that was proven a myth over a decade ago. Just look up the article Government Executive.com ([www.govexec.com](http://www.govexec.com)) and you will learn how this whole thing came out of an accounting practice that had to split up engineering costs equally among every piece of equipment on a purchase order. Anyway, we need to start thinking about how we can spend our tax dollars more wisely so that we can concentrate our resources on the things we need to instead of the administrative costs surrounding them.

It is absolutely shameful that the richest country in the world has a high school dropout rate between 33 and 50%, depending on the race and location of the student. Our dropout rate should be zero for all races. Our literacy rate is also quite low in comparison to the ideal 100%. No wonder there are so many people stuck in the cycle of poverty. If mom and dad can't read, who is going to make sure their children can? If the children grow up with a poor education, their children are more likely to do so as well. When a low income student is given the opportunity to continue his or her education, there is a good chance that his or her children will also go to college. It really is that simple of an equation.

**Student + Educational Opportunity + Encouragement = Success.**

# Education

Our adult citizens need education too. From those people that dropped out of school to those that have lost their jobs and need more up-to-date training or retraining in a different field, we cannot leave anyone behind. We have all seen the large numbers of jobs that have left our shores. From lower skilled manufacturing jobs to higher skills manufacturing and technical jobs, we have a serious problem. Without good paying jobs, men and women have a difficult time paying the bills, let alone expect to live the American dream. Many of those jobs lost during this latest economic recession will never return. The longer people are out of work, the more they fall behind in keeping up with the latest technologies necessary to compete in this global job market. Other countries saw that there was going to be shortages of technically skilled workers and started beefing up their technical trade schools, colleges and universities. Unless we do the same, we will lose our economic advantage.

**Let us stop blaming each other, stop playing politics, and start educating our citizens.**