

A Needed Paradigm Shift in Education (Short form)

Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

This writing is an excerpt from a monograph I wrote back in 2010. (If you want to read it in its entirety, it's on this site below in the 2010 writings.) Even though this was written some time ago, I believe what's here is still relevant, particularly as it complements a new book published by Washington Summit Publishers, *Why School Reform Failed*, by Raymond Wolters. Another book this writing speaks to is the recently published "*The Prize: Who is in Charge of America's Schools*" by Dale Russakoff (Houghton Mifflin, 2015), which reports the failure of a massive effort to turn around the underperforming Newark schools supported by a hundred million dollar gift from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. The argument I make in the monograph and this excerpt, let's call it an essay, is that these kinds of efforts are destined to fail because they operate from the wrong fundamental perspective, or the word I employ, paradigm.

According to Russakoff's book, Zuckerman thinks he's learned his lessons from Newark and has put more millions into reforming the Bay Area schools out in California, only this time it's going to go better. What Zuckerman and his comrades don't get, I contend, is that what they are doing in the Bay Area is in fact the same old, same old, and thus the results—after an early tease that, yes, this is working, that's always part of these kinds of undertakings—will be what they've always been: academic achievement is as bad if not worse than before (which is interpreted as meaning that the schools are still bad).

If what's gone on in the past is any indication, the failure to achieve significant improvements in the Bay Area won't lead to fundamental changes in the way the school reformers with money and clout operate. They'll affirm to

each other (they don't talk to anybody that doesn't think as they do) that they are on the right track: learning will be better when schools and teachers are better. It's just that they haven't implemented their dead-on insight well enough. They only need to tweak what they've been doing and presto chango. They are like flies that decide the reason they didn't get through the window they've been banging up against is that they should have gone feet first. Yeah, that's the ticket, we'll go feet first and break right through that window. The reality is that the only way those flies are going to get through that window is if someone on the other side opens it. It's not what they do that counts; it's what someone else does. That is where this essay goes.

I wrote this as a professor of education. If it got any attention, I don't know about it. Anything that deviates from the conventional wisdom regarding schools is ignored. They don't debate you or even bother to refute the particulars of your argument; they make you invisible. Wolter's book illustrates this phenomenon in his discussion of the ideas of Robert Weissberg and a number of others. To the education establishment, Weissberg and his sort, and that includes me, are dismissed as anachronistic, misguided, and just possibly malevolent. Guaranteed, Wolter's and Russakov's books will not be the topic of conversation in colleges of education faculty lounges, and they will never, never, never appear on students' assigned reading lists.

So here it is, from 2010:

This paper is about making better sense of what is going on in American schools. It is directed at those in policy-making positions in the government, professional educators, and the lay public.

Two Buddhism-derived commitments will be helpful in this exploration. The first is a commitment to *right awareness*: being fully awake, present, alert, here, now, in

this moment. The second is a commitment to *right understanding*: seeing and perceiving things as they really are, rather than what you assume they are, or have been told they are, or wish they were, or think they ought to be; or in the way you believe you are obligated to perceive them; or in the way that makes you think more highly of yourself; or in the way that serves your own needs, wants, and interests.

Right awareness and understanding are about freedom of the mind. They are about setting aside doctrine and formula and conventional wisdom. They are about going beyond theories and slogans and numbers and other abstractions to concrete reality. They are about examining the world carefully, with new eyes, scrutinizing it, testing every idea and contention, and knowing rather than assuming and believing and hoping. They are about seeing, really seeing. They are about becoming fully alive. With schools--with many things in American life--we have not been fully alive. ¹

This writing makes a case for looking at schooling in America in a different way. My thesis is that a paradigm shift with reference to schooling would be helpful in doing that. By paradigm I mean--various ways to get at the same concept--a basic pattern of thought; a fundamental way to perceive reality; a prevailing perspective; a lens through which to understand reality; a conceptual, theoretical, explanatory model or structure that provides a frame of reference for discerning what is happening in the outside world or the inner, subjective world within the person. Even though we are not always articulately aware of our paradigms--we don't have words to describe them and give them explicit meaning--they exist as organic, physically felt, tacit, personal truths and outlooks that strongly influence, even determine, what we see, think, prefer, and do. By paradigm shift, I mean moving from

one paradigm to another and seeing what difference that makes. That's what I'll do here.

A supply/aggregate paradigm predominates in American schooling. I propose that it would profit us if we shifted to a demand/individual paradigm and see where that takes us. This writing will be an explanation of what I mean by this. I want to make it clear at the outset that a paradigm shift does not mean replacing one paradigm with another; in this case discarding what I am calling a supply/aggregate paradigm. To the contrary, the ideal is being able to bring multiple paradigms, or basic perspectives, to the consideration of any issue, and then using the one or ones that best empower us to discern what is going on and where to go and how to get there.

What is the prevailing supply/aggregate paradigm in education? It's a perspective we all know well. There is problem with American schools and teachers, particularly with regard to poor and minority students. Schools aren't doing the job nearly well enough. The school product we are offering the customers, the consumers--students, parents, the general public--isn't up to par. That is to say, the supply isn't good.

And how do we know the supply isn't good? Because the statistics are bad. SAT scores are down; Nation Assessment of Educational Progress numbers aren't what they should be (NAEP is a nationally representative assessment of what America's students know in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history); American students come off bad in tests of math and science compared to students in other countries; girls aren't enrolling in math and science courses in the same numbers as boys; performance on standardized tests is lower among low income students; and black and Hispanic performance lags behind that of white students.

These statistics are summary data--means (averages), medians (the middle score in an ordered list of all the scores), standard deviations (how loosely or tightly data are bunched together), and correlations (how one phenomenon, say race, is associated with another phenomenon, say achievement)--generalizations about groups of people, inferences. They are not descriptions of actual, flesh-and-blood, individual students. Rather, they are conclusions about collections or groups of students, or *aggregates*.

What to do about a supply problem as evidenced by aggregate data is obvious: *improve the supply*. Make schools and teachers better, and thereby improve the aggregate data. And, for a half century, that is what we have been doing, or trying to do.

One way to improve the supply is to get all schools--and increasingly "all" means every school in America--on the same page with their curriculum (what they are teaching, the content, the learning goals). This week at this writing (March, 2010), a *New York Times* article ("Panel Releases Proposal to Set U.S. Standards for Education," March 10) reports that a panel of educators has just released a proposed set of common academic standards for the nation's schools. The standards lay out what American public school students should learn in math and English, year by year, from kindergarten to high school graduation. They replace the "motley current checkerboard of locally written standards."

So too will getting rid of bad teachers improve the supply of education. *Newsweek* magazine's cover story this week (the March 6, 2010 issue) is entitled "Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers."

The relative decline of American education at the elementary and high school levels has long been a national embarrassment as well as a threat to the nation's future. Once upon a time, American students

tested better than any other students in the world. Now, ranked against European schoolchildren, America does about as well as Lithuania, behind at least 10 other nations. Within the United States, the achievement gap between white students and poor and minority students stubbornly persists--and as the population of disadvantaged students grows, overall scores continue to sag.

And who is a bad teacher? It's one whose students don't score well on the average (in the aggregate) in tests. The assumption is that the quality of supply equals the quality of results, i.e., student achievement; and therefore teachers, the suppliers, must be held accountable for the performance of their students. Jettison the ones whose students don't perform and that will improve education.

Note the national focus on these two examples--national academic standards, and looking at teaching from a national, American, perspective. Over time, a supply/aggregate paradigm tends to move things to higher, broader, more inclusive, farther reaching, less personal and intimate levels and strategies and practices. A national analysis and agenda will eventually characterize, or at least be a central element, in school reform efforts--or perhaps a state focus, or collection of states, or, less frequently, a local or community one, but not an individual one. In order to get the best leverage on the supply problem, this paradigm seems to imply, go the "big picture" route, and the bigger the picture, the better.

And this is what has happened since the 1960s. Examples: Academic standards identification efforts at both the state and national levels. School choice programs, either through vouchers or charter schools (charter schools are public schools that operate with relative independence). Schools-for-profit. The 2001 No Child Left Behind federal legislation requiring states to develop assessments in basic skills for all students in certain grades if those states are

to receive federal funding. At this writing there is the Race to the Top fund, a federal program that provides grants to state programs of school innovation and reform.

The basic approach in all these undertakings is for experts to set the goals or standards of success that schools, teachers, and students are to meet, with success in these regards defined in terms of standardized measures of group accomplishment and improvement, particularly that of black and Hispanic students relative to white students, and to a lesser extent, low income students relative to affluent students. Schools and teachers--not students, not their parents--are held accountable for bringing about academic success, and again, as measured by standardized tests. A major assumption giving impetus to this overall approach is that competition among schools will be a strong incentive for lackluster schools to get off the mark, that is, to improve their product, their supply: test results in the various schools will be made public for comparison; the possibility of students leaving an underperforming school for another; and, worst case scenario, schools that don't produce results will be shut down.

The approach just outlined would seem to make a lot of sense, particularly if you assume the problem with education is that schools--and the referent is public, or government, schools--are offering their clients a bad product (as evidenced by the fact that X percentage of high school graduates can't do basic math, and the like). The problem, however, is that when you move from rhetoric and good intentions to reality, things fall apart. For instance, Diane Ravitch, a highly respected figure in American education, in a recent *Los Angeles Times* op-ed piece ("The Big Idea--It's Bad Educational Policy," March 14, 2010), asserts:

Today, there is empirical evidence, and it shows clearly that choice, competition and accountability as

educational reform levers are not working. But with a confidence bordering on recklessness, the Obama administration is plunging ahead, pushing an aggressive program of school reform--codified in its signature Race to the Top program--that relies on the power of incentives and competition. This approach may well make schools worse, not better. . . . On federal tests, known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, from 2003 to 2009, charters [charter schools] have never outperformed public schools. Nor have black and Latino students in charter schools performed better than their counterparts in public schools.

While Ravitch focuses on school choice in her remarks, her conclusion squares with my own regarding school reform across the board. Whatever the strategy, when you get beyond talk to actual results, it comes up short.

And that includes teaching approaches: I'm a professor of education, and time after time, year after year, decade after decade, in my work I have gotten the word that this latest get-it-done instructional strategy will save the day, turn disinterested, lackluster students into go-getters: there's been constructivism, developmental responsiveness, multiple intelligence-based instruction, projects, portfolios, rubric-based learning, and so on, and so on, and so on. But beyond making teachers and teacher educators feel good about themselves, you couldn't prove it by me that any of them has made a positive difference in what students get done in their schoolwork.

There is the class size explanation of what's wrong (a supply answer). Classes are simply too big, that's the problem. Students can't learn in these big classes. We have to get the teacher-student ratios down. That argument has a lot of surface appeal, and how great it would be if it were in fact valid; we could just get the class sizes down and the problem would be solved, or a big part of it. Here again, though, reality rears its ugly

head. I've not seen any empirical research that links class size and academic achievement when you are dealing with realistic numbers. Yes, two students is better than forty, but you have a very tough time demonstrating that it makes a difference whether there are fifteen or twenty-five in a class. The only thing I'm sure about with the class-size take on the school (supply) problem is that it results in more jobs for teachers and lower savings account balances for taxpayers; so at least it is good for some adults (the jobs part).

And then there's the knowing look I get all the time in my work accompanied by the pronouncement, "It's all about money." The schools are underfunded, that's the (supply) problem. Support the kids; give us your money. Americans, good souls that they are, have gotten that message--and really, that pitch--and have been willing to give more and more of their earnings to the schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2009), in inflation-adjusted dollars, since 1960 American elementary and secondary per-student cost has quadrupled. One would be hard-pressed to make the case that schools now are four times better, or two times, or even as good as before.

A variant of the generally-underfunded-schools argument is that it's urban areas serving large numbers of poor and minority students that are underfunded (because we don't care about these kids, whites have taken flight from their obligations in the cities, we're all selfish capitalists, or whites are out-and-out racists). Jonathan Kozol, a best-selling author and regular on the lecture circuit has milked this scold for years, depicting himself as a saint among sinners in the process.²

If you get beyond the finger pointing and self-puffery, however, you will notice that Kozol and others of his sort depend on anecdotes and the very shifty use of statistics to support their sermons.

Some actual numbers: In 2007, the average per pupil cost in the United States was around \$10,000 a year. New York City was reported at \$13,755. Utah, in contrast, was \$5,275. ("The Highest Per Pupil Spending in the U.S.," New York Times, May 24, 2007.) Trust me, by every measure, Utah students outperform New York City students.

In this last paragraph I noted that New York City was "reported to be" \$13,755, because the question of whether big cities have been on the up-and-up in their reporting has come to light. The Washington, D.C. schools, for example, whose students perform at the bottom of standardized measures, reports a \$17,500 per-student expenditure. About six months ago, I divided the budget of the D.C. schools by the number of students and came up with, I can't remember the exact figure, somewhere in the mid-20 thousands. I assumed I had to be off in my calculations, or missing the point somehow, and let it go. But perhaps I was on to something. Writing this, I came upon a *Washington Post* article that says there has been some slippery bookkeeping going on and that the real per-pupil expenditure in the D.C. schools is a whopping \$24,600. ("The Real Cost of Public Schools," April 6, 2008). A March, 2010 report of Cato Institute, a policy analysis center, declared that the average per-pupil spending in the nation's five largest metropolitan areas and the District of Columbia is 44 percent higher than reported.³ New York City is actually nearly \$27,000 (Phoenix is around \$12,000). Los Angeles is \$25,208 (compared to \$20,751 in nearby high-income Beverly Hills). The big-city expenditures are 93% (!) greater than the estimated median for private schools.

I remember some years ago, a court order directed that a vastly greater amount of money be given over to the largely-minority Kansas City schools. Money was poured into the Kansas City schools--new textbooks, lab facilities, swimming pools, and so on. The academic

results: no improvement in academic achievement. Nobody spends more than New York City and Washington D.C. and Kansas City and nobody spends less than South Dakota and Utah, and guess whose students do better on the tests. Speaking of Buddhist awareness and right understanding, start to think about why that is, really.

I think about a 50 million dollar grant from the Annenberg Foundation during the Clinton years to improve teachers (supply), especially in urban areas. So well intended, so convincingly argued, but the last I heard, nothing much if anything has come out of it in terms of student learning.

Over and over the pattern: no significant improvement in student achievement; Ravitch's assertions about charter schools writ large.

Which is not to say that nobody gets anything out of these sorts of efforts. While it doesn't serve schoolchildren and their parents very well, particularly those who have it tough in America, the supply/aggregate paradigm serves some people very well:

- Politicians and bureaucrats come out ahead because it puts them center stage where they like to be, and feel the need to be. All this action underscores the importance of what they do for a living. Politicians, and the government bureaucrats that do their day-to-day business, take the money they extract from people (taxes) and give it to other people to spend; and they devise and enforce rules and regulations that tell other people what they have to do. An improve-the-supply orientation props all that up. It wouldn't look good if these people were just standing on the side while people went about their lives without them. Plus that would be ego deflating. Where does that leave me?--me, me, *me!* Coming at things this way, the politicians and their backstage helpers don't have to spend much if any time in classrooms beyond photo-ops, or even know much at all about education other than basically

what's in the wind, and they can pick that up on the fly and still take long weekends off. They can play expert by glancing quickly at data that lumps students together and pontificating conventional wisdom ("Our schools are failing," "Everybody must learn basic reading and math," "All students must master the traditional academic subjects," and so on).

- Black and Hispanic interest groups and their leadership come out ahead. Their incomes and status depend on getting people to view their kind in collective terms and as victims and dependent on others' largesse, and on attracting attention and resources to themselves. You can't understand the school improvement thrusts in recent decades--including vouchers, charter schools, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top without factoring in the interest groups. No Child Left Behind isn't really about the kids in Richford, Vermont, the state where I live. It is about the Hispanic kids in Houston and placating the Hispanic lobby and attracting Hispanic votes in upcoming elections. That is not to say that is all it is, but don't miss this part of it.

- The public school establishment--unions, teachers, school administrators, teacher training professionals, publishers of educational materials, state departments of education--like a supply/aggregate paradigm because they are the suppliers and they tally the aggregate numbers, and it underscores that they are the frontline action and need still more attention and money. Even when they are criticized--when schools and teachers are depicted as not being up to it--they don't get offended, because it's not them that it is being criticized. The bad schools and teachers are those people over there, not them. They have foolproof new ideas, and as soon as they get the necessary resources they'll fix the problems with those other guys. Schools may be criticized, but never the process of schooling itself, so their livelihoods aren't threatened. In fact, most supply-

paradigm proposals call for them to do even more of what they do--longer school days and academic years, more programs, etc. Somebody else in their industry, the school business, might lose a job, though probably not, but in any case it won't be them.

- Journalists of the sort that wrote the "fire the bad teachers" cover story for *Newsweek* come out ahead too. They get to be on the side of the angels--in favor of good schools, on the side of poor and minority kids, against bad teachers (that's pretty safe)--and they get to articulate conventional wisdom (it's those bad teachers!), which takes no heavy lifting, and pass it off as cutting edge insight, and they stay clear of grief (bad teachers aren't organized, and if they show up to the dinner parties you attend they aren't going to be vocal about you calling for their heads). Mainstream television and print journalists make a living being safe to their audience, and so you if you know what will be a safe play at any point time, about schooling or anything else, you can expect *Newsweek* and *NBC* to do just that in a big way.

- The general public comes out ahead because it gets to hear that the problem isn't them, and it isn't kids, bless them, it's those bad schools (which probably does not include the one down the street from them, so it's not as if they have to leap out of their easy chairs and spring into action). They feel good hearing that they are already onto the problem--schools are messed up--and they don't have to shift gears and think about things in different ways. The increased taxes they are hit with isn't all that big a price to pay to be in the know about education and to be on the team doing something about it without it tying up their day.

So the supply/aggregate paradigm gets some people ahead--at least as they experience it on the surface; at a deeper, fundamental, long-term level it may actually cost them, but

then again, most people aren't thoughtful enough to ground themselves in deep, fundamental, and long-term realities. In fact, if it didn't get some people ahead (as they perceive it, anyway), it wouldn't persist. People are self-interested creatures. They do whatever scratches their back even if they tell you what they are doing is scratching someone else's back.

The problem is that this paradigm, this orientation, when it predominates, does not result in children and their parents coming out ahead, or at least not enough of them, and particularly not those that occupy the lower tiers in American life. So without discarding this paradigm--that isn't the argument here--I'll turn the coin over, as it were, and look at things from the opposite angle. Instead of supply, I'll focus on demand—the thoughts and behaviors of the consumers, the users of the school system, students and parents and communities. And instead of aggregates, statistics, I'll shine the light on flesh-and-blood individual human beings. Even where I refer to people collectively, as groups, the perspective will remain one of perceiving all of them in the flesh, as it were, as real, live human beings, not as numbers, not as abstractions. The group is him and her and that person over there, and that other person and that other person . . . see them, imagine them. I'm calling this take on things a demand/individual paradigm.

If you look at schooling from a demand/individual paradigm, here are the kinds of things that become salient, visible, jump out at you:

My brother's two sons attended public schools in a largely Jewish suburb of Minneapolis. During a recent visit to my family in Minnesota, he noted how committed to education the Jewish families were in this community (a "demand paradigm" reference--about users, not providers; demand, not supply.) I responded with the bold guess that the schools

his sons attended were good ones. He said, yes, they were.

Of course they were. They were good schools, because an obvious truth about schools you might miss if you only look at what the schools are doing--at supply--is that *schools mirror their clientele*. Tell me about the people who attend that school and nothing else, and I'll tell you about the school.

I'm reminded of how after World War II the question was asked whether the veterans who were now getting government assistance to go to college--it was known as the GI Bill--were going to be able to be successful academically. Most certainly they were going to be successful, because--and I'm not contending that the school people would be fully aware of this--the universities would alter their operations and standards to accommodate them. That's what schools do: they keep their customers happy, and they do what they can to get the mass of them through the program.

So if you want to know why, for instance, there is the big press on using competence--not excellence, competence--in basic reading and math as the measure of success in America's schools, go beyond looking at the politicians and educators for the answer. Look at who is attending the schools. That is to say, look at things from the demand side. With anything--teaching methods, organized sports, whatever it is--your ability to predict what will go on in education will be greatly enhanced if you take stock of the clientele, the consumers of the educational product and their community and culture, and then deduce. Schools, and politicians and bureaucrats too, reflect the demand.

A corollary conclusion, insight: schools will change when the demand changes. Until the educational consumers in a school make it clear that they want better academic product, and more, are willing and able to work with the

school personnel to take advantage of it, don't hold your breath waiting for that school to become more than a holding tank for most students. Sooner or later, whether they consciously want to or not, schools and teachers play to their audience. If the audience doesn't like the show it's getting, it had better come to grips with how much it is creating the show. School and teacher accountability sounds good, but it runs up against reality: more than anybody, the ones accountable, truly responsible, for what goes on in schools are students and their parents. What is, is, like it or not; and that is what is.

Coming at things from a supply/aggregate paradigm, there is the propensity to lump students together and treat them alike, when, if you actually look at them, they aren't alike. "All students will meet these standards in these subject areas." "All students will achieve competence in these skills." "White and black levels of achievement will be the same." "Girls will focus on math and science to the same extent as boys." And so on. And when that doesn't happen, rather than question basic premises or look at things from a different vantage point, the conclusion is that we haven't done enough of what we've been doing. So, more legislation! More standardization! More centralization! More controls! Better schools! Better teachers! And most of all, more money--money, money, *money*! Give us your money!!

When you look at schools from the demand and individual perspective, when you look at flesh and blood students rather than labels and numbers, it is abundantly clear that students differ greatly in every way imaginable: in capability, interests, goals, commitments, character, school-going skills, and accomplishment.

And not only do students differ individually, *groups of students* differ. The *raison d'etre* of the fields of anthropology and sociology is that groups of people differ

from one another; they aren't all alike. There is such a thing as culture, shared values and ways, and all cultures aren't alike. All groups don't go at life the same way. That should be obvious, but in our time it isn't--or better, it can't be, because we have been convinced and cowed into looking at words, concepts, slogans, pitches, and abstractions, instead of reality. A hard reality is that you can't get a better predictor of good schools than where blacks and Hispanics in critical mass (30%) aren't. The question is why that is the case. And the reason that is is whatever it is. It is not whatever we think it is, or hope it is, or stay out of trouble by believing or saying it is. If it is in some part due to culture, that's what is, and if it has nothing to do with culture, that's what is. What is, is. And it doesn't take a Buddhist to know that. Aristotle pointed out that fact of life. He called it the Law of Identity. Something is what it actually is and not anything else. In order to solve any problem, or decide on any goal or plan of action, you need to ground yourself in reality.

Students differ in native intelligence. I can't imagine anyone working with real life students for any length of time without concluding, at least deep within them even if it is repressed for whatever reason, that some students are smarter than others, and that that matters greatly for what they accomplish academically.

There are more than a few psychometricians, professionals in the area of educational and psychological measurement, who contend that general intelligence (g) exists, and that IQ can be measured, and that test bias doesn't account for the observed differences. And more, they offer, not just individuals, groups too differ on the average.⁴ It might be noted that they are courageous souls, because saying there are genetically based differences in cognitive capability is sticking your head out of a foxhole. You are going to get your head shot off, smeared

as a racist and bigot, and the facts of the matter have nothing to do with it, it's political, ideological, and religious in a way (egalitarianism is a kind of secular faith that calls up zealotry in people akin to what went on in the Crusades).

Arthur R. Jensen, professor emeritus of educational psychology [he has since died] at the University of California at Berkeley, holds that IQ is highly genetic, that race is a biological reality rather than a social construct, that genetic more than cultural differences cause the 15-point IQ difference between blacks and whites (blacks lower) in the U.S., and that the failures of compensatory education for disadvantaged children need to include genetic explanations.⁵ The 15 point lower average black IQ score represents a one standard deviation difference from whites' average (a standard deviation above and below the average cuts off the 84th and 16th percentiles in a normal distribution of people).⁶ That means that the black average is at the 16th percentile of the white population, and that 84 percent of whites score higher than the average black. Even if this is a true difference, however, and a meaningful one, with over 30 million blacks total, in the top of the five classifications of intelligence there are over 100,000 blacks, a very large number. At the same time, to assume that equal across-the-board educational results can be attained with blacks and whites if they are not in fact equally capable cognitively is highly problematic. And trashing and silencing anybody who points that out doesn't make it any less so. Whatever is expedient in the short run, in the long run it is better to live in alignment with reality.

The only way to get equal results among unequal people is to get the standard low enough that everybody can match up to it. For example, if it is assumed that everyone is equally capable of dunking a basketball when that really

isn't true, and it is presumed that the reason that everybody isn't dunking a basketball is that the coaching has been bad, sooner or later the basket is going to be six feet instead of ten feet. Or back to schools, the measure of a good school and a good education will become demonstrating minimal competence with basic reading and writing and math.

Indeed, the language of educational discourse is changing. I have in front of me an article published in a leading educational journal by a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute and a former White House advisor to President Clinton on the federal role in education.⁷ I am taken by the language, the mindset, in this article. No talk of excellence, exemplary achievement, outstanding accomplishments; nothing of that sort. Instead it is all about students being "proficient," "adequate," "equal," and when they aren't it is because schools are "low performing."

I'm imagining a high school basketball coach calling his players together at the beginning of the season and saying, "Boys, this year we are going to be . . . proficient! adequate! And you young men are going to be . . . equal to one another! I've got standards for playing basketball on this sheet of paper that every one of you are going to meet! Now let's get to it!!" And his charges leap up from the bench where they have been seated and burst past the coach and onto to the court in fevered pursuit of adequacy and equality. The point, what may make sense politically can make little or no sense in human, psychological, motivational terms. A few days ago, in reference to No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, a parent commented to me, "Americans are a great people. That stuff is education for menials, not a great people." But his voice is unheard amid the chatter of the politicians, lobbyists, and the educational establishment

(schooling is about what we think and what we do--us, us, us! . . . *look at us!!*).

Staying with the sport comparison, it could be assumed that blacks and whites are equally interested in playing basketball well and are equally equipped with basketball-playing skills. Therefore the NBA should reflect the racial composition of the United States and since there are six times as many whites as blacks in the population, there must be six times as many whites as blacks in the NBA, and pour money and resources into that problem until it is fixed. Of course, that would be absurd, and the NBA doesn't do things this way. It doesn't give over any time worrying about whether blacks as a group, due to culture, physiology, or whatever else, are better or worse than whites at playing basketball. They simply give every individual white and black person an equal opportunity to play the game and win a spot on the roster and however the group numbers fall out, so be it. For certain, they aren't going to lower the basket to seven feet, or have discriminatory practices against blacks, call it affirmative action or diversity, or condemn the coaches as racists because the New York Knicks are all black. And really, that is the American thing to do. America is, or should be, the land of opportunity, not the land of equal results provided by others.

Schools could do the same kind of thing. Whatever the group differences among blacks and whites in intelligence--or motivation, whatever it might be--give every individual student a shot at a good education and let the outcome be as it may. The test of a school under this arrangement is not the results they achieve with students but rather the opportunity they provide them.

If I've learned anything in a long career in education it is that education isn't something you can do to somebody. Rather, it is something somebody goes out and gets. An

education is appropriated, not received. What a school and its teachers can do is provide a rich opportunity to students and support them as they move forward to take advantage of it. By that standard, I have never been in a bad school, including city schools that have been labeled, that term, "low performing." In every school I've been in, I've asked myself the question, "Could a student really intending on succeeding, and willing to work really hard, get a good, empowering education here?" And the answer has always been yes.

And more than that, some students were in fact succeeding in every school I've been in. The overall accomplishment, test scores, may have been low, but some students were flying. When you only attend to aggregate numbers--averages, medians, this group versus that group--you miss that reality. I think of an African American girl I worked with in an urban high school, Adrian Ford. Adrian came from a rough part of town and her young mother was raising Adrian on her own with very little money. Adrian wasn't the smartest student. But one thing jumped out about Adrian: she was committed to doing her very best in school. And her mother encouraged and supported her in that direction in every way she could. And Adrian succeeded in her schoolwork even though she was in a "bad school." That bad school was a good school for Adrian, and it was because of Adrian that it was a good school. The supply paradigm tacitly assumes that students are puppets on the strings of those who manage their academic lives. Adrian was what we all have the capacity to be: her own puppet master. Look at things from the personal, human perspective and that possibility becomes a salient and important reality.

Adrian sought me out to help her with her schoolwork. I was there working in the school as a consultant to the principal. I came away from my contact with Adrian thinking we would do well to put more time

into studying "success cases" like Adrian's to understand better why some individuals defy the statistics and make it in school and elsewhere. With thirty- and forty- and fifty-year-old men and women from difficult circumstances who are living happy and productive and honorable lives: how exactly did they do it? What were the influences in their lives? What capabilities did they hone? How did they think and act?

If I could know only one thing as the basis for predicting which ones among a group of children in a class would be successful, it would be which ones *intend* to be successful. An intention is more than a need for success or a hope for success. It is a pervasive, physically felt posture in the world that says, "I'm getting it done." We know from our own lives that when we get ourselves into that posture, when that becomes our stance in the world, with a new diet or exercise program, whatever it is, good things happen. And we knew we were going to make good things happen because we felt it inside, it permeated our being; it was who we were, no less than that. We can quit waiting around to win the lottery--in the schools that would be hoping to be assigned to a good teacher, getting lucky on a test, something of that sort. We can go to work with everything we have. We can learn to dream of good things, specific good things, and to make no-turning-back decisions to accomplish them, and we can learn how to put in massive and persistent effort in that direction, and we can learn how to be flexible (when something doesn't work we try something else), and to find and utilize support, and to praise ourselves for every step forward we make, no matter how small. A basic skill that all of us needs, at every point in our lives, is how to intend. But intending is something you do as an individual. It isn't a way of being that can be given to you by someone else, or done for you.

I came away from my contact with Adrian, and others like her, thinking that America should expect every student to demonstrate that they are doing their absolute best to learn before we declare the school and its teachers deficient. *Every single student should be held accountable for doing their best to learn.* And one more: *Every student should be held accountable for being kind to other students, and to teachers and the other school people.* No matter who you are, no matter what has gone on in your life, no matter how old you are, you have the capability, and the responsibility, to do your best and be kind.

When you look at students one at a time, the importance of parents jumps out. Adrian's mother expected Adrian to do her best in school, and made it clear that she and Adrian were a team and that when Adrian was in school she represented them both in everything she did there. Adrian's mother knew what Adrian was doing and celebrated every one of Adrian's academic successes, no matter how small.

Laurence Steinberg and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania studied nine high schools looking for what accounts for academic success. They didn't assume that the reasons were necessarily the "usual suspects" derived from what I'm calling the supply paradigm: curriculum; teaching; school leadership; class size; funding; standards and expectations; testing; and accountability. They found that the best predictor of academic achievement was . . . *parenting approach.* Steinberg and his co-researchers published their findings in a book, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do.*⁸ Even though the book was reviewed widely, it was ignored by the people in charge of making things happen in education. To the extent that Steinberg is taken seriously it pulls the rug from under the current movers

and shakers in education, who don't want to hear that it isn't all about them and they might be wrong.

Steinberg spends a lot of time in his book talking about Asian parents, whom he found to be particularly effective in promoting school success in their children. In one of my education classes at the university, I use a book written by two Korean-American sisters, one a medical doctor and the other an attorney, entitled *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers, and How You Can Too*.⁹ I find the book to offer some helpful wisdom and advice about how parents can promote academic success in their children. But this is another book ignored by the establishment. My students, in training to be teachers, have gotten the word in their teacher education courses that they, not someone else, are going to save their students, and smirk at the book. What do parents know, and anyway, Asians are drudges and nerds, plus the adolescent suicide rate is high in Japan (actually, it is lower than in the U.S. and has been for decades), case closed.

And then there are homeschool parents, with no teacher training and, on the average, spending \$500 a year per child, whose children outscore schooled students on every possible measure, including social adjustment. They are written off because parents and their unenlightened ways are what educators and social reformers are trying to save children from. These parents are doctrinaire and controlling (no evidence of that, and as if schools aren't) and these kids are social misfits (no evidence of that either, and if you want to see social misfits, spend a day at Wilson High). But again, reality, who needs it? I am fascinated with how beliefs trump reality. Plus, so it goes, a lot of these parents are Christians and are laying that outlook on their children, and the world doesn't need that. Research shows a connection between religiosity and academic achievement (the Utah kids getting results on no

money), but that doesn't fit the dogma, so we can pretend that isn't so. There is simply nothing to be learned from how these homeschooling parents go about their business, so it goes. The only challenge is to get these children and adolescents into the government schools where we can teach them how to think and live, because we know about both of those things and these presumptuous parents--who do they think they are?--don't.

If you get up close to students one by one, you realize that, indeed, one academic size doesn't fit everybody; all students don't need the same exact school program. If you perceive students as undifferentiated masses broken up into a few politically charged categories--whites versus minorities, poor versus rich, boys versus girls--you lose sight of that reality. With the supply/aggregate perspective, that paradigm, the tendency is to assume that the same educational goals and curriculum and teaching and learning arrangements will suit everybody, or at least everybody in a particular group. Academic study is a means for individual human beings to achieve an end: living well in the time they have on this earth. That involves attaining economic viability; being respected by others and respecting themselves; getting to the place where they can contribute productively and positively to their family and to society; and being happy and at peace. How to get to that end point--academically, personally, in all ways--is different for different people.

Looking at schooling from a demand/individual angle complicates in a healthy way the question of what kind of education best suits the vastly different human beings who attend school. It's not enough from afar to pronounce what everybody needs is minimal competence in reading and math or familiarity with traditional academic subjects or vocational training of a certain sort. Even if students do need those things, what *all* do they need in order to

live well and honorably? The answer to that question may well have as many answers as there are students. As much as you and I may be alike, we are still unique and have different paths to walk in life, and we have different learning challenges to confront--or at least we do if we seek to live our lives rather than go through somebody else's prescribed motions and are to avoid winding up at the end of our days with the sense that we've blown the chance we had to live as the person we really are. All to say, we need to look at education in a way that prompts us to view students as something other than interchangeable parts.

Yet another ignored book is the one written by Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, professors at Harvard and MIT, called *Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy*.¹⁰ The authors pose and answer a couple of key questions in fresh ways: What are the skills needed to earn a middle-class income? and, What are the principles around which a school can restructure to teach these skills? I won't go into what the skills are in this context; you can check out the book if you are interested. Murnane and Levy go beyond conventional wisdom and easy answers about what students need, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that's healthy, and we aren't doing that enough approaching educational issues as we are. What I find particularly helpful is that Murnane and Levy raise a fundamentally important question: What does it take to participate in today's, and tomorrow's, economy? If you can't find a way to work that accords you a decent income and that you respect and others respect, you have a big problem. We need to look at each student individually and see whether he or she need a particular approach or something else, and even more importantly, each student needs to look at themselves and make this

determination. The student, not the rest of us, is the one with something truly big at stake.

When you look at students as individuals, including from the most difficult social and personal circumstances, you find some who don't need to be prodded along by the school. They are committed to living a great life, and they are willing to study with all they have in them to become what it takes to achieve that great life. I'm certainly not saying there are many students like this--or adults for that matter--but they exist and they count, and they shouldn't be lumped in with everybody else. The pursuit of greatness involves the intention to live an exemplary and true life. Those with this intention seek to experience and manifest the finest, the best, the very highest quality, in every dimension of their existence: In physical health and bodily perfection and grace (I think of the closest possible approximation of a Greek statue or a great dancer). In self-understanding. In self-value and self-importance. In character: morality, ethics, courage, autonomy, integrity, responsibility, willfulness, dedication, persistence. In relationships—parents, siblings, friends, mates, children, racial and ethnic and religious kinsmen, humankind, animals and nature. In love and sexual expression. In art and literature and historical understanding. In grooming, fashion, and surroundings—home architecture and furnishings, work place decor. And in vocation. For these individuals, the various aspects of their being and lives reflect and give expression to their uniqueness, their singularity, at ever-increasing levels of development. All that they do and become occurs within the context of a deeply felt awareness of their mortality--death will come and eternity will begin, and all one has is the time between now and then. I wrote an essay for this site called "Autotelic Education: A Concept" in which I outlined an approach to schooling these kinds of students.¹¹

The focus in our time is so much on damage control with the least of students that the best of students, who also need support and encouragement, are essentially left to fend for themselves in arrangements that are not set up to accommodate, or even understand, people like them.

And then there is the concern that I've saved for last, and the one that matters most to me: human freedom. The human being, and that includes me, and you, has the right to direct his or her own life. America is grounded in liberty and in the inviolability of each and every unique human being. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I am appalled at the way individuals in our time feel mandated to direct other people's lives, whether it be politicians and government bureaucrats, think tank intellectuals, university academics, or classroom teachers. Human beings aren't lab animals for anybody, no matter how smart and well intentioned they presume themselves to be. What I do with my life, what I think, what I value, is my business, not somebody else's, and that holds true for everyone else. Let parents and children manage their own lives and live with the consequences of that; trust and respect them enough to allow them to do that. Back off on the mandates, compulsion, requirements, reports back to you, doling out money based on how much people kowtow to you, all of that. Give people their lives back.

Educator TheodoreSizer died this past year, a great loss to us all. Sizer wrote a book back in 1984--never understood, and now ignored as if it were never published--called oddly enough for an education book, *Horace's Compromise*.¹² I highly recommend the book to contemporary readers, along with his follow-up book, *Horace's Hope*.¹³ Unlike anyone else in education I can think of, Sizer wrote about human freedom. Perhaps that came from the fact that Sizer was an American historian

with a keen sense of our roots as a people and as a nation. From *Horace's Compromise*:

We have allowed the establishment of elaborate mechanisms of control, with the folks at the top providing carrots and sticks to manage those at the bottom.¹⁴

Most Americans don't want government telling them where their children will be schooled any more than they would tolerate government telling them where to live.¹⁵

Calculus or probability and statistics? Organic or inorganic chemistry? An outside reading by [radical historians] Howard Zinn or Oscar Handlin? Mandatory instruction in birth control? The Bible as literature as literature or as a holy book? Happily, few communities can achieve a consensus on these kinds of issues. American values vary too richly for that. Such being the case, what do schools do? The only sensible answer is for them to make choices available, to give students, teachers, and their families the opportunity to follow their preferences. . . . The alternative--a course of study mandated as the result of decisions reached through special interest politics and unrelieved majority rule--is both insensitive educationally (no one of us, including an adolescent, learns much from things that, forced upon us, we resent) and un-American (the tradition of minority rights is an important aspect of American liberty).¹⁶

The state has no right to insist I be "employable" on its terms of what a "career" might be. That is my private matter, and I take the risk that no one will purchase the services that I prepare myself to offer. The state has no right or obligation to tell me how to spend my leisure time. I can enrich myself and the state if I am cultured, but it is unreasonable of

the state to impose on me its own definition of culture. As long as my style of life and values do not impinge on those of others, I should have the sovereign right to be what I want to be, including a slob. Beyond expecting me to be sensitive and responsible to legal and constitutional principles that allow freedom, the state has no claim whatsoever on my beliefs or character. Beyond expecting rudimentary civility, the state has no subtle or not-so-subtle right to shape my personality.¹⁷

Sizer speaks for me. I greatly miss him.

I sincerely believe it would help if we tried looking at education in America from the perspective of what this country stands for and what it promises and what it expects of every one of its citizens, and from the perspective of individual, precious, mortal human beings--call that a paradigm shift. Not that I think we will do that, sorry to say, but I think we ought to.

Endnotes

1. A good primer on Buddhism is Steve Hagen, *Buddhism: Plain and Simple* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).
2. Kozel's latest screed: *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown, 2005).
3. Adam Schaeffer, "They Spend What? The Real Cost of Public Schools," *Policy Analysis*, The Cato Foundation, March 10, 2010.
4. A good place to start in looking into this is the famous--or is it infamous--chapter thirteen of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's book, *The Bell Curve*:

Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life (New York: Free Press, 1994) entitled "Ethnic Differences in Cognitive Ability," pp. 269-316. Also, see Richard Lynn, *Race Differences in Intelligence: An Evolutionary Analysis* (Augusta, GA: Washington Summit Publishers, 2006).

5. See, Frank Mielle, *Intelligence, Race, and Genetics: Conversations With Arthur R. Jensen* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008).

6. Hernstein and Murray, p. 278.

7. Andrew Rotherham, "A New Partnership," *Education Next*, Vol.2, No. 1, Spring 2002.

8. Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

9. Dr. Soo Kim Abboud and Jane Kim, *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers, and How You Can Too* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 2006).

10. Richard J. Murnane and Frank Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

11. Robert S. Griffin, "Autotelic Education: A Concept," web site writing, www.robertsgriffin.com.

12. TheodoreSizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

13. TheodoreSizer, *Horace's Hope: What Works in the American High School* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1997).

14. Sizer, *Horace's Hope*, p. 47.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

16. Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*, p. 64.

17. *Ibid.*, pp, 86, 87.

Robert S. Griffin is Professor Emeritus at the University of Vermont.