

Whither Goest American Education

By Peter H. Michael

Eighth Grade Examination for Bullitt County Schools, November, 1912

Spelling

Exaggerate, incentive, conscience, pennyweight, chandler, patient, potential, creature, participate, authentic, bequest, diminish, genuine, vintage, incident, monotony, hyphen, antecedent, autumn, hideous, relieve, conceive, control, symptom, rhinoceros, adjective, partial, musician, architect, exhaust, diagram, essayer, scissor, associate, success, benefit, masculine, synopsis, circulate, eccentric.

Reading

1. Reading and Writing. (Given by the teacher.)

Arithmetic

1. Write in words the following: 5764; 0.0603; 123416; 653.0968; 43.37. 10
2. Solve: $35.7 \text{ plus } 4, 5.8 \text{ plus } 5.14 - 5.9 \text{ times } 12$. 10
3. Find cost at 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ cents per sq. yd. of kalsomining the walls of a room 20 ft. long, 16 ft. wide and 9 ft. high, deducting 1 door 8 ft. by 4 ft. 6 in. and 2 windows 5 ft. by 3 ft. 6 in. each. 10
4. A man bought a farm for \$2400 and sold it for \$2700. What per cent did he gain? 10
5. A man sold a watch for \$180, and lost 16 $\frac{2}{3}$ %. What was the cost of the watch? 10
6. Find the amount of \$50.00 for 3 yrs., 3 mo. and 3 days, at 8 per cent. 10
7. A school enrolled 120 pupils and the number of boys was two thirds of the number of girls. How many of each sex were enrolled? 10
8. How long a rope is required to reach from the top of a building 40 ft. high, to the ground 30 ft. from the base of the building? 10
9. How many steps 2 ft. 4 in. each will a man take in walking 2 1-4 miles? 10
10. At \$1.42 a cord, what will be the cost of a pile of wood 24 ft. long, 4 ft. wide and 6 ft. 3 in. high? 10

Grammar

1. How many parts of speech are there? Define each. 20
2. Define proper noun; common noun. Name the properties of a noun. 10
3. What is a Personal Pronoun? Decline I. 10
4. What properties have verbs? 10
5. "William struck James." Change the Voice of the verb. 10
6. Adjectives have how many Degrees of Comparison? Compare good; wise; beautiful. 10
7. Diagram: "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver." 10
8. Tagge all the words in the following sentences: John ran over the bridge. Helen's parents love Mr. 20

Geography

1. Define longitude and latitude 10
2. Name and give boundaries of the five zones. 10
3. Tell what you know of the Gulf Stream. 10
4. Locate Erie Canal; what waters does it connect, and why is it important? 10
5. Locate the following countries which border each other: Turkey, Greece, Servia, Montenegro, Rumania. 10
6. Name and give the capitals of States touching the Ohio River 10
7. Locate these cities: Mobile, Quebec, Buenos Aires, Liverpool, Honolulu. 10
8. Name in the order of their size three largest States in the United States. 10
9. Locate the following mountains: Blue Ridge, Himalaya, Andes, Alps, Wasatch. 10
10. Through what waters would a vessel pass in going from England through the Suez Canal to Manila? 10

Physiology

1. How does the liver compare in size with other glands in the human body? Where is it located? What does it secrete. 10
2. Name the organs of circulation. 10
3. Describe the heart. 10
4. Compare arteries and veins as to function. Where is the blood carried to be purified? 10
5. Where is the chief nervous center of the body? 10
6. Define Cerebrum; Cerebellum. 10
7. What are the functions (or uses) of the spinal column? 10
8. Why should we study Physiology? 10
9. Give at least five rules to be observed in maintaining good health. 20

Civil Government

1. Define the following forms of government: Democracy, Limited Monarchy, Absolute Monarchy, Republic. Give examples of each. 10
2. To what four governments are students in school subjected? 10
3. Name five county officers, and the principal duties of each. 10
4. Name and define the three branches of the government of the United States. 10
5. Give three duties of the President. What is meant by the veto power? 10
6. Name three rights given Congress by the Constitution and two rights denied Congress. 10
7. In the election of a president and vice-president, how many electoral votes in each State allowed? 10
8. Give the eligibility of president, vice-president and Governor of Kentucky. 10
9. What is a copyright? Patent right? 10
10. Describe the manner in which the president and vice-president of the United States are elected. 10

History

1. Who first discovered the following places:—Florida, Pacific Ocean, Miss River, St. Lawrence River? 10
2. Sketch briefly Sir Walter Raleigh, Peter Stuyvesant. 10
3. By whom were the following settled: Ga., Md., Mass., R. I., Fla. 10
4. During what wars were the following battles fought:—Brandywine, Great Meadows, Landy's Lane, Antietam, Breena Vista. 10
5. Describe the battle of Quebec. 10
6. Give the cause of the war of 1812 and name an important battle fought during that war. 10
7. Name 2 presidents who have died in office; three who were assassinated. 10
8. Name the last battle of the Civil War; War of 1812; French and Indian War; and the commanders in each battle. 10
9. What president was impeached, and on what charge? 10
10. Who invented the following:—Magnetic Telegraph, Cotton Gin, Sewing Machine, Telephone, Phonograph. 10

William Foster,
Ed C Tyler,
J E. Murdiner,
P T Harner,
Ora L. Roby,
Bullitt County Board of Education,
Chas. G. Bridwell, Trustee Officer.

This article began as the reply to a close friend who asked the author's opinions on what might be driving the decline in United States academic standards and if similar slides are occurring in other countries.

It began with one of those Internet looky-here links that takes you to something surprising, in this case the final examination for eighth graders in Bullitt County, Kentucky. The exam looks far too advanced for middle-schoolers until one sees that this is what early teens had to pass when it was written in 1912. This seemingly tough test seems reveals in a glance that what students today are expected to learn is a good deal less than a century ago, a situation subject to endless studies but less common-sense consideration.

Why public education gives the appearance of having slipped is that students, families, teachers and society itself have changed, not altogether for the worse, and that public education remains grounded only in aging marvels.

Students aren't what they used to be but this is not entirely a bad thing. A century ago, the United States educated a far smaller proportion of its children but those who remained in school were usually the smartest, able enough to absorb the knowledge required to pass that 1912 eighth-grade exam and qualify for high school. When my grandfather and his brother graduated from high school in 1904, there were only ten boys in their entire county who did so that year. Today we send nearly all children on to high school with over ninety percent of them graduating, an all-time national high. So now it is not just the top few percentiles of children, the easiest to teach, who are being schooled, but the top nine deciles. The typical student is no longer somewhere around the ninety-fifth percentile or higher, plenty bright, but around the fiftieth, average in intelligence and teachability.

Schools must now teach to the average, what a modern wealthy democracy does and is the right thing to do. European countries and many former European colonies have long used a track system which channels students into either college preparation or trades at the end of middle school, a rigid system in which late bloomers and students channeled into trades have very little chance of going to college. The contrasting egalitarianism of United States education goes far in accounting for why American students test lower compared to other countries: we don't test just an upper stratum of college prep children who are bound to test well. Another advantage that American students have today is that, unlike most of the rest of the world, they are not learning merely by rote memorization, but also from being taught how to reason.

Like students, American families also aren't what they used to be, making for students who are, on the whole, harder to teach. Higher

divorce and illegitimacy rates produce tens of millions of American children living with poverty, stress and accompanying impairments to learning ability. Exacerbating this is that poverty tends to centralize geographically, particularly in urban settings where schools in poor neighborhoods tend to get short-funded.

What many regard as the saddest result of rampant economic disparity in the United States are the effects on the nation's children, nearly a quarter of whom live in poverty. It is well researched that growing up in poverty is among the greatest threats to healthy child development. Poverty and parents' financial stress impede a child's cognitive development and ability to learn, and contribute to poor health and well documented behavioral, social and emotional problems. The National Academy of Sciences reports that chronic stress from childhood poverty increases gut-reaction anger at the expense of the ability to control emotions, a condition which embeds and persists throughout adulthood. Teachers deal with exactly this in any poor neighborhood. Of the world's thirty-five industrialized economies, the United States ranks next to last in the proportion of children in poverty, above only Romania and just below Bulgaria even though U.S. per capita income is six times that of those two nations.

At the same time that American students and their families have changed, teachers aren't what they used to be either and this is not a good thing. A century ago, the brightest women who chose to work outside of the home were largely confined to teaching, nursing and that new line of work, secretary. The school marm in the one-room school house out on the prairie was almost always the best educated woman, perhaps person, in the village and often the brightest. Today she is a CEO, doctor, lawyer or running for president. Because the doors to all professions have been opened to women, today's teachers come from two or three notches lower than did their counterparts of a century ago.

Because of instruction standards from kindergarten through doctoral studies which have been relaxed since the 1960s, not only are students being taught less, but those students who become teachers know less, too. If you wonder why a college graduate still doesn't know what the eight parts of English speech are, it is because his or her teachers didn't know them either so this starting point of English grammar wasn't taught. In the ultimate of faddish laziness, many schools now no longer teach students how to write in cursive resulting in job applicants who can't sign their names.

Situations vary from country to country but no country seems to have taken a slide in education as much as the United States has.

Along with the demographic changes of students, families and teachers, American society as a whole has experienced a profound shift in how it values education, now toppled from the pedestal it once occupied. Drive around any town old enough, look at its school buildings and what one sees is that the high school was usually the nicest building in town, more of a showpiece in which local folk took pride than the nicest home, the town hall, the dry goods store, even the hospital if there was one. Grade schools weren't far behind. As recently as a half century ago, education came first in the minds of American civic leaders and it showed in handsome, well-equipped school facilities. Two of the three high schools I attended were indeed the largest and most attractive buildings in their small towns of about 10,000, one out on the Midwest prairie, the other a toney New Jersey suburb of New York City. Today what schools get are ugly minimalist designs, cheap construction, trucked-in portable classrooms, and a silent message to all that education is merely utilitarian, a box to check.

But education doesn't have to depend on edifice. I well recall visiting a rural Thai grade school which consisted of a covered pavilion without walls where students sat at makeshift desks with their books and slates, and were taught by a monk. This was a public school which the monks staffed without pay on the grounds of their temple. I know enough Thai to see that the quality of education in this very modest setting was excellent.

The blight on American public education extends to higher education. Two generations ago, the taxpayer supported about seventy percent of the budgets of public universities. At one of my alma maters that figure has dropped to thirteen percent at what is now rightfully called a publicly-assisted university. The very worst in relaxed educational standards at any level is practiced by for-profit colleges whose "business model" is lining the pockets of owners through student Pell grants, keeping their student income streams in school as long as possible by dishing out grossly inflated grades, not educating much, and leaving the student holding the bag for educational loan debt and rejection by employers who won't hire those with watered-down degrees.

American public education was built on several aging innovative marvels which vaulted a poorly educated agrarian society into the very forefront of education and the national development that derives from a broadly educated populace, but the last of these innovations was more than a half century ago.

In a single stroke, the Morrill Land Grant Act (1862) launched public higher education across the United States. Up until then, American higher education had been strictly private, expensive, exclusive and not very practical. Universal public primary education took hold in the 1880s. Beginning with the world's first community college which opened in Joliet, Illinois in 1901, the U.S. today leads the world by far with more than 1,300 of them teaching the trades, midlife retraining, and university preparation. The GI Bill (1944) promoted millions into the white-collar work force essential to the mid-twentieth-century economic transition into post-industrial society. The California Master Plan for Higher Education (1962) became the international higher education blueprint, showing the way to offer college to vast numbers and how universities and especially community colleges could give people a second shot, or midlife first shot, at higher education. In effect, the Master Plan created the re-entry student who, as any college or university faculty member knows, is especially well motivated to learn.

All of these education innovations were world firsts which went far and fast in the accelerated development of the United States after the Civil War, but the most recent of them is over a half century old, two generations of students ago. In the meantime, we as a nation have begun handing out diplomas to people who at the very least ought to have been taught how to sign their names and to tell a noun from a verb but can't.

In tracking down responsibility for the slippage in American education, it would be easy to point to teachers, but they conform to curricula set down by school boards which in turn are drawn from the citizenry where the buck finally stops. Like students and teachers, school boards have changed demographically, seldom any longer comprising the most educated members of a community. School boards, too, aren't what they used to be.

Where did the world-leading educational innovations mentioned come from and should we be looking to that wellspring again? The land grant colleges and universities, universal public primary and secondary education, community colleges, the GI Bill and an education master plan that works all came from government at one level or another. Americans are chronically suspicious of government involvement in education, especially at the federal level, but there don't appear to have been any minuses from that involvement since that first intervention with the Morrill Act over 150 years ago.

We now have the controversial federally-mandated Common Core curriculum with its national benchmark testing. School districts and states not measuring up now want out of Common Core to hide failure and should not be allowed to do so. The federal government has a mixed record but perhaps what it has been best at is right move after right move in public education. Until another game-changing educational innovation might come along, it looks like the nation's best bet is to keep school districts' feet to the fire with Common Core.