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Being average is no longer good enough

By Jim Nowlan

In a recent column, I noted that most, not all, Downstate school districts perform below statewide averages on 11th grade English and math tests. I didn't blame anyone, instead noting that performance is inversely correlated to the household incomes within each district, the lower the average incomes, the higher the test scores. Thus it has been since I began looking at these kinds of data decades ago. As Downstate school districts tend to be lower in overall household income than their suburban counterparts, scores also tend to be lower.

Another purpose was to startle Downstaters—parents, community leaders, and school folks—into working harder to become at least average. Nobody likes to think of his community as “below average.” And most folks have been unaware of their situation.

But space limitations prohibited me from going further, to write about how Americans across the country appear to be sleepwalking through our own decline when it comes to education.

Unfortunately, our grandchildren will pay a steep price for our provincial ignorance.

I am still haunted by my introduction to China, now about 15 years ago. (Over the years, I have had three six-week gigs in that country, teaching short courses in American politics to very bright seniors and graduate students at top-tier Fudan University in Shanghai, then giving invited lectures at major universities in Xian, Nanjing, Suzhou, Beijing and elsewhere.)

After a night's sleep upon arrival in Shanghai, I took a walk early the next morning, a Saturday, around the neighborhood of my “foreign experts' quarters.” On the tree-lined sidewalk, I noticed

youngsters in cute uniforms gathering outside what was obviously an elementary school. I walked on.

The next day, I asked my host professor about this. She responded: “Oh, they were going to school. They go to school every Saturday until noon.”

Further, the youngsters stay in the classroom each day an hour longer than do students in the U.S. And for about 35 more days each year, spread across the year, rather than a long summer vacation here, when I am told much learning is lost.

Yet, if an Illinois school superintendent and his/her board recommended Saturday classes, I imagine there would be riots in the street. In China, if a school decided against Saturday classes, I am told parents would rebel and demand there be such, as they insist upon everything possible for their children’s education, and future.

When I was going to elementary school post-World War II, the rest of the developed globe was prostrate, leveled in many places by the conflict. Untouched, America boomed, providing what the world needed. So, we could afford an easy-going school calendar. No longer.

With four times our population, China is already racing ahead of us in some fields. It appears an open secret that U.S. is trying to hobble China tech giant Huawei at least in part because that company has leapt ahead of the U.S. on critical 5G-speed digital technology.

Our school kids have to do lots better than “average”; otherwise they will be working for Asian executives one day. Sure, China has many problems, such as the long-term consequences of its one-child policy, now abandoned, and its oppressive government system. Yet, we would be foolish to bank on China being slowed by such.

I fear my scribblings of concern will be discarded by those who prefer the comfort of not rocking the boat. And I blame all of us, from leaders—afraid to buck public backlash against any dramatic efforts to boost our education outcomes—to the public, unwilling to, or ignorant of, the challenges we face.

Now, how's that for a rant!