

American education in crisis, again?

By Jim Nowlan

The sky is falling in American education, again, according to a new report on “Education Reform and National Security.” So poorly are we doing in educating our youngsters that now our national security is at stake! Critics of the report say we could certainly be doing better, but that in many respects we’re doing okay. Who to believe?

There is an interesting subtext here as well, that is, a public debate between former New York City schools chief Joel Klein, of the sky is falling thesis, and education historian Diane Ravitch. The latter, also based in NYC, is a reformed reformer who now has reservations about choice in schools (vouchers, public charter schools) and is against high stakes testing. Let me try to sort it all out.

Thirty years ago, a national blue ribbon panel issued “A Nation at Risk,” which warned of “a rising tide of mediocrity [in education] that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” We have been reforming ever since, with not a great deal to show for it, if you read the statistics rolled out by the recent education reform report, which was co-chaired by Klein, to wit:

- Fewer than 75 percent of students fail to graduate from high school in four years, with much lower percentages for African-American and Hispanic students;
- Only 22 percent of high school students met “college ready” standards in all their core subjects;
- U.S. students rank poorly in international rankings in reading, math and science.

In a scathing review of the report in the influential New York Review of Books (June 7, 2012), Ravitch calls it “a mishmash of misleading statistics and incoherent arguments” written in “leaden prose that contains not a single sparkling phrase.” According to Ravitch, for example, “high school graduation rates are at their highest point in history for students of all races and income levels,” though “certainly they should be higher.”

The Klein report declares that states and school districts “should stop locking disadvantaged students into failing schools without any options.” In other words, schools should provide vouchers to attend private schools and the option of public charter schools.

In Illinois, charter schools are found mostly in Chicago. They are public schools that can operate somewhat independently of the rules that govern regular schools, e.g. teachers often have annual contracts rather than tenure. Many charter schools emphasize special curricula such as math and science or the arts, for example.

Ravitch points out that Milwaukee has had vouchers for 21 years, but “on average the students in voucher schools achieve the same test scores as those in regular public schools.” She says most studies of charters also show no difference in test score comparisons with the public schools.

As for international test scores, Ravitch says that American schools with few students from poverty backgrounds score very well in comparisons with other nations.

Which brings us to the fundamental problem: While Asian-Americans do marvelously in school, African-American and Hispanic students, as well as white students in poverty, do poorly overall.

A few schools that either physically or psychologically remove the minority students from their neighborhood, high poverty environments have shown great results with students. I wrote a couple of years ago about the SEED Academy, which provides a hot-house residential environment for its African-American students, 90 percent of whom go on to college.

But we can't afford that for every student who would benefit. Nor has anyone come up with a way to educate the mass of minority students effectively.

[In New York, Klein had monumental battles with the United Federation of Teachers, winning some, losing some. Maybe as a result, he sees a largely privatized (or "charterized"), non-union school enterprise as the way out of our educational under-achievement. Ravitch has, on the other hand, come to believe in the fundamental democratic mission of the public schools.]

I think we can learn lessons from the best of the private and charter schools that would be useful for the 85-90 percent of students who will still be educated in regular public schools. And I agree that we must keep pressure on schools—and parents—to up their game a notch or two, because the competition from other developing nations is fierce and the demand for skills in a digitizing world is intense.

Yet this latest jeremiad against American education by Klein and others needs a follow-up blue ribbon study. This panel would explore the cultures of poverty and of how to transform these cultures out of their ambivalent, even negative attitudes toward educational achievement. This is the albatross around the necks of America's education leaders.

