

# A CULTURE OF COMPLACENCY

## THE GROWING DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE SCHOOLS AND THE WORKPLACE

CHARLES J. SYKES

**K**ee in mind that we are supposed to feel good about this: Last October, federal education officials released test scores showing that Wisconsin continues to have one of the worst racial learning gaps in the country.

The gap between black and white students on the National Assessment of Education Progress test of eighth-grade reading skills was 35 points—the worst of any state in the nation.

Shrugging off even the pretense of urgency, members of the Milwaukee School Board spent much of the week talking about restricting military recruiters and whether or not to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

The state's teachers' union bestirred itself long enough to pooh-pooh the numbers and then went back to fighting for fatter fringe benefits and pensions for its members and trying to kill school choice in the central city.

Most of the rest of the state reacted with the complacency of people confronted with "Somebody Else's Problem."

In a classic example of the Lake Wobegon syndrome, the media reported that despite the ghastly racial gap, "Wisconsin students scored



above national averages."

But what did "above national averages" actually mean?

Among eighth-graders, only 36% of Wisconsin students scored as either proficient or advanced in mathematics, while nearly two-thirds — 64% — scored at the basic or below basic level. The numbers were nearly identical for

reading, where only 34% scored proficient or advanced, while two-thirds were at the basic or below basic level.

Given the amount of money Wisconsin pays for education, this is very, very expensive mediocrity.

The fourth-grade math scores were hardly more reassuring: 41% scored at the proficient or advanced level, while 59% were basic or below.

In fourth-grade reading, more than two-thirds of fourth graders read at a basic or below basic level, only 33% scored proficient or advanced.

---

*Charles J. Sykes is the editor of WI:Wisconsin Interest and a senior fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. He also hosts a talk-radio show on AM 620 WTMJ in Milwaukee.*

## A Culture of Complacency

Given all of our anxieties and assorted panics involving child-rearing, it may seem contradictory, even perverse, to suggest we are complacent about raising our children. But a culture has to be awfully smug about the big things to devote as much time as we do issues like dodge ball, tag, the weight of backpacks, the onerous burden of homework, and the self-esteem destroying threat of class rankings. The very triviality of our concerns is evidence that we think we have the big stuff pretty much in hand.

But despite the gold stars and happy faces, there is growing evidence that we are falling further behind in preparing young people for the challenges of the emerging economy.

Several recent studies provide a sobering reality check:

The 2005 “Skills Gap Report” commissioned by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) found that the vast majority of American manufacturers—90%—are experiencing a shortage of qualified, high skilled employees, including scientists and engineers. The lack of skills, the report warned, is endangering the “ability of the country as a whole to compete in the global economy.”

When the businesses were asked whether the nation’s K-12 schools were doing a good job preparing students for the workplace, an overwhelming 84% said “no.” Representatives of aerospace and defense industries were even more negative, with 93% giving schools failing marks for preparing students.

Other studies suggest a dramatic disconnect between expectations and reality.

A 2003 survey by Public Agenda found that students, parents, and teachers were confident that high school graduates were prepared for the work force. Sixty-seven percent of the parents of high school students thought their child would have the skills to succeed in the workplace; 78% of their teachers were also confident that graduates were ready for work.

In sharp contrast, though, only 41% of employers said that the young people they encountered had such skills.

The same study also found that 67% of parents, 77% of teachers, and 73% of high school students thought that a high school diploma meant that students had basic skills.

But large majorities both of employers who hired the graduates and professors who taught them disagreed. The same survey in which parents, students, and teachers confidently assumed the validity of the high school diploma found that 68% of professors and 58% of employers thought that the diplomas was no guarantee at all that students had mastered even basic skills.

The 2005 NAM study should also be a blow to the inflated self-esteem of recent graduates. Large numbers of employers complained about the lack of reading, comprehension, math, and science skills among recent graduates.

But topping the complaints was the perceived lack of “basic employability skills” such as attendance, timeliness, and work ethic. Fifty-five percent of employers cited the basic employability skills as a deficiency among young workers.

The study’s findings were consistent with previous surveys in which employers identified basic employability skills as the most frequent deficiency among employees.

But this also suggests a deeper, more complex problem. While public education can justifiably be called to account for the lack of reading and math skills, the lack of a basic work ethic may suggest a cultural problem that runs deeper than simply reforming public schools.

As the NAM report noted:

This, of course, presents an interesting challenge to the public education system and society overall. Even if schools perform well in their traditional role of increasing math, science and reading comprehension skills, this would not address

the top, pressing concern of employers—the need for attendance, timeliness, and work ethic.

As global competition intensifies, the need of American businesses for even more qualified and skilled employees is also likely to grow, exacerbating the growing disconnect between the attitudes and abilities of new employees and the requirements of the new jobs.

“This paradoxical mismatch—between the need for the highest skill levels ever and the current need to address basic employability issues and basic skills in general—is particularly vexing given the emphasis companies place on having a high-performance workforce,” the report concluded. “It also suggests the need for significant change in approaches within the education and public workforce systems.”

The study emphasized that lack of skills—especially the lack of basic employability skills—posed a stark threat to the American economy. “The problem for U.S. manufacturers is that this challenge is not universal. Countries with rich educational heritages, e.g., India, China and Russia, are graduating millions more students each year from college than the United States. . . .”

“You don’t bring three billion people into the world economy overnight without huge consequences,” Craig Barrett, CEO of Intel observed, “especially from three societies (like India, China, and Russia) with rich educational heritages.”

The NAM study echoed the warning: “This means that we are now facing an entirely new level of competition with no guarantees that the U.S. manufacturing base will remain strong. Plainly said, unless solutions to the

skills-gap issues are acted upon with great focus and determination, this country will likely be left behind in the global competitive race.”

### **Calls for Reform**

Similar alarms have been sounded from high places. “The heyday when a high-school or college education would serve a graduate for a lifetime is gone,” Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan warned.

Today’s recipients of diplomas expect to have many jobs and to use a wide range of skills over their working lives. Their parents and grandparents looked to a more stable future—even if in reality it often turned out otherwise.

Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates has been even more blunt, flatly calling the modern high school “obsolete.”

“By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and underfunded—though a case could be made for every one of those points,” Gates said last year.

By obsolete, I mean that our high schools—even when they’re working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today. Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today’s computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It’s the wrong tool for the times.

### **Denial**

But is there any tangible evidence that public education has responded to the challenge?

“Over the past eight years, which have included noteworthy educational reforms,” the NAM study reported, “employers of all sizes have yet to see an improvement in the ability

---

*Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today’s computers on a 50-year-old mainframe.*

---

of public education institutions to prepare students for the workplace.”

That is hardly surprising given the difficulty of changing an entrenched educational culture that has proven hostile to accountability and competition alike.

In at least one obvious sense, public education is an unlikely solution to the problem of competition: it is a government monopoly. A top-down bureaucracy, anchored by a culture that grants tenure to its front-line workers, public education is structurally insulated from the realities of the marketplace, and its leading advocates are often overtly hostile to its values.

A survey by Public Agenda found a dramatic disconnect between the public’s expectations of what schools should teach and the beliefs of professors of education—the teachers of teachers. The study found that nearly two-thirds (64%) think schools should avoid competition for rewards such as honor rolls, and nearly half (47%) supported giving students in team projects a group grade rather than an individual grade.

Public Agenda noted:

In sharp contrast to the concerns expressed by typical Americans in earlier Public Agenda studies, small percentages of education professors feel maintaining discipline and order in the classroom (37%), stressing grammar as well as correct spelling and punctuation (19%), and expecting students to be on time and polite (12%) are “absolutely essential” qualities to impart to prospective teachers.

But aren’t we already overworking and overstressing students?

Despite occasional media and parental hand wringing the answer is: no.

In 2003, the Brookings Institution examined the popular notion that U.S. schoolchildren were suffering from a growing homework load that was robbing them of their childhoods. The alleged “homework crisis” was widely featured in the media, including a

cover story in *Newsweek* magazine. But according to data analyzed by the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, almost all of the stories were wrong. In fact, the great majority of students at all grade levels now spend less than an hour a day studying.

Despite the complaints, the research suggested that homework correlated with success in school and that, in fact, children were not doing enough homework at all.

A 1997 Public Agenda study also suggested that our schools were something less than sweatshops.

Half of the teenagers told researchers that their schools did not challenge them to do their best work. For example, 79% said they would “learn more if schools enforced being on time along with the completion of homework.”

Said one teen:

You can just glide through. You can copy somebody’s homework at the beginning of the period. I mean you can do whatever you want. . . . They practically hand you a diploma.

### **Hard America, Soft America**

Author/commentator Michael Barone writes that, “One of the peculiar features of our country is that we produce incompetent 18-year-olds and remarkably competent 30-year-olds.”

America, he suggests is divided between “Hard America,” which stresses competition and results, and “Soft America,” which coddles and protects.

From the age of 6 to 18, he writes, “our kids live mostly in what I call Soft America—the part of our society where there is little competition and accountability. In contrast, most Americans in the twelve years between ages 18 and 30 live mostly in Hard America—the part of American life subject to competition and accountability; the military trains under live fire. Soft America seeks to instill self-esteem. Hard America plays for keeps.”

The obvious question is whether Soft America can prepare young people for Hard America? Are the competent 30-year-olds who carry the nation's economy the same 18-year-olds who flounder at the challenge of tallying up the cost of a Big Mac and Coke?

Is the transition between Soft and Hard sequential; do young people graduate from one to the other? Can they make the transition from a culture of coddling and self-esteem to a culture of accountability and responsibility?

Or is there a growing gap and disconnect between two parallel approaches to life? And what happens if Soft America—embodied in public education—becomes even softer at a time when Hard America—in an increasingly competitive global marketplace—becomes even harder?

So far, there are few signs that American culture regards the problems with any real sense of urgency. American teenagers remain a leisure class with considerable spending power, but few tangible responsibilities. Parents continue to embrace the emphasis on self-esteem rather than self-control, while young people continue to graduate with expectations that are poorly aligned to the realities of a workplace that is rapidly evolving. And public schools continue to resist competition from choice schools and accountability measures that have real-world consequences.

The new studies suggest that, unless something gives, we are all in for a reality check.