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Since then, the website has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it.

An Ominous Warning about the State of American Education

By Peter Smagorinsky

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While browsing in a book store not long ago, a friend of mine came across a book whose back cover included the following ominous message:

YOU CAN READ AND ENJOY A BOOK LIKE THIS ONE

Will your children be able to?

The most sacred heritage an American child has is his right to as much education as he wants or can use. It is only through education that our children can understand the other priceless things that America gives. Today our educational system is faltering. Tomorrow it may be gone—unless we act now! The day after tomorrow the American way of life will be gone, too, if our educational system breaks down.

The statement concludes by reviewing frightening statistics about teacher attrition, reporting that teacher turnover has recently doubled because “*The morale of teachers has dropped to an all-time low.*”

I couldn't have said it any better myself. The teaching profession is under tremendous pressure, and teachers are finding other careers that they find more satisfying. The public invests too little money in schools, resulting in low morale among the teaching force and questions about the future of society. These problems are of immediate concern and require solutions before it is too late.

There's something I didn't mention in introducing this book-cover warning: My friend found it in a used book store, and [the book was published in 1948](#).

I share this alarming book jacket caution because of what it says about the profession of teaching: No matter how fondly people remember the good old days, a closer look often wipes away the veneer of nostalgia. Public education, as such looks into the past often reveal, has always been under attack, has always been poorly funded, and has always been given jobs too great for the resources provided, and too challenging for overworked faculty to undertake with vigor.

Other looks into the past reveal some figures that are shocking given the expectations for 21st Century schools. Until late in the 19th century, *adults* were deemed literate when they could indicate their signature with an “X.” In today’s more demanding society, the Common Core Standards require that *children in kindergarten* “Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., *My favorite book is...*).”

Although Georgia has typically lagged behind national educational rates in general, its history of educational perspectives suggests trends for the nation as a whole, especially the South. In 1944, 17% of adults in Georgia were high school graduates; in 1946, 5% of college-age people in Georgia attended college; in 1948, of Georgia’s 15,000 White teachers, about 6,000 had earned a bachelor’s degree and 9,000 had not. The high school completion rates for the next decades: 1950, 21%; 1960, 32%; 1970, 41%; 1980, 57%; 1990, 71%; 2000, 79%. And these figures were calculated using formulas that under-counted dropouts; more advanced methods found the 2010 the graduation rate in Georgia at 67%, suggesting that the older, quite dismal figures were actually inflated, assuming that graduation rates have continued to rise, even as poverty becomes more entrenched and widespread.

School critics often claim that even as educational funding has gone up, test scores do not rise along with them, thus showing that investing in education has no impact. Few teachers agree with this belief. As the statistics enumerated above show, schools retain far more pupils now than ever before, which is more costly simply in terms of educating vastly greater numbers than were enrolled in prior eras of massive dropout rates. Further, it is more costly in that these greater numbers of pupils include types of students who require considerable attention and resources: those needing special services, those who are behind in their progress toward graduation, those whose life circumstances challenge them in so many ways that educating them properly involves levels of support never before available to them.

In the past, such young people were indeed left behind to fend for themselves outside what an education can provide in terms of knowledge, opportunity, and economic advantage, as my mother’s father learned when he struck out on his own as a plumber’s apprentice at the ripe age of 13. Today’s laws require that young people persist in school for as long as the school can accommodate them, in hopes that the knowledge, socialization, and credentials will benefit them down the road. Yet funding lags such that the alarms from the mid-20th Century can easily be mistaken for those sounded more than a decade into the 21st.

What is different is that when schools allow over 80% of their students to depart before graduation, as they did in Georgia in the 1940s, they are working exclusively with the easiest students to teach: those who choose to remain in the educational pipeline. Today’s teachers have a far more complex and challenging student body to educate, yet do so under working conditions that remain poor and dispiriting.

The people who are well-served by the system continue to prosper, but those whose educational prospects are undermined by low funding levels will have the greatest difficulty surviving these

austere times. This phenomenon is known as the Matthew Effect, following from Matthew 25:29 in the New Testament: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

Ultimately, society gets what it pays for. When we turn our backs on the great vision of America as the Land of Opportunity, we violate a basic tenet of our value system. I shudder to think of what the cost of this neglect will ultimately be.