

December 2, 2011

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

How to fix America? Start with education. With our economic recovery still trying to find its way and with our national politics limping along in gridlock, in some ways, America is broken. Broken by greed, to be sure, but broken, too, by laziness and complacency. It is almost as if *we have forgotten who we are*.

What to do? A starting point to *fix* America (to get us back on track) is to make education a top national priority. According to the November 14, 2011 edition of Time Magazine, where the cover reads, *Can You Still Move Up in America?*, the decline we have been experiencing in recent years is due largely to our three-decade-long decline in education.

The World Economic Forum ranks the U.S.’s educational system 26th in the world, placing us well behind other industrialized countries like Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada and Singapore.

Education remains an excellent predictor of employment potential and of upward mobility in general. According to Time, the unemployment rate for college graduates, for example, is just 4%, while for high school dropouts, it is 14%.

In an eye-opening article, *When Will We Learn*—in this same issue of Time—Fareed Zakaria admonishes us that *the need for better education for most Americans has never been more urgent. While we have been sleeping, the rest of the world has been upgrading its skills*. Bill Gross, who heads up Pimco, points out: *Our labor force is too expensive and poorly educated for today’s marketplace*.

With unemployment not showing promising signs of dipping much below 9% in the year ahead, this reality ought to alarm us. So, how to fix education?

A starting point might be, simply, to work harder. As Zakaria notes in his Time article, *U.S. school children spend less time in school than their peers abroad. They have shorter school days and a shorter school year*. In South Korea, for example, children will spend almost two years more in the classroom than U.S. children by the time they walk out of high school.

Hire the best teachers. However, as expert after expert has pointed out in recent years, the overwhelming key to education is teachers. Microsoft’s Bill Gates has spent over 5 billion dollars in recent times trying to bring reform to American education. When asked what his top priority would be for every school district across our nation, his immediate response was: *hire the best teachers*.

Apparently, this is precisely what Finland has done. Even though Finnish students start a

year later than most countries, emphasize creative work and shun tests for most of the year, they score near the top on international tests. What's up with this? In a word, they hire only the best teachers who are paid well and accorded comparable respect to doctors and lawyers.

Finland's teachers are selected through a very competitive process. To begin with, all teachers are required to have at least a master's degree and only one in ten applicants are accepted in the teacher-training programs.

From everything I have read on this, teachers, indeed, are the critical factor. Of course, for our nation to act on this, we would have to undergo a total reset in the way we view teaching as a profession and in the ways that we reward and compensate teachers as well.

Becoming more like us. In any event, a starting point would be to make education a top national priority. And of course, that means money which means tough decisions would have to be made—on all levels—in the trenches of funding allocation.

To compete in the global market place that is the 21st century, we not only need to make education a top national priority, we need to rediscover what made us—in the latter half of the 20th century—the most innovative, creative and successful nation in the history of planet earth.

At its best, American education teaches us how to resolve problems, question authority, think for ourselves and be creative. Throughout our history, there has been a distinctly American character to our education which we need to reclaim, enabling us to become what writer James Fallows once labeled, *more like us*.

More like us needs to happen real soon.