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Exploratory Essay

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The American School System: A Rough Road Ahead

There are many similarities and few differences between E.D. Hirsch's "Why America's Universities Are Better than Its Schools," and Benjamin Barber's "America Skips School." The main purpose of both articles is to address the fact that Americans fall far behind in the scholastic accomplishment of their young students. Mutually, the two authors agree that American K-12 students learn more each day outside of the classroom than they do inside the classroom, and that the schools need serious reform. Barber focuses his attention on the financial situation of the schools, as well as the political standpoint that the government just does not care, and the American government has simply given up on its children. Hirsch tackles the idea that if our K-12 schools stay with their current level of teaching, it is only a matter of time before the institutions of higher learning will no longer be considered among the best in the world. At the present time, it seems as though America's youth have been placed into a category for which they are no longer looked upon as a bright future for our nation as was considered in the past, as Barber has commented, "Jefferson thought schools would produce free men: we prove him right by putting dropouts in jail" (159).

Children today are becoming more street-smart, and feel that there is no need for true knowledge. For example, "Knowledge is considered less desirable than more

'practical' all-purpose goals such as 'higher order skills,' 'self-esteem,' 'metacognitive skills,' and 'critical-thinking skills' (Hirsch 144). They see it as much more important to look at what society rewards its people with, and that seems to be anything but a good academic background. In today's culture, the people who are praised in America are the people who are able to make millions of dollars by performing music, acting in front of the camera, playing a sport, and unfortunately in some neighborhoods, selling drugs. Barber concurs that "When the society undoes each workday what the school tries to do each school day, schooling can't make much of a difference" (157). Our students think in terms of what is going to bring them to the peak of the success mountain in this great motherland where everyone has equal opportunity. According to Barber, "...we have taught them all too well: there is nothing in Homer or Virginia Woolf, in Shakespeare or Toni Morrison, that will advantage them in climbing to the top of the American heap" (157). In addition to adults advocating this type of hero worship to American students, it is unfortunate that these students spend twice as much time in front of the television than they do receiving instruction in the classroom, admiring these heroes.

Hirsch brings up a very compelling argument in his text when he states, "In fact, it is *easier* to create a good K-12 system than a good university system..." (144). If it is indeed easier to construct a K-12 system in our country, then we have to ask ourselves: why is no action being taken? Here is just one simple way to bring United States performance up to par: "American children are in school only about 180 days a year, as against 240 days or more for children in Europe or Japan" (Barber 154). Increasing the number of schools days will not by itself increase American intelligence, but it is quite clear that America's standards to graduate are not quite up to par either. This is obvious

since America's top universities must have learning centers for students to attend who have not mastered the basics of reading and writing, or mathematics. Barber brings a very good point to attention when he says, "Perhaps most important, we'd raise standards and make teachers and students responsible for them. There are two ways to breed success: to lower standards so that everybody "passes" in a way that loses all meaning in the real world; and to raise standards and then meet them, so that school success translates into success beyond the classroom" (161). The attitude of raising the standards is exactly what America needs to be at the same level of competition as every other top academic nation around the world. Teachers sit back and coddle their students too much, letting them slide by in a way that is only hurting them in the real world. American schools can not be so lenient on their underachievers, rather they need to step up to the plate and hold them back from college if need be.

Perhaps the most dismaying opinion is that America has just all together given up on the kids. "...the reason for the country's inaction is that Americans do not really care about education – the country has grown comfortable with the game of 'let's pretend we care'" (Barber 154). How could the United States let its citizens be looked upon this way? As a country that is admired by so many others for its great accomplishments, it is letting the most important accomplishment slide right through its fingertips – the education of its future. The fact is that the government is not financially backing education to its full potential. "Only 5 or 6 percent of the nation's education budget is federally funded...Most agree that although money can't by itself solve problems, without money few problems can be solved. Money also can't win wars or put people in space, but it is the crucial facilitator" (Barber 160). When suburban schools are getting

twice the amount of money as inner-city schools, there is a major dilemma. If teachers were to be offered higher wages, it may attract a more intellectually-driven group of teachers, thereby providing better educational services.

In closing, Barber's beliefs mirror my experience in the American educational system. His views, on how underachieved our educational system is, parallel my encounters with the structure of schooling. In high school, we are given standards everyday that we must meet in order to be considered successful, but the truth is; these standards are ineffective in preparation for colleges and universities. He is absolutely right in his belief that to breed true success, standards must be raised, and every student is required to achieve them. Also, when Hirsch proclaims that it is easier to create a well rounded K-12 system, his opinion is very valid as well, because that is where the problem lies. Obviously, the professors in the American universities are more inspired in some ways to give their students in-depth knowledge to set higher standards, however, it is disturbing to know that some high school students still enter America's most elite universities through remedial processes, because it might upset the world-wide standards set by American universities.

Works Cited

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