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## **The Question of the Student In Educational Reform**

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### **Abstract**

In pursuing the goals of educational reform over the past several decades, educational policy makers have focused on teachers, administrators, and school structures as keys to higher educational achievement. As the would-be beneficiaries of reform, students, and their interaction with the educational system, have been almost entirely overlooked in the pursuit of educational excellence. Yet, as we argue,

students are as causally central as educators in bringing about higher educational achievement. In what follows, we examine rational student interaction with the educational system and show why a large number of students have incentives to undercut the intent of the reforms. These are incentives created by our development of an educationally-based, meritocratic social and economic system. No one, apparently, is asking what exactly is in the reforms from the point of view of quite rational, if sometimes irresponsible, student self-interest. Indeed, the educationally-based, meritocratic social and economic system may be actually forming student preferences guaranteed to result in educational mediocrity rather than excellence. Finally, we comment upon the meaning of "educational excellence" and show why the educational reformers' understanding of the purpose of public education—to compete in the global economic system—can only fail to capture it. In doing so, we point to the kinds of educational structures and policies that create multiple pathways to competent adulthood that do have a chance of bringing about the reformers' stated goal of excellence in the educational system. But these are structures and policies that challenge the entire conceptual framework of the current educational reform movement.

There is a curious omission in the spate of educational reform movement reports, analyses, and recommendations over nearly decades of its existence. They have focused on teachers, the curriculum, school structure and quality, content and performance standards, teacher education, and the like. Yet almost no attention has been paid to the would-be beneficiaries of implemented and proposed educational reforms: students. The achievement level of American students is bemoaned and, arguably, documented in the international comparison studies all right. But beyond being assigned the task of benefiting from the reforms (i.e., learning), students, their roles and activities, figure palely in the drive for higher educational achievement.

Yet, as we shall argue, it is students—their goals, motivations, and conceptions of the good life—that may well prove to be the undoing of the educational reform movement. In other words, we might well improve the quality of teachers, legislate higher content and performance standards and academic requirements, and reform teacher education to the educational reform movement's content, and still totally fail in achieving anything close to educational excellence in our schools. The reason will be that there is nearly total disregard for rational student interaction with the educational system. Students, in quite rational pursuit of their own ends, are clearly capable of undermining the intent of the reforms.

In what follows, then, we shall in Part I develop a view of what it means to be an ideal student. Here we shall raise the question of whether students have any duty or responsibility for acting as an ideal student would. And though we shall note that a general view of positive student responsibility can be justifiably defended—not merely asserted—we shall also show that students may be both irresponsible *and* rational in failing to act as ideal students. In Part II, we explore the distributive behavior of the educational system and the idea of a schooling-based meritocratic society. Here we shall argue that this distributive behavior strongly favors the development of the kinds of students—students in name only—who contrast strongly with a noted view of "the ideal

student." In Part III, we shall develop a more refined typology of students as rational actors. We argue that in full rational pursuit of their own view of the good, these students in name only will rarely, if ever, find it in their interest to act as an "ideal student" would. In Part IV, we shall finally establish that the failure to take into account the various rational (and non-rational) interests of students will most likely undermine the reformers' intent. In concluding, we point the way to the kind of fundamental and more penetrating educational reforms that could lead the way to excellence in education and educational achievement.

## I

### The Ideal Student

While the current educational reform movement has undergone successive changes in focus since the "A Nation at Risk" report was published (D. P. Gardner, et al., National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the banner of "Educational Accountability" remains its enduring hallmark. Indeed, as Finn et al. (1985, pp. 194-195) noted from its inception, the educational reform movement gathered steam towards its current infatuation with state and national educational standards precisely because of the widespread perception that the educational profession had abandoned even the pretense of upholding educational standards, while disclaiming any responsibility for the sorry educational results. Thus, if educators were so derelict in their duty, school boards and, increasingly, state governors and legislatures and the federal government entered the scene to set things aright. Through such tools as higher requirements for teacher licensure and inservice performance and district and state, if not national, content and performance standards, the collective feet of educators could be held to the fire for meeting them. Student performance could then be monitored through standardized testing, NAEP, and new (more realistic, but more expensive) statewide performance assessments tailored to state standards. While student performance on the assessments, of whatever sort, remains the key item of interest to the "outcomes-oriented" reformers, educators clearly bear the onus of raising the scores. In the earlier phase of the reform movement, more than a few school districts proposed, or flirted with, policies to evaluate teachers individually on the assessment scores of their students. Relatively lower scores, as proposed then, could bring teacher probation or even dismissal (Rodman, 1986). The teacher unions and common sense, however, have generally prevailed in arguing against such unfair evaluation practices. While school districts and states may be devising new (and fair) ways to help suspect teachers and new incentives to reward teaching excellence, sanctions for poor student performance are now more often levied at entire schools, and even school districts (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Popham, 2001).

Doubtless there are many mediocre and poor teachers in the United States and Canada who should never be visited upon a classroom (but probably no more as a percent than in other professions). Anyone spending time in schools will recognize this. Better teacher preparation, better conditions of employment, better professional development, and better procedures for identifying marginal teachers are clearly in order (especially as promoted by educators themselves). Yet, once more the reform movement's preoccupation with the teaching profession, as a whole, ignores a salient feature of education: education is far more than a linear technological process in which the teacher

transforms "raw material" (the student) into a finished "product" (an educated person). Teaching, it is true, is a "making something happen" profession. And so there is a causal relationship between teaching and student learning (see Ericson & Ellett, 1987). But it is not the simple causal relationship of the manufacturing process so familiar to business leaders, legislators, and other leaders of the educational reform movement. Though understanding teaching as a "making something happen" profession, these leaders are too prone to infer that a lack of success in teaching entails either that the teaching was poor (or the teacher a failure) or else that the teacher was never trying in the first place.

Although central to the reform movement's demand for ever increasing educator accountability, the inference from lack of teaching success to poor or derelict teaching is clearly fallacious. It simply ignores *the causal role of students* in bringing about their own learning. Students, obviously, are not raw materials awaiting only a teacher's skillful hands. They are an integral factor in the learning process. For even the best teaching in the world will produce no results if students fail to be concerned with their own learning and fail to master the tasks and activities necessary to educational achievement—tasks and activities such as attending to explanations, practicing introduced skills, and doing homework. In other words, we are speaking of an *interactive* causal process in which *either* poor teaching or poor "studenting" is generally sufficient for a lack of student success. (Note 1) (Of course, extraordinary teachers and excellent students can overcome ineptitude and initial disinterest in the other party.) Not all, therefore, hangs on the activities of the teacher as the educational reform apparently assumes (given the broadsides against educators and silence on students). If the schools are failing, indeed, then we have to explore the equal possibility that it is not educators, as a whole, who are necessarily at fault; rather, might the blame be laid squarely at the feet of our young?

Yet delicacy, rather than logic, might suggest this to be an indecent proposal. To entertain blaming the young for our educational situation may sound a bit like entertaining a proposal to torture the innocent. Still, it seems to be the only way to confront the educational reform movement with the logic of its own position. *For if educators are fair game because of their causally central role in the learning process, then students, who are equally causally central, can hardly be spared similar attention.* Fairness simply demands it.

But much of this question concerning teacher and student accountability hinges on a prior issue that is also overlooked. Granted that teachers and students are two major interactive causal factors in student learning, can causation serve as a sufficient basis to ground teacher or student responsibility? In a previous paper on teacher accountability (Ericson & Ellett, 1987), we strongly criticized the view that *causation entails responsibility*. For example, atmospheric conditions may cause lightning, but we would not hold atmospheric conditions morally, legally, or institutionally responsible for the lightning or its effects. Thus, moral or legal responsibility does not, in general, follow from being a causal factor.

Therefore, as with teachers, in considering whether students are to be held responsible for their own learning, we require something beyond acknowledgement of their central causal role. We require a moral and/or legal theory that plausibly determines student responsibility. Here it may help to sketch an ideal of what it means to be a student. From there we can ask whether students have an obligation to fulfill the characteristics of that ideal. (Note 2)

Clearly, the ideal of the student goes well beyond two well-known legal obligations required of all students: (1) to attend a legally sanctioned place of education (including "home schools") until a certain age and (2) to be non-disruptive. Rather, a normative view of an ideal student extends to the *manner* of their activities within the school and out. And though students engage in a variety of activities during a typical school day ranging from the classroom, to recess, to having lunch with friends, and on to engaging in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. We shall construct, however, an "ideal" of the student that focuses selectively and primarily on purely scholastic and academic concerns.

According to this ideal, it is a major aim, internal to the practice of education, to introduce the young child to the manifold ways that we have come to structure our experience of the world. (Note 3) Initially, this means enabling them to begin to master various skills common to decoding the intellectual traditions and disciplines that they will later confront (e.g., literacy skills and computation). As they develop and build on prior learning, they will be increasingly initiated into the whys and wherefores of the various forms of understanding that we have achieved over time. For example, either explicitly or implicitly, they will come to learn that the study of human history differs (in content, concepts, methods, and tests for truth) from the study of natural science. And as they come to see the differences and commonalities among these basic ways or conceptual schemata by which we have structured the world, they thereby become more competent interpreters, critics, and evaluators of them. As Paul Hirst puts it, it is what it means to come to have a mind in the fullest sense. (Note 4)

But from this brief sketch of perhaps what many take to be the ultimate aim of education, we can derive an intuitive view of the ideal student. It is contained in such familiar expressions as "she is a *real* student of x!" Such expressions betoken a true zeal on the part of the learner to get on the inside, to master an area or subject for its own sake. It carries with it the idea that the learner is prepared to do whatever is necessary to achieve that critical mastery. In part this will mean, depending upon the subject, practicing, mastering, and engaging in exactly those activities Fenstermacher (1986) speaks of in "studenting": attending to instructions and explanations carefully, reading closely, critically discussing thoroughly, investigating thoughtfully, questioning eagerly, practicing with an eye to proficiency, appraising carefully, etc., while prizing each new gain in understanding throughout.

It is by engaging in these activities in such adverbial fashion that we can give meaning to such expressions as "she is a real student." They denote individuals who do not merely fill the institutional role of student. Rather, they define for many of us the concept of the ideal student. And, of course, it will be the best teachers who are skillful in enabling students in the institutional sense to become students in the ideal sense.

One further aspect of this portrait of the ideal of the student remains to be emphasized. That is the question of motivation. In speaking of a student's zeal to get on the inside of a subject matter, we point to the fact that, whatever external utility exists in mastering it, such external utility does not exhaust the student's interest. In other words, the student values the learning *primarily for its own sake* and not merely for the sake of what it may lead to. Students in this sense are *intrinsically* motivated by the subject matter. And their preferences, commitments, and feelings come to be defined by the standards of excellence *inherent* in the discipline. (Note 5)

This ideal forms the basis for a typology and ranking of students. First, and foremost, is the student who comes to value a domain of knowledge for its own sake. Such individuals are purely intrinsically motivated. (They are also quite rare; we shall call them the "scholar" type.) Next, and somewhat more frequently encountered, are students who must often be given a specific external reason for studying a subject. These are students who are primarily motivated for reasons extrinsic to an intellectual discipline itself, but come to value it because it is essential to some professional (or career) goal. (We shall call them the "professional" type.) Now there may be those who are professionally-oriented, but who after time come to derive enjoyment from learning an intellectual discipline itself. (We can call them the "scholar-professional" type.) Finally, similar to, but truly unlike, the professional type of student are those who are solely motivated for reasons *strongly external* to an intellectual discipline itself, because learning the material eventually leads to what they really seek: status and wealth. For example, they may not really care about wanting to heal people, but they view the practice of medicine as highly lucrative.

Now all four types may engage in the activities of studenting mentioned above and may sometimes be indiscernible to teachers. But it is mainly the scholar and scholar-professional types that fall under our concept of the ideal student. The purely externally motivated student, when concerned only with the status and wealth that formal education may help bring, is unaffected by the aim of education adumbrated above. He is a student in the institutional sense that may at times, when long-term self-interest is considered, *mimic* the ideal of the student. As we shall note in the next section, the dynamics of the educational system strongly fosters the development of this type of student. During other times, however, the status and wealth motivated student most closely resembles that most teacher-dreaded student type: the wholly unmotivated student (or "indifferent/hostile" types). When coupled with indifferent or even hostile students, the status and wealth seekers swell the ranks of those who are in the schools, but not of it. For together they have no abiding allegiance to the purpose of education itself. While we know of no complete survey estimating the population of each type of student (surely an important task that should be done), general experience suggests that alarmingly large numbers of our young fall into the educationally unmotivated category. (Note 6) For they are students in name only. In many schools, especially at the secondary level, educators are in a day-to-day struggle to simply find something to interest these nominal students. As we shall explore later, status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students are quite capable of scuttling the most carefully worked out educational reforms and may serve as the overlooked factor in undermining the reform agenda.

But prior to attending to such issues, we finally need to comment upon the matter of student responsibility. Granted, as we have argued, that students are causal agents of their own learning, can students be held morally or institutionally responsible for their own learning? Some school districts, such as Beverly Hills, California, request that all students sign a "student responsibility contract" that purportedly obligates students to perform the activities of students in the ideal sense. But, of course, this is a "contract" and "obligation" in name only. It is neither enforceable in a court of law, nor in the "court" of morality. So, this will not do.

Teachers, on the other hand, because they receive remuneration for their services and because they assume a *high moral* office in a helping profession, have both a legal and

moral responsibility to do all that is in their power and authority to ensure that students learn and are introduced to the activities of the ideal student. The educational reformers, like the educational profession itself, do have a legitimate interest in calling to task those in the profession who fall short in upholding that moral office. Parents and guardians, similarly, share in a legal and moral obligation to foster and encourage the development of their young to the utmost. And when parents themselves fall short, educators are correct in pointing out that parental negligence can be a major source of our educational ills. Though accurate enough, parents cannot be regulated by the state in the way that teachers can be. They fulfill the letter of the law by trying to ensure the regular school attendance of their children. Hence, educators tend to be the sole target of the reformers as a matter of politics and policy.

But what of student responsibility for learning? As we have argued elsewhere, students can be held morally responsible in the context of a liberal democratic society. (Note 7) In so far as the chief purpose of education is held to be induction into the ideals of democratic citizenship, students have an interlocking right to education that comes *with* a duty to take it seriously (especially as students develop in rationality). (Note 8) Some rights also incur obligations, and civic education *in a pluralistic democratic society* (but not all societies) is one of these.

But to the extent that educational reformers emphasize other ends as the chief purposes of education, such as national economic expansion and personal social and economic status, the message is muddled, if not vitiated. (Note 9) We might well think that personal self-interest would dictate attending to the activities of the ideal student. An interest, however, does not a moral obligation make. As policy makers, the educational reformers are on a slippery slope of their own devising. Self-interest, even rational prudence, may channel students in a completely different direction than that envisioned by them. We shall argue this in a variety of ways in the next section. Excellence in education and the Jeffersonian ideal of a democratic public cannot be purchased, no matter what the amount, by mercantilistic ends.

## II

### **Meritocracy, The Educational System, and the Educational Reform Movement**

If a person comes to form certain goals, then one comes to have a certain interest in the means to reaching them. The point is conceptual. If it is a young person's considered desire to truly explore a school subject, to get the most out of it, then it is in her interest to master the art and skills of studenting. To the student in the ideal sense, performing the acts of studenting and performing them well is always in her self-interest. And it might be thought that it is a major function of the educational system to encourage this interest in studenting and to see that it is spread to as many students as possible. There is no doubt that many educators at the classroom and school levels are striving to do exactly that. Bringing students along to become intrinsically motivated in a subject matter is widely held to be one of the highest aims of teaching and education.

At the level of the education system as a whole, however, the story is rather different. Here, what is encouraged is not so much the attitudes and activities of studenting in the

ideal sense as studenting in what we call the "systemic" sense. Here the goals of studenting in the ideal sense—the zestful pursuit of knowledge and understanding—give way to the goals of studenting in the systemic sense: the pursuit of grades, degrees, and careers. In the systemic sense of studenting, knowledge and understanding, at best, are merely means to these other goals. At worst, the true pursuit of knowledge and understanding is an impediment to their attainment.

We shall now explore why the educational system at the aggregate level encourages studenting in the systemic sense, explore what those activities and attitudes are, and show how they work to discourage students from becoming students in the ideal sense. In Part III, we shall also comment on the rationality of the totally indifferent and even hostile student.

## **The Distributive Behavior of the Educational System (Note 10)**

It is difficult to understand the emergence, development, and expansion of the American educational system without taking into account deeply-rooted, American cultural beliefs concerning the value of education. Jefferson long ago noted that a liberal education is essential to the preservation of the republic. The pioneers, who immediately established schools upon settling, saw in education the extension of civilization and the preservation of cultural tradition. And as the nation became transformed from an agrarian to an incipient and now full-blown technological society, the American school was viewed as more and more central to the creation of a skilled workforce. It is this latter view concerning the value and importance of education, of course, that primarily motivates the educational reform movement, concerned as it with America's position in the world economy.

But there were other social forces at work that help explain the now nearly universal attendance and attainment of pre-collegiate education and rapidly expanding post-secondary education. Chief among these forces is that long-entrenched, almost fervent, American belief in the social and economic efficacy of education. It is a belief, or related collection of beliefs, that far predates the transformation of the early American agrarian economy. Writing in the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835, 1969) clearly recognized this boundless faith in the power of education:

Even the crowd can now plainly see the utility of knowledge, those who have no taste for its charms set store by its results and make some effort to acquire it...

As soon as the crowd begins to take an interest in the labors of the mind, it finds out that to excel in some of them is a powerful aid to the acquisition of fame, power, or wealth (p. 458).

The belief in the social and economic efficacy of education springs from 18th century liberal ideology that holds that social rewards and privileges belong not to an elite, hereditary class, but should go to those individuals of talent, intelligence, and industry. The ideology of America, if not the reality, has always been one of meritocracy. Thus, with the growth of the common school in the 19th century, it takes little imagination to understand how beliefs concerning the social and economic efficacy of education could be translated into a conviction that schooling pays social and economic dividends. Clearly, it is a conviction that could appeal to employers interested in the relatively



greater profits an educated workforce could generate. And it could appeal to individuals who viewed schooling as a way to better their life chances. The transformation of the secondary school from an elite to a mass institution in the 20th century appears to have cemented the relationship between the social and economic efficacy of education and the conviction that schooling pays off socially and economically. (Note 11) In the later rapid expansion of higher education, we find ample confirmation of that expected relationship.

To understand why, imagine a society that distributes social and economic benefits (income, status, earnings opportunities, etc.) on the basis of the distribution of *purely* educational benefits (knowledge, skills, judgment, etc.). Such a society is likely to be extremely inefficient. It is difficult and time-consuming to discover who knows more and who less. But if there were an intervening social institution that functions to evaluate individuals' relative possession of educational benefits, then such official testimony would straightforwardly provide the basis for a subsequent distribution of social and economic benefits.

In our own society, it is through the development of certification in the educational system (by such instruments as grades, test scores, diplomas, and transcripts) that made possible the development of a relatively efficient meritocracy based on education and gave powerful confirmation to the belief in the efficacy of education. Further, it welded a hodgepodge of schools and colleges into a national educational system. For just as certification serves the social and economic system, grades, transcripts, etc. serve the educational system as a "medium of exchange." This medium of exchange function of grades, transcripts, and diplomas is based on their rough "surrogate" (Note 12) capability to stand in for or represent the possession of relative levels of knowledge, skills, and judgment. The standard grade of "A," for example, is shorthand, a way of saying that a student has shown superior mastery of a subject (given a certain system level). It permits the avoidance of exhausting discussions of exactly what the student has mastered. And in their medium of exchange function, these surrogate educational benefits make possible communication among educational institutions creating easier transfer and placement policies between schools at the same level and ease and efficiency in selection and placement policies between schools at different levels (say, high school and college). Thus, surrogate educational benefits make the educational system possible. Yet they also provide the basis for linking the educational system as a whole with the social and economic system.

It is not difficult, then, to understand how an actual educationally-based, meritocratic society works. Basically, it encompasses four distinct distributions of which only two are the educational system's own. They can be encapsulated as follows:

**Figure 1**

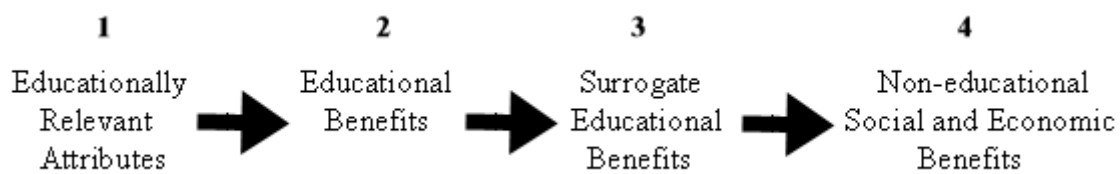


Figure 1 can be understood as saying that the distribution of educationally relevant attributes (intelligence, tenacity, and choice) in the school-age population in large part

gives rise to the distribution of educational benefits in that same population (some learn more than others). In turn, the distribution of educational benefits produce a distribution of surrogate educational benefits (some are evaluated more highly or get higher test scores than others). Finally, the distribution of social and economic benefits (some get better jobs, earn more, obtain higher status than others) is distributed on the basis of the relative distribution of surrogate educational benefits.

Of these four distributions, only 2 and 3 are clearly distributed by the educational system directly. (The "genetic lottery" and early childhood life chances generate the distribution of educationally relevant attributes; the social and economic system directly distributes social and economic benefits.) But what is central to the idea an educationally-based meritocratic society is the notion that adult social and economic advantages should be based on the distribution of (surrogate) educational benefits. "On the basis," then, entails that there is more than an empirical likelihood of a positive relation between the two distributions. Rather, it has to do with the manner in which the adult distribution of social and economic benefits is socially legitimated. (Note 13) As Green et al. (1980, 1997, Ch. 6) put it, entailed is the following normative principle: "Those having a greater share of (surrogate) educational benefits merit or deserve a greater share of social and economic benefits." This educationally-based meritocratic principle provides a social basis for the way that subsequent social and economic inequalities can be regarded as justified. (Note 14) It is a principle, in other words, of distributive justice. It is the principle concealed in the very notion that schooling pays. It is also the principle responsible for prompting students to student in the systemic, rather than ideal, sense that we shall explore below. Moreover, it is the principle that may well prevent any real and lasting educational reform. It remains now for us to draw out how differing student types might rationally interact with a meritocratic educational and social system.

### III

#### **The Different Ways of Rationally Interacting with the System**

Up to this point in our treatment of the student and educational reform, we have not adequately considered the importance of a student's entire motivational and belief configuration. Although it is helpful to know that a person has a certain view of the good, more information is needed to explain, and in most cases justify, the student's interaction with the educational system. Beyond coming to know a person's view of the good and their other, perhaps conflicting, goals and purposes, we also require an understanding of the *relative strength* of each of these if we are to understand what the person has good reason to do. In adopting this explanatory framework of student behavior, we are in effect considering students as *rational agents* who pursue alternative courses of action for which there are comparatively good reasons. Since young children generally have not developed a motivational and belief system sufficiently to be viewed as rational agents, we shall confine our analysis to the population of intermediate, senior high, and college students who are (roughly) rational agents. (We readily grant that many students at these levels are not -- or only occasionally -- rational believers and doers; their beliefs and behaviors often demonstrate that.) Here, we want to show that *even when students are fully rational, the distributive dynamics of the educational system encourages student conduct that conflicts with the ideal of the student*—and so creates

conflicts between educational objectives and student objectives. These conflicting aims and desires present extraordinary challenges to and put constraints on the direction and degree of real educational reform.

In assuming that the educational system contains some students who are rational, the power of our analysis depends crucially on the conception of "rationality" that we use. It is difficult to find answers to questions about whether an action is rational (reasonable), and in many areas such answers are controversial as well. (For example, it is extremely controversial whether every rational actor has compelling reasons to treat all people morally.) Regardless of the difficulty in all cases, our arguments will assume three major claims about rational agency that are well-established and accepted by most current philosophical research (and even here there is controversy—followers of David Hume would not fully endorse our second claim):

- C1. A rational agent need not (but can) have a dominant concern for his or her own long term welfare.
- C2. A rational agent's desires and beliefs are open to critical appraisal in light of the facts and logic.
- C3. In so far as a rational agent seeks a specific goal, the agent will seek out effective means for fulfilling that goal.

The first claim rejects the view that a rational person is necessarily prudent (e.g., see Parfit, 1986, on critical present aim views of rationality). The second claim rejects the view that only the means to fulfilling one's desires—and not the desires themselves—are open to critical appraisal. In what follows, we assume, therefore, that the rational agent's beliefs and motivations could be appraised as reasonable or unreasonable in light of his or her circumstances. The third claim reminds us that all rational agents will take care to find ways to reach their goals. It is, however, beyond the scope and limits of this paper to provide the detailed arguments to sustain these claims.

What reasons, then, might a student who has various capacities, beliefs, purposes, loyalties, and commitments have for interacting in certain ways with teachers, administrators, counselors, etc. in the system? Let us begin by reconsidering the ideal student who intrinsically values knowledge and understanding (i.e., for its own sake) and who is intrinsically motivated in the educational system. When this type of student interacts with the system, the love of scholastic and academic learning dominates and primarily influences the person's behavior. Of course, if basic economic needs are not being met apart from activities in the educational system, rationality requires that such a student temper her pursuit of the intrinsic benefits of learning with more career-related aims. (It may well be irrational for a person to go through primary and secondary school loving learning but never pondering how they are going to live after the close of their school years.) But still the ideal student is only motivated in minor ways by the extrinsic values of education. As noted above, we call this kind of student "the scholar." And as mentioned previously, this ideal student is rare, indeed.

Consider now the type of student who is primarily attracted to a particular practice or profession (say, healing people or designing high quality items in the cases of medicine or engineering, respectively), but who sees no (or little) intrinsic value in knowledge or understanding per se. This individual will require that all the knowledge and

understanding worth acquiring must be relevant to his or her professional goals. In dealing with teachers and texts, this kind of student, who we have called "the professional," will be motivated to learn, *but only* on the condition that the teaching (and the grades) is clearly connected to becoming a certain kind of professional.

It has often been said that the best motivation for learning something is intrinsic motivation (see, e.g., Jerome Bruner, 1960). In the strong sense, however, this is false. In caring strongly about achieving some good internal to a practice (say, healing people), then a rational agent would care strongly about acquiring the means to achieve the goal. This is roughly the principle (C3) of practical rationality. One of the best motivations for learning organic chemistry is the belief that it will be really useful in the medical profession. The professionally-oriented student need not intrinsically value organic chemistry, but her respect for its utility will lead her to learn it very well indeed.

It should now be clear that differences between the scholar and the professional account for much of the differences in what is learned and how it is learned. Because their primary reasons differ, these two types demand and expect different things from teachers and the system. For example, the professional type will always be ready to demand from teachers how the content will be *useful* for her career interests. ("How will I ever use this stuff?!?")

And these differences between types of students can take place within a single individual who strongly, intrinsically values the various forms of knowledge but who, to an equal degree, extrinsically values these forms. For such an agent, determining what to learn and how thoroughly to learn it will be a difficult trade-off (or compromise) between competing goods. Knowing what to expect of this bifurcated agent is a difficult task. This type of person may demand and expect different things at different times in ways that seem to lead to unpredictable and irregular behavior. We have called this kind of student the "scholar-professional."

For each of the three types of students, who most closely fit aspects of the ideal student, we have assumed that their motivation for economic and social status has little influence on their interaction with the educational system. We assume that their primary and dominant motives to be either the intrinsic and/or extrinsic valuing of educational benefits. Recall, however, that the surrogate educational benefits (grades, test scores, diplomas, etc.) function to distribute non-educational social and economic benefits. Now it is clearly possible and probable in our individualistic, wealth- and status-oriented society (though clearly not necessary) for a rational agent to be primarily motivated to acquire the various social and economic goods that help make life more enjoyable (to an extent). As Toqueville noted, it is also possible and probable that a rational agent may come to see that acquiring a differentially greater share of surrogate educational benefits is a comparatively reasonable means to acquiring a differentially greater share of social and economic benefits. (It is a highly risky, if not downright irrational, strategy to count on just being lucky.)

Suppose, now, that this kind of rational agent neither extrinsically nor intrinsically values pure educational benefits (knowledge, skills, understanding, etc.). This student, who we have called "the status and wealth seeker" (one kind of "systemic" student), wants the degree (or the grade) *only because* it is a reasonable means to social and economic benefits. But this kind of student will regard the acquisition of knowledge and understanding as an arbitrary hurdle or obstacle to getting the diploma (and then the

goods). Though the status and wealth seeker will want the grade and eventually the diploma, he or she will regard the learning as utter drudgery—something to be done as minimally as possible and something to be forgotten as soon as it is practical (i.e., as soon as the grade is assigned, the degree received, or the SAT test taken (Note 15)). This type of "student" will be like a chameleon to his or her teachers. For this type's public display will be like the scholar but with a fair emphasis on "brown nosing" behavior. Privately, however, he or she finds it all a rather disgusting game to have to play, though one played with typical thespian resources. When it is possible to avoid detection, the status and wealth seeker will lie and cheat, plagiarize, steal, or buy the necessary work (term paper mills), and do anything that will prevent other students from receiving higher grades than his or her own.

Though morally rather unattractive, we should expect little else from a rational agent who sees the institutional norms of schooling and the social tradition of academic education as basically arbitrary matters. As we shall see, the normative principle connecting the educational and social and economic systems strongly encourage status and wealth seekers to remain in the educational system when their talents and capacities might be more productively—not to say morally—engaged in pursuits outside it. But the development of this kind of person is an unintended effect of our adoption of an educationally-based meritocracy.

There is yet a final kind of systemic student to identify: to save space (since they are somewhat different, but motivationally the same in school), we called this type "the indifferent/hostile student." This is the "student" who neither intrinsically or extrinsically values pure educational benefits nor expects (or wants) a relatively greater share of social and economic benefits brought about through the pursuit of higher grades or diplomas. These individuals may very well want an abundance of material wealth and social respect; but they either disdain the effort (and charade) the status and wealth seeker employs in securing surrogate educational benefits or else views the institution of schooling with repugnance.

How, then, could it be rational for the indifferent/hostile student to remain within the educational system and not drop out? The answer easily could be friends and expectations. The indifferent/hostile student's friends are in school and he or she has a primary motivation to be with them. Alternatively, such persons know that the family and society at large expect them to be in school, and they strongly want to please them. Finally, it is extremely rational for a teenage drug dealer to want to be close to the market of other kids. All of these are plausible and, no doubt, salient reasons for many of our disaffected young.

But a deeper reason for staying in school has to do with the dynamics of the educational system that dictate a defensive strategy for rational agents continuing in school at least through the 12th grade. As rates of high school completion have climbed towards 100% of the school-age population in this past century (currently about 80% of 17 year- olds complete high school), the positive social and economic benefits associated with high school completion have drastically declined. Indeed, as a purely logical point, at 100 percent attainment, completion of high school in itself can have no disproportionate social and economic pay-off for individuals (Green et al. 1980 & 1997, Ch. 6). (This means that the status and wealth-seeking student is forced to go on to higher education where the pay-off prospects are still real.) But if *completion* of high school is no longer a big deal, *not completing* high school is an absolute disaster for individuals. In an

educational system in which nearly everyone completes high school, being one of the few who drop out is a near certain recipe for a life of the lowest paying jobs with an attendant probability of periods of unemployment or a generally unappealing life. (How many "life-long" drug dealers manage to retire after leading a "work" life free of misfortune?) The indifferent/hostile student, if rational, is compelled to remain in school out of defensive necessity (see also Thurow, 1975).

But since the indifferent/hostile student is indifferent or hostile to both the acquisition of knowledge and understanding and to the relatively greater social and economic pay-off of advanced formal education, this systemic type of student will have little reason to come truly to grips with the curriculum or even to engage in the status and wealth-seeker's charade with teachers. They have reason only to avoid the disaster that confronts the school dropout. And once they are compelled to be in school where they, at bottom, do not want to be, their expression of frustration, boredom, and hostility is quite understandable, if not potentially explosive (witness the rash of school shootings, etc.)

The five general kinds of students can, thusly, be categorized in terms of the kind of motive and the (comparative) strength of the motive (see Table 1 below). What it shows is that rational students can have a variety of different kinds of reasons for dealing with the educational system. For each type of student, the reasons they have will provide the rational justification for their action strategies. (And here we must stress the equally important fact that many students interact irrationally or non-rationally with the educational system, but still they mimic in large part the behavior of the status and wealth-seeker and the indifferent/hostile students: the two kinds of systemic students. They just are not as consistent and clear-minded about why they act as they do.) Moreover, a typology of the kind that we offer here calls for more and better empirical research to determine more precisely the relative proportions of each kind of rational student at the various levels of the educational system and their less rational counterparts. (Note 16) Such research will improve our understanding of what kinds of reforms are likely to be effective in working with each kind of student and in what degree. As we turn to the final part of this paper, we shall address our comments to other important, more philosophical, aspects of this issue.

**Table 1**  
**Certain Types of Student With Respect to Kind and Strength of Motive**

	<b>Kind of Motives (Reasons)</b>		
	Intrinsically Motivated by Knowledge and Understanding	Extrinsically Motivated by the Utility of Knowledge	Extrinsically Motivated by the Social and Economic Benefits of Educational Attainment
Scholar	Dominant-Strongest	Weak	Weak
Professional	Weak	Dominant-Strongest	Weak

Scholar-Professional	One of the Two Dominant/Strong	The Other of the Two Dominant/Strong	Weak
Status and Wealth Seeker Strongest	Weak	Weak	Dominant/Strong
Indifferent/Hostile	Weak	Weak	Weak or Negative Dominant Strongest

## IV

### **Student Rationality, Educational Excellence, and The Educational Reform Movement**

Through the framework we have established, we hope we have made a start in establishing that rational student action can have a powerful effect on the eventual results of the educational reform movement. Yet it still seems rather odd that there is very little mention in the educational reform literature on potential student reaction to reform efforts. And what little there is comes mainly from within the educational profession itself (for example, the so-called "middle-school philosophy"). But perhaps this oversight should not be overly surprising after all. For several concerns and assumptions have been at work in the educational reform literature from its inception with "The Nation at Risk" report. These are concerns and assumptions that have dominated and directed the ensuing discussion and debate by policy makers over what reforms to pursue.

The first of these concerns has been the economic competitiveness of the various states, and the nation as a whole, as the post-World War II dominance of the United States underwent successive challenges on the world market, especially in the 1970—1990 period. It was during this time that the educational reform movement first emerged and gathered steam to the point that the 2000 state and national elections made educational achievement the paramount political issue facing the country. (Now, of course, education has been overshadowed by the events of 11 September 2001.) In other words, the policy makers have shackled the cause of educational reform to the fortunes of our aggregate economic activity. But this view of the purpose of education—to supply a schooled workforce to meet the needs of an increasing technological world—almost guarantees that the young and their purposes for undertaking schooling will be lost from view. Yet almost no one, we would conjecture, goes to school and strives (or fails to strive) for higher levels of educational achievement *because* it is good for the American economy. Because of this tunnel vision driving educational reform, it is difficult to find a policy maker on whatever level who has asked a most basic question: What is in it for the student?

Second, in viewing high levels of educational achievement as the principal means to attain economic salvation, the educational reform movement tends to assume that the young are monolithic in nature. Indeed, the ongoing concern with school drop outs has

one primary aim: get them back in school (or keep them from dropping out) so that they can be "regular" students once more. But, as we have argued, there is no such thing as a "regular" student. There are a variety of student types who vary in their goals and strength of motivation, and by anyone's estimate most of these do not resemble the three types of an ideal students. Enticing drop outs back into schools will do little more than reinforce this monolithic view of students and perhaps lower achievement levels further. Early school leavers, many of whom have subjectively reasonable beliefs in light of their limited experience, can potentially be shown that it is definitely in their long-term social and economic self-interest to return to (or stay in) school, if only to avoid the disaster that is their eventual destination. But such policies and programs to encourage them to return to school will only swell the ranks of indifferent/hostile students (and to some extent status and wealth-seekers), which is why most of them left school to begin with. It is not that we should be indifferent to the plight of the drop out, for it is serious and real. Rather, we need to understand that keeping those young in school who have no taste, at least at the moment, for academic work is hardly a recipe for higher levels of achievement in the aggregate and for harmonious school environments.

Again, for any proposed educational reform, we must ask one of the most important policy questions: What is in it for the student? And this is not simply a crass, egoistic type of question to raise either. Some ends for which humans act are ultimate ends concerning "internal" goods (about which more below) and can be shown to be worthy of both rational and moral choice. Thus, the scholar, the professional, and the scholar/professional type of student who, in pursuing the ideals of knowledge and understanding and/or service to fellow citizens and humanity, are engaged in pursuits and practices that are rationally and morally laudatory. But still, it makes sense to ask *from their point of view* what is in any proposed educational reform *for them*? Yet these kinds of students are probably in the minority of students in the educational system. The educational system, because of the normative principle linking the educational and social and economic systems, is replete with systemic status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students. (And it is well to notice that many so-called professionally-oriented students are actually status and wealth seekers. How many students, for example, would pursue the medical or legal professions were they of low pay and low prestige?) Thus, the success of implemented and proposed educational reforms rests largely on their ability to engage the interest of the status and wealth seeker and the indifferent/hostile student.

But now consider the nature of the proposed and implemented reforms. For example, there are reforms that lengthen the school day and the school year. There are reforms that call for a more demanding school curriculum and higher graduation requirements. There are reforms that call for the ending of the "social promotion" of students from one grade to the next higher, regardless of school performance. There are educational reforms that mandate a minimum grade point average for participation in extracurricular activities such as sports. And there are state standards-based exams that govern high school graduation. Now few of these reforms are likely to affect adversely the interests of the scholar, the scholar/professional, and the professional. Of course, the professional and scholar/professional may resent more and higher requirements in areas *irrelevant* to their interests. However, one of these reforms—standards-based examinations—could well impact adversely the interests of the scholar and the scholar/professional. That would especially be true if the testing, as likely, drives classroom instruction in a teacher and school "accountability-based system" now being implemented in state after state. For as



teachers and administrators feel accountability pressures to raise average test scores, they are likely to target instruction at the "least able" students (who have the most room to improve). We should expect an attendant result to be the lowering of the level and content of teaching. In this way, state standards-based, assessment and accountability systems could help turn many ideal students into cynical, resentful ones or else help drive them into the private sector of the educational system. Alternatively, even the scholar may become frustrated by a different kind of reform found in the Ontario, Canada schools that expects students to master a far more demanding curriculum in much less time—a form of "curricular intensification."

But, now, what is in these reforms for the status and wealth seeker and the indifferent/hostile student? The answer is little else but pain and suffering. The most rational response of the status and wealth seeker is to seek shortcuts and end-runs around these reforms when necessary and to try to frustrate their intent whenever possible. For the indifferent/hostile student, there is but one rational strategy: sabotage at all times by refusing to play the game when there is nothing at stake personally. And when high school completion is at stake in those school districts and states with test-passing requirements, the indifferent/hostile student, if rational, will put forward the minimal effort necessary in order to pass the test, thus only grudgingly avoiding the plight of the drop out.

Of course, these are but a few ways to frustrate and undermine attempts to reform the educational system. Many of our more rational students, in the main, may not know and understand in any great depth the various ways we have come to structure our experience of the world, but they can be very clever and resourceful in ensuring that they never come to that truly educated state. And can we blame them? Perhaps in a world that emphasizes the intrinsic value of pure educational benefits and their service in upholding the ideals of democratic citizenship, we might well place blame on the more rational students who foolishly waste important educational opportunities. But can we place blame on such students in a world that emphasizes formal schooling as the prime means to economic dominance as a nation and "making it" socially and economically in personal terms? (Can we even place blame on such students in a world that uses grades "earned" to sort students at each level? Even the scholar and professional types will see how getting high grades is strongly related to getting into higher levels of the system.) (Note 17) We think not. For it is not our students who have placed great emphasis on the purely instrumental value of formal education for both the economy and the social and economic standing of the individual. Rather, it is the truncated vision of the erstwhile educational reformers and of a society that apparently cares more about the credentialed symbols of educational achievement than about the intrinsic and extrinsic value of pure educational benefits in leading a good and worthy life. We have, in other words, unerringly established an educational system and a set of social and economic incentives that are guaranteed to deliver marginal educational achievement and to create resistance to any real and meaningful educational reform. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find so many status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students in our schools. For in creating an educationally-based meritocracy, we have done everything we could to encourage their development.

Education in this way, rather than seriously pursued, becomes a rather cynical game to be played. The problem is not that we fail to value education. Clearly, Americans (and Canadians) do. The problem, instead, is the *way* we value education.

This points to the deep and final incoherence that lies at the heart of the educational reform movement. By shackling the drive for educational excellence in education to the cause of competitiveness in the world market, we are likely to achieve neither. For at the heart of the reform movement, there exists a defective understanding of the nature of educational goods, true educational standards, and how excellence is to be promoted and sustained. The cause of this defective understanding is an intellectually-derived, moral tradition that runs deep and powerful in American life: "moral individualism." Moral individualism is, as Stoutland notes, "...a comprehensive, individualistic moral theory about how individuals should live their lives and relate to society" (1990, p. 107). At its best, it can provide a rationale and basis for understanding society as a cooperative endeavor in which some self-sacrifice is required of all for the benefit of all. At its worst, and this is its modal tendency, moral individualism promotes egoism and the satisfaction of individual preferences even at the expense of others. Since, as we claim, moral individualism is clearly reflected in the thinking of the educational reformers, it will profit us to examine some of the beliefs that comprise it.

## **Moral Individualism and the Educational Reform Movement**

Again following Stoutland, "...moral individualism understands the good as anything that satisfies an individual's desires, interests, or preferences. This implies that all goods must be individual goods, that is, goods for, and assignable to, particular individuals, since all desires, interests, or preferences belong to particular individuals" (1990, p. 119). It follows from this that a *social* good can only be one that satisfies the preferences of most of society's members because a social or public good is only the sum of individual preferences. The common good or public interest is only, on this view, the sum of individual preferences. The common good or public interest is thus necessarily reducible to the private interests of individuals. The provision of education to all, then, is a social or public good if it can be shown to be in the public interest, that is, the interests of most of society's members. Although altruism—or the self-sacrifice of one's own private interests for the private interests of others—can find a place within moral individualism, that place is necessarily precarious. For happiness or the good life in moral individualism is a life in which one's own private interests are maximally satisfied. Thus, appeals to the common good must be couched in terms of appeals to the private interests of the many. And when individuals do not see a particular candidate for a public good deserving of their own support (i.e., in their own private interest), the majority who do may be forced to compel self-sacrifice on the part of those who do not (e.g., compel them to pay taxes for the support of formal education). As, Stoutland succinctly puts it, "What is distinctive about moral individualism is not that it assigns no important role to society, but that it regards society, as wholly *instrumental* to goods for the particular individuals who are its members...Societies [on this view] do not constitute preferences; their role is to satisfy them" (1990, pp. 120).

We are now in a position to appreciate the way in which the educational reform movement is ensnared in the trap of moral individualism. In order to appeal for higher levels of achievement in—and more money and accountability for—education, the reformers have been forced to explain how higher achievement is instrumental to the satisfaction of the sum total of private interests. This they have done through the appeal to the economic competitiveness of the nation and the related theme of a forewarned unilateral "educational disarmament." (Note 18)>

But while the reformers carried on the battle-cry for educational reform to society at large, they left their rear unguarded on the issue that we have addressed: the interests of students. But should they finally address the various rational interests of students, then what, within the confines of the value framework of moral individualism, can they say? First of all, no appeal is possible to education as an intrinsically valuable good, since in moral individualism *nothing* has intrinsic worth. Here something is good only if it satisfies some private preference. Second, for them no appeal is possible to education as an *extrinsically valuable* good, a good which by definition leads to an intrinsically valuable good, since again in moral individualism *nothing* has intrinsic worth. For such a view, something is good only if it satisfies private (short term or long term) preferences. And if a student has no preference for higher educational achievement (short term or long term), no instrumental appeal is possible. Third, because the reformers have tied education to the purpose of economic competitiveness—rather than to the non-individualistic ideals of full-blown rationality and democratic citizenship—no appeal to student responsibility is possible. And fourth, appeals to students to achieve highly for the public good (economic competitiveness) are definitely likely to fall on deaf ears. Any tendencies toward self-sacrifice in our moral individualistic society are fairly diminished by the teenage years. (The patterns of altruism that clearly do remain are no doubt testaments to the staying power of those more communitarian social institutions such as the family and church.) And finally, unlike the paying of taxes, it is doubtful that we would compel the young to self-sacrifice by threatening fines and prison sentences for low achievement—though in a few places state legislators have actually introduced bills to deny a driver's license to errant students!

Thus, the only appeal to students that can work is to their self-interest. The educational reform movement has no other real recourse. But in the appeal to narrow self-interest we have, given the structure and dynamics of an educationally-based meritocracy supported (by and large) by a bedrock of moral individualism, the very instrument that delivers the educational mediocrity the reformers decry. What the reformers fail to see is that the structure and dynamics of the educational system *are actively forming and encouraging* student preferences that run counter to the creation and sustenance of educational excellence. One might say that the system is creating status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students. Excellence in education has nothing at all to do with the external goals of sustaining a competitive economy or materially enriching individuals. But that is something very difficult for those of us caught up in our individualistic culture to understand. And it is certainly the central defect of the educational reform movement. It leads to the incoherence of which we spoke. Indeed, excellence in education is not something that can fit into the framework of moral individualism at all.

## **Educational Excellence and the Idea of a Public Good**

Central to this understanding is the act of recognizing that there are some kinds of goods that are *irreducibly* public goods—goods that cannot be privately assigned to or appropriated by individuals alone. Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981) establishes this in his account of social practices and his distinction between "internal" and "external" goods. For MacIntyre, a practice is "...any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those *standards of excellence* which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity" (1981,

p. 175). Examples are complex games, true professions, and, not least, the various arts and sciences. What is common to all of these is the fact that they each contain standards of excellence (norms) that define their corresponding activities and what it means to be a skillful participant in them. Moreover, they each require no mean effort to master (and typically require forms of apprenticeship); and in many cases they cannot fully be appreciated (or judged) except by those on the inside of the practice. On the other hand, goods are external to a practice if they can be secured in some other fashion than through the practice itself. Status and wealth are obvious examples. Since external goods can be appropriated by and assigned to individuals, they are "...characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 178). And although internal goods are "...the outcome of competition to excel...it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 178). In other words, they are not reducible to the good of particular individuals.

The achievement of knowledge is one such example of an irreducible public good that benefits the community. And note that in the transmission of knowledge through education, teachers do not give up something when students come to understand. The economics of exchange relations do not apply here (nor, as Green et al., 1980 and 1997, note, is knowledge subject to the economist's notion of "decreasing marginal utility").

Now MacIntyre's account of practices allows us to establish exactly why the educational reform movement has a flawed and defective vision of educational excellence. In understanding the practice of education as merely instrumental to satisfying certain desires (i.e., economic competitiveness or individual social and economic well-being), they reduce educational benefits to external goods. But excellence in education can only be understood by reference to *the public standards internal to the practice*. (Note 19) In this way, pure educational benefits are not goods because they satisfy individual preferences. They are goods because they are specified by the standards of excellence internal to the various forms of knowledge that we have achieved over time. They can be realized only by engaging (to a considerable degree) in the practice of education in its own terms, by coming to see its point in and of itself, and therefore *only by submitting oneself to its discipline*. (Note 20)

But in thinking of educational benefits as merely the means to satisfy aggregate or individual preferences, the educational reform movement rules out the possibility of understanding education in its own light. In so doing, the policy makers necessarily fail to capture the very nature of educational excellence from the outset.

## **The Practice of Education and Educational Reform**

In taking the practice of education in its own light seriously, we quickly begin to reconsider the meaning of questions such as "What is in it for the student?" That question, we should note, arose primarily within the framework of moral individualism. Instead, we need to think about educational reform in terms of the institutions whose role it is to sustain the virtues inherent in the practice of education. Again, if we look at the educational system today, we witness an institution that undermines, rather than sustains, the pursuit of educational excellence. Individualist thinking simply lacks the capacity to understand how important the structures of society are in forming individual preferences in the first place. The normative principle that governs the link between the

educational system and the social and economic system simply instantiates the norm that the road to riches is through high grades, rather than emphasizing the intrinsic and extrinsic value of educational benefits. Instead of taking the interests of the status and wealth seeker and the indifferent/hostile student as givens and then asking how we can transform their preferences into those of ideal students, we should be asking a far different question (unless we want to continue to blame educators in the interest of political mileage). For the fact remains that once formed, preferences are difficult to change. Rather, we should be asking: "What is it about the educational system that leads to the development of status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students?" In other words, *transforming the educational system may be the only way to transform individuals*. Only then does the direction of real and meaningful educational reform—and the true meaning of educational excellence—become evident.

This is the direction that has been urged by Green et al. (1980 & 1997, pp. 164 -168). It can be re-framed more directly here. Stated simply, we must *weaken* (if not abandon) the normative principle that differentially rewards educational attainment (grades, degrees, and diplomas, etc.). In other words, if there were no longer any major pay off economically and socially for educational attainment via the educational system per se, then education through the educational system could be unwaveringly pursued for the intrinsic and extrinsic value of pure educational benefits. Moreover, if educational attainment in and of itself was less decisive for life chances, then the social and economic compulsion to complete, for example, high school would disappear. Simply consider what this would mean for the indifferent/hostile student as well as, remarkably, for the drop out. By weakening (or even severing) the connection between the distribution of surrogate educational benefits and the distribution of social and economic benefits, the motivation to pursue educational attainment for *purely defensive purposes* (to avoid the current plight of the drop out) is gone. The indifferent/hostile student would be given a real choice concerning the future. And many of them would exercise such a choice, at least for the time being, by dropping out of the educational system. With the absence of unwilling and resentful students, we should expect plummeting rates of school violence and the restoration of a healthy climate for learning.

But with a higher percentage of school leavers in the secondary school age population, the social and economic costs of dropping out are greatly reduced. Dropping out is a personal disaster and social stigma *when only very few* drop out. In a world of many drop outs, employers cannot routinely screen for formal, but often suspect, surrogate educational credentials.

There is an equal implication for the status and wealth seekers. If the pursuit of educational credentials were no longer the primary route for "making it" in life, their reasons for remaining in school and engaging in manipulative and deceptive behavior patterns simply collapse. If "making it" is truly their goal, then they would be free to expend their doubtless ingenuity outside the schools in other, hopefully more worthy, pursuits in striving to reach it.

But with the educational system reduced, thusly, in size—retaining and, most importantly, *easily re-admitting* only those who wish to profit from the disciplined pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and callings—our society would be forced to understand that the demands of real and lasting educational reform greatly exceed the current, ephemeral attempts to tinker crudely and blindly with the educational system as it exists. If we continue our present course, we may realize fleeting gains of a few points

on test scores. (Note 21) Indeed, we may even be compelled to face the fact that there might be a multitude of pathways to make the transition from youth to productive and competent adulthood, only one of these through the educational system as such. (Note 22) Quite apart from the now fashionable so-called "middle school philosophy" developed to deal with disaffected students, we may need to think about returning to the concept of the retired grammar school to provision all students with elementary/intermediate literacy, civic, scientific, and mathematical knowledge and skills, along with basic computer skills. Upon completion, students might then choose between continuing in the academic educational system or opt out for more practical educational opportunities. Except for the few advanced jobs and career categories—in relation to the entire population—it is questionable that we need hordes of high-tech people to run the economy. (Few of the status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students are currently destined for these positions anyhow. Indeed, more of them might actually end up in these positions by easily re-admitting them into the educational system when they are more ready.)

But the need to open new pathways (and in some cases re-open old ways) in the transition to adulthood would raise a host of issues about how to structure strong educational and economic policies to foster different *kinds of practical learning experiences* for youth directly in the workplace and other social settings. For it has never been the case that the young have little interest in learning *per se*. Curiosity and the thirst for learning are universally natural to the young. Rather, the problem is that we have compelled young people to pursue *one kind of learning* -- scholastic/academic learning—for ever increasing amounts of time without regard for its perceived relevance to them. The clear and convincing result is now an educational system awash with status and wealth seekers and indifferent/hostile students, not to mention their less rational counterparts. By creating multiple pathways to adulthood that feature practical, hands-on, experiential learning within a "real world" context, we can develop arenas that will do much to foster moral attachment, real learning, and a "conscience of craft" (Note 23) (for those currently disaffected with academic culture and practice). Rather than stigmatizing such academic "drop outs," a multiple pathway approach might be far more appealing to a majority of adolescents of all social classes (especially since it would not foreclose the option of dropping back into the academic educational system later on). (Note 24) It is true that many might not ever return to academics, as such. However, they most likely would end up with far more marketable skills than our current crop of disaffected high school graduates. With such skills, the nation's economic competitiveness might be heightened beyond the educational reformers' dreams. (There is more than a touch of irony in this.)

Such extra-systemic educational reform would not be easy by any means. (Note 25) Indeed, it would require the creation of a public consciousness that education -- in all of its forms and throughout a lifetime -- must be seen to be a society-wide responsibility, not just the currently, and mainly age-segregated institution of schooling. The educational system, if allowed, can easily succeed in the pursuit of true educational excellence if its mission is appropriately construed as the producer, guardian and transmitter of fundamental cultural and scientific understanding. It cannot, however, be all things to all people as we now pressure it to be. For far from achieving continuing competitiveness in the world -- so far an event that has as much to do with luck, fair-enough economic design, strategic collapse in the old Soviet Union, and immigration -- the current spate of educational reforms will do little to move us truly

ahead on the road to educational excellence. And that is the ultimate lesson to be learned from raising the question of the student in educational reform.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The inelegant, but descriptively accurate, term "studenting" was originally introduced by Gary D Fenstermacher (1986) in "Philosophy of Research on Teaching." It refers to those activities of the student often necessary for student achievement.

<sup>2</sup> We believe that the following sketch of an "ideal" student is widely held, but our subsequent arguments do not rely on its being widespread.

<sup>3</sup> This view paraphrases that of Paul H. Hirst in his justly famous essay, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge" (1974). Howard Gardner's *The Disciplined Mind* (1999) gives a related formulation.

<sup>4</sup> Hirst, *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Green (1999) in *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* explicates the major difference between what he calls *strong* and *weak normation*. In this instance, ideal students become strongly normed to the standards of excellence in education (and to the academic purpose of schools *in so far as* schools support these standards). Indifferent students, as we shall see, are neither strongly normed to the standards of excellence in education nor to schools, though they may be compliant with school rules and routines (weak normation). Hostile students are neither strongly nor weakly normed to the standards of educational excellence or the schools. Indeed, they tend to be defiant of both.

<sup>6</sup> Steinberg, et al. in *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (1996) studied 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine different communities over a ten year period. From a psychologist's point of view, he examined the "engagement" of young people in schools (with "engagement" defined as "the degree to which students are psychologically "connected" to what is going on in their classes" (p. 15).) In his sample, he discovered that around 40% of the teenagers from all social classes were "disengaged" (p. 67). While there are strong reasons to prefer Green's (op. cit.) notion of strong and weak normation in identifying types of students and their motivations, Steinberg's "disengaged student" may serve as a proxy to our indifferent/hostile types of students. We also take strong exception to Steinberg's recommendations for "re-engaging" students. Steinberg's psychological framework also fails to mark out how students who are disengaged might be acting quite rationally (from their point of view) in the educational system. Accordingly, he omits any mention of a connection among rationality, leading a good life, and avoiding harm.

<sup>7</sup> See Ericson & Ellett (1990) "Taking Student Responsibility Seriously."

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Postman (1995) in *The End of Education* strongly takes to task the current economic

rationale for public education and calls for a new, far more noble, "metaphysics" of education.

<sup>10</sup> This section is strongly grounded in the work of Green et al. (1980 & 1997), *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System*, especially Ch. 6.

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Trow's (1961) classic, "The Second Transformation of American Secondary Education."

<sup>12</sup> This use of the term "surrogate" acknowledges that grades, for example, are neither interval-ratio scales nor even ordinal scales. Their "sloppiness" as scales is what makes them an efficient medium of exchange.

<sup>13</sup> The United States, we should note, is far from a perfect educationally-based meritocracy. Typical of capitalist economies, the U.S. legitimates social and economic inequalities based on personal luck, perseverance, and even such things as a winning personality. Increasingly, however, formal educational attainment governs entrance into career and earnings networks and hierarchies.

<sup>14</sup> The supporting arguments for regarding the normative principle as a principle that legitimates subsequent inequalities in social and economic goods among persons is given in detail in Green et al. (1980 & 1997), pp. 42–45. The point to grasp is that the relation between (surrogate) educational benefits and non-educational social and economic benefits is not merely a strong, positive (causal) one, but also is a justified or authorized one in our society.

<sup>15</sup> The popularity of Scholastic Assessment Test coaching firms, such as the Princeton Review and Kaplan, is a testament to this widespread attitude. They typically guarantee higher SAT scores through emphasis on test taking skills and strategies, not the acquisition of knowledge and understanding.

<sup>16</sup> Again, see Steinberg (1996), *op. cit.*, whose survey evidence comes closest to providing this.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Howard S. Becker (1989), "A School is a Lousy Place to Learn Anything."

<sup>18</sup> This phrase headlined *The Nation at Risk* report (Gardner, et al., 1983). The rhetoric places education—and its support—on a par with national defense in terms of national importance. As Green et al. (*op. cit.*, pp. 147 - 156 ) point out, this is the strongest possible appeal for the support of the educational system.

<sup>19</sup> Such standards of excellence internal to education are not to be confused with the generally woeful, rarely even rationalized and certainly not justified, state educational standards of the educational reform movement.

<sup>20</sup> As opposed to the individualist's identification of the good life with the satisfaction



of private preferences, more communitarian-type views from Aristotle to MacIntyre and Green locate the good life in the realization of irreducibly public goods embedded within irreducibly social practices. For such views happiness is the zestful exercising of basic human capacities (e.g., intelligence or inventiveness) in the pursuit or cultivation of the kinds of excellences appropriate to a practice of a given kind. Though the excellences of building a common world, building a family life, or of education require different kinds of activities or performances, the performance "commanded," as it were, in each is a kind of virtuosity. Thus, the goodness or badness of the performance is a matter of *objective* evaluation in relation to the standards of excellence that are definitive of the communally sustained practice.

This is not to reject the place and appropriateness of external goods such as wealth or status in a full life. For these may result from a life devoted to the pursuit of excellence. Rather, it is simply to note that external goods cannot be the *aim* of the good life on communitarian grounds.

And again, we should stress, while individualism understands society as just instrumental to the satisfaction of individual preferences, communitarians see society as essential. For even while in competition to excel, communitarians understand that internalization of the norms of the practice by all who compete is necessary to sustain its flourishing existence. (This is why truth, courage, and honesty are central virtues to most practices. Dishonesty and bad faith may often be the quickest route to fame and fortune, but they undermine the deep layer of social solidarity that forms the foundation of any practice.)

<sup>21</sup> The recent Rand study (Grissmer et al., 2000) suggests that heavy-handed accountability measures can squeeze out some gains, after all. But even here, the data reporting of some states, such as Texas, is suspect. See, for example, Linda Darling-Hammond (1999, p. 3).

<sup>22</sup> The Coleman Report on youth in transition, though now long-forgotten, remains the most serious and thought-provoking study in alternatives to the current regimen of growing up in America. It needs to be re-visited. See James S. Coleman (1974).

<sup>23</sup> See Green (1999), *op. cit.* Such settings, in other words, would be able to foster strong normation and other attachments necessary for leading a good and productive life. Weak normation (at best), anomie, and defiance are currently the phenomenological states of the indifferent/hostile students in our schools.

<sup>24</sup> In some ways our view is compatible with the views of Howard Gardner, "Getting There," *The Disciplined Mind*, pp. 214– 240. We and Gardner both advocate the end of the monolithic educational system. For even schools, as such, might have multiple pathways as is common in Scandinavia, Germany, other parts of Europe, and Japan. (Note that many of these societies are far more egalitarian than our own.) But Gardner only sees the high technology pathway of Bill Gates, Louis Gerstner, and others. Gardner fails to consider the possibility and viability of *non-school pathways* that would enable students to enter the career market in a variety of ways. But even if restricted to schools, a multiple pathway approach would have distinct advantages. For the differing "exit grades" of each would inhibit the continued existence of a *common coinage*

(medium of exchange) as represented by the current formal domination of the Carnegie Unit system and informal, but real, pressure exerted by colleges and universities to specify the intermediate and high school curriculum in a manner to meet their own needs.

<sup>25</sup> For example, it may even require an examination and restructuring of the reward schedules for certain learned professions such as medicine and law. Like the academic profession (some of whose sub-specialties deserve similar attention), they already command considerable social respect. But when coupled with relatively high economic pay-off, their probability of attracting the strong attention of the status and wealth seeker escalates enormously. The proliferation of "professional ethics" courses in professional schools is a testament to the fact that the high professions are imperiled in this way. For the aim of status and wealth seekers is to profit them first and foremost, and only incidentally serve their fellow human beings.

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