

Race to the Top: Hope or Flop?

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I want to start out by saying what an honor it is to speak to you all this evening. The League of Women Voters is one of the truly first-class political organizing institutions in this country. By way of establishing my credentials, or connecting my credentials to the sponsoring organization, I'd like to point out that when the BIG day comes, be it the result of exigent circumstances, or reasoned argument, when the United States decides to re-write its Constitution, I for one have argued that we mandate equal gender representation in the halls of power. It is my firm belief that this one simple reform could dramatically improve life and living for all American citizens.

But let me turn more squarely to today's topic.

We've got odd circumstances in this country. We've got CEOs from major corporations berating the nation's public schools—yet these same CEOs collectively spend billions each year trying to create unthinking, irresponsible consumers out of our children. Our kids are battered with messages telling them that whatever it is they want, it's priceless—or that they should “live richly.” No need to work for anything—just use the card.

Any John Mayer fans here? Are you familiar with the song, *Waiting for the World to Change*? If so, you know the line: “when they own the information, they can bend it as they wish.” In this circumstance lies a huge cultural consequence of the power we place in the hands of corporations. The owners of these corporations can use their media outlets (by the way, multi-national corporations own and control over 95 percent of all print and broadcast media) the owners of these corporations can use the media to create cultural propensities within us, that enrich them.

Right now they are trying to make us believe that universal health care is bad—never mind that every other developed country on earth has it—never mind that it would dramatically reduce the cost of health care in this country, never mind that it would save tens of thousands of lives each year, it’s bad, it’s evil—or worse, “it’s socialism.” Like public schools are not, like a police force, or a fire force is not. The rest of the world recognizes that when it comes to things that are really precious, really priceless, in life: our safety, our freedom, when it comes to things like an education for our children, or the health of our children—these things can’t be left to the vagaries of the market—an insight so obvious that every other developed nation in the world takes it for granted. It is only here in the United States, where immense wealth and power can mis-educate the public, instill fear, and dictate policies that value profit over people.

But more to the topic today, the wealth and power that controls corporate media is trying to make the public believe that public schools are bad, that charter schools, as a step toward privatization, with no nuisance teacher unions, would be the best move we could possibly make.

I am here today to tell you that the problems in America’s public schools—and you can name your problem of choice—poor test performance, the achievement gap, rising drop-out rates, bullying, violence, disrespect, disengagement, disinterest, you name it—any and all of these problems are only minimally related to what goes on in the nation’s classrooms. Let me repeat that—the problems that beset us as educators are only minimally the result of our own poor performance or poor decisions in the nation’s schools.

I will come back to this, but I'm going to stop on this note just long enough to do a little international ratings comparison. If we put the nation's educational performance up against other public policy driven enterprise in American society—even using the statistics cited by America's harshest public school critics—you find that our schools are actually doing remarkably well.

One of the figures you'll hear tossed around is that the U.S. ranks 23rd internationally in terms of student academic performance. This is actually based only on student performance in math and science, AND we only end up that low when 12th grade scores are figured in—we fare much better through grade eight, AND I should also point out that many of the kids in other countries ahead of us on the list are taking these tests at age 20 or 21, compared to 17 and 18 in the U.S.--but let's ignore all of that. Let's say the #23 figure is 100 percent accurate. We are #23 in the world in terms of school performance.

Then, let's look at health care. Anyone out there know the analogous ranking for the nation's health care performance? It turns out that our collective health care enterprise ranks #36 in international comparisons. If our schools are #23 and this means we have to totally re-do the way teachers are prepared, what does that suggest for the way America's physicians are prepared? If being #23 means we need to have a calculated plan to cut the power of teacher unions, what does being #36 mean for the power of the AMA?

I'm not proposing that we draw an exact analogy, or that there aren't other issues that come in to play when these sorts of comparisons are undertaken, but the basics are clear enough—America's schools, #23 in the world; America's hospitals and clinics, #36 in the world.

The reason you won't find people complaining and writing op-ed essays about the poor performance of America's health care system is because it hasn't had to put up with a decades-long corporate AND governmental attack in the same way that schools have. Whether you are looking at schools or hospitals you will actually find the very same phenomenon—those that perform poorly are in the nation's poorest places—those that are indeed world class are located in the richest neighborhoods.

In fact, if we used only the public schools located in the nation's richest neighborhoods, and claim that they represent all American schools, we would find that we jump all the way from #23 to #1 in international comparisons. If we simply pick those states that historically have been top performers and allow them to represent all schools across the country: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa, we jump all the way from #23 to the top ten. There are reasons for all of this, but once again, VERY FEW of these reasons have much to do at all with the professional performance of teachers or administrators. There is a dirty little secret in the education business, a secret so well kept that many teachers and administrators aren't really aware of it at all. The secret is that human learning is so nuanced, so complex, so intertwined with such a long list of variables, that quite frankly, we stink at trying to measure it. If we would listen to the nation's most sophisticated psychometricians, individuals like Bob Linn at Colorado, or even econometricians like Jesse Rothstein at Berkeley, we'd know this. They have consistently argued that we should not be using tests for high-stakes decisions—yet their advice is routinely ignored. In fact, tying teacher salaries to student test scores is a big part of the "Race to the Top" initiative. I want to bring up a couple of points related to this—points that everyone in this room should seriously consider. The first is that

this practice is defended by consistent research results that demonstrate that the largest single in-school variable related to test performance is the teacher. This is something that I'm guessing everyone here in this room has heard. Most often, however, the most important words in that sentence are ignored or deleted altogether: those words are "in school." It turns out that in terms of statistical power, in-school variables, including the performance of a teacher, pale in comparison to out of school variables. Let me share just a couple of examples. An eighth grade boy gets on the bus in the morning ready to head to school and sit for a battery of standardized exams. Only to his surprise, he sees his girlfriend sitting with another boy. This circumstance, this moment of adolescent trauma, can wipe out a year's worth of instruction as measured by exams given that day. Or think about this. A week, or even a month, before tests are to be taken, a young girl receives an email from her father telling her how horrible her mother is—and this girl is supposed to do her best on a standardized exam? It's taken us a long time to get to this point, but we now know that having stressed parents negatively affects a student's ability to focus and to learn. And trust me, there are a lot of stressed parents out there.

These are just a few of the infinite number of out-of-school variables that can have a larger impact on test scores than curriculum or instruction. But, it turns out that our standardized tests are very good at one thing, and this is the key ingredient in terms of fully understanding our educational dilemmas in this country. Standardized tests are much better at predicting household income than they are at predicting future academic performance. In other words, statistically speaking, the higher the household income, the higher the test score. When I say statistically speaking, I mean the larger the unit of analysis—and in the United

States we're talking about a sample size of millions--the more confidence we can have in this trend. Are there exceptions? Yes, tens of thousands all across the country. And more's the pity, actually. These exceptions inhibit the ability of Americans to see the overall trend. But it is this sensitivity to household income that explains why if we pick and choose schools from the nation's wealthiest suburbs to represent the U.S. in international comparisons, we jump from #23 to #1. It is this sensitivity to household income that has forced supporters of testing to cling to the "value-added" notion—meaning, we know poor kids will score low, so we must measure what kind of GAIN a teacher produces during a year. The trouble is, at least at this point in time, according to Berkeley's Jess Rothstein, who served for many years at the chief economist in the Dept of Labor, the research surrounding attempts to capture a value-added measure suggests that it's little better than a coin flip. Research reported in the New York Times just a few weeks back essentially confirms this.

This is interesting. Has anyone heard of the "proximity to Winnipeg thesis"? It's been around for a long time and there is, admittedly, more score variation among states than there used to be, but basically it goes like this: If you want your children to attend a school that will yield high test scores, move closer to Winnipeg, Canada. Statistically speaking, that will work—but with respect to these five states, it isn't because they are overrun with wealthy people, it is because they are more equal in terms of income distribution. The net effect of this circumstance is that it lifts standardized test scores above states that have a greater divide between the wealthy and the poor—for in every instance this greater divide comes with the few at the top and the many at the bottom. Notice that in this analysis of test performance the topic of teacher or administrator preparation, their decision-making, their practice and policies

related to curriculum and instruction—none of this has come into play. In fact, one of the landmark findings of John Goodlad’s systematic study of American public education, A Place Called School, was that it is nearly impossible to see any difference, from a curriculum or instructional standpoint, between good schools and bad ones. They use the same textbooks and the teachers use very similar methods.

Let’s move quickly to the issue of school drop-outs. We’re not doing well with this problem—in fact, it’s a huge embarrassment to the devotees of No Child Left Behind. But once again, this problem has little to do with the performance of teachers or any of the other villains identified in the Waiting for Superman film—just in case there are folks here who decided to take in that little gem of a film. The sad truth is that drop-outs occur when the economic lives of those who drop out are not substantially different from the economic lives of those who don’t drop out. Rural people over 50 years old know and understand this. We saw our classmates drop out to farm full-time, or depending on where you lived, to work in the mines, or to commercially fish on coastal waters. It’s no different today. If high school graduates have nothing to do but roam the streets, drop-outs will soon join them there. What this means is that if we truly want to improve the performance of America’s schools, we must first improve the performance of America’s economy. Said another way, in order to improve America’s schools we need to fashion economic policy that will yield jobs, not export them, jobs that come with a wage conducive to living a dignified life. In 2010, American corporations created more jobs overseas than in the U.S. The availability of work and the level at which it is compensated is a matter of economic policy—as is the current range in the wealth-poverty divide. Deliberate policy efforts, like de-regulating the financial industry and legislating tax cuts

for the wealthiest among us, has pushed the wealth-poverty divide in this country to such a degree that it now exceeds the worst excesses of the medieval era. Indeed, these policies are quickly pushing us to the status of third world nationhood, places where people are routinely imprisoned, where the environment is routinely put at risk, where food safety is increasingly suspect, and where a crumbling infrastructure threatens the return of infectious diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, etc. All of this is evidence, in my book at least, that our schools are outperforming the economy in terms of contributing to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this country.

There's one last telling circumstance related to the poor performance of the American economy. Those individuals in positions that collectively drive the economy, and I'm talking about people like, for example, those at BP who decided to cut corners in the gulf, or the bankers who decided to package bad loans with good loans and then bet on them, or the supreme court justices who in the citizens united case handed the political life of the nation over to multi-national corporations—these are all individuals who blew the tops off of school tests. Nothing could make the point more clearly—an education is simply not synonymous with a test score. A test score is a false god if there ever was one. In fact, until we get much, much better at testing technology, building the nation's educational policy around testing is actually counter-productive to the cause of true education.

When compared against health care and against the economy, schools look pretty darn good. And, regrettably, if we do a similar comparison against the nation's political life, we find the same holds true. To recognize this it is helpful to understand that many of our nation's

founders, in particular those who carried the day at Philadelphia's 1787 constitutional convention, had a deep distrust for the concept of democracy. Our constitution wrecks of that distrust, though some of the worst examples have been amended. But we still suffer from things like the electoral college which allows individuals who lose the popular vote to still win the election—most recent case of this was in 2000. Then there's the nonelected Supreme Court, whose members serve for life, then there's the fact that our constitution is tougher to actually change through popular will, than any other modern constitution in the world. Worse, the constitution was written to purposefully minimize citizen participation in government. Our political lives, from a constitutional standpoint—amount to no more than coming out to vote once every two years—and then only if we feel like it. Which, by the way, we generally don't. We have the lowest voter participation rate of any of the world's top 25 democracies. Unbeknownst to the founders, the system they created was ideally suited to corruption by wealth, which is to say, in the context of the 21st century, ideally suited to the near-complete takeover by corporate interests.

With our government so blatantly in the hands of corporate interests—it is no wonder why voter apathy is so rampant. People don't bother to vote because neither party cares much about citizen concerns. You get elected and stay elected by serving corporate interests.

Our schools were initially created to give citizens the wherewithal to play a political role with their lives—but that goal was dropped at the height of our Social Darwinist era—when we decided certain human groups were less evolved than others—we shifted the purpose of schooling from political to economic wherewithal—which had the added benefit of

differentiating the curriculum—college prep for rich white kids, vocational preparation that including shoe-polishing, for minority kids.

But even having had to shoulder and ultimately throw off that Social Darwinist legacy, educational performance in this country demonstrably outperforms other large societal enterprises such as health care, economic policy, and political policy. Recognize that I am sparing the defense industry—an enterprise that has been synonymous with waste for decades. Make no mistake about it, compared to the rest of the nation’s largest policy arenas, schooling is the VERY LEAST of our problems, and probably the most effective of any of them.

Sad to say, but the Race to the Top strategy will share the fate of all federal educational reform efforts. Anyone in this room remember Goals 2000? And then, America 2000? These were federal initiatives designed to meet EIGHT broad goals by the year 2000, among them “being first in the world in math and science.” We did not meet a single one of those goals. Not a single one.

So the Bush administration created a new federal strategy—something called No Child Left Behind. Nine years after that bill was signed it is clear that we are leaving many more behind, just using drop-outs as an indicator, then we were before the law was passed. You’d think this kind of dramatic failure, really seismic-level failure, of federal education policy might create some reflection, might generate serious questions about whether Congress is too far removed from classrooms to be making policies that affect the classroom. Instead we’re going to subject ourselves to yet another federal education strategy doomed to failure, another federal strategy that will very likely make things worse than they are today. If it isn’t yet clear

to you at this point, with respect to the question Race to the Top: Hope or Flop? I come down emphatically on the side of flop.

Thank you for your attention here this evening.