



Why Bill Gates's Billions Will Not Improve Education

As we all know, Bill Gates and his wife Melinda have established a charitable foundation that will spend billions of dollars trying to improve American education. But despite all their good intentions, they will fail. Why? Because they really don't understand why American education is failing so miserably.



Recently, in an interview in *Newsweek* magazine (1/3/2011), Gates was asked why American education is lagging so far behind other countries. His reply: "The Chinese, who have a 10th of our wealth, are running a great education system. There are some things we can learn from other systems. They have a longer school day in most countries, and a longer school year in most countries. And some of them have elements of their personnel system that are worth learning from."

The problem with that answer is that it reveals that Gates knows nothing about the history of American education. There was a time in this country when the schools provided a very decent education for all of the children without any of today's frills and computers. I know, because I was a recipient of such an education back in the 1930s and '40s.

In those days we were taught to read with phonics, we were taught to write in cursive script, and we were drilled in the arithmetic facts. Our schools were immaculately clean. We sat in desks bolted to the floor, arranged in rows, so that you only saw the back of the head of the student in front of you. The room was quiet, and the walls were bare except for a portrait of George Washington.

In those days, the teacher sat at a desk in front of the classroom and was the focus of attention. She taught a curriculum that appealed to a rational mind. You couldn't possibly have Attention Deficit Disorder in her classroom since your attention was riveted on what she was teaching. And what she taught made sense: history, geography, music appreciation, decimals, fractions, etc. Also, the school Principal read the 23rd Psalm at assemblies, which calmed us all down.

In junior high school we were all taught touch-typing so that we could use that highly useful skill later in life. Today, at 84, I use it in writing articles on my computer. But how many kids learn touch-typing today in our schools even though they will have to use computers for the rest of their lives? Of course, they no longer learn to write in cursive. After all, we are all going to use computers to do our writing.

So we really don't have to look at how other countries are educating their children, since those countries are actually imitating what American education used to be like. But Bill Gates will have a very



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tough time trying to get American educators to return to a philosophy of education that produced what Tom Brokaw called America's greatest generation.

The educators want his billions, but they will not give him what he wants. They will give him dumbed-down garbage dressed up as "education reform," along with suitable doubletalk. In fact, he got a sample of that doubletalk from Sandi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who shared the interview with Gates. When asked why our schools are lagging behind the rest of the world, she admitted that our education system was "stagnating," and added:

Many of them teach a common curriculum...and they create the tools and conditions that teachers need to teach, and they have mutual respect and accountability. So kids have a role in terms of education, parents have a role in terms of education, teachers have a role in terms of education, and policy makers do as well.

All of that malarkey is known as professional "bull." Gates added: "You know, a quarter of our teachers are very good. If you could make all the teachers as good as the top quarter, the U.S. would soar to the top of that comparison."

There have always been a small number of excellent teachers, those, for example, who know how to teach reading in the proper phonetic manner. My friend Sue Dickson is one of them. She went to a teachers college that did not teach her how to teach reading. But after reading Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read*, she devised a phonics program that appealed to her first graders, with songs, games, and little books that enchanted them. Although she was able to get many individual teachers to use her program, and occasionally a small school district that used it for a while, she was never able to get her program adopted by a large school system.

So we know that there are great independent-minded teachers in the system, but they must keep a low profile in order to survive in a very hostile environment. If Gates really wants to know what is going on in teacher training these days, he ought to visit with Sue Dickson. She'll tell him stories that will curl his hair.

But to Ms. Weingarten, teacher quality is something of a mystery. She said, "But there's this notion of really figuring out what the best teachers do and trying to scale that up."

Would you hire Ms. Weingarten to be president of anything but a teachers' union?

Of course, if you visit a primary school classroom today, you will know why our schools can't produce enlivened children with intellectual curiosity, who love reading books and conversing at an adult level. They are now seated around little tables facing classmates who may be talking or pestering them or coughing in their faces. Everyone is doing something else. The teacher is now a facilitator roaming around the room. She is using a reading program called Whole Language which turns children into dyslexics. There are all sorts of things making it impossible for many students to concentrate, so they acquire the new school disease called ADD, and are put on a powerful drug like Ritalin.

The curriculum is now made up of politically correct subject matter: global warming, multiculturalism, alternate fuels, organic nutrition, values clarification, sex ed, death ed, drug ed, diverse life styles, sensitivity training, and anything else the educators can dream up.

Gates, unfortunately, believes that the key to the problem is in improving teacher performance. Obviously, he doesn't know what goes in in today's colleges of education. He said: "If you improve teachers today, the country doesn't see the benefit of that for 15 years or so. So to be in this business



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you have to have a long-term view....So you can't be too impatient."

Again, Bill is way off track. A good, solid intensive phonics reading program in all of the primary schools of America would be all that is needed to send American education soaring to the moon. But apparently Bill Gates doesn't know this, and none of the education charlatans will tell him this. Too bad he's going to waste his money on phony reforms.



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