Lack of Incentives a Fundamental Problem in Education?

An interview with Dr. Eric A. Hanushek

By George A. Clowes

Eric A. Hanushek

A frequent source of testimony on education issues for Congressional committees, Hanushek was a senior economist at the Cost of Living Council during 1973-74 and served as deputy director of the Congressional Budget Office in 1983-85. He was president of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management in 1988-89. In 1997, he was selected to be a member of the International Academy of Education. Hanushek spoke recently with School Reform News Managing Editor George Clowes.

Clowes: How did you become involved in research in education?

Hanushek: The first Coleman Report on the impact of schools on student performance came out in 1966 and caused quite an uproar. There was a large seminar organized by Pat Moynihan and Fred Mosteller at Harvard to try to figure out what this report said and how to interpret it. I got invited to participate in that seminar, and that led to me doing a thesis on the effects of school resources and other things on student performance. It was an exciting time.

No one quite believed the Coleman Report. In fact, I don't think it was interpreted correctly for a long time. The common interpretation of the Coleman Report was that schools don't matter. I think that the right interpretation—that has held up subsequently with lots of later work—is that the measured aspects of schools don't seem to be systematically related to performance, but that there are huge differences across schools.

Clowes: So we're not measuring the resources that do account for these differences?

Hanushek: Right. It's how you measure features in schools. What we found is that what makes a big difference—as all parents know—is which teacher your child gets. But it's just that you can't predict who's going to be a good teacher by looking at whether they've got a master's degree, or if they're experienced, or what have you. That's what's come out of all the subsequent work.

What I've come to believe pretty strongly is that the most important aspect is the teacher and teacher quality. This comes partly from some of the more recent work I've been doing, which has been concentrating on the basic question, "What determines student achievement?" or "How do teacher differences, teacher salaries, and other factors affect student achievement?"

What we're finding is that there's a lot of heterogeneity of teachers within any one given school. That means it doesn't appear as if it's all a matter of having good and bad principals, with good principals collecting a set of good teachers and bad principals collecting a set of bad teachers. It seems to be much, much more complicated than that, and it doesn't seem to be systematic at all.

We've been doing a large study of school performance in Texas, where they have annual testing of all students in basic subjects. We've been able to follow the performance of individual students as they progress through fourth to seventh grade, and of different cohorts as they go through the same grades in the same school. That's allowed us to sort out a lot of these questions.

One of our fundamental findings is that there are huge differences in teacher quality, even within individual schools. When we look at the measured attributes of schools, we find a small class-size effect in the earlier grades—in fourth grade—but not in later grades. That class-size effect is much, much, much smaller than the variation in teacher quality. It was just dwarfed by teacher quality differences.

We also find that there is an impact of having a first-year teacher. The first year of teaching is kind of rocky, but after that, teacher experience doesn't seem to make much difference. Whether teachers have master's degrees doesn't make any systematic differences in performance either.

Clowes: So a teacher's first year of teaching is critical for the students?

Hanushek: Yes. That comes into play with class-size reduction programs like the one in California. What they did there was to try to hire a whole lot of new teachers immediately.

Continued on page 7.

See “Lack of Incentives a Fundamental Problem”
Dear AAE,

During the first week in September, I called your office and spoke to a staff member. I explained my situation, and what has transpired is nothing short of a miracle. Without the help of your organization, I would have had nowhere else to turn. Thank you for being there, not only to listen but also to take immediate action. Words cannot express my gratitude.

I have been a classroom teacher and administrator for the past thirty years. For the past two decades, I have not been a member of the union. I appreciate the work of the Association of American Educators, and look forward to receiving Education Matters. Keep up the outstanding work.

If you have an occasion to use the following letter, I would consider it an honor.

Dear Fellow AAE Members,

If you are being harassed, intimidated, or treated unfairly by your school administration, I want to encourage you to persevere and seek help from the Association of American Educators (AAE) and/or another organization that will defend your constitutional rights as an educator.

During the first week of school of this current school year, I was written up for reading from Dr. William Bennett's book, The Book of Virtues, as part of my Character Education program. A letter from the attorney representing my school district, and a letter from the assistant superintendent were placed into my personnel file, even though I did not violate any school policy and no complaint was filed against me by a student or parent.

The complaint registered against me was the reference made to “Lord” in the poem “Washing” from Dr. Bennett’s book. The first verse of that poem states, “Dear Lord, sometimes my hair gets quite untidy, rough, and mussy; And when my Mother makes it right, I’m apt to think she’s fussy.” Because the poem addresses “Dear Lord,” it was interpreted as a prayer and my principal feared that I was praying with my students. He then sought and received a legal opinion from the district’s attorney that supported his authority to prevent me from reading anything from Dr. Bennett’s book. Dr. William Bennett is a former Secretary of Education, and the book is an anthology of some of the finest American literature for young people ever compiled.

When I was initially confronted by my principal, he told me that he had a concern for any atheist parent who might walk by my classroom and hear the Lord’s name mentioned. He also told me that he was aware of my religious involvement in my church and the community. A fellow Christian teacher had a similar encounter with this principal the previous year, and chose to transfer to another school rather than to fight the issue.

It was a Friday afternoon of the following week that my principal informed me that I was to appear on Tuesday before the assistant superintendent, and should therefore be represented by counsel from the local affiliate of NEA. This, I believe, was an intimidation factor on the part of my principal, knowing that I was not a member of NEA. I went home and immediately called my district superintendent, and a letter from Dr. Bennett himself, my superintendent ordered my principal to remove the letters from my personnel file.

It was only because of the encouragement and perseverance of the Association of American Educators that the issue turned out in my favor. If you find yourself in a similar situation, I encourage you to not resign your position or to give up your cause. Your association is there to help you and it can do so effectively. Stand firm and let others help you defend yourself in whatever situation you may be encountering.

As educators, we have cowered too often to a very liberal mindset. Tough times may be ahead, but if we all stand firmly for what we believe, our students will benefit and our educational standards and America will be better.

Thank you.
Sincerely yours,
Doug Eriksmoen
Grand Forks, North Dakota

Dear AAE,

Thank you so much for including my article in the January 2003 issue of Education Matters. I am glad that you found it to be worth reprinting, and I am very much honored that you decided to feature it on the front page.

I continue to let the future teachers at Hillsdale College know about the Association of American Educators, especially when we study teacher unions and their impact on children and teachers alike.

If I can be of assistance to the Association of American Educators again, please do let me know.

Sincerely yours,
Robert C. Hanna
Associate Professor of Education
Hillsdale, MI

Preparing Future Teachers

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Like the weather, the burden of mandates affecting public schools is something many talk about but few do anything about. A classic example came a few years ago at a legislative education committee hearing during an unstructured discussion about public schools. A committee member asked a testifying superintendent what regulation or mandate he would have repealed. The superintendent couldn’t think of one. The question might have caught him by surprise, but when the next four to testify, all district superintendents, were asked the same question, they had no suggestions either.

More recently some leading education experts and reformers were asked about studies on regulatory burdens. They were unaware of any such work, and one said he not only knew of no such study but that even raising the question was novel.

President Bill Clinton once said we should stop funding projects that don’t work. The current administration has indicated a willingness to do the same. No argument about that. But how do we know what does or doesn’t work if no studies are done? It has been estimated that the federal government alone has 760 or more education programs—not all of which are in the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE)—yet President Clinton never identified even one that should receive no more funding or even be substantially modified. To date, it doesn’t appear as if President Bush has identified one either.

A school superintendent in suburban Philadelphia once said he had to comply with 1,027 mandates, 70 percent of which were unfunded. Ohio Governor, now U.S. Senator, George Voinovich estimated that school administrators in that state spent 50 percent of their time filling out federal forms, which accounted for only 6 percent of education funding there. The USDOE’s own Paper Reduction Act has estimated that department requirements necessitate 48.6 million hours of paper work, the equivalent of 25,000 full-time employees. Arizona’s former chief school officer, Lisa Graham Keegan, said it took 165 of her staff, 45 percent of the total, to manage federal programs, which comprised only 6 percent of her budget. There is no reason to believe Ohio and Arizona are not typical in this regard.

There is also the problem of the federal government not delivering on a promise, whether the program involved is justified. For example, a 1976 federal statute that requires districts to provide “a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment” for all disabled students ages 3 to 21 was accompanied by a promise the federal government would pay 40 percent of the excess costs by 1982. That has never happened. The latest proposal from the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce authorizes up to 19 percent in federal funding for IDEA. However, that’s still less than half of the original authorization, and this new special education bill has not yet been passed.

Those who want the federal government to institute even more programs, such as hiring more teachers (which no one has said the feds will pay for over their possible 30- to 35-year careers), or give billions of dollars for school repair to the same school boards that have allowed the buildings to deteriorate in the first place, might consider more effective alternatives. At the very least, if the federal government has billions of dollars to spend, it could begin by first paying for existing mandates it promised to support, freeing local money for other needs.

Better yet, the reduction or elimination of many of the unnecessary, unworkable, ineffective, or inefficient mandates now in place would save local districts billions of dollars with no additional expenditures at all.

Many states do no better. The California school code grew to more than 6,000 pages. Indiana’s code at that time was “only” 1,250 pages, but then that’s a smaller state. Pennsylvania’s code is only about 600 pages. In Washington State the school code was one volume, roughly the size of the Seattle telephone book, yet regulations for nonpublic schools occupied two pages.

This raises an interesting question. If no two states have the same school code, whether in length or detail, how important or necessary are requirements that only one or a few states have while the rest do very nicely without them? Why does California need ten times as many laws, mandates, and regulations for its schools as Pennsylvania? Is the latter missing something? Is the former cluttered up with irrelevances, nitpicking, etc?

This brings up a point often overlooked: mandates do not come out of the blue. However unnecessary or ineffective they may be or appear, someone (plural) proposed them, someone supported their establishment, and someone subsequently objects to their repeal, if for no other reason that, once in place, they at least benefit those who are employed in their application, whatever the effect may be on those whom they were anticipated to serve.

Possible questions to consider include:

If only one mandate could be abolished, what should it be?

What mandate seems to be the most unnecessary?

What mandates are redundant, and cover, or confuse, the same topic?

What mandate is reasonable in concept but faulty in design; that is, how could it be amended to better achieve its intended goal?

What mandate is the most needlessly expensive? Or ineffective? Or inefficient?

All school mandates, at the national, state, and local levels, total in the unknown thousands. Much has been written on this subject. One Internet search listed 1,707 items, while another, with a slightly different identification, listed 1,413. Even allowing for some degree of overlap for the two lists, it might be expected that the distinct number of items might be somewhere between 2,000-2,500.

There is no shortage of words. It’s action that is lacking.

David W. Kirkpatrick, a former public school teacher who has been actively and extensively involved in education reform, previously served as the editor-in-chief of School Reformers News. Dave has just been appointed senior education fellow at U.S. Freedom Foundation in Washington, D.C., 202-547-2200.

Thought of the Month

“I hope I die during an insurance, because the transition from life to death would be so subtle.”

—Anonymous
Textbooks Said to ‘Hide’ Problems with Islam

World history textbooks in U.S. classrooms sanitize the problematic parts of Islam when compared to how they often treat Western civilization, a review of seven widely used texts reported.

The study, released by the American Textbook Council, said a rosy treatment of Islam may arise from the lobbying of the Council on Islamic Education on national publishers.


“Subjects such as jihad and the advocacy of violence among militant Islamists to attain worldly ends, the imposition of [Shariah] law, the record of Muslim enslavement, and the brutal subjection of women are glossed over,” the 35-page study says.

This contrasts, the report suggested, with the candor in textbooks over such events of Western history as the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, imperialism, Christian fundamentalism, and women’s suffrage.

Without solid facts about Islam, the study said, “instructors fall back on themes of tolerance and apology [and] skirt the reality of international affairs and threats to world peace.”

Many topics in history textbooks are reduced to a few paragraphs and require elaboration by teachers or supplementary materials. But Islam is so exotic that a few textbook sentences can have an inordinate impact, Mr. Sewall said in an interview.

“Few teachers are comfortable with the subject,” he said. “They are generally ignorant of Islam, so they depend on the textbooks for guidance.” The textbook council, formed in 1988 in New York as an independent group researching social studies and history texts, advocates factual knowledge and appreciation of Western values.

Source—Larry Witham, The Washington Times

Secretary Paige Criticized for ‘Christian’ Comments

In an interview printed by the Baptist Press, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, Education Secretary Rod Paige was quoted as saying, “The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system.” He added, “In a religious environment the value system is set. That’s not the case in a public school, where there are so many different kids with different values.”

In a separate interview at Union University, a Baptist school in Tennessee, Paige was quoted, “All things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community…where a child is taught that, there is a source of strength greater than themselves.”

It didn’t take long for Barry Lynn, Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, to respond. In a press release criticizing Secretary Paige, Lynn said, “He seems to have forgotten that he’s not the Secretary of Christian Education, but rather the education leader for all children.”

Lynn suggested that Paige should apologize for his remarks or resign his office.

Secretary Paige indicated that he would “pray” for his critics.

California Charter School Teachers Targeted

Wayne Johnson’s tenure as president of the California Teachers Association (CTA) ends in June, but his March 29 speech to the CTA State Council showed no signs that the bellicose leader plans to go quietly into the night.

While lambasting his perceived adversaries (including the California affiliate of the AFT), he shot himself in the foot once again.

Johnson cited statistics that in 1960-61, California teacher salaries averaged 57 percent of school districts’ budgets, but today that average had dropped to 36.7 percent. That’s an interesting choice of year, because that average had dropped to 36.7 percent.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT)

Johnson targeted California teachers and educators who have supported efforts to achieve professional status and collective bargaining rights for union members.

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Barbara B. Burroughs

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), founded in 1987, is a leading national organization that promotes the importance of strong teacher quality. The NBPTS has been called “the gold standard” by many in the education field. Teachers with National Board Certification (NBC) are recognized as among the country’s most highly qualified educators. In fact, NBC is now a prerequisite for hiring in many states.

But what exactly is a National Board-Certified Teacher (NBCT)? The NBPTS has identified six characteristics that define a Board-certified teacher. These characteristics are:

1. demonstration of subject area mastery
2. demonstration of professional teaching knowledge
3. demonstration of high-level teaching skills
4. demonstration of the ability to assess student learning
5. demonstration of the ability to use assessment results to improve instruction
6. demonstration of the ability to plan and implement instruction

These characteristics are assessed through a rigorous assessment process that includes a combination of self-evaluation, peer evaluation, portfolio review, and student achievement data. The process is designed to ensure that teachers are not only knowledgeable in their subject area, but also possess the skills necessary to be effective educators.

The NBPTS has become a major player in the education reform movement, and its certification process is widely recognized as a model for teacher evaluation. NBCTs are among the highest paid teachers in the country, and are often given additional responsibilities and privileges.

In addition to promoting the importance of strong teacher quality, the NBPTS is also working to improve teacher education programs. The organization has developed a new set of National Board Quality Standards for Teacher Education Programs, which will help ensure that all teachers receive a high-quality education.

For more information, visit the NBPTS website at http://www.nbpts.org. You can also find a list of NBCs in your area by searching online directories or contacting your local education agency.
New Report Helps Bring Clarity to Teaching about Christianity in Public Schools

“The more common form of bias: teachers aren’t prohibited from referencing Christianity; they merely ignore it.”

Gateways to Better Education is launching a national campaign to inform public school educators and parents that schools have the educational obligation to teach students about the Bible and the contributions Christianity has made to America.

The nonprofit organization recently released a 14-page report, entitled “The Case for Christianity.” It provides documentation to support its conclusion that public schools can and should teach about Christianity in a less restrictive way—restrictions that have been mostly self-imposed over the years.

“Many people are surprised to discover that state governments expect students to learn about the Bible and Christianity,” says Gateways president Eric Buehrer. For example, California’s state academic standards expect students to “read and discuss” the biblical stories of Creation, Moses, and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Colorado state officials expect students to “describe religious developments in United States history.” In Florida, students are expected to know “the significant ideas” of Christianity.

A Tip of the Hat

The president of the Kansas affiliate of the AAE receives a deserving tip of the hat.

Doug Barnett, an 8th grade teacher at Pioneer Trail Junior High School in Olathe, Kansas, won the Kansas competition in the Daughters of the American Revolution’s 2003 Outstanding Teacher of American History contest.

Doug gratefully received the award at the DAR’s state conference last month. He will now be in competition with the other state winners. The national winner will be announced at DAR’s Continental Congress during July in Washington, D.C.

Doug has taught in the Olathe School District for twenty-four years. He also coaches the boys and girls basketball teams at Pioneer Trail. In addition to his teaching and coaching duties, Doug has served as the President of the Kansas Association of American Educators for the past three years.

Congratulations Doug Barnett! EM

Editor’s Note—

If you or a fellow AAE member has received an award or honor in the past year that you would like us to know about, please drop us a note. We would love to share more success stories with our colleagues.
Lack of Incentives a Fundamental Problem in Education?

Continued from page 1

The richer, wealthier suburban districts hired experienced teachers from the inner-city schools, and the inner-city schools went out and hired all inexperienced teachers. And so you can infer that it's likely that inner-city children got hurt by the class-size reduction program in California, which is just the opposite of what people want to tell you.

Clowes: So we need to look at how education is organized as well as the way it's funded?

Hanushek: Right. We also look at differences in teacher salaries across districts, and we ask: What happens if one district pays more than other districts for teachers? We find that there is some effect of salaries on movement, but it's much less than the effect of the student body characteristics on movements.

Basically, teachers are moving to teach higher-achieving higher-income white children. Teachers seem to be following the characteristics of the student body more than following higher salaries.

The other thing we find is that salary differences aren't very related to student achievement. What that says is that if you raise salaries you can in fact usually get a larger pool of teachers to choose from, but that schools don't systematically choose the better teachers.

Clowes: Is that because of the teacher pay structure?

Hanushek: It's because of teacher compensation and the structure of management in schools; neither is really paying attention to student performance.

Clowes: If we hire more teachers to do the same amount of work, wouldn't teacher productivity go down?

Hanushek: That's another complicated issue. Education output has essentially been constant for twenty-five years, as far as we can tell from the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. So what you've had is roughly constant performance, but you've had rapidly increasing expenditures. From that, it looks as if productivity is going down, and it looks as if it's going down more than in other service sectors where you think that they have the same problems of labor intensity and so forth.

But it's not entirely surprising that we don't see student performance going up when we spend more because none of our policies and organization in schools pays attention to output or performance.

The fundamental problem in education is that there aren't any incentives to increase student performance. Nobody's career is really dependent upon the children doing well. Pay, hiring, and everything else is essentially independent of how well somebody does teaching and how well the school does at increasing student performance.

Clowes: Would spending more money improve performance?

Hanushek: In my view, there's not a very close relationship between spending and student performance, and so we have no way of saying what we can expect if we put any amount of spending into a school. We know that some schools will spend money well, we know that others will spend it badly, and we know that on average, we don't get much effect.

Clowes: What other strategies should policy-makers pursue to improve student achievement?

Hanushek: In my opinion, we have to do better at making sure we have high-quality teachers in all classrooms. The way you're going to do that, I think, is having incentives in the system that relate to student performance.

Basically, if you want to improve student performance, you have to pay attention to student performance. Right now, we say "We want to improve student performance," but then we pay attention to all kinds of other things but not to student performance.

We have to get better incentives in schools to increase student performance. Now, there's an intermediate position that says along the way you also have to do much better at measuring the value added by schools and teachers. We're simply not very good at doing that.

Dr. Eric Hanushek is the Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, as well as a Research Associate at the national Bureau of Economic Research. He is a leading expert on educational policy, specializing in the economics and finance of schools. His books include Improving America's Schools, Making Schools Work, Educational Performance of the Poor, and Education and Race. For more information about Dr. Hanushek, visit http://edpro.stanford.edu/eah/eah.htm.

George A. Clowes was educated in the UK, earning a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Manchester University. George is currently the managing editor of School Reform News, a monthly newspaper published by the Heartland Institute, Chicago, IL.

The Worm in the Apple

How the Teacher Unions are Destroying American Education

By Peter Brimelow
Publisher—HarperCollins
www.harpercollins.com

“The Worm in the Apple is a stunning indictment.”
—John Stossel, ABC News correspondent, 2020

In this devastating critique, Peter Brimelow portrays the teacher unions as a political and economic monopoly that is choking the life out of our public education system, like the trusts that put a stranglehold on American business a hundred years ago. Brimelow makes the case that until the unions are held at least partially accountable for the thirty-year decline in U.S. K-12 education, and public schools are freed up to operate outside of restrictive union contracts, most education reform efforts are doomed to fail.

Today, the biggest labor union in the country is the National Education Association, which claims nearly three million “members.” Brimelow says its agenda is not to provide better teaching in schools; it is to provide more money and benefits for teachers—and, above all, for itself. It accomplishes this through monopoly bargaining muscle and by buying special privileges from politicians. Even worse, the unions want to turn curriculum, textbooks, and grading standards into bargaining chips in labor negotiations.

The Worm in the Apple paints an alarming picture of a bureaucratic parasite that has taken hold of our schools. It issues a clarion call to rescue students, parents, taxpayers—and, not least, teachers—from its grip.

About the author—

Peter Brimelow, who has two children in public school, is the editor of VDARE.com, a senior fellow with the Pacific Research Institute, and a columnist for CBS MarketWatch. A financial journalist, he has written extensively about the NEA and the economics of education in Forbes and Fortune magazines. The author of Alien Nation: Common Sense About America’s Immigration Disaster, he has contributed to the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the Washington Post.

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