



*The Advocate*, January 9, 2006

"Education is still the best ticket to a purposeful life"

By Eric J. Cooper

Advocate readers are confronted by writers who fear for the future prosperity of Connecticut and the nation and their ability to compete in the global economy.

Columnists warn us that America's and Connecticut's competitive advantage is rapidly slipping because our educational systems are failing.

Yet as we rush around in our busy lives, is anyone listening - and, if so, what proactive steps are being sought? Recommendations range from the highly specific, such as recruiting and training specialists in science, math and technology, to the very complex, which includes structural and broad-based changes in how our education systems are formed and run.

In a search for a silver bullet for education reform, many well-meaning community and business leaders, activists and stakeholders push hard for charter schools. The hope is that a few well-placed charter schools, freed from the regimentation of large public school enterprises, will balance the learning equation for students and eliminate the achievement and economic gaps between white children and children of color, the latter being too frequently challenged by family and financial circumstances.

The implementation of successful charter school models are viewed as transportable across and within communities. Yet, at best, the proposals are somewhat restricted by a spotty success rate for charter schools. And, even if a few charters succeed with hundreds of students, thousands of students in our traditional public schools are waiting and praying for change in their academic lives, as well. Will we continue to deny their hopes, throwing up our hands in frustration and complaining that too many students are just not capable of learning? Ultimately all who live in our state depend on the success of each student - each citizen - for Connecticut's continued prosperity.

Some cynical Americans decry as grossly unrealistic the attempts of others to eliminate the education achievement and economic gaps. Wrote Dan Seligman in *Forbes Magazine* last month that: "It is not possible to close the achievement gap. The reason that the gap will never be eliminated is that intelligence rises with socioeconomic status...cognitive ability predicts scores on achievement tests." The implication is that those challenged by poverty lack the intellectual capacity to succeed and their socioeconomic status defines their destiny.

The intellectual capacity question is not new. It can be traced to the 1960s, when the inventor of the transistor, Arthur Shockley, and his supporters suggested that race



explained the limited intellectual capacity of children challenged by poverty, and that neither aspiration nor programs would remedy the ability of the poor to learn, earn and ultimately enter the middle class.

Yet for 100 years, researchers studying IQ tests have consistently revealed that their predictive power is limited to one thing: traditional school performance. Even at that, the correlation with traditional academic performance has fallen in the low range in every research investigation ever undertaken about IQ and its predictive validity.

Well-known researchers have gone so far as to say that most, if not all, differences in achievement can be explained by environmental and family factors. But there are cases where students with reported IQs in the range of 70 and challenged by Down syndrome have become successful doctors, lawyers, artists and business people. I am certain many Advocate readers can cite examples from their personal experience. Many of us also know individuals with very high IQs from middle-class or wealthy families who, in spite of their so-called intellectual superiority and wealth, did not fare as well.

People of color are projected to become a majority in this country by 2050. Given that, it would seem that we ought to recognize the urgent need to change our perceptions about the impact that race, poverty and perceptions play in our communities. Clearly, the nation must expand its academic expectations of higher education to include all of our children. American philosopher John Dewey told us that "...education is the opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which one is born." The premise is as relevant today as it was decades ago. Those who argue for charter schools and the improvement of public schools understand the basic American tenet of "equality under God." As a nation, as a state, can we afford to maintain our prejudices and overgeneralizations about some of our citizens? The answer must be a resounding no. That ultimately would deny *all* Americans equal opportunity for sustained prosperity.

Improving education must be the focus if we are to remain competitive. Reform begins with belief - an irrefutable belief in the intellectual capacity of *all* Americans to succeed in a manner that enables the community and the nation to maintain its leadership, its highest value and its place in the future of humankind. Can a state as wealthy as Connecticut and a nation as wealthy as America do anything less? There are education solutions that can improve the human and family capital in Connecticut and across the country.

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