

## What's Wrong with Our K-12 Education?

Alexander R. Khachatryan, Reasoning Mind, Inc.

May 2001

**Academic Programs.** My personal experience with U.S. public and private school systems is that they are not very different when it comes to academic programs. Both teach simple skills (reading, writing, math) and scattered tidbits of trivial knowledge in science and the humanities. Is this what schools are supposed to do? Since ancient times, the terms "school" and "academy" have been used to describe communities that strove to develop thinking and reasoning skills and to make students contributors to the growth of mankind's body of knowledge. In contrast, modern American schools function as factories: first, teach a skill or some facts, then test that this "knowledge" has been placed in students' short term memory, i.e. that the student can quickly (!) answer a trivia question or solve a simple and standard problem. And it's OK to forget everything once the test is passed; the system implicitly encourages it. How else could I explain facts such as, e.g. that three months after getting an "A" on an honors algebra course, my son George had trouble with the problem of summing up two fractions with unlike denominators?

**Why are American schools so far behind?** As this great country has never developed under any dictate, there have always been internal reasons in society that have molded its development. Usually, these reasons come from the needs of the economy. *The truth of the matter is that our society has done an excellent job of training the workforce that we needed during the last few decades.* America required many blue-collar and white-collar workers who performed relatively standard operations, like bank transactions and services provided by travel and insurance agents. Reasoning, logic, or creative thinking weren't crucial for any of these jobs. The skill needed for being successful was the ability to apply standard algorithms created by others, or, in other words, perform a standard sequence of simple actions quickly and without errors. And these have been exactly the skills taught in our schools for generations! Society needed relatively few "thinkers" – individuals who could design and create new technologies and products, and these were always provided in sufficient quantity no matter what the school system was.

**From Anticulturalism....** There is also another aspect that has contributed to our low educational standards. American society is harvesting the crops of building a democracy to embrace everybody, including children. We are so busy with our jobs and lives that the principle "everybody has the right to do whatever he/she chooses to do as long as such actions do not hurt others" seems like a convenient philosophy to justify leaving our children alone. This is known as "anticulturalism" – the notion that children should develop on their own. We closely supervise babies and toddlers to make sure they don't physically hurt themselves. But once they learn to avoid getting hurt by sharp, hot, quickly moving, etc. objects, many parents tend to believe that their parental mission is successfully accomplished. Here are the consequences.

What will an average child do at home when left unsupervised? Have easy fun. Choose something that is easy, i.e. doesn't require much effort, and delivers as much pleasure as possible. In other words, "maximize profit at minimum cost". Watch TV all day, play video games, browse the Internet, in many cases looking for something thrilling, violent, sexy... Why? Because it's a no-brainer. If we give children only what they want, we get what we deserve: witnessing our kids fail to develop interest in thinking, reading, accumulating knowledge and enjoying the greatest pleasure in life – unfolding the power of their intellects.

**... To Anti-intellectualism.** Anticulturalism has reached far beyond its definition, destroying *the culture of intellectuality and creativity*. Reading or being an original thinker, pushing the limits of mankind's knowledge is not cool among teenagers. George was harassed by his classmates when he read a book on the school bus: "Hey, are you trying to seem smarter than everybody else?" The culture of intellectuality and creativity is still alive, but in a very narrow circle of American intellectual elite. We as a society were quite comfortable with this *status quo* until recently. Now, phrases like "failing public school system", "educational reform", "leave no child behind" have become buzzwords among politicians. According to polls, education has become the most important issue of today's America. What has changed?

**Economy rules.** The answer is well known: *the economy has been transformed by information technology*. We woke up one morning to discover that computers and smart software systems are aggressively taking away traditional white-collar jobs – the Internet is replacing bank tellers, travel and insurance agents, making these and many other jobs obsolete. What society needs is a smart work force that can create and innovate in all aspects of science, technology and business, while the majority of all routine, repetitive and standard operations are delegated to computers. The consequences of this are apparent. Rebuilding American elementary and secondary education is not just about doing a better job teaching simple math, reading and writing. To grow the work force society needs, *we have to revive the culture of intellectuality and creativity*.

**What should we do?** Changing a culture is a monumental task. Most challenging is changing children's attitude towards intellectuality. An affection for reading, a drive towards accumulating knowledge and participation in provoking discussions should become respected and admired by children. We adults can do a lot in making this a reality. We can show children how beautiful and rewarding thinking is. Help them develop an appreciation of original and deep thoughts that will bring children closer to realizing the joy of making discoveries and inventions. We can and should make learning enjoyable *intellectually*. We can make it happen both in schools and at home, and it's not as difficult as it may seem. *Reasoning Mind* has been specifically designed to create a platform for everyone who seeks to contribute to the building of a culture in which young minds can flourish. Success will come only through the combined effort of all society. This country became what it is because we can get things done once we are determined to. Let's do it. Can anything be more rewarding?