

U.S. NEWS

How Public Schools Demand Failure and Perpetuate Poverty

TEACHING APATHY

Insisting students remain in school is analogous to telling a battered woman to stay with her abusive husband.

Cevin Soling | Updated Apr. 13, 2017 3:53PM EDT / Published May 15, 2016 12:01AM EDT

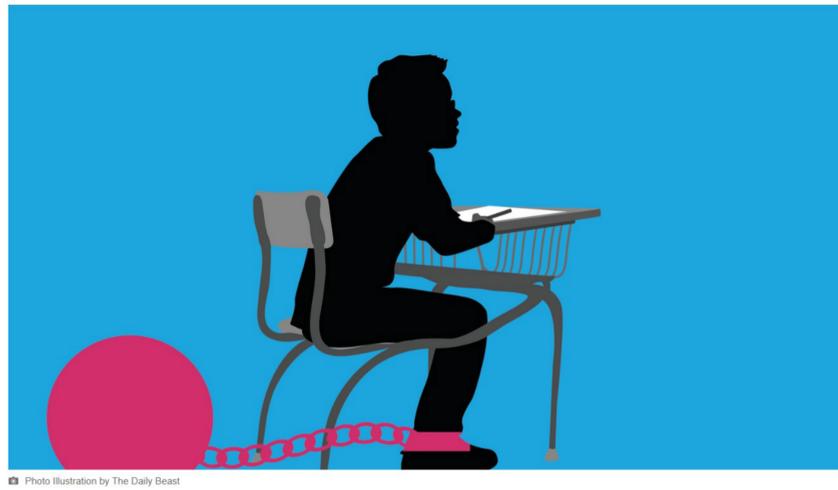


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Viewed broadly, schooling is an ineffective vehicle for social transformation and instead upholds the status quo. A pernicious consequence of the myth of schools being the best approach to overcome poverty is that the neediest are blamed for their impoverishment.

Compulsory education is frequently celebrated as the best means for economic success. This mantra began with its inception in 1848 when Horace Mann insisted that American schools would function as "a great equalizer" that "prevents being poor." While politicians disagree over curriculum and funding, there is broad consensus on the capacity for schools to alleviate poverty.

Not only is this not true, public education actually perpetuates poverty.

As early as 1966, education researcher James Coleman showed that schools' impact on students who live in poverty is meager. Because problems are systemic, additional resources have no meaningful impact. It is important to appreciate that although the words "school" and "education" are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. A public school is a bureaucratized institution that indoctrinates a captive audience, while education is the acquisition of knowledge, values, and skills that are conducive to a satisfying and meaningful life.

The most obvious deficiency of the argument that schools are the best means to overcome poverty is that there are clearly better approaches, such as vocational schools. The prospect of creating schools specifically designed to provide marketable skills has been sidelined by the monopolization of public funding for autocratic schooling. This approach has effectively ended apprenticeships and marginalized professional training before the age of 18, thereby impeding upward social mobility.

Deprived of potentially preferable alternatives, students from poor families must endure an environment whose primary mission is to train students to be docile and accept authority. This behavior is rewarded above all others, and research shows that submission to authority is the best predictor of grades. By regimenting myriad aspects of student life, schools undermine individual agency, depriving students of autonomy, promote compliance, and keep the population unaware of their civil rights, which are curiously not taught in schools. The net effects are apathy, preservation of the status quo, and economic stratification.

In addition to *how* students are taught, *what* students are taught adversely impacts poorer students to a greater degree than their peers. The curriculum has precious few courses that provide skills that are meaningful in the job market. The dominant focus, as reflected by testing, is English and math. Despite this emphasis, 1 in 3 high school graduates lacks basic math skills, and advanced math is rarely used in or out of the workplace. As for English, while literacy is certainly valuable for employment, two studies by the Department of Education show that only 15% of American adults can perform complex and challenging literacy activities and those proficient are much more likely to credit home learning for their skills.

As far as what schools do effectively create, the dominant product is boredom. Studies link this kind of boredom to stress, which can be physically debilitating for poor students. These challenges with coping make poverty an impediment to learning in school. These factors are reflected in what is known as the achievement gap—the performance disparity among certain groups of students. With regards to socioeconomic status, the margin between affluent and low-income students has been dramatically increasing over time.

A primary function of schooling is to sort for the purpose of determining social hierarchy. This process requires that everyone cannot get straight A's or achieve perfect SAT scores. Even if you had a population that excelled in math and English, the tests would be tweaked to exploit trivial differences to create a predictable range of results with predetermined percentages excelling and failing. Failure is essential to schooling and systemic bias assures that the lower socioeconomic sector will largely shoulder that segment of the student population.

The major problem of failure within public schools is that it is aggravated by the monopolization of educational resources. Without support for vocational training, apprenticeships, creative or artistic pursuits, independent or guided study, self-directed education, or other meaningful educational opportunities, alternatives to compulsory schools are profoundly limited for those who cannot independently afford them. This lack of options is the only reason why dropping out of school is problematic. Insisting students remain in school is analogous to telling a battered woman to stay with her abusive husband because there are no viable alternatives.

It is worth noting that failing school does not equate with failing life, though it has been sold as such and at times becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. For this to be true, school would have to represent all possible options a person could pursue. While failing in school does prevent someone from being a productive member of society, this consequence is often imposed either through the aforementioned deprivation of resources that disproportionately harms the poor or through the artificial valuation of a diploma.

The assertion that a high school diploma is necessary for success is not founded on its intrinsic worth. A diploma does not confer evidence of literacy or competency, as documented by a study of students at 80 colleges and universities and by the Department of Education's own research, but rather it more accurately provides evidence of attendance. A person may dramatically excel in all scholastic subjects, but if they cannot show up for class and sit still, they will not graduate. Capacity to perform, at best, is secondary. Despite this, many employers will not hire people without a diploma. Thus, the concept of a diploma creates a barrier to entry that devalues those without one. Because the economically disadvantaged are the most likely to drop out, this is yet another way that schooling effectively promotes poverty.

Graduating also creates diminished employment opportunities. Schools are structured on developing a specific skillset dictated by a core curriculum that has remained largely unchanged for decades. Reforms such as No Child Left Behind, Common Core, and STEM have further homogenized the curriculum nationwide such that whatever aptitude compulsory schools do instill, all graduates are trained to develop the same set of skills. The law of supply and demand states that a large supply of workers with the same skills and a limited demand for workers with those skills will create lower wages and unemployment. Without college or job training, which requires costs that the economically disadvantaged are less likely to be able to afford, prospects for meaningful or well-paid employment are substantially reduced.

By insisting that schools are effective, it is easy to conclude that those who do not stay in school must have a major character flaw. The ability to cite outliers who became successful is used to condemn the alleged failings of those who do not graduate, but this is anecdotal and no more valid than vilifying people for not beating the house at a casino. Certainly some do, but the odds are against them.

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