

Failing Schools or a Failed System?

Almost everyone who is involved in education knows that it isn't working the way it should be. School days can be spent racing from class to class with no time to think. Many just wait for the day to end. Both students and teachers can feel trapped in classes that seem boring or irrelevant. With the incredible advances in human knowledge and access to the internet, the classroom should be a place of excitement and exploration. Instead it's often a place of routine - preparing for standardized tests which supposedly measure learning.

Gaining the tools and skills to examine and understand the world through developing math, reading and writing skills are often turned into mind-numbing chores. As a result, for many going to school is a matter of going through the motions and playing the game to just get through or maybe go to college. But many, especially in poor working class schools don't see a place for themselves in this game and they leave. Society has a place for many of them as well - it is called the "school to prison pipeline" and it is not only for those who don't graduate.

So, what's the problem with our schools and why hasn't it been fixed? There is an expectation that education should be an equalizer that overrides the class, racial, gender and other differences imposed on us by society. We are supposed to believe that the impact of growing up without proper nutrition, in an insecure environment, surrounded by all sorts of violence, can be overcome simply through education. Of course there are examples of people who go through hell and manage to use school as their shelter from the storms of life, but that is more the exception than the rule.

The more opportunities we have growing up, the more choices we have in life. If you grow up around athletes and want to play a sport, chances are you will have a more developed set of skills. It's the same with music, languages, art, reading and just about everything. We can choose to gain skills as we get older — that's what learning is about. But society doesn't present us all with equal access — far from it. Even going to college is out of reach for most working class people because of the skyrocketing costs. And those who do go to college often are forced to take on a staggering amount of debt, which limits their choices after graduating.

What Is the Goal of Education?

All societies have some form of education. As soon as we are born, we begin being taught how to adapt and function in our society. But what is it that we are learning in school? Are we taught to understand the world we live in so we can play an active role in changing our society and shaping our lives? Or are we taught to adapt and ignore the realities of the world and market ourselves to those who control the jobs and wealth of society?

Those who are in control of society's resources have shown how little they value real education. Budget cuts have eliminated classes like music, art and dance. Class size increases mean fewer options for creative involvement of teachers with students. Low salaries for teachers means that many who would like to teach cannot afford to and those who try are often forced to leave for economic reasons.

This hits the poorest communities the hardest. But even in the wealthier communities there is such a pressure to get high grades and participate in all sorts of activities to get into college that often there is no joy in learning. It is just a competitive race.

Overall the education system has abandoned the real needs of young people. Education should be about developing skills and interests. It should be about learning to learn, not just developing skills that are marketable today. The lives of young people shouldn't be driven by fears that they won't have a job and a place in society. But that is what education is about today. It works to prepare people to accept the current situation, to ignore the problems that confront humanity, like global warming, war, poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

This is not an option if we are to have a future worth living. Young people are the future of society. They need to be provided access to all that society can offer. We all need tools to understand the world. The real challenge is to use what we learn in order to explore the deeper questions that we are interested in. That includes all aspects of life, from medicine to music, to art, to science.

We can't accept a system of education that refuses to provide for the young. Our failing schools are a reflection of a failed society - to change the schools, we have to also change the society they serve.