

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laurence Steinberg. *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. 194 pp. \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80008-0.

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Laurence Steinberg, a psychologist at Temple University, Bradford Brown of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Sanford M. Dornbusch of Stanford University have produced a long overdue study documenting the failure of expensive reform efforts in American primary and especially secondary schools. This relatively short work, written for both the lay person and the professional educator, addresses and answers a number of troublesome questions, including: What went wrong with school reform efforts? Why are so many students disengaged from the learning process? Whose fault is it? What can teachers and parents do about it?

Steinberg and his associates do not shy away from potentially explosive areas. Why do Asian-American students do well while African-American and Hispanic students perform poorly? The answer is not intelligence. Extensive interviews and detailed research among a variety of students indicates the significant role of parents, peers, and jobs, and the occasional and minimal influence of teachers and schools.

In the first two chapters, the authors clearly identify the problem and produce evidence that American society is generally denying its failure satisfactorily to educate young people, especially teenagers. Compounding the problems of this denial is the habit of placing the blame directly on the schools and the teachers rather than on society as a whole. Students today, they explain, still understand the need to graduate from high school, but as a group they see no need to work hard at it, or strive for high grades. An average of four hours a week is spent by American students on homework, compared with the four hours of study accomplished daily by their counterparts in the rest of the industrialized world.

In discussing “disengaged students,” the authors

point out that not only must schools present an interesting program, an emphasis of most well-intentioned reform efforts, but that students must be “...willing and able to be interested” (p. 63). One-third of students in the study admitted that they did none of the assigned homework. In response, teachers have been forced to “dumb down” classes. In emphasizing this point, the authors cite the phenomenon of *Dumb and Dumber* and the recent proliferation of films and television programs glorifying stupidity. Given the opportunity, today’s students will drop to the lowest achievement level possible to qualify for graduation. Lowering the standards of failure encourages students to lower their own performance level. It is shocking to realize that tests clearly show student intelligence rising while SAT and other test scores continue to decline precipitously.

Chapters six and seven examine four styles of parenting: authoritative (preferred), authoritarian, permissive, and not involved (least desirable). The studies showed that in all households, the authoritative style, in which set rules and individual responsibility co-exist and complement one another, helps children perform better in school with greater regularity. However, chapter eight reveals the results of studies indicating that peer pressure can undermine even the best efforts of the most concerned parents. For many students, this unrelenting peer pressure discourages any effort to do more than simply get by in school.

Chapter nine presents yet another difficulty to be considered. American students work too many hours to allow them time to concentrate on their studies. Few apply the money earned to savings for college but, rather, spend it almost immediately on self-gratifying material goods. Of all the developed, industrialized nations, only

the United States allows adolescents to put in long hours on jobs rather than in studying, something the authors subtly condemn employers for exploiting while continuing to undermine the purpose of educating the country's adolescents. Further, the study condemns the fact that a significant number of students are entirely too involved in extra-curricular activities. The authors suggest a formula for parents, limiting to no more than ten the number of hours their children may work and/or participate in extra-curricular activities. They also suggest that, contrary to popular opinion, students do not watch excessive amounts of television and that this was not as major a factor in their lives as "just hanging out" with their friends.

The final chapter lists ten recommendations to remedy the problem. They range from "Establishing Academic Excellence as a National Priority" (p. 188) to getting parents directly involved in school activities and limiting hours worked outside school. Included in the recommendations is the idea that colleges and universities, as an encouragement for students to study, should raise

admission standards to realistic levels and maintain them regardless of the initial disqualification of minimal students.

This is a powerful book long needed. It is a breath of fresh air after the flood of propaganda by politicians and others that has convinced the public that teachers and bad schools are entirely and solely at fault for the decline in their children's education. Readers need to stay with the text and follow the arguments as they build. The style is not sensational, but rather calm and studied and quite convincing. The research appears to be solid; the disquieting conclusions will make some uncomfortable. In the mind of this reviewer, the work is a "must read" for parents and for educators anywhere in the system from kindergarten through the undergraduate years.

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