Education on the Edge

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Education is at a critical tipping point.

Unfortunately too many educators are either in denial about the condition of their profession, or misguided about what to do about it.

This Strategic Alert examines the dark realities of education, and what must be done to buoy the sinking ship and set it on a new course that builds a stronger bond between education and the future.

(Please note: While what follows may sound "conservative," I am a progressive "thought leader" in collaborative leadership and a "classical futurist.")

Dark Realty – Youth in Peril

Despite the billions of dollars invested in local and higher education across the world, our profession is in dire trouble. The problem is epidemic and unprecedented in our history. Let's look at the harsh facts: (Download Youth in Peril to see this data as a PDF Slide Show).

Teenage suicide in United States
Second leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 34

Among students in grades 9-12 in the U.S. during 2013:

- **17.0% of students seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months (22.4% of females and 11.6% of males).**
- **13.6% of students made a plan about how they would attempt suicide in the previous 12 months (16.9% of females and 10.3% of males).**
- **8.0% of students attempted suicide one or more times in the previous 12 months (10.6% of females and 5.4% of males).**
- **2.7% of students made a suicide attempt that resulted in an injury, poisoning, or an overdose that required medical attention (3.6% of females and 1.8% of males).**

Only 7 in 10 ninth-graders complete high school

- Child is kicked out or drops out of high school every 26 seconds
- 47% said they dropped out because they were bored, classes were not interesting/irrelevant (aimless, purposeless)
- Nearly 7 in 10 (69 percent) said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard
- Low income students are 5 times more likely to drop out
- Nearly one half Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans fail to graduate
- High school dropouts are ineligible for 90% of jobs in the economy
- 9th grade is the critical year for determining the path to the future
- Almost three-fourths of Illinois prisoners have not completed high school; the dropout problem is one reason state prisons are bulging with 43 percent more inmates than they were designed to hold.
- More than one in five African-American dropouts is likely to be imprisoned
- States with high graduation rates historically have low incarceration rates, and states with many dropouts tend to have more of their residents in prison

Drug Abuse is a Sign of Despair

- First time that drugs surpassed car accidents as one of the leading causes of death since the government first began tracking drug-related deaths in 1979.
- One in five teenagers had taken prescription drugs without a doctor's prescription. 20% of these adolescents are addicted.
- 90% of Americans who are currently addicted started smoking, drinking or using drugs before age 18. A quarter of those who begin using addictive substances at these early ages become addicted as adults, while only one in 25 who start using these substances after age 21 does.
- Harm that using substances such as tobacco, alcohol and marijuana can have on their child's cognitive development, affecting their ability to form proper judgments and mature emotionally.

The American Dream & Hope for the Future is Dying

- American's youth are down on the future, with nearly half of those ages 18 through 29 believing the "American Dream" is more dead than alive, according to Harvard's Institute of Politics.
- Reflecting the sour mood of the overall electorate, 48 percent of those asked "For you personally, is the idea of the American Dream alive or dead?" responded "dead." Those who picked "alive" accounted for 49 percent.
- Fifty-eight percent of college graduates said the dream was alive for them personally, compared to 42 percent of those not in college or who had never enrolled in college.
- "It is disturbing that about half of the largest generation in America doesn't believe the American dream is there for them personally," said John Della Volpe, the institute's polling director. "That frustration, I think, is tied into a government they don't trust and they don't think is working for them."

Narcissism is Rampant

A Generation is becoming Numb

- Today's college students are not as empathetic as college students of the 1980s and '90s according to University of Michigan researchers collected from almost 14,000 college students over the last 30 years.
- "College kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago, as measured by standard tests of this personality trait."
- "Many people see the current group of college students — sometimes called 'Generation Me' — as one of the most self-centered, narcissistic, competitive, confident and individualistic in recent history," said Konrath, of University of Rochester Department of Psychiatry.
- "It's not surprising that this growing emphasis on the self is accompanied by a corresponding devaluation of others."

Trust in our Institutions has Crashed
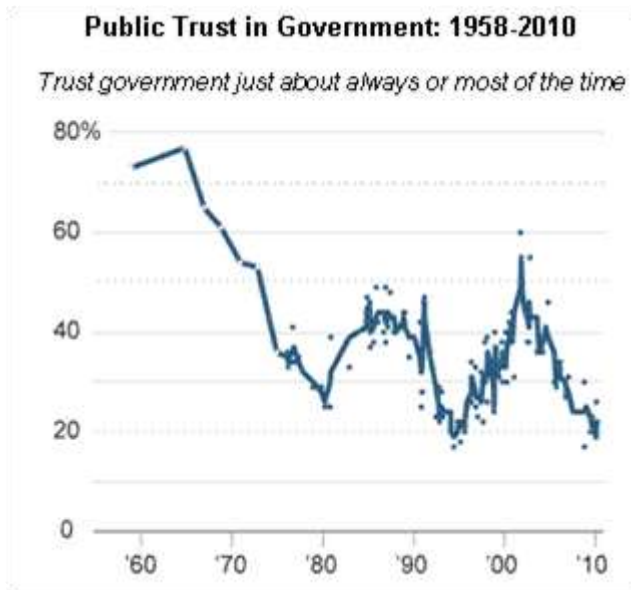
- **Public trust in the federal government in Washington is at one of its lowest levels in half a century, according to the Pew Research Foundation that has been tracking this data since the end of the Eisenhower Administration.**
- **Just 22% of Americans say they trust the government to do what is right "just about always" (3%) or "most of the time" (19%).**
- **The current level of skepticism was matched previously only in the periods from 1992 to 1995 (reaching as low as 17% in the summer of 1994), and 1978 to 1980 (bottoming out at 25% in 1980).**
- **When the National Election Study first asked this question in 1958, 73% of Americans trusted the government to do what is right just about always or most of the time.**

Public Trust in Government: 1958-2010
Trust government just about always or most of the time

These are the facts. The Crisis is Real. If these trends continue their downward slide, we risk the erosion of the core qualities that have made our nation the strongest and most productive civilization the world has ever produced. An entire generation is becoming despondent and a drag on our economic and social well-being.

Victim or Hero?

Educators across the land simply must not go into denial about the severity and magnitude of this problem.

While it may be argued that education is no more than a reflection of the deeper difficulties in our social culture, such a position places education in the role of powerless victim, not heroic leader.

Challenge

Everywhere we turn, we hear the call for making students "future ready," which has led education down the pathways of Common Core and more *science, technology, engineering* and *math* (commonly referred to as STEM).

While the STEM focus as some merit, these are all "left brain" functions. Some have said this is too narrow – we must add the *arts* (STEAM). While adding arts (a right brain function) may help provide a more balanced education, it certainly is not enough, in fact it is too little too late. Neither are all students naturally "left brained," which forces students to *under-develop* their natural strengths.

Character & Social Relationships

One of the major problems our society faces is having insufficient abilities for people to work together, to act and think civilly, to coalesce, to build trust.

These functions are largely right-brained, focusing on *character* and *relationships*. Unless our educational system addresses these issues head-on, all we do is produce are highly competent Machiavellians applying game theory to life or becoming self-idolizing narcissists interested only in themselves.

I don't intend to refute the value of left-brain education, but to create a better balance.

By adding the *arts* and *relationships* to our education we create a more holistic STREAM.

Purpose of Education

The *purpose of education* has been debated beginning with the Greeks before Socrates and Aristotle. During this long 2,500 year long journey, several requisite themes continue to reoccur, with strong advocates proposing the purpose of education is to:

- Pass central cultural values and wisdom (more than knowledge) to the next generation
- Provide a sense of meaning and purpose in each student's life
- Instill the capacity of life-long learning to enable the creation of a better world
- Enable youth to *lead* their lives successfully, becoming leaders of the future
- Be better parents and citizens to fulfill the social contract of democracy
- Provide practical application of learning to enable successful engagement in the real world

The history of education shows that successful civilizations have always imbedded the development of moral character into the development of their youth for a good reason – to ensure the advancement of civilized behavior into the next generations.

Today we are failing that lesson to the point we are now sowing the seeds of our own self-destruction.

Failure of Moral and Character Development in our Schools

In our modern school systems, the development of character has fallen flat on its face, eroding the morale foundations of trust.

The last fifty years have seen a serious decline in the fundamental principles that had once been engrained in the core of education.

Consider this excerpt from John Dewey, one of the leading education authorities from the 20th century:

> [It is essential to] bring intellectual results into vital union with character so that they become working forces in behavior. ….. shift[ing] the centre of ethical gravity from an absorption which is selfish to a service which is social.
>
> The child is one, and he must either live his social life as an integral unified being, or suffer loss and create friction…….
>
> The child is an organic whole, intellectually, socially, and morally, as well as physically. …
>
> The child is to be a member of a family, himself in turn responsible, in all probability, for rearing and training of future children, thereby maintaining the continuity of society.
>
> > He is to be a worker, engaged in some occupation which will be of use to society, and which will maintain his own independence and self-respect.
> > He is to be a member of some particular neighborhood and community, and must contribute to the values of life, add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he is….
>
> The child must be educated for leadership as well as for obedience.
>
> > He must have power of self-direction and power of directing others, power of administration, ability to assume positions of responsibility. This necessity of educating for leadership is as great on the [business] as on the political side….. [1]

If you are surprised that this passage was written in 1909, you probably went to grade school when character still counted in education. The current generation of younger students might be perplexed by the emphasis on character; it might not compute in the digital age and doesn't meet the metrics testing.

Our Moral Compass is Lost

The problem with today's civilization is we have lost our moral compass; our culture's gyroscope is wobbling badly.

Our emphasis in education is now focused on left-brain skills of *science, technology, engineering*, and *math* (STEM), while defying Dewey's admonitions of a child being an organic whole intellectually, socially, morally, and physically.

With the demise of our morale center of gravity, our leadership skills have deteriorated to name calling, divisiveness, deceit, distortion, fear-mongering, and bullying – all signs of moral depravity.

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[1] From Dewey, John; *Moral Principles In Education*; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909

As esteemed educator Henry Merritt Wriston proclaimed in the 1950's:

> Education ……is wasted if you do not develop morally; if you do not acquire morale courage ………. to call what is right and wrong and take the consequences.

> Most of the voices we hear are the voices of arrogance by bullies. The world is filled with enthusiasm and brains. The problem is that all the brains have no enthusiasm, and all the enthusiasts have no brains. The world is dying of hot heads and cold feet.

It is no wonder, for the last hundred years, humanity has fish-tailed back and forth from triumph to tragedy. Two world wars, the false god of communism, the instability of capitalism, and the decline in character in our leaders has led to a cultural malaise.

We are at a tipping point that needs counter-balancing lest our malaise turns malignant.

The core values of morality and character must be revitalized if education is to perform its fundamental role in our society.

> Dewey was emphatic that there are many opportunities to weave and embrace the lessons of character into a curriculum.

This is not at all to imply we must replicate the educational system of the past. Rather, we must rebalance the core of education to have an emphasis on *both character and competence.*

One of the key elements of this rebalancing on the side of character is to reinforce the essence of *collaborative leadership,* the capacity of each person to build trust and work in teams.

> *Leadership stands at the pinnacle of all the arts,*
> *for it is the art of mobilizing and multiplying talent.*

Finding Personal Mission & Purpose in Life

In his landmark book, "*Crisis and Hope in American Education,*" Robert Ulich, James Bryant Conant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the 1950s said:

> If our schools fail to help a person discover his or her purpose [in life],
> they fail in almost everything that really matters.

This statement strikes at the core at one of the fundamental aims of education; a factor we are largely failing to accomplish.

People want their lives to be *meaningful*, *filled with learning*, *exploration*, and *fulfillment*. Three things tend to contribute to these qualities more than anything else:

- *Personal Mission & Purpose*: Our ability to articulate a vision, personal purpose, and value proposition that gives guidance, direction, meaning, and selection criteria to choices in life.

- *Trust & Teamwork*: Our capability to building a trustworthy, respectful environment where collaboration with others continually improves and supports the way we relate to our world, our friends & family, our community, and the organizations for whom we work.

- *Quest for Learning*: Our dedication and determination to make life-long learning integral to our life's journey, and making the world a better place than we found it.

Education Molds Belief Systems

The course of history is determined, largely, by belief systems that catalyze actions of leaders, which, in turn, mold the culture of society. Education in turn preserves, reinforces, and projects those beliefs back into the culture. The best leaders and educators reconceive those beliefs, moving the culture in a new direction. When the new directions are guided by a moral compass, civilization moves forward; and conversely, when the moral compass goes adrift, history records decline.

Throughout history, belief systems have driven cultures to great heights or abysmal depths:

> Ancient Greece created a phenomenal explosion of social, artistic and technological innovations that became a hallmark of human evolution. It was a complete breakthrough from the past. Philosophers (literally "*lovers of wisdom*") were cherished and revered. If we just examine science alone, we find the Greeks "created science;" the creators were known as "philosophers," meaning "lovers of wisdom."

> The Hellenistic period produced scientists and the scientific method and logic that in turn spawned mathematics, geometry, trigonometry, progressions, optics, geodesics, mechanics, hydrostatics, pneumatics, astronomy, military technology, and urban planning. These scientific insights then laid the foundation for pioneering work in engineering to implement the scientific revelations.

Certainly the great regressions in civilization, such as that of the fall of Rome, the Dark Ages, or Dictatorial Fascism are all reflective of human nature gone awry.

> In the epoch of Roman hegemony, science literally dried up as philosophers were demeaned as trivial and irrelevant. During the seven hundred years of Roman dominance, there were virtually no scientific discoveries. While engineering continued to make Greek architecture bigger, grander, and stronger, there were absolutely no scientific breakthroughs.

> Why was there a depletion of science in the Roman era? Because leaders and educators demeaned science as unnecessary to maintain power and gain wealth.

> Furthermore, the strong morality developed by the Greeks was forsaken by the Romans as well. It was certainly more the decline in moral character than the decline in science that led to the fall of Rome.

Any civilization's vitality is beheld in the quality of its vision, its ideals, its art, its deeds, its quest for learning, and its ability to progress on an upward trajectory based on its trust in its leaders.

A civilization in decline is known by its reversion to its deepest, most primal animal instincts. The Dark Ages and the Era of Dictatorial Fascism and Communism epitomize civilization in retrograde. What we see in Washington today is a reflection three generations of cultural dissolution and decay. Leadership and Education play the most pivotal role in moving a civilization's culture in one direction or another.

A New, Expanded Role for Education

We can place blame for those who contributed to this decomposition, but that would just drag us into the wallows of despair. Better we focus on how to bring humanity to a higher plane.

Today, with most children coming from either a broken home (today nearly 40% of all children in America are born out of wedlock) or a family of working parents.

Thus education must play a much stronger role in the development of character in a child's/youth's life. Whether educators like it or not, we are faced with having to act in some capacity as surrogate parents – to train values, teaching how to get along with others, learning how to live a life of integrity, and educating how to form real, trustworthy friendships. Given today's societal conditions, we need to build character more today than one hundred years ago.

The State of Education Today

Viewed from the perspective of the general public, which pays for public education, higher education does not fare well. Here is how they view educator's Honest & Ethics (which is somewhat indicative of their "trust" in educators)[2]:

- College Teachers – 47% (down from 53% in 2012)
- High School Teachers – 60%
- Grade School Teachers – 70%

When evaluated as institutions (as opposed to professions) the state of confidence in public education fares far worse:

- Public Schools – 32%

Compare this to another venerated institution:

- Churches – 44% (down from 67% in 1985)

Our trust in what used to be sacrosanct institutions as been declining precipitously. When citizens stop trusting their institutions, societies begin to crumble. That is what we are experiencing now.

Designing a Rebirth

History has shown that civilization runs in cycles of decline and rebirth. This is one of the critical junctures of civilization where we must design our rebirth, rather than succumb to civil decline while we are wrestle with uncivilized divisiveness amidst a sea of bewildering technologies.

All revitalizations of human societies -- such as the Greek Golden Age or the Renaissance followed by the Enlightenment -- are marked by a sense of energy, a belief in the perfectibility of humanity, a faith in the value of human existence, a confidence in the evolution of a better future, a confidence in one's own character, and a trust in the institutions and leaders who guide them.

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[2]based on years of Gallup Poll research

As my mentor, friend, and co-author Paul R. Lawrence (Harvard Business School) observed,

"Trust determines the course of history, the destiny of nations, and the fate of people."

It is our obligation as educators and leaders to leave the world better than we found it, and to provide the guidance and direction for future generations to continue this noble quest.

This calls for those of us committed to such a noble quest to form a noble alliance, to help orchestrate an Age of ReEnlightenment that aims to bring the best out of people.

Conclusion

Thomas Edison, in his later years, understood the value of building a society that balanced technical competency with human character:

Somehow I have not yet achieved the success I want [despite all my technological achievements]. We live in a troubled world full of doubt and uncertainty.

Are our children and their children going to approve of what we've done? Or are they going to discover too late that science was trusted too much, so that it has turned into a monster whose final triumph is man's own destruction?

Some of us are beginning to feel that danger. But it can be avoided.

I once had two dynamos, [running in tandem that] need regulating. It was a problem of balance and adjustment [alignment]. The confusion in the world today presents much the same problem. The dynamo of man's God-given ingenuity is running away with his equally God-given humanity.

We must put those two dynamos in balance; make them work in harmony as the Great Designer intended they should.

It can be done.

What man's mind can conceive, man's mind can control.

Man must learn that; and then we must not be afraid of tomorrow; then man will go forward toward more light.[3]

This is our challenge and opportunity and social responsibility – to balance and align competence with character in our education.

The future of civilization hangs in that balance and alignment.

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[3] From speech cited in *Thomas Edison, The Man*, starring Spencer Tracey, MGM 1940, available on You Tube (excerpt from the last scene in the movie)