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Education

Better quality education, more (better quality) education per student, and more students getting more (better quality) education, are all necessary. But education is not a cure-all for job woes and economic problems. Since the 1970s, we have not done a good job with education. Until we do a better job, we can't assess what education can do or can't do. This essay is not a general program for curing the faults of education or for using education to get everyone a good job. I say what I can. Readers should know: I never had children; I was a teaching assistant at a university for about five years; I was an assistant professor at another university for five years; while an assistant professor, I got an award as the best teacher at the school; and from 2000 through 2011, I had a job at yet another school where I often worked with graduate students in fisheries and sometimes talked with undergraduates.

-We need to make sure ALL local grade schools and high schools turn out quality graduates. Graduates must know what they should know. They must be able to read, think critically, write, and do algebra. They must know enough science and must know enough about the world and its peoples. They should have a character that would make them an asset, the character that we used to think of before 1970 when we said "high school graduate" and "college man (or woman)". We should use education not only to find jobs but we do have to keep that goal in mind. Keeping that goal in mind is one of the best ways now to make sure the qualities of knowing and character remain high.

-Schools should have high rates of graduation but high rates of giving out pieces of paper are always secondary to quality education and to insuring that a diploma means something. Quality matters more than quantity. We should aim to graduate students at a rate that is consistent with the natural ability of most people to grasp the skills at a particular level. If 85% of people can learn eighth grade skills, then we aim for about 80% graduation from the eighth grade. Not all people who graduate grade school are able to enter high school and do the work there; if 90% of people who enter high school can learn high school skills, we aim for about 85% graduation from high school. If, because of the law, all children who graduate from grade school do enter high school but only 80% of those children can learn high school skills, then we aim for 75% graduation from high school. I say often that not all people can master the skills for all levels, and we should not pretend they can. We can give people who have a good attitude and attend regularly a certificate in accord with their actual skills but we should not give them a diploma that they have not earned.

-We should make sure that all colleges and universities graduate only students who have all the skills commensurate with a college degree and the specific skills in courses they took.

-Both in school and out, we should promote the fact that you do not need a college degree to do most jobs even if, in today's world, you need a degree to get the job. We should change the mismatch of what you need to get a job versus what you need to do a job. We should match what you need to do a job with what you need to get that job so that people need get only the degree that they need to do the job. You do not need a high school diploma to do most jobs. Most people can do most jobs with an eighth grade education. Most people can do most jobs with a sixth grade education. We should end "grade inflation" and "degree inflation". See below.

-Leave aside for now the fact that you don't need more than an eighth grade education to do most jobs even if you need a college degree to get them. Leave aside the relation between school achievement (pieces of paper) and lifetime earnings. Why push for higher quality education and more of it? Because a good education makes good citizens and good people, and a bad education makes bad citizens and bad people. No, the relation is not exact, but it is close enough. Also, better education, and more of it, lead people to be better prepared in today's world of technological and bio-technological capitalism. It better prepares America for the future even if it didn't lead to better citizens directly. In contrast, bad education makes for bad citizens and bad people. The more bad education that a child receives, the worse is his-her citizenship and the worse is his-her character. Bad education is to be avoided while good education is to be pursued.

-I like arguments about more school (more pieces of paper) leading to better jobs and higher lifetime earnings. That is one way to get America prepared for the future. I rely on the tie between education and jobs to keep interest in the points I make in this essay. Yet we need always to put the material relation between education and jobs in the bigger more important context of the need for good citizens and good people.

-We do not need to make every local school into a prep school for the Ivy League. We do need to make sure every child with ability and the right attitude can get a solid education and get as much education as he-she wants up through at least high school. We should make sure nothing stymies good education, and make sure that teachers and equipment can help every student get a good education. We need to make sure that every school is safe. The biggest safety risk is other students.

-We have to accept that not every child can be educated to the same skill levels and in the same ways.

-To do all this, we need national standardized tests and we need for tests to be administered by people not from the local area. We need to know for sure that graduates from Compton, CA, Bakersfield, CA, Kennebunkport, ME, and Auburn, AL are all equivalent. After bad scandals in Atlanta, GA; Columbus, GA; and Montgomery, AL; I have seen that we cannot trust local tests and the local staff enough – I do know that the vast majority of local staff are good. I know all the problems with standardized national exams, and I am sure now that the problems of not having them are much worse than the problems of having them. Standardized tests can tell us where we stand, where we succeed, where we fail, what we can do something about, and what we can't do something about.

-I make no specific suggestions about curriculum except two: All children must have a full and accurate idea of biological evolution (Darwin), and they must have a full and accurate idea of modern cosmology (the “Big Bang”).

-A good attitude toward education, books, knowledge, science, rational argument, skill, skilled people, educated people, and decent people, is crucial to success in school, getting the best out of school, and success later. I don’t go into detail on a good attitude. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn would have done just fine with the right guidance.

-Not all students have a good attitude or learn a good attitude. Not only do they hurt themselves but they hurt other students. We have to be willing to get rid of students that hurt other students even at the cost of hurting the discarded students. I know it is horrible to give up on a student but we have to give up on some so that others can actually get an education.

-Not all ethnic groups have the same attitude (culture). Some groups have an attitude that leads to better success in school while others have an attitude that leads to worse success or to failure. People from Europe, East Asia, and South Asia tend to do best in school. I do not say which groups do worse. We can blame poverty for some of the discrepancy but not much of it. I am sorry not all ethnic groups are equal here, but it is true, and anybody who is really interested in good education has to be realistic about it. If we want equality in education and in other aspects of American life, then we have to figure out how to deal with attitude differences between ethnicities. Reverse discrimination, de facto ethnic quotas, and so-called “diversity” programs are not the answer. We should aim for equal opportunity but not necessarily for equal outcome. In the end, the burden of developing a good attitude rests on the ethnic group itself and not on school staff, other groups, or society as a whole. (See below for brief comments on relations between poverty, problems with employment, fairness, bias, bad attitude, and the cycle they are caught up in.)

You personally can develop a good attitude even if your group is poorer than other groups and even if your group is poorer because it is cheated. Your bad attitude hurts you worse than any poverty, any cheating, and any discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender.

Standardized tests are one way to deal with this issue. Suppose all schools have the minimum financial base and enough good teachers. Then, if the children in any ethnic group consistently score below acceptable levels on tests, then parents, teachers, leaders, and politicians have to consider that their poor performance is also the fault also of their ethnic group, and have to consider what to do. If some groups consistently score below other groups, even if most of the low-scoring students in the group do pass, then parents etc. have to consider it is the fault also of their ethnic group, and have to figure out what to do. As always, the burden falls on the ethnic group itself.

If any ethnic group will not change its attitude, then the ethnic group has to accept that its children will do worse than other children in school and in economic life. This is not the fault of other ethnic groups, the school and its staff, or society as a whole.

If the children of any group do consistently badly on standardized tests, then the children of that group will get certificates at a consistently lower rate than the children of other groups. No doubt, this lower rate will stigmatize the group and add to its problems, including attitude. Failure breeds failure. Poverty breeds poverty. Stigma breeds stigma. And bad attitude supports them all. I am sorry this is true but there is not much that society can do if the group won't take responsibility for itself and won't change its attitude for itself. All groups, and all families, are responsible for the attitude, ethic, and behavior of their members. This is not "blaming the victim".

I know that having enough bad students in a group, a minority but enough, can ruin the whole education setting for the majority in the group who have a good attitude and are good students. Then, the stigma leads to other students getting worse grades than they deserve. The bad apples ruin everything for the whole group including the majority of good apples. If students who might otherwise be good adopt the bad apple (thug, gangster) for an image then they bring it on themselves. I know all this is unfair to the students who really try and who do not adopt a thug persona. I also know this sad outcome is not the fault of other groups or society as a whole, especially if the group itself produces (tolerates) many bad apples (thugs, gangsters) and does not actively support good students. The best that society and other groups can do is try to treat all students as individuals rather than succumb to the bad image. In real life, that is very hard. In real life, eventually, other groups have to respond to prevailing images. All this is another reason to adopt national standardized tests, so that we try to treat well-intentioned students in all groups as individuals and do not succumb to bad images.

If the people in any group cannot control the bad apples (thugs, gangsters) and will not support well-intentioned students, there is little that society as a whole can do, even with standardized tests and all the good will in the world. If the people in any group allow children generally in the group to adopt "thug" as the role model then people in that group can expect their children to do badly in school and do badly in work life too.

-Likely the biggest root of attitude is attitude by parents. If the parents have a bad attitude, or a blank attitude, it shows up in the children. Children can succeed despite a blank attitude toward books and school by parents but this "rising above your circumstances" is not nearly as common as teachers hope. A good attitude is more than just screaming at children to do homework, and locking them in a room for a time while they pretend to do it. A good attitude is more than screaming about bad grades. It is more than telling children how important it is to succeed in school. A good attitude is more than fretting about TV and video games but not turning them off. It is more than turning them off. It is more than bemoaning a thug role model. Good attitude is more than carping at your children. We need more truth about attitude, bad attitude, good attitude, and what is to be done.

-We need to fire bad teachers. We need to reward good teachers. It is too bad that "bad" and "good" will be defined by the performance of their students on tests, but our education is so far gone now that we have to accept this situation. Pressure on teachers is far less useful than pressure on parents but it is not avoidable.

-Money improves the quality of education but money alone is not enough. Schools in Asia have only a pittance compared to schools in the United States yet students in Asia do well. Money cannot defeat bad attitude or blank attitude.

-We need to find the minimum financial support per student needed for a decent education, and make sure every student in the country gets that level. If every student in every school in the U.S. had a computer at school and had access to the Internet, that much material support, combined with good attitude, would be enough material support (but not enough to overcome bad attitude or blank attitude by itself). Now, that level of student support is easily doable in almost every school district in America.

If schools have to get rid of sports and marching band in order to support education, the choice is obvious. Schools should not have any sports or marching band until they meet minimum academic standards as a whole.

-If insurance for liability is a big hindrance to lowering costs at schools, then re-write the liability laws to make them reasonable for schools.

-Eliminate or drastically reduce summer vacation.

-America has an odd system of local funding for schools. Local funding reinforces differences between schools. It makes sure that bad schools stay bad and good schools stay good. It also leads age groups to fight with each other as when people in the 60-plus age group don't want to raise property taxes while those in the 20 to 40 year age group do. It is tempting to say that all funding should be done above the local level, maybe even at the national level, and that all students should get the same amount toward their education across the country. It is unlikely that we can make this happen and it might not be fully desirable. We should get clear about the minimum needed per pupil. We should make sure all schools have that minimum per pupil regardless of where the money comes from. Most likely, we should use the state level (as in Alabama or Oregon) as the basis for funding so that all schools in a state meet the minimum funding level for schools for that state. This level has to vary from state to state and region to region. Once the funding at minimum level has been met, then additional funding at the local level can "kick in". We should not scrimp about the minimum level. We need to make sure every child gets books, a computer, access to the Internet, and food. If states cannot do it, then the federal government has to step in to make sure all students get minimum funding, and the money comes from the state.

-I would like schools to provide "free" breakfast and "free" lunch for all students. Of course, free is not free; somebody has to pay for it. But this is an expense we should take on and can take on.

-I would like students to be able to stay at school until five or six o'clock, as a service to working parents. Whether we can do this depends on funding.

-We need to get more material online to help students. We need textbooks and self-learning modules online. The work done by Khan Academy is wonderful but it is shameful that the work was not done by a thousand schools in America long before Mr. Khan did such a good job. We need to continue along those lines. Everything that can be taught can be taught through online learning modules. We still need good teachers but we need them for other more personal more detailed teaching.

-Not all students will succeed at all levels of school and not all will succeed equally well. We have to get back to the idea that people differ, and personal differences affect success. We have to figure out what to do with children who cannot work to fourth grade level, sixth grade level, eighth grade level, or high school level. We cannot give them diplomas above their real skill level without sabotaging the diplomas of students who deserve diplomas. We can give under-achieving students a certificate that recognizes their achievement but does not undercut more adept children by undercutting the value of all degrees. We can set up under-achieving students so they can find work and support themselves. That does not mean to make well-paid work for them. Teachers have to be willing to look into the eyes of a parent and tell the parent that Johnny or Suzy is not doing the work at this grade level and probably won't be able to do the work.

-We must end "grade inflation". Briefly, the average grade in U.S. schools for over 100 years had been a "C" but now it is around B+ or A-. Here I don't explain why; see below. The result is that grades are meaningless. We have to make the average grade a "C" again and make sure that grades are reliable indicators of ability and attitude. See below.

-We must end "degree inflation". We have to stop giving out pieces of paper. We can't give a diploma just for going to school or just for going and being a nice person. We have to make sure a degree means something. See below.

-Education works best when it is not primarily aimed at jobs but when it is pure education done for the sake of the subjects. I know it is hard to give students standardized tests and teach about pure subjects too but that is what needs to be done. If the teachers have to "teach at the test" then they have to do that but they can do that in a pure field. We need to teach literature, not "literature aimed at getting a job". We need to teach mathematics, not "math aimed at getting a job". Economists have found that advanced capitalist economies do better when scientists pursue not applied science but pure science. Applied science can bring gains in the short run but pure science brings more gains in the long run. The same is true for all kinds of education.

-America is famous for the imagination of its people. When people immigrate to this country, the minds of their children "take off". This is great. It is the greatest strength of this country in the long run. Rote education "for the test" can be an enemy of imagination. That belief has been a dogma in the media since after World War Two. But this myth is not necessarily true and it is harmful too. The myth adds to looking down on nerds and other good students. The myth excuses bad attitude. It is not easy to mix technique and imagination but it can be done. No art is possible without this mix. Rather than teach either rote rigor or lax unformed useless dreaming, it is better to lead people to the point where they

make their own mixes. I think we can find a way to insure that children know what they are expected to know, and perform as needed on tests, but still have wonder and imagination.

-Already some business firms have given up on the idea that a diploma or degree means that a student knows much or has the right character. They administer their own tests to job applicants. I am sorry they have to do this but I encourage more of it. If an applicant with a college degree cannot find France on a map, then he-she should not get a job even if the job has nothing to do with the location of France. If a high school graduate cannot read and critically evaluate a business report then he-she should not get a job even if the job has nothing to do with business. Their lack of ability means that their degree is bogus, and firms should not hire people with bogus degrees. If many business firms give their own tests, then parents and children will get the idea of what needs to be done, and maybe do it. Then firms can stop giving tests and start depending on the quality of local schools.

Now here comes the part that makes this essay economic.

-Even with a good education system, we cannot use the education system alone to make sure everybody gets any job at all or gets a good job.

=People differ in ability, and some do not have the ability to get a good job or even a good enough job.

=Capitalist nations have some endemic minimum amount of unemployment and bad employment (bad jobs with poor pay and few or no benefits). This cannot be overcome with any of the methods that the U.S. is using now. Please see other essays. The U.S. has about 5% unemployment and, now, about 25% bad jobs. Regardless of the amount and quality of education, and even though Americans have a good attitude toward work, about 5% of Americans will be unemployed. Better training would reduce the number of people with bad jobs but it would not give everybody a good job. As far as I know, nobody knows what impact different kinds of education would have on bad jobs and good jobs.

If everybody in the United States had a PhD in computers, still we would have 5% unemployment, and still some people would be working with computers in ways that they did not like, getting badly paid, and with few benefits.

Education can make things a lot better but it is not the cure-all. It is still worth investing in education and still worth changing education to make sure it works better.

If we don't confront unemployment and bad employment, then improving the quality of education can still do some good but not nearly as much good, and our efforts will get undercut over the long run. As of now, we push unemployment and bad jobs onto obvious groups around which we draw boundaries, such as Blacks, Hispanics, and poor Whites ("rednecks" and "trash"). The rates among them are higher than the rates among other groups. When White men have 8% unemployment, Black men might have 30% unemployment. Say, on average, marked groups have 15% unemployment and 40% bad jobs. In

those situations, they develop bad attitudes toward education. Bad attitudes undermine local schools no matter what else the local schools do and what funding they have. Then bad local schools boost bad attitude. And so on.

This self-reinforcing pattern would change some, but not enough, if we funded and ran local schools better but did not also confront employment issues and deal with them. We can fight all this without also controlling employment issues but we have to know what we are doing, doing it that way is a lot harder, and it won't fully succeed. It would be much easier all around if we faced employment issues and dealt with them too, including issues of employment and race. Dealing with them does not mean throwing money at Blacks, Hispanics, poor Whites, and people who claim a disability. It does not mean making more dependants of the state. It does not mean finding all Blacks and Hispanics good jobs. See other essays.

Improving local schools is the best first step toward facing employment issues. It gives a fighting chance to students from groups that are on the bad job merry-go-round. Using national standardized tests would help clarify how much of employment hardship among Blacks, Hispanics, and poor Whites was due to their attitude, to discrimination, and to the fact that we cannot reach full employment and good jobs for everybody.

Still, regardless of other policies, the starting place, and a key to advancement, is the self-improvement of attitude. Without that, blaming racism and blaming the system are useless.

-If we made sure every local school was up to standards, then it might seem all local schools would be about equal. I am not sure if total general equality is a good idea, but more equality than now is a good idea. It is a good idea to make bad schools better without making good schools worse. That end would make schools more equal without necessarily making them completely equal.

One problem with making schools more equal is, deep down, parents don't want that. Parents want some schools to be better so the students of good schools go on to good schools at higher levels and then go on to good jobs and great success in life. Parents want to make sure their children go to those good schools while the children of their competitors do not go to those schools but go to bad schools – or at least to schools that are enough inferior so that other children cannot compete successfully with their children.

This is called “comparative competition”: how you do by some absolute standard matters less than how you do compared to rivals; “I don't have to outrun the bear, I only have outrun you.” It is also called “keeping up with (really surpassing) the Joneses”. It sounds awful but it is true. If we don't take it into account, we can't make bad schools better.

Comparative competition is inseparably bound up with socio-economic class, race, and gender, but I can't go into those subjects much here. I can't qualify what I say or say it more exactly.

People in one socio-economic class (and race) get nervous when the children in the socio-economic class just below them start doing well in school. Parents worry that their kids will outdo our kids. The people in our class work to fund our schools so our schools stay wealthy enough and good enough even while the people in our class also finagle to make sure their schools stay poor and bad. I don't explain how the people in a wealthier class make this happen. As mentioned, local funding reinforces differences and is a big way that one neighborhood makes sure that its schools do well while schools at other places do not do as well.

If all local schools got competent, and the distinctions between schools got less, then middle class and upper middle class parents would get disturbed. They would deny feeling disturbed. Publicly, they still would support the idea that all schools should meet a minimum standard. But they would be disturbed. They would work hard to make sure their schools excelled by comparison. I do not go into how they might do this but I am sure they would do it and they would succeed.

As long as competition is comparative, and middle class and upper middle class parents make sure their schools are better, would it really do much good to make sure all local schools met minimum standards? Isn't this like grade inflation? Wouldn't making all schools better just mean spending a lot of money but (1) not really changing the class structure and (2) not really making sure that lower class, Black, Hispanic, and poor White children got jobs with their better educations? Don't we produce enough competent graduates now to fill the jobs that need doing without spending more money trying to make minimum education class free when we know education as a whole can't be class free?

The point is not to make all schools as good as upper middle class prep schools but to make all schools good enough so all children have a fighting chance to get a good job. Employers do not always want employees with a "preppie" and Ivy League history. They want employees who definitely can do the job and have the right character. We can make all schools good enough to do this. Then, if well-off middle class and upper middle class parents want to spend more on their children, let them do that. Eventually they will find they hit a point where spending more money doesn't help, especially when nearly all local schools are turning out good enough students. Not everybody wants to buy certified organic grain fed beef when everybody can buy good quality FDA certified pesticide free nutritious food for less than half the price. Making sure that all local schools are good enough is the best defense against the extra spending of the upper middle class. It is good enough. I know of no other defense.

When fighting subversion by middle class and upper middle class parents, national standardized tests are the best friends of poor people, working people, ethnic groups, and religious groups. Tests prove that children of all backgrounds can do well enough if given a reasonable base. Even if the children of disadvantaged groups don't do as well as the upper-middle-class children on the whole, if a lot of poor kids and ethnic kids do well enough, that proves the point. That is enough to promote more support for local schools, to change the attitude of colleges, and to change the attitude of employers. Standardized tests are not a way to blame the victim but to empower former victims – if used correctly. Standardized tests likely are the only way to stop subversion by the middle and upper middle class from "gutting"

reform of all local schools. They are the only way to insure that all local schools get enough support to produce quality graduates among the students who do graduate.

So, the integrity of national standardized tests must be guarded zealously. To its credit, the Justice Department under President Obama vigorously prosecuted the leaders of the cheating ring in Atlanta. The Justice Department did not convict all the leaders but the Justice Department did send a clear signal that test integrity is vital to the future of children from poor, ethnic, and religious groups. The head of education for the State of Alabama also vigorously sanctioned cheaters in schools in Montgomery and Selma. I applaud both the Justice Department and the Department of Education in Alabama for seeing what has to be done and doing it, however hard and unpopular.

As someone who values books and education for themselves, I think giving people a real education is reason enough. But I also know that education has to be paid for, and people who already pay a lot in taxes don't want to pay more for quality education if the quality education means nothing for jobs and for international economic competition.

-As I said before, we cannot use education to get rid of all unemployment. No matter what we do, some children are not able to use education to get a good job. Even so, we can use education to make sure any child who has the ability can use the ability. Ability eventually leads to jobs even if not directly in all cases. We can use education to reduce the number of bad jobs. We can use education to improve the quality of our citizens.

The remainder of this essay is optional.

-A note on grade inflation and on giving out meaningless degrees:

I know of ethnic and gender differences in what I say. I can't take them into account here. They do not undermine the main ideas.

Grade inflation and degree inflation are in the same boat as some business firms that have to use ads but the ads, and the expense, do little good. If you don't do it, you die; but, if you do do it, it doesn't do you much good. I have used this example in several essays, so, if you have seen it before, please bear with me. Soft drink companies such as Coke and Pepsi have to advertize. If they didn't use ads, their rivals would kill them in the market. But, after all the ads are said, done, and shown, the "market share" of Coke or Pepsi changes little from year to year. Car companies have to advertize. Think of all the ads that claim this brand of pickup truck is the toughest, strongest, best, and cheapest. If any car company did not advertise heavily, it would go bankrupt. Yet, when all the ads are said, done, and shown, the market share of any car company remains about the same from year to year. People who have bought Toyota before tend to buy Toyota again. If you do it, it gets you little; but if you don't do it, you perish. Damned if you don't; in never-ending purgatory if you do.

In the 1950s, this was not true of grades and degrees. If you got Cs, you still got a job and made money. In fact, you made more money than geeks who got As. If you graduated from grade school, you still got a decent job even if you did not get as good a job as a person who graduated from high school. If you graduated from high school, you got a good job. In fact, you might make just about as much money over your lifetime as a college graduate. And so on with college and graduate school.

Now, if you don't have a high school degree, the only job you can get is flipping burgers, and you make only a pittance over your lifetime. It doesn't matter if a better job doesn't really require that you read or write; if you don't have a degree, and another person who can't read or write does have a degree, then the other person gets the job and you lose. The same is true of high school and college degrees. It now takes a college degree to get a job that once a high school diploma got easily, such as police officer, fire fighter, head clerk in an office, or supervisor in a factory. It doesn't matter if you can do the work without the degree, or if the content of the degree is irrelevant. If you don't have the degree, likely you won't get the job, and you certainly won't advance.

If you do have the degree, there is no guarantee now that you will get a job, and many degree holders now are "sad sacks" in their parents' basements. But, if you don't have the degree, you can never get the job, and somebody less talented than you with the degree will get the job. You have to have it whether it does you any good or not. And so on through graduate school.

You don't need great grades to get into high school but you do need seemingly good grades to get into college. You need seemingly great grades to get into grad school. Even if the grades indicate little about your actual ability at any level, without the grades, you are stopped. As with degrees, having good grades does not guarantee a good college or a good grad school but not having them guarantees a bad college or none at all, and guarantees no grad school.

In these conditions, not giving a degree is like condemning a student to death. Not giving high grades is the same as denying a student a degree, denying him-her entrance to college, denying him-her entrance to grad school, and denying him-her any good job. If you want to ruin a life, give a student a B instead of an A; it doesn't matter what subject.

So, naturally, students get high grades that mean little and get diplomas that mean less. People who can't read, and can only fake their own signature, get high school diplomas. People who have never read Shakespeare or Aristotle, can't do algebra, and can't find France on a map, get a college degree. Almost no graduates now can form a cohesive argument, write a paragraph, or really explain why a politician is an idiot.

The end result is that nobody trusts diplomas or the schools that give them out.

Grade inflation and degree inflation, and the need to have good grades and a degree, have been the two strongest forces behind increasing tuition, debt for education, and increasing house prices. They have been a strong force influencing general inflation, although not as strong as deficit spending.

It would be good if we returned to using "C" as the basic grade and the grade given to most students. This can only happen if we have national standardized tests for most subjects.

-What do we do with Johnny (or Suzy) who has a good attitude, gets along with everybody, tries hard, but just can't get the subject matter in fourth grade, sixth grade, eighth grade, or high school? Do we keep him in the same cohort as his friends, and so don't stigmatize him, and so don't make sure he does even worse? Or do we put him among other people of the same achievement level regardless of age and so shame him into doing worse? If we know he will go no further, do we keep using resources on him? In today's climate, if we turn him away in the sixth grade, in effect, his earning life is over and his social life is over. We might as well punch his ticket to the penitentiary.

The best thing we can do for Johnny is NOT give him a fake diploma that makes it seem as if he is the equal of Sheldon Cooper.

Give Johnny a certificate that shows what level he has definitely achieved and that comments honestly on his good character. Give him something that future employers can trust. Let him stay in school as long as he wants, with his own age cohort if possible, as long as you, Johnny, Johnny's parents, and the other children know what is going on and accept it. This is about what we do now except that we don't use a certificate, we do give fake diplomas, and we pretend about it all.

-This section uses a little jargon. In theory, parents want their children to maximize lifetime earning potential, and, in theory, people want that for themselves too. So, people should get the amount and type of education that maximizes lifetime earning potential for the amount of money that they invest in education. The relation between money-in to money-out for education is not terribly complicated but it is complicated enough to require more than short space. The relation has gotten complicated because it has changed since the 1950s. People don't always respond to what is factually the case now but to what was the case when they were in school or to what is on TV. If conditions change, people can respond incorrectly.

Up until about 1965, there were two relations that were also related to each other. Even so, they were not so complicated to understand, and people then understood them well. (1) The more education you got, the more money you made, up through college. After that, grad school did not help with money unless you became a professional such as lawyer, doctor, or engineer. Often a high school grad who had a skilled job in a good firm, such as supervisor in a car factory, made more money than a college grad and more money than a professor who did not teach law, medicine, or engineering. (2) Apart from getting into graduate school, lifetime peak earning came not with As and Bs but with Cs. People who got C+s made the most money over their lifetimes on average, not people who got Bs or As. To get into graduate school (MA, MS, PhD), you did need better grades than Cs, but better grades than Cs did not help most people in lifetime earning.

I consider the situation until 1965 to be the best situation, and I would like to go back to it with some changes to accommodate for different technology and a different world. We can't go back to this until every local school is good enough, we treat diplomas with respect, the average grade is "C", and a C means something.

After 1965 until about 2000, grade inflation and degree inflation set in. Still, the peak of earning from investment in school was probably only college, not graduate school, unless you went to law school or medical school. The peak of lifetime earning for education likely was at the college level with an added business degree or engineering degree. Unlike as before, a grade school level education got you almost nothing, and a high school level education only left you far behind college. This is when tuition began really escalating, as people competed for more school for more earnings.

Things mostly stayed the same after about 2000 but did the relation between earning and investment in education did get murkier. People do not go into debt for high school; they do go into debt for college and grad school. The debt is a lot. I don't know for sure how much an average bachelor's degree costs at a public university but I would guess about \$50,000; it is double that for "out of state"; and double that for a prestigious private college. So the question now is: "Is the additional cost for college worth the additional lifetime earning potential?"

To answer that question, it helps to know that graduate school does not add much additional earnings to college unless, again, it is medical school or engineering. Graduate school used to add a greater chance of getting a good job but that is not so clear anymore. I return to law school below. So, for now, leave graduate school out of the picture.

We should be clear who we compare to whom. We should first compare people who get only a high school diploma to people who get only a college degree, on the assumption that they both get good jobs. In another essay, we would have to figure in the chances of getting what kind of job with what kind of degree.

Until about 2000, the simple answer used to be the "damned if you don't, purgatory if you do" answer. If you don't get the college degree, then you don't get a good job. But, in a "kind of" return to the past, this is no longer entirely true. Employers have figured out there are too many college grads and that people don't need a college degree to do simple file work with a computer. They don't even need a high school diploma. Employers can now get college grads cheaply to do what high school grads use to do for the salary that employers used to spend on high school grads. So, for the employer, it is just as well to hire a high school grad who can show competence in what the employer needs. If a high school grad gets this job, and does not have \$100,000 in debt, then lifetime earnings are better than a college grad with big debt even if the high school grad starts out with a bit less salary. The high school grad can put his-her salary to use right on a house or investments. The high school grad can always go back to school in one of the many degree programs online. Whatever small additional money the college grad from a job that really requires only high school skills gets, the college grad has to use to pay off student loans. I

don't think parents and young people are aware of this situation yet, so people still are going to college and still incurring debt. I doubt that will change in the next decade at least.

The biggest reason now to get a college degree is not getting the initial job or salary but for promotion later in your career. Most institutions require a college degree for promotion. Here is not the place to consider if that requirement makes sense; just assume it is there. It is not clear that getting promoted later in life because you got a college degree ten years ago is a financially sound reason to go into debt for \$100,000 when you were young. If you have self-control and can go to school later on a pay-as-you-go basis, and so get a piece of paper that way, without incurring much debt, then you can do better than a college grad who does get into a lot of debt.

There is now a surplus of lawyers (but not of doctors and medical personnel). As a result, each lawyer does not make as much as lawyers used to make unless the lawyer gets hired at the right firm doing the right work – and simply having a law degree is no guarantee of that. So law school graduates often have a huge debt of over \$150,000 (\$50,000 for college and \$100,000 for law school) and often have no job, or no good job. This information is getting out but I am not sure it is making much of a difference yet in what students do. Everyone thinks he-she will be that lucky hire.

It is still a good idea to go to college right out of high school if you don't put yourself too much in debt. If you have good self control, can get specific (technical or specific field) knowledge while in high school, can get a good job out of high school, and can go to college later when you can pay-as-you-go, then high school only might be a better decision. If you do not have good self-direction, and likely will not return to college later, then you might be better off slogging through college after high school and incurring the debt.

This scenario is one reason why online schools and degrees have expanded so much. The quality of the education is not important but the piece of paper still is important for later promotion. You can get the piece of paper on a pay-as-you go basis over however much time you need.

It usually takes half-way decent grades to get into a half-way decent college right after high school. It does not take half-way decent grades to get into an adult education program or into an online school. So you are not as hampered by grade inflation if you go to school later.

If you decide to postpone college you will have to forego the idealized college experience of sex, drugs, rock and roll, parties, romance, football, discussions about religion and politics, etc. If you go to work right out of high school, you will not have the kind of lifestyle that young people are supposed to have, as portrayed in movies and on TV. If these are good reasons for you (or parents) to go into \$100,000+ debt, then do that.

Parents used to send their children to college to get connections to people and institutions that would be valuable later all through life. This is still the biggest reason parents push their children to expensive prestigious institutions. (I like TV shows about parents who begin their child's Ivy League education by

trampling over other little darlings to get into the right pre-school.) With all the people going to state schools, and all the institutions and programs now available, it is not clear how important this reason is now except through prestigious schools. It is not clear that a talented high school graduate who got a good job, got to know people, and put him-herself through college later, would be at much disadvantage compared to a college graduate from a state school. I don't know how to put a money value on this aspect of "education".

Of course, if you value the education for the education, and you go to a school that actually gives you a real education (not likely), then please do that. I hope you can get a school that can give you a real education. You can learn a lot on the Internet these days.