

“It is Time to Invest in our Public Schools”

By: Robert Rubinstein

We need to dramatically change our attitude and approach to learning and public education. There is no doubt that educating the children of this nation in its over 14,000 public schools is expensive.

We need to personally and financially commit to meet the needs of our individual young people, our communities, and our futures. Let’s keep in mind that the needs and expectations of children in Chicago are not the same as the needs and expectations of children in Oregon, or Alaska, or Florida.

America has thrived and become the greatest country in the world because people have had the freedom and motivation to create, innovate, and design concepts and products. A public-school education should support and enhance our young people and their opportunities to succeed in meaningful ways, not bury them under a morass of tests that focus on “sameness.”

U.S. public schools spend over \$1.1 billion on tests demanded by the “No Child Left Behind” Act. “And yet, federal funds have been lacking to help pay the tab for administering 45 million tests a year (going up to 56 million once NCLB’s science assessment is added.” (“Pauline Vu Looks at the Rise of Standardized Tests,” Stateline.org).

These benchmark tests focus on some basic skills, but not on many of the more complex skills students will need to succeed in future jobs and life. The teaching and investigation of important subjects such as history, civics, and the arts have been drastically cut back. As a result, we have a generation that has little understanding of other cultures and peoples, or what happened before in history that has brought us to the present problems we contend with today. Even more critical to our future is that young people do not understand their civil rights, the meaning and intent of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Imagine the power

this ignorance gives to those in control of our state and federal governments and to those who control “media.”

Here are some things we ought to do to put public education on the right track:

- We need to modernize our school buildings. How can we prepare young people for life and jobs in the future if we have buildings that cannot support modern and future technology? And we need to protect the health of those who teach and learn by correcting light, heating, and ventilation problems that plague many of our older buildings.
- We must hire administrators who have classroom experience and have worked constructively with young people and teachers to develop education that meets the needs and goals of their education community.
- Successful classroom teachers should be allowed to vote on education policy as members of school, district, state, and federal education policy committees.
- It is essential to build positive, constructive communication with parents and invite parents to participate in their child’s school.
- Teachers can, with some imagination and effort, include basic academic skills in the study of a wide array of subjects from space to sports, instead of “teaching to the test.”

- Student progress should be evaluated with curriculum-based tests, written work, group work, projects and behavior. Learning is an individual process, not a final exam.
- We must allow young people to openly express their needs and likes without feeling threatened, and we must seriously listen to what they see as their needs and goals. What teens must deal with in their world is very different from the world of adults.
- Colleges of Education should continually screen and counsel future teachers. Instructors who have themselves taught successfully in today's schools should be part of the university teacher cohort, and be included in university curriculum design.
- Teachers must be given decent financial rewards for teaching. They accumulate tens of thousands of dollars of debt to earn degrees (in Oregon, a Master's Degree is required), yet within five years, half of all new teachers quit teaching. Currently, teachers see class loads rising, and pay and benefits being cut. Teachers are paid wages that are below current "business standards" for professionals.

We mouth – the public and the politicians – a great deal about how important our children, their education and futures, are to us and to our society. However, we essentially do little, if anything, to make significant, positive changes.

To spend over a billion dollars annually for students to take more than fifty-three million tests per year, wastes critical public-school funds that could be invested in designing and providing a better education for our children's futures.

We need commitment from those in our schools, from parents, from public officials, from the general public, from students to seriously initiate those changes before our futures become the present.