

Education: A National Crisis

By W.Reid Cornwell

In 1948 I entered South Fork School in Forsyth County, North Carolina. It was a rural school with K-12 in the same building and there was one class per grade. Unlike my peers, I had already learned to read. In fact, I was reading National Geographic, mainly because I loved the pictures. I was also able to count and do basic math. In other words, except for the socialization, I had completed the first grade.

Mrs. Smith, my teacher, recognized that there would be a problem and suggested to my family that I should be advanced to the third grade. My family, not wanting me to be treated as different, rejected the suggestion.

Thus began a saga of boredom which led to acting out and ultimately dropping out. At seventeen I went into the Marine Corps. Six weeks later I took the GED scoring a perfect performance.

John Moyles, a gifted systems analyst, walked this same path and is now a highly sought after consultant. My eldest son, an anthropologist, and co-director of The Center for Internet Research, has a similar history.

My youngest son, equally bright, finished high school with good marks and ACT scores got an early admission to a University and promptly failed all of his classes. He was unprepared for college curricula.

A young girl was not allowed to start public kindergarten because she was a few days too young. Her parents sent her to Montessori where she excelled. Now old enough to enter the public system she was forced to repeat kindergarten. Her parents were told that the state would NOT provide the funds for the first grade because she was too young.

Students were given a project to build catapults. The criteria called for the dimensions to not exceed one cubic yard. Creative students reasoned that decreasing the width of the base they could lengthen the throwing arm making it more efficient. Not so said the teacher, it had to be 3 by 3 by 3 feet. The student's grades were penalized.

These stories span a time period of nearly 60 years. While some are personal stories, they are similar to ones I have heard hundreds of times. Simply put, the crisis in public education system is not new. It is an evolving problem made worse by changes in the demands of our economy. It has persisted for decades and will persist for decades more unless a concerted effort is made to alter our theory and practice of education.

New technologies afford the opportunity for a revolutionary revitalization. Only an irrational fear of "something new" stands in our way.

Albert Einstein has said, "A crazy person is someone who does the same thing over and over and expects a different outcome. Dressing up old practices with a new lexicon is not reformation. It is crazy.

Many years ago, the American Negro College Fund had a slogan, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Despite billions of dollars spent, public education continues to squander the minds of millions of kids. This project is dedicated to those children who struggle to find the skills necessary to lead full and productive lives.

The Education System is not a failure. To our credit we give an adequate education to millions of learners. The problems in our education system relate to specific national goals and interests. The problem is most profound at the extremes of ability. The system fails at exceptions.

The most strident complaints appear to come when students of above average or gifted ability fail to reach their potentials. It is unfortunate that many of the students who fail to graduate fall in this group. These students universally express the sentiments that they were bored, not challenged or did not see the relevance to their lives. Many of the students that do complete K-12 express the same opinion.

We believe that computer technology offers the opportunity to remedy many of the problems that plague scholastically challenged students. These technologies can remove the arbitrary structures that impede motivation and curiosity while liberating teachers to provide the essential services required by the overwhelming majority of students.

The "Connected Learning" project can be a panacea for the students that are indeed being left behind despite our best efforts. Connected Learning can be developed outside the mainstream of our system to serve the mainstream and also serve the minds we are wasting.

At most every university in the U.S. effort is going forward to develop uses of technology that will provide opportunities that are embodied in the theory suggested by "No Child Left Behind". This effort is fragmented. Universities themselves are hobbled by practices that are atavistic. As one award winning professor (tenured 36 years) puts it, "Universities have not changed the way they teach in forty years."

"Connected Learning" will attempt to provide a framework that will address both the myths and realities of education. Its goal is to provide organizing principles to guide empirical research and development. Although it is couched in the language of reform, it is believed that it is about reinventing education in the light of advances, not only in technology, but also in educational practice and learning science. Read the full whitepaper: <http://education-2006.org/whitepapers/Connected%20Learning%20Framework.pdf>

Ambitious! Yes, and to the extreme. Daunting! You bet. Necessary! Absolutely!

We believe that the crisis in education is more profound than terrorism. It is so, because you are hundreds of times more likely to fail to graduate from high school than be killed by a terrorist. Since 9/11 millions of students have fallen by the wayside of education. It is so because it affects the heart of what America represents.