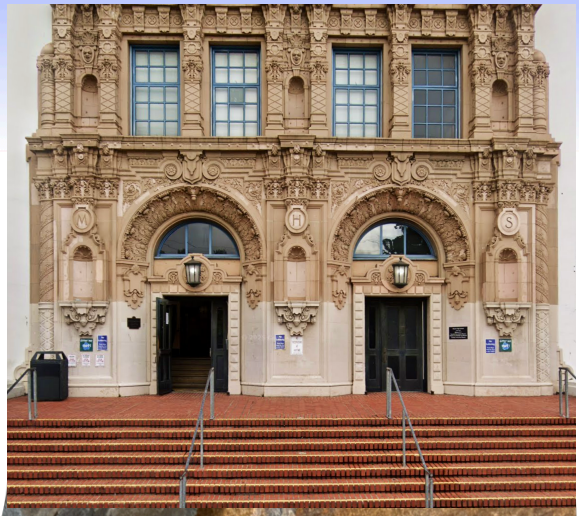

The Magnet School

One of the tragedies of the human condition is that we use our big brains not to make rational decisions but rather to rationalize the decisions we've already made.

The premise here is that though education has evolved (we no longer teach Latin or Greek in public schools), we are confident that our current collection of subjects properly defines education.

Our society embraces the claims of "my truth," but is sadly rigid about what constitutes a first-rate education. Any variation is presumed inferior.

This application is not in search of $50,000,000. It is in search of a limited grant to verify that making the expansive changes described herein is viable.

The cover sculpture was created by a late friend, Arnold Emanuel Loebel, a science professor, author of several chemistry textbooks, and an avocational artist.

Preface

When I first heard of the Crankstart proposal to fund ideas that would improve life in San Francisco, I began refining ideas that I have gleaned from reading about the needs of schoolchildren. The implementation of G. W. Bush's No Child Left Behind was an ineffective centralization of education. Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act replacing NCLB proved that education is not the forte of presidents, Right or Left. The belief that schools in Miami and Missoula should be funded on the same principles was never intended by the absence of "education" in the US Constitution.

There is a troubling, illogical belief held by some liberals that the 50 states together will have greater concern for the education of children than the 50 states acting individually. Now that Trump is in charge, can the Left believe that California's schools are in better hands? The sudden jump in Mississippi's educational ranking should certainly give us pause in the belief that there are voters in "bad" states that don't care about their children's schools. All parents care.

I humbly submit this under the expectation that I will personally have little or no participation in its implementation. My applicable skills are as a systems analyst, not as an educator. I am free of professional bias. What I see is an educational system determined to continue to rely on inflexible beliefs that work for a majority but fail with a substantial minority. I question the wisdom of those who believe that all students should share a common aim.

America is failing too many of its children. I believe that San Francisco may provide a model to help reverse this trend for the state and the country.

The United States provides the finest education in the world to its top students—the students who respond to what we have come to think of the specified subject matter as the very definition of education. Therefore, it is presumed to be adequate for everyone. It is not.

Often, educators blame the parents for disappointing student performance. That is unfair. Decades ago, when reading proficiency was common, colleges did not have to enroll applicants in remedial reading to supplement what should have been foundational.

There is no need for a solution for those schools that graduate more than half of their students based on their academic achievements. Even if much of what is presumed learned (based on test results) is forgotten by college entry, except for what is applicable to the student's major and minor concentrations, most will prosper.

For those who do poorly, who act out, drop out, or simply leave public school without direction, the system seeks alternatives, such as vocational training. What is needed instead is for schools to discover the strengths of students who do not respond to hours of academics and homework. Our culture is too often focused on helping children with their weaknesses, illuminated by tests. That is not a path to happiness and self-confidence. This proposal suggests identifying every child's strengths and interests and cultivating those.

Key to this is to ask the parents of struggling students their opinion as to what would elevate their child's well-being, self-confidence, and happiness. An experimental school that accepts only applicants whose parents apply after they know exactly what will be provided. For children who are unhappy at school and are performing poorly, trying something else is a small risk.

I am not an educator and have only rare suggestions about teaching. This proposal starts by trimming the core to primarily literacy, then surveying parents and students for their preferences, such as physical activity and creativity. If during each year of public education students are not reading adequately, that should be addressed before introducing STEM disciplines.

Children who learn to love reading become life-long learners. Reading in an alternate school should be first and foremost. Failure to instill reading proficiency will diminish a student for life.

Recommendation

Initiate magnet schools to serve the least successful students.

Empower parents with choice by creating alternatives to meet the needs of children who do poorly in the typical public school. According to the National Education Association (NEA), a minority of parents feel that their child has too much homework (20%) and too much stress (25%). To be in the minority is to be ignored. Parents whose children do not fit into the educational straightjacket are labelled "uncooperative." This proposal is to start one or more magnet schools that offer an alternate curriculum. Sell it based upon addressing the initial research as to what parents and students want.

> *The American public does not agree on a single purpose for public education…*
> *—Joshua P. Starr, the chief executive officer of PDK International*[1]

Justify compulsory education for the new magnet school. The clear justification for making young citizens literate is to protect democracy, like conscription in a time of war. Without a literate citizenry, democracy fails. Most parents with public school children want the school to focus on the academics needed to gain entry to a top college or university. It is what most well-regarded schools do now and no modification is needed, no criticism intended.

Vocational education in public schools is mission creep. Our society keeps looking to public schools to take on more responsibilities, including social ills, before addressing reading proficiency. Preparing students for the working world is not different from instilling the foundational qualities of citizenship—honesty, curiosity, fitness, self-confidence, and character. Many want vocational training, but how are educators, from teachers to administrators, to know what a young student's interests are and how children could know the future? Work preparation can be useful, but not for a specific trade.

Self-actualization is most needed for those who do not thrive in the California dream of having every child move on to college. This proposal expects that giving students confidence and pride will encourage more of them to consider college if school uncovers the student's non-STEM strengths in the arts and humanities.

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[1] https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/whats-purpose-education-public-doesnt-agree-answer

Searching for Strengths

Interest, not rigor, is at the core of learning.

A good school gets good results on standardized tests, resulting in high college acceptances. It is populated with young people who want to learn and to get good grades, though those two things can be unrelated. Students get good results on tests, weekly or standardized, by preparing for the test. Separately, students learn by having interest in the subject. Test results show a desire for good grades. Retention shows interest in the subject matter. The burgeoning field of test coaches teaches little or nothing about subject matter. They give advice on how to play the odds of guessing. It is through the miracle of circular reasoning that these test results are used to measure both the students and the school.

Testing – Attention needs to be paid to what tests tell. Relatively short periods of time between identical tests about learned subject matter show a corrosive effect on the student's memory. For those in the business of getting kids to pass the test, repetition and review can push students over the passing line without much "learning" to show for it. More effective are short quizzes that take up very little of class time. The standardized tests handed down from the Department of Education by NCLB and ESSA were both serious setbacks to public education.

A poor school gets kids who did not make it into the good school. This is an opportunity. These are children who have not responded to the benefits of good test scores for two obvious reasons: First, their parents may not understand the subject matter from "new math" to STEM. Second, the child's innate interests and talents lay undiscovered. A child who learns to ride a bicycle, play guitar, compete at high levels of chess, to cook, or to shoot competent basketballs will retain those skills for a much longer time, often measured in life-span. Demanding students to take subjects because of their age, without concern for their interest, is a waste of the student's time and the taxpayers' money.

The reason that we cannot fix the poor schools by making them all good schools is that we are trying to build on the student's weaknesses and ignore their undiscovered strengths. Many in the poor school can be elevated by uncovering their abilities. Scholastic weaknesses expose disinterest, not stupidity.

Parental Involvement

When Terry McAuliffe said during a debate in 2021, “I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach,” it was widely regarded as a gaffe[2] that may have cost him an election. It was an unpopular statement among parents. While it may be difficult to know exactly what Mr. McAuliffe meant to say, there is something to be learned from it.

Though there may be parents who have no interest in their children’s education, it is doubtful that they are common. Some may feel inadequate. If we could divide parents into those who feel superior to their children’s teachers and those who feel inferior, it would be the second group that may seem indifferent.

Asking parents’ opinions involves them. Connecting those who share concerns with their children’s educational experience while asking for their input will show that the parents’ opinions are valued. Parents who think their opinions are not valued may know something we need to know but won’t listen.

Schools, “the bad schools,” comprising the rejects from the good schools, need to be given the flexibility to offer a variety of options. After satisfying the pared-down core of literacy, *et alia*, the rest of the day can be met with creative pursuits (music, art, photography), athletic activities (sports, track, yoga, dance, weight training), small group projects (city planning, transportation, cooking, style), and so on. While enterprising students at the good school are learning to employ AI to do homework and pass exams, the new magnet school has little need for tests and grades. You either can play the violin or you cannot.

It is widely conceded that throughout history, many influential people had mediocre records in school. It would be wrong to condemn the schools that work well for the majority, but it is just as wrong to criticize the children whose talents are either undiscovered or unappreciated or both.

Editorial - This proposal seeks to expand the number of children whose lives and value to society could be enhanced by their treatment in the public school system. The tightly confined teaching model is producing a growing number of children who cannot read at defined proficiency. A new approach is only logical.

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[2] He spoke an embarrassing truth.

The enclosed submission is intended to be of limited scope. It is in direct opposition to the NCLB accusation, “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” It is not low expectations that are failing almost half the public school children who never achieve reading proficiency. NCLB sought to raise the bottom half of students to become more like the top half. The fact that uniform curricula were always intended to do just that, are we to assume that children who were doing poorly were victims of their teacher’s soft bigotry? Not only did NCLB fail to produce the intended results, it damaged the schools that had been succeeding. Obama’s ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) was no better.

For children, the need for self-esteem, self-actualization, dignity, and joy are more important than academics. One hopes that all encouraged children might see higher education as worthwhile, but poor grades are not motivators. Some children respond to criticism; this proposal is for those who need kudos.

Dangers of This Approach

An alternative to the public system can result in a child’s education wandering away from what is being taught in the typical schools. A child whose family moves after 2-3 years of alternate study might find it difficult to fit in. Therefore, carefully evaluating each application is essential. It should be possible to keep pace with the typical schools by offering many traditional academic course electives to those who want them. If so, each applicant must be apprised of the value of staying academically up to par.

In the alternate world of the proposed magnet school, a student’s strengths once uncovered and appreciated may be given no value in a traditional school. Having to leave the magnet school for a traditional school is like taking away the previously uncovered skills that elevated the child’s self-confidence and self-worth. That could be psychologically damaging. Conversely, so is failing to find those skills. Is it better to quash hope than risk disappointment?

It is risky to presume that colleges will overlook slimmed-down coursework, but for applicants who demonstrate reading proficiency and hold a passel of personal recommendations, there will be seats waiting. For students whose bibliography shows a mature interest in the world, even the Ivy League might be more interested than assumed. Today, the love of reading is impressive.

The Cost

To avoid having the experiment fail and cause more damage than help, the investigation of parental acceptance combined with the financial and legal soundness of the new approach must be thorough before putting any of this into place. It is not claimed that just having parents choose the school solves all problems.

For this grant application to pretend to know the public's interest and make cost estimates would require a distasteful reliance on mendacity. The alternative is to preload this application with a cost burden that this author could scarcely afford.

The most costly parts of this proposal are the collection of interest from parents, securing the cooperation of the state to accept an atypical magnet school, and the determination of public school real estate availability. In other words, before finding a use for $50,000,000, a small fraction of that is needed to prove the feasibility of serving every child's psychological needs.

A committee with modest financial backing must convincingly establish the viability and support of magnet schools for those not getting the most out of the typical public school. The committee should describe the school herein:

Legal – A lawyer to evaluate the legal hurdles of a so-formed magnet school.

Technical specialist – Develop techniques (software) to aggregate data.

Communications – Speak before small groups of interested parents.

Financial - Control, monitor, and report all expenses.

Educational planning and support – Lesson plans and coursework definition.

Project leader or chairperson – Ensure that the group is working together.

Office space? – The temporary need for space might be met with donated space.

Real estate – The school district is being pressured to close/sell some real estate. A magnet system looking for space could be judged useful.

About the Author

I have lived in San Francisco since 1988. Long retired, I have no credentialed experience in education and do not claim any. I have neither financial nor political interests in the promotion and implementation of these suggestions, though I would volunteer if and when appropriate.

The ideas expressed herein advocate for more parental input suited to their children's needs rather than rules of administrators from Sacramento or Washington, D.C.

Without the constant failure of public education to meet the educational needs of a significant number of the city's children, there would have been no reason, beyond gall, to submit this.

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Addenda - stuff left unsaid

During my research, I found many things of interest that lend support to the need for a magnet school that reaches and elevates students who, by the concessions from the Department of Education and local superintendents, are not thriving. To quote anonymous, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Because everyone in the educational community accepts various subjects defined as foundational, it can seem heretical to broaden the purpose and meaning of education in search of improvement.

The more students who find **a school that fits**, the less rebellion and destructive behavior is likely to plague the school. Parents who agree to the school’s rules should sign an acknowledgment that “Here, teachers rule.”

DEI is aspirationally inspiring, but as a social argument, it is shallow. **Diversity** shows itself in the best possible light on the basketball court, where people from all parts of the world show respect and affection for each other neither because of nor despite racial differences. They accept each other for their commonality—the sport. Common interest is the solution to racial prejudice. Children who choose an alternative education cannot be sorted effectively by racial quota.

Equity is vague and often misunderstood as equality, but equality only applies “under the law.” Equity presumes that the school knows who is disadvantaged at the start, at home. How the school discovers this and compensates is unclear.

Inclusion seems like something taught in kindergarten. A school that allows children to shine in a creative or athletic pursuit rather than the typical academic one is unlikely to conform to the racial mix of the city, not because interests imply segregation, but demographics and interests are unrelated. Just as acceptance to Lowell High by merit has sometimes been in conflict with DEI, acceptance by need and interest cannot serve a conflicting social value.

Homework is believed to be effective. Too often, it makes a child feel oppressed. It can cut deeply into the time friends and family have together. That missing socialization is among the issues making many children feel isolated and tethered to a heartless virtual world by their smartphones.

Testing is accountability put on the shoulders of students. That which is not testable is less valued. This is a curse from governmental funding, federal or state. *If we give you the money, you must give us the data that prove you are spending that money correctly.* Most parents are sold on the belief that tests are essential buttresses to learning. It is hard to see how No Child Left Behind and its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act, have buttressed anything. These programs cut deeply into teaching time and put significant stress on students.

Testing serves university admissions. Those students without strong college interests get little value from the tests—*their* interests remain unserved.

There is no single word for the responsibility of **government/civics/social morality/law**. Schools think of this as a single-year class. That is inadequate. It can start in the third grade and be revisited year after year as necessary. Society is complex. It can be plumbed at different depths by maturity.

Just the minimum and leave. Many of my critics are inclined to think that pupils will go home after doing the minimum, but that is unlikely. That would require a school based upon the minimum and nothing more could be approved by the superintendent. If there is no school that offers this, then it is either stick with the traditional school or succumb to the one that best fits. Most principals are likely to fill the days with options that match the applicant child's interests.

Vocational training:

> For much of U.S. history, vocational education was used as a tool for racial and class stratification. Immigrants, low-income youth, and students of color were disproportionately tracked into low-level vocational programs regarded as "dumping grounds" for those deemed incapable of academic success. Echoes of this history persist today.[3]

During my high school summers, I worked in house construction, learning a little about pounding nails and painting garage doors. If school had contributed such modest skills, it's unlikely to have mattered much. Learning to draw and read orthographic blueprints would have been helpful, but that was unavailable until taking engineering drawing at college.

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[3] https://onlabor.org/career-and-technical-education-at-a-crossroads-opportunity-or-exploitation/

The over-diagnosed ADHD children can benefit from activity. There are private schools that have, or claim to have, remarkable success with drug-free treatments. Whether parental choice could populate a school with troubled or disordered children is not knowable without significant community investigation. To presume to know how the parents of such children are searching for options contradicts the limitations of this proposal.

Because the causes behind an ADHD diagnosis are so variable, from poor sleep to a comorbidity (autism, dyslexia, homelessness, hunger, anger, abuse, poor parenting) in addition to some as yet undiscovered innate disorder present at birth, the treatments that are effective with one could be useless with another. A public school that could better handle children with unwanted behaviors could benefit both the child and the classes the child will not be disrupting.

Academic electives should be available when the pupil is ready, not when it is convenient for the school's planning or when the child is the right age. The concept of "right age" itself is contradicted by the age difference between children born in January and those born in December. Evidence indicates early differences in age (those born in the second half of the school's calendar year vs those in the first half) can have maturity disadvantages that may track the child for many or all of the remaining school years.[4] Allowing a child to put off academic electives for a year or two outside the typical age will better align the child's interest and intellectual maturity with others in the class. Informed parents commonly delay the entry of male children into school by a year for this reason.

Early graduation might better suit many students than the need for K–12 completion. A fifteen-year-old who reads proficiently, demonstrates math skills, shows interest and participation in societal/government classes, and has used the rest of the time wisely, such as demonstrating personal skills either academic or non-academic, might be given an early diploma. This is no different from letting a precocious child skip a grade. Maybe 15 is a good time to take a gap year and work or volunteer before applying to college.

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[4] Gladwell's book *Outliers* examines the relationship between birth month and hockey prowess—age matters.