

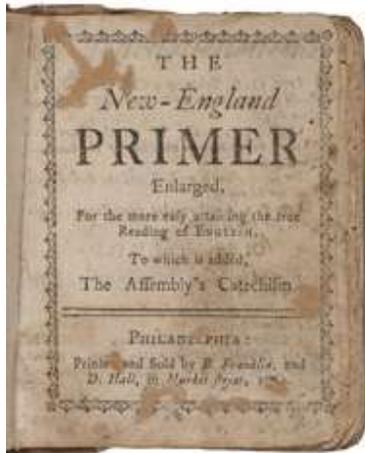
Some Will Go To College – All Will Go Through Life

by Steve Kloser @reeno317

Part One: *Curves, Tests and Grades*

Teachers, school administrators, school boards and government agencies across America work diligently to educate our youth, yet the U.S. consistently ranks squarely in the middle of worldwide achievement in Science, Math and Reading.¹ How can this be in what we all like to think of as the greatest nation on Earth?

There are two underlying fundamental problems with the American education system in the 21st century. The first is that there is not now, nor has there ever been, an American Education System. From the time of the first New England schoolhouse to today, local education has been paid for by local tax dollars, with local government setting curriculum and standards for hiring teachers in accordance with the bidding of local voters.



Beginning at a time in our emerging nation when simply knowing how to read and write qualified one to be a teacher, grassroots teaching methods, policies and procedures were in place and in practice long before anyone thought about an education 'system'. Subsequent attempts to improve, define or standardize education have always approached the task as a molding of the status quo. This approach of building from the bottom up works great for pyramids, but less well when attempting to set standards, achieve specific goals and provide consistency; a defined vision at the top that can be disseminated downward is a better method.

The second underlying issue within education in America is that whatever systems we do have in place, e.g. testing methods and requirements for academic advancement, are haunted by values, decisions and conclusions that were arrived at long ago, based upon a mere spec of the information (not to mention technology) that we possess today. Two examples are the grading system and the use of the bell curve.

Grading

As one might expect, when there no systems in place where a need exists, any system that presents itself may quickly become the de facto system until or unless it is replaced by a more popular system. A case in point is the standard A through F grading system which was devised at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1897. Originally the lowest grade at Mount Holyoke was an 'E', however after one year administrators purposely changed the failing grade to 'F', and so it has been since. That seemingly innocuous and logical decision has caused incalculable emotional damage to students over the ensuing years. Where a grade of 'E' might elicit thoughts such as 'I did very poorly', or 'I don't get this subject', or

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/02/us-students-are-lagging-behind-academically-heres-why>

'I could have tried harder', a grade of 'F' is interpreted as, 'I failed'. And in that despondent moment, 'I failed' can easily turn the corner and become, 'I am a failure'. *No – you're not.*

We must abandon the long-held concepts of passing and failing in education.

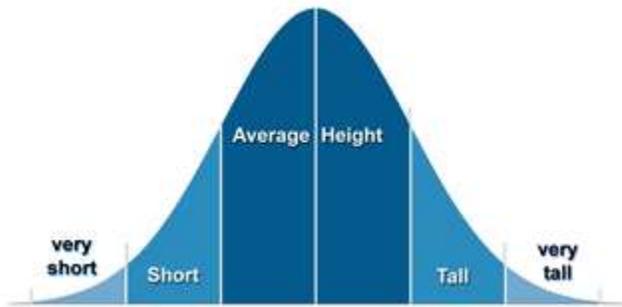
The Bell Curve

The Bell Curve, or Normal Distribution Curve, forms the basis for much curriculum design and social classification in education today.

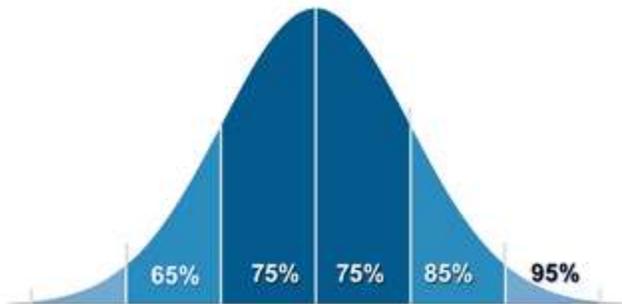
A *normal distribution* is an arrangement of a data set in which most values cluster in the middle of the range and the rest taper off symmetrically toward either extreme. A graphical representations of a normal distribution is often called a *bell curve* because of its flared shape.

Height is an example of something that follows a normal distribution pattern. Most people are average height, the number of people that are taller and shorter than average are fairly equal and a very small (and still roughly equivalent) number of people are either extremely tall or extremely short.

Below is an example of a normal distribution curve:



When test scores are plotted, results within a class will also result in the bell pattern, with most students scoring in the mid-seventieth percentile, with fewer students scoring in the mid-eightieth and mid-sixtieth percentiles, and only a few scoring very high or very low.



Education in America is of course a descendant of education in England as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Studies in divinity, law, and medicine were typical, along with Latin and often French accompanying studies in literature. When in pre-revolutionary America Harvard University

(originally New College) opened its doors in 1636, it was only natural to install a similar curriculum. As Yale and Princeton and other bastions of higher learning subsequently welcomed students, they followed suit. Not much has changed.

OK – Latin class is no longer a hot ticket, but the focus of the curriculum hasn't been altered much – math, science, literature, language – basically readin', writin' and 'rithmetic – the *Classidemics*. We value having an aptitude for these topics because the brave British that settled this land valued those aptitudes. We call people with these aptitudes, *intelligent*. We call people who do not have these aptitudes, *not intelligent*, or much worse.

As our nation and education practices developed, standardized tests were created to measure student achievement. After plotting these test scores the resulting bell curve theoretically gave teachers and parents an idea of how *intelligent* each child is in relation to his/her classmates.

From one's place on the bell curve terms like 'D student' were born and frequently spoken within earshot of the student, often causing students to feel shame or guilt or stupid. Worse, some students come to believe that they are a '*D student*' when in fact they suffer from a correctable learning disability or are truly gifted in an area other than classidemics.

On the other side of the coin, we note that only a very small percentage of the students – the 'A Students' - feel great about themselves, having been anointed one of 'the smart ones'. The majority of the students are led to believe that they are 'just average', and along with that can come the notion that trying hard to succeed probably won't get them very far because they're not exceptional. This is a shame.

These tests have always been problematic because they were usually written by mainstream white Christian adults for primarily mainstream white Christians students, and were/are thereby unavoidably biased to some degree. This is a commonly debated topic, worth solving (if possible), but it is a symptom – not the disease. The disease is that there's only one aptitude being tested, still prizing seventeenth century British values above all else in twenty-first century America.

In a different world - say after a devastating war, if there's anything left - the most valued personal aptitudes would necessarily be different. Tests might require test-takers to imagine, sketch and plan a system by which one person peddling a bike powers several machines at once using gears and pulleys or discuss ways to grow vegetables in very acidic soil or demonstrate the ability to ease others' pain by touch or song or thought. A different set of people would magically now be *intelligent*, and many of today's intellectuals would quickly become the new 'D Students' dismissingly sent off to do something useful.

We must abandon our long-held concepts of intelligent and not intelligent.

What's the goal?

Since the system we have is the only one we've ever known it is all but impossible to imagine education differently, but if starting from scratch, we might ask, "*What is our primary responsibility to our children, and to society vis-à-vis our children?*"

- 1) First and foremost we need to ensure that each student has the skills and information necessary to successfully function as an adult in society. *Life Prep Courses* designed to foster the ability to use a personal computer, complete a job application, balance a bank account, create and balance a household budget, discuss alcoholism and other addictions, navigate one's city and cook basic meals must be instituted. Appendix A contains a more complete working list.
- 2) Additionally, we have an obligation to provide our students and our teachers the resources that will enable our students to compete with the very best minds in the world in their chosen fields.
- 3) Furthermore, we owe it to our young people to enable them to discover the things they are good at and help them nurture those gifts.

The era of participation trophies and orange slices has taken a lot of heat in recent years, but those well-meaning soccer parents and coaches are on the right track – they're just using the wrong vehicle. The notion that every child should win is noble and sounds reasonable, except that competitive sports is an activity that is specifically designed for the sole purpose of creating an equal number of winners and losers!

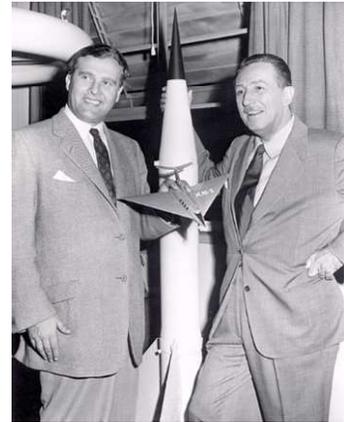
Unlike a soccer match, school is a place where all the children can win. We must start by assuming that everyone is good at something - or *intelligent* in some area - and work to assess each student's aptitude, inclination and inherent ability, and then provide them with the opportunity to explore, test, evaluate and move forward.

- 4) Lastly we must come to the realization that we cannot improve the American education system until an American Education System exists. Many state's rights proponents see education as one of the last parts of their society that hasn't been usurped by the federal government, and are loathe to make concessions. However, in order to compete in the world market and give our children a chance at keeping up, we must as a nation establish and maintain a unified set of minimum requirements for high school graduation – one that truly reflects such a desire!

Part Two: *What About Jane?*

On an autumn day in September of 1962, President John Kennedy challenged a nation to do the impossible and send a man to the moon in just seven short years. Perhaps the thing he his best remembered for other than his unfortunate death, we take his declaration for granted. What is interesting is that at a time before digital calculators and watches, before microwave ovens and before TV shows were regularly broadcast in color, the audience at Rice University did not greet his proclamation that “We choose to go to the moon” with incredulousness, or appear to wonder how such a monumental goal might be achieved, but instead greeted it with eager applause and giddy enthusiasm.

President Kennedy felt emboldened to make his pronouncement and a nation felt empowered to support him because they had already seen how it would work; it was real to them. Traveling through space had been explained, diagramed and animated by the genius behind the propulsion system NASA still employs today, Werner von Braun, with the help of America’s biggest space enthusiast Walt Disney and his TV series, ‘Man in Space’. Without Walt and his *Imagineers* making von Braun’s vision tangible to an entire nation including a then young Senator from Massachusetts, the unifying energy and enthusiasm that drove a technologically nascent nation to accomplish such a feat may never have materialized.



We need to spend a lot more on education.

For decades now, voters have been periodically asked to pay more tax to fund the same schools and get the same results, which news stories and articles like this one remind them, aren’t very good. It is tiresome and obviously ineffective.

Secondary education needs to be re-imagined from the top down based on what is required to give our youth and our nation the best chance to not only compete in the world but continue to be a global leader. Once imagined, this new vision must be explained, diagramed and animated by people like today’s Imagineers at Disney, and made tangible to taxpaying parents, grandparents and prospective parents. Perhaps a series of TV ads titled, ‘America’s Youth in School’ would be a good place to start.

Without a clear vision of a new outlook and approach to educating our children that will drastically improve results, the education of our children is doomed to continue to be mediocre, their days spent in underfunded schools with underpaid teachers limping along as best they can. But if we can create a clear vision of a truly better approach and convince America of its merits, America will pay for it – we’ll do anything for our kids.

Planting Seeds

In the same way that a parent hopes that their love for a team or school or profession will be shared by their children, so do professors hope that their love for academia will be shared by their students. The students most like the professors are the students most generously rewarded by the professors, who

are hoping the students will become professors in their image. This is partly borne from individual ego, but mostly from a sincere belief that becoming a professor is the highest calling.

In this way academia begets academia and professors beget professors, as an oak drops millions of seeds hoping that one might take root and flourish. To that end, we have come to view high school as merely college prep, although more than a third of high school grads will not enroll in college² and only a third of Americans have earned a college degree³.

Whether we realize it or not, the entire educational structure in America is designed to produce professors on the top rung of the accomplishment ladder, doctors and lawyers on the rung below, business execs on the next rung down, and so on. Like any organic entity, education in America has learned how to perpetuate itself. And, like many organic entities, it does so with little or no regard for anything other than its needs, in this case dismissing the 35% of high school grads that won't go to college and another portion that wouldn't if they had other options.



*Our public high schools must serve as much more than a free farm system
for (for-profit) universities and colleges.*

Some will go to college – all will go through life.

Our first obligation to our youth is to give them the tools they'll need to be contributing members of society. This includes making sure they acquire skills like balancing budgets and applying for a job, but also helping them discover the things they have an aptitude or passion for. If that aptitude is for *Classidemics*, then high school will most likely also become college prep for them. If that aptitude is for *New Tech*, or *The Arts*, or *Mechanics & Engineering*, high school can be solely vocational and career prep for some students, and it can be college prep with an emphasis in the area of their intelligence for other students.

Additionally, we are obligated to provide our children and our teachers the resources required to insure that our students can not only succeed, but excel and rival students worldwide. The list of these resources is long and varied, including books, teacher's aides, software, computers and systems to interact with 'sister' classrooms across the globe.

In order for change to be effective it must be consistent. A national set of minimum requirements for high school graduation must be established and enforced by local school districts, who will continue to set local policies and curriculum that enhance and support the federal agenda.

Jane

We are all familiar with Jane. She is the server at your local 24/7 eatery that works the early morning shift and seems much more stressed than her two tables would dictate; it always seems like she's having a hard time, or a hard life.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/business/fewer-us-high-school-graduates-opt-for-college.html>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/184272/educational-attainment-of-college-diploma-or-higher-by-gender/>

In this world, she wasn't able to do well in school, and got labeled as *dumb* early on. Her only joy was once-a-week Art Class. By the time Jane was a sophomore she was so far behind classidemically that she stopped going to school and started hanging out with some people that used meth, and pretty soon she was strung out and pregnant. Like falling behind in school, Jane fell behind in life, never being able to make enough money or figure out how to budget what she was making. Her days became a series of overdue bills, tattered clothes and bullshit boyfriends. And now she wants to take your order, doing a job she is so afraid to lose that it actually makes her a lousy waitress.

In a different world, say the one over there →, one of the Learning Issue Specialists that assist all the teachers identified Jane as being moderately dyslexic while still in elementary school and after months of work Jane learned to compensate and read well. She was then able to keep up with her class classidemically, albeit in the middle of the ol' bell. Meanwhile, Jane's ability to draw and paint was praised and encouraged throughout her school career.

In her *Sophomore Life Prep Course* Jane learned to make a household budget and balance it. She also learned about alcoholism and other addictions, pregnancy and STDs and ways to prevent them and how credit card interest works. Like her peers, upon successful completion of the Sophomore Life Prep Course she was permitted to choose one of four sets of directed studies for her junior and senior years: *New Tech, Mechanical & Engineering, Classidemics* and *The Arts*, which was no choice at all for Jane! And now she wants to take your order, doing a job she doesn't mind because she know she's good at it, working the early shift so she can take a couple classes at community college in the afternoon.

The nurturing of Jane's natural aptitude in her directed studies classes allowed her to develop good skills and confidence, so she looks forward to Tuesday and Thursday nights when she donates her time to do face painting for kids at the hospital and when she doesn't have to work on Saturday she makes a few extra dollars sketching caricatures at the Farmer's Market.

Acknowledging that Jane's story has been skewed for our purposes, that world over there → sounds pretty nice. Jane is a happier, more productive citizen, and the more students there are like her, the fuller community bands and choirs will be, the bigger the increase in arts shows and community theater will be, the healthier your community will be.

Part Three: *We'll Be Amazed*

There has never been a good answer to the question, "Why do we have to learn this?" Asked millions of times by millions of students, it is invariably responded to by teachers with avoidance tactics or gibberish because very often the real answer is: you don't.

We invest heavily in information from the bell curve, yet ignore much of what it tells us. We know ahead of time that students like Jane, whose classidemic test scores fall in the center or the left of the standardized test bell curve, will not do well in Algebra or Biology class, yet we are compelled to require that they take those courses. Why? In order to give them a well-rounded education?? Because they'll need it to get into college and we must prepare all students for college no matter what?? Or is it because the idea that we all **must** strive to get to the top of the achievement ladder – that in its essence education IS striving to get to the top of the achievement ladder - is so ingrained in us that we can't even question it?



Prizing twenty-first century American values over seventeenth century British values

In the 21st century Americans value the individual – especially our darling children and their special needs. Part of the problem in schools today is that the idealistic notion that all children should be treated the same, with the same opportunities and expectations, when children are clearly not all the same, effectively slows all the students' progress.

Here we again find our soccer parents, this time clamoring for their child to be included in something for which he did not qualify. At first glance the issue might be seen as the parents trying to force their child into an activity, but the real issue is more likely that the activity that coincides with their child's aptitude does not exist. They want their child to feel included, which is natural.

Forcing millions and millions of our beloved children, each one unique and special, up the same four hundred year old British achievement ladder is insane. How many professors do we need?

For many students, a solid ninth grade level knowledge of basic geography, arithmetic, science, reading, spelling, history, English and computers is all or most of the classidemics (plus computers) they will really need. Simply put, those on the right side of the standardized test bell curve aside for a moment, both society and our young people are much better off if we send high school graduates into the world that have gained solid ninth grade math, science, geography, history, reading, English and computer skills, than if we send them off with high school Algebra and Geometry courses under their belt, the subject matter of which they by and large did not comprehend and will never use as an adult, and who can theoretically solve $64 = y - 8$ but cannot balance a bank account, which is what we're doing now.

We must develop aptitude tests that can give us clues about each child's abilities and inclinations as they advance through elementary school. By the time students reach the tenth grade parents, teachers and students should have a pretty good idea of at least some of the student's areas of intelligence (high aptitude). The incoming sophomores should also have acquired at least most of the basic skills and knowledge expected of today's graduated ninth grade students, with areas of higher or lower classidemic aptitude merely noted along the way.

Sophomores might spend half their days taking *Sophomore Life Prep Courses* which have been sparsely detailed above. The other half of their day could be spent taking courses prescribed for entrance into a community college or a university, or in areas for which they have shown an aptitude or an interest.

If, at the end of their sophomore year, students demonstrate all the required abilities and knowledge that indicate the completion of their *Sophomore Life Prep Courses*, they may choose an area of directed studies on which to concentrate during their junior and senior years. Choosing from *New Tech*, *Mechanical & Engineering*, *Classidemics* and *The Arts* based on demonstrated aptitude and preference, students spend most of the last two years of school studying and doing what they love ... or at least what they are good at.

Now upper class students, they are able to spend half their day delving deep into their directed study coursework. Collegebound students would spend the remainder of their day taking courses prescribed for entrance into a community college or a university, and careerbound students could augment their course load with classes in areas for which they have shown an aptitude or an interest, along with a mandatory *Life Prep Refresher Course*. Additionally, all students would be required to take a *Job Skills* course, during which they would learn how to make change, mop floors, stock a shelf, wait tables, change a tire and take inventory, among other tasks.

Students are also given instruction on career possibilities in their area, whether they might consider their passion a vocation or an avocation, and some no-nonsense business advice from guest professionals.

By not trying to treat all children the same, with the same opportunities and expectations, when children are clearly not all the same, we free them to excel by lifting the limits imposed by the inclusion of students with dissimilar aptitudes. Now the Classidemics can get into some serious equations, the Artists into some smokin' jazz, the Mechanics into a beast of an engine or robot and the Techies into some serious code – serious. If you allow artists to make art, engineers to create things, techies to improve tech and classidemics to do research all day, you won't need grades and you won't need to take attendance.

Let's Get Busy

We must completely revamp high school curriculum with the driving philosophy being that all students are intelligent.

We must assess in what area each student's intelligence lies and help them nurture that intelligence.

We must revamp the high school graduation requirements, including a set of national minimum requirements to receive federal funding, with a much bigger focus on life skills and a reduction of unnecessary Classidemics. (This will not be easy, as teachers are a passionate lot, often driven by a love for their subject and often driven by a fear of losing their job. A small committee of Education Professors and small business owners - and not teachers currently in the trenches - should be utilized for this.)

We must spend a LOT more on education. We need to provide a 21st century living wage for teachers, classroom equipment, student computers, internet bandwidth, IT systems, IT personnel, books,

software, more teachers, teacher's aides, art supplies and so on forever and ever, Amen. In order to do that,

it must be real to taxpayers. A few courageous school districts will have to put the plan in action as a pilot, with its progress and success documented. The NEA in conjunction with the Dept. of Education must then produce a series of TV ads titled, 'America's Youth in School' and show the country a better way; better education, happier students, more productive young adults. They must market it like it is beer or shampoo. They must make it as real to today's taxpayers as Walt and Werner made space travel to the taxpayer's of the 50s and 60s.

And then, instead of acting like *an undeserving step-child begging for just enough gruel to survive*, as does the very typical mailer below,

LOCAL OPTION LEVY | **Ballot Measure #34-284**
The School Board is proposing a 5-year Local Option Levy renewal that will appear on the May 15, 2018 ballot. | **Renewal Election**
| **Tuesday, May 15, 2018**

ABOUT THE LEVY

School District serves about 40,000 students in 53 schools. In 2013, voters passed a 5-year local option levy to restore teaching positions that had been eliminated and to reduce class sizes.

If passed, the local option levy renewal would allow schools to retain 300 teaching positions and maintain class sizes at the same tax rate of \$1.25 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. If the levy does not pass, the School District would see a decrease of \$30 million dollars to the budget, leading to an increase in class sizes and potentially layoffs of 300 teaching positions.

Teachers need to stand up and say, "Damn It! We need more! We need more to do a good job. We need more to do right by your children. We need more to be safe. We need more to ensure that the United States of America will fulfil its manifest destiny as the most powerful, most advanced nation in the world. We need more – a lot more, and your children are worth it and their teachers are worth it and America's future is worth it and it is time to pony up."

We'll be amazed

Back to 'America's Youth in School' for a moment: There are a couple kids in almost any high school that could produce those ads. Really! We will be amazed at what our youth can do when left alone to do what it is they do. Technology has matured so fast in the past ten years, and provides so much that was unavailable a short generation ago, that those born after the turn of the century have a perspective so intriguingly different from their elders that their visions surely stretch beyond the realm of their parents' imaginations; that we literally cannot fathom all the wondrous things they will come up with.

We must empower them and their imaginations. We must follow through with all the hovering and helicoptering and protecting and championing and bragging with some good ol' fashioned tax dollars - lots of them. We'll be amazed.

Appendix A for Part One

A Working List of Skills and Knowledge Covered in *Sophomore Life Prep Courses*

- The ability to use a personal computer for basic tasks.
- The ability to fill out a job application – both online *and* on paper.
- The ability to create and balance a household budget.
- The ability to balance a checkbook - both online *and* on paper.
- The ability to navigate one's city, either by driving a car or mastering public transportation.
- The ability to cook basic meals.
- An understanding of how pregnancy occurs, STDs are spread, and optional methods to prevent both.
- The ability to explain how interest (\$) works, and how credit cards are different and dangerous.
- The ability to do laundry & clean the house.
- Basic communication and relationship skills.
- An understanding of the two-party political system, and some of the basic differences between the parties.
- The ability to recount a general timeline of American history, *at least* including and in order, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, the world wars, the Technological Revolution
- A knowledge of alcoholism and other addictions and how they work.
- A working knowledge of First Aid