

THE REFORM OF EDUCATION IN ST. LANDRY PARISH

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In a magnificent book called *Collapse*, the Pulitzer Prize-winner, Jared Diamond, examines why some of the great civilizations of the past have collapsed into ruin. From the fate of the prehistoric Polynesian people on Easter Island, to that of the Native American civilizations of the Anasazi and the Maya, to that of the medieval Vikings who settled in Greenland, he traces a fundamental pattern of decline and ultimate catastrophe. Not only did these civilizations damage their environment and squander natural resources, but they also held on to cultural values that served them poorly and contributed directly to the collapse of their way of life. All of these peoples could have survived, some even in the most extreme environments, if only they had been able to make the necessary cultural adaptations.

In terms of median household income, Louisiana ranks as the fourth poorest state in the nation at \$32,566,¹ St. Landry parish ranks as the seventh poorest parish in the state at

¹ See <http://louisiana.state-capitals.com/state.html>. To compare Louisiana to the other states, one has to review the State-Capitals webpage of every state.

\$22,855,² and the town of Washington, where I was born, ranks as the poorest town in the parish at \$12,177.³ In our area we see dreadful poverty, and the future can only get worse as we import cheap goods from China, cheap manual labor from Mexico, and superb digitized labor from countries such as India and Vietnam. Thomas Friedman, in a national bestseller called the *The World is Flat*, argues that we are living in a world of global competition unlike anything we have ever seen before, and I venture to say that if we do not make some drastic changes in our cultural attitudes, like many of the people that Diamond describes in his book, we are headed for economic and social collapse.

Our only hope lies in education. But somehow we naively think that we educate a child simply by putting him or her in a classroom. We fail to understand that what a teacher does in a classroom represents only half of the learning process. The other half involves a response on the part of the student. Just as it takes both a quarterback and a receiver to complete a pass, both teacher and student must perform, and there is a simple rule of thumb that we can apply in this regard: for every two hours of instruction, there must be at least one hour of student response,

²See <http://louisiana.state-capitals.com/county/Saint%20Landry>

³ See <http://louisiana.state-capitals.com/city/Washington>

and this response must take place in a highly disciplined and quiet environment.

But our homes do not always provide an adequate environment for the student to respond to what was taught in the classroom. Over 40% of the households in Louisiana have no husband present. This is the highest figure in the nation. Within our state, St. Landry parish ranks sixth from the bottom in this regard at 55.60%, and within our parish the town of Washington ranks at the very bottom with a deplorable figure of 70.10%. How can a young unmarried mother living in poverty with as many as three or four children at her side assure that they will all spend two to three hours a day in a highly disciplined and quiet environment? To this we have only to add the influence of drugs or alcohol, and the effort to educate becomes utterly futile and hopeless.

The solution I propose would involve a radical shift in cultural values, wherein all of the resources within a school currently devoted to entertainment would be focused exclusively upon academic achievement.

Imagine the money, time and other resources devoted to basketball, football and other sports. In times of crisis, a school, like a business, must look to the bottom line, and if extracurricular activities do not enhance the ability of a student to climb out of poverty and achieve a respectable standard of living later on

in life, why should they be sponsored within a school? We have only to consider the number of students who have graduated our high schools in the last ten years and today earn a living as professional athletes. Of the tens of thousands of students in our parish who have engaged in sports at school, surely we cannot find more than a handful that have been able to earn a living in this regard.

As high schools boomed in the 1920s and 1930s, and became mass institutions, extracurricular activities such as basketball and football gained in popularity. As far back as 1929 we find the totally bizarre concept of high schools being built around basketball courts. William J. Reese makes reference back then to a Flora Indiana high school of only 90 students that had a gym capable of seating seat 1,200 fans. Another Indiana high school in Martinsville had a gym that could seat 5,000 fans, a number greater than that town's entire population.⁴ Somehow in the history of America's schools, the extracurricular, fueled by progressive tendencies, transformed itself into pure entertainment for the masses, and it appears that no school board has ever succeeded in reversing this aberrant trend.

Note that my argument is not against sports. Entertainment plays an important role in every society (a point that I will return to towards the end of this paper). But why do schools

⁴ See William J. Reese (2005), p. 195.

here in the United States arbitrarily take resources set aside for education and devote them to entertainment? Most countries are happy to let the sports industry fund its own recruitment and training of athletes. The sports industry has become a mega-billion dollar enterprise, and surely it can carry on quite successfully without any input from schools.

As educators we ask our children to buy into a gigantic lie that if they excel now in sports, one day they might become as rich and famous as a Michael Jordan or a Troy Aikman. We actually hold up such people as role models, and we encourage our children to excel in sports with the greatest hype imaginable. We ask them to live in a fantasy world totally unrelated to the real world that the overwhelming majority of them will have to face later on as adults. *In the end, we sacrifice their future so that we might be entertained.* Nowhere can we find cultural values that erode and destroy in a more pernicious manner the moral, social and economic structure of our society.

We should have the honesty to admit that the ability to play sports is, in fact, nothing more than the ability to play. Unfortunately we become so entertained by this playful activity that we totally underestimate or ignore the discipline and hard work needed to get a good education and eventually land a good job.

Why do we empower schools to assist our children in learning how to play?

Would it not make infinitely more sense to empower schools to assist our children in learning what was taught in the classroom?

There are only so many hours in a day, and if learning requires two to three hours a day, how are students supposed to find another few hours within the same day to devote to sports such as basketball, football and baseball? In the end we have to ask ourselves one simple question: is playing more important than learning?

It sounds so absurd that schools should be engaged in teaching children how to play. This might make sense to a certain extent with small children in primary school, but why should this continue into secondary school right at the very time when the higher rational ability of the student is coming to maturity?

Instead of sitting a student down at this formative stage in life and teaching him the discipline of independent study and learning, we toss him a ball and ask him to go outside and play. Afterwards we wonder why our public school system ranks so poorly in comparison to many countries in Europe and Asia, why we live in one of the poorest and most backward regions of the United States, and why so many people in this parish are on welfare or end up in prison.

In racial terms we confirm the old stereotype of blacks as entertainers. They can sing, dance and play ball, but in the current academic setting of our

public school system, they will never compete in large numbers at the highest levels at the finest universities for the best jobs that this nation has to offer. The best long-term hope we have of breaking the cycle of poverty so widespread in this part of Louisiana lies not with welfare and affirmative action programs, but with a concept that would complete the process of learning that begins in the classroom. Specifically what does this mean?

I propose a mandatory supervised study hall for all grades 6 through 12 lasting from 3:30 PM to 6:30 PM each day of the week, Monday through Friday. Of course, the one study hall session could be divided up into several sessions before, during or after class hours. All of the resources currently devoted to entertainment within the school would be shifted to providing the student with the quiet and disciplined environment needed to learn what is taught in the classroom.

No tutoring would take place during this study hall period. Tutoring is teaching, and the central theme of this paper says that at the end of an entire day of teaching we do not need more teaching but something entirely different: *student response*. Furthermore, tutoring works against the responsible and independent frame of mind that this study hall program is designed to create within the student. In the *total silence* of the study hall, the student not only learns what the teacher has taught, but he or she also learns something far more

important: how to study and work in a self-reliant and independent manner, how to focus all mental and emotional resources on the work demanded by the teachers.

At times the need to tutor reflects the failure of the teacher to teach, but in many cases, it reflects an obvious and ubiquitous failure of the student to respond to what was taught. If we firmly address the deficiencies at both levels, and if at each grade level we group students of different learning abilities into different classes, tutoring would no longer be needed. Such grouping, however, in no way should allow a class to follow a path or track not strictly devoted to academics.

Since no tutoring would take place, one disciplinarian could serve a large number of students of various ages and grades. In Flemish Belgium we often see a gymnasium that doubles as a study hall filled with over 200 hundred students under the watchful eye of only one or two disciplinarians. In this ungraded and multi-age setting, there are no problems with discipline. For if any child should talk or not focus on the task at hand, he or she is obliged to remain there for an additional hour. Any unfocused behavior during this additional hour necessitates an additional hour of study hall the following day.

This ungraded mixture of students in the study hall is quite important in reducing non-verbal interaction among friends and classmates. The disciplinarian carefully seats problem students in an area of study hall

where they are most easily observed, and this enables him or her to react quickly to any problems that might arise. The study hall remains at all times an ideal setting for the student to learn, and it features a level of discipline seldom found anywhere within American culture.

The position of head disciplinarian becomes one of the most important positions within a school. It demands the highest level of motivational and leadership skills, not only serving the student in the effort to learn but also assisting any teacher who might have problems with discipline. The disciplinarian has the responsibility of assuring both parents and teachers that serious learning takes place.

Communication between teacher and disciplinarian is essential. By carefully assigning work that conforms to the rigorous standard of the entire study hall period, the teacher controls the agenda of the study hall, and at the same time, the discipline demanded in the study hall spills over into the classroom and has a dramatic affect on what happens there. Any child found talking, misbehaving or distracted in class would be obliged to stay an extra hour that day in study hall. Through an intense dialogue between teacher and disciplinarian, the gap between teaching and learning is continually bridged.

The teacher should give a test each day in each subject, but such testing should not demand a lot of time. It might consist of no more than one or two questions carefully crafted to find

out if the student has grasped the basics of what was taught the day before. Since the daily test immediately engages the student to respond to what was taught, it saves valuable classroom time by eliminating many levels of repetition and recapitulation. The more the student is actively engaged in the learning process, the easier it becomes for the teacher to teach, and nothing grabs the attention of the student more forcefully than the regimen of a daily test.

The standard in daily testing should be rigorous, and one of the best grading methods in both daily and weekly testing is for the teacher, regardless of the number of questions that comprise the test, to work within the framework of only two possible grades: zero or 100%. Any result short of a perfect 100% (this would include, for example, a single misspelled word) should be a zero, and one such failing score would oblige the student to spend that day an extra hour in study hall.

We should not underestimate the power of a zero to focus the attention of the student on the work demanded by the teacher.⁵ Children will perform

⁵This was the daily test-grading method used by my father, Robert L. Olivier, who taught for over 30 years within the St. Landry parish public school system. He administered these daily tests in a very fair manner (no trick questions), and amazingly just about the entire class would score 100% each day in each subject.

according to our expectations, and therefore why should we not expect the highest intellectual performance each and every day?

Further testing at the end of a week, at the end of a six-week period, at the end of a semester and at the end of a year should also take place. During exam time the disciplinarian should have the freedom to lengthen the study hall period according to the importance of the exams and the overall adequacy of student response within that period. This continuous testing would oblige the student to take full advantage of the time and opportunity provided by the study hall. Discipline, hard work and accountability should characterize every aspect of student life within the school.

Each day the disciplinarian should receive the results of all tests. This would allow him or her to focus attention on those students whose scores do not reflect adequate effort in study hall. Every Friday the school should issue a report card to be signed by both father and mother, even if the two should not be living together. In this way both parents would be

To those who might object to this method and say that it might create a sense of inferiority within the student who might occasionally score a zero, I can confidently say that the overwhelming majority of my father's students learned the discipline of several hours of study each day, and therefore they consistently achieved at the highest level. The sense of pride and accomplishment that this teaching method instilled in them was truly remarkable.

obliged to follow closely the performance of their children. The weekly report card signed by both parents is a common feature of the Flemish study hall program.

Students failing weekly tests would be obliged to attend study hall for at least four to six hours on Saturday, and a significant part of this Saturday study hall period would be devoted to teaching the student how to study in an independent manner. The same laws that apply to truancy during the week would apply to truancy on Saturdays. Specialists in the field of psychology, psychiatry, sociology and medicine would be called in on Saturdays to assist the disciplinarian in dealing with problem learners.

Students failing weekly tests would also be obliged to spend an extra hour in study hall each day throughout the following week. Students with failing grades at the end of a six-week period, in addition to Saturday study hall, would be obliged to spend an extra hour in study hall each day throughout the following six-week period. Students with failing grades at the end of the first semester, in addition to Saturday study hall, would be obliged to spend an extra hour in study hall each day throughout the entire second semester. Finally, students failing comprehensive end-of-year examinations would be obliged to attend two months of summer study hall, five days per week and six hours per day. At the end of this summer study hall period, they would be obliged to retake final exams, and should they fail these

exams, they should, without exception, repeat the year. Social promotion does not promote, foster or enhance academic excellence.

The cost of transporting children home after an additional hour of study hall, as well as the cost of transporting them to and from study hall on Saturday or during the summer, should be born by their parents. If the school should provide taxi or bus service in the case where parents have no automobile, the school would have full recourse to the legal system in the collection of debt in this regard. In this way the parents of problem learners could never adopt a passive and detached attitude regarding the engagement of their children in the learning process, and they would put substantial pressure on their children to perform.

The comprehensive end-of-year examinations are particularly important. Here the teacher steps aside while the student actively recalls and integrates everything taught over an entire year. These exams are the highest expression and most accurate measurement of student response, and here we might make distinctions in levels of excellence where an A demonstrates firm mastery of a subject, where a AA demonstrates mastery that goes beyond what was taught in the classroom, and where a AAA demonstrates mastery that equates to university-level comprehension.⁶ While a school

⁶ Of course, other grades are possible from a B+ to a failing F.

should demand and expect that the majority of students at the end of the year score an A in most subjects, it would bestow the AAA grade quite infrequently, perhaps only once or twice in a year.

Instead of encouraging students to compete in their ability to entertain, we should encourage them to compete in their ability to learn. Every six weeks, students would be ranked according to their test scores. In this way, teachers, disciplinarians, parents and students could easily identify patterns of progress or decline. The school board should encourage academic competition within and between schools. Newspapers should have an academic section celebrating the achievement of outstanding students and schools.⁷

Within a class and within an entire school, we might distinguish the student of the month, the student of the semester and the student of the

⁷ For many years newspapers have confirmed this cultural fascination with sports in schools. As Reese points out: "Small-town as well as big-city newspapers nevertheless followed sports teams with a fanaticism missing when covering the debate squad. In 1916, Michael Vincent O'Shea editorialized in the *Wisconsin Journal of Education* that 'everything possible should be done to exalt the intellectual work of secondary schools, and subdue the importance that is attached to athletic prowess. We need to celebrate individual achievements by every form of public demonstration in order to impress upon students the importance of brain as contrasted with brawn.'" William J. Reese (2005), p. 195. These words of O'Shea back in 1916 are far more relevant today.

year. We might also distinguish students who excel in particular subjects, who show the greatest progress or who display exemplary behavior in class or study hall. These same awards and distinctions would repeat at the level of the parish and the state. Wherever we find progress, especially among the slowest of learners, we should always stand ready to encourage and praise.

Some child-oriented educators argue that academic competition might instill a sense of inferiority among those who perform poorly. But how can they overlook the fact that sports within our schools are all about winning and losing? Simply not engaging in sports or not making the varsity team can involve a tremendous loss of status and prestige, and when our children do engage in sports, our coaches teach them to display attitudes of aggression and confrontation. Often they are taught to stomp, crush and defeat the opposing team, and as one team rejoices in victory, the other team suffers humiliating defeat. Here we witness enormous struggle and competition over skills that mean almost nothing later on in life when applying for a job.

Academic competition, by contrast, takes place in a far less aggressive setting, and if we demand of all students a high level of response to what was taught in the classroom, surely there will be far fewer losers and non-performers in academics than what we see today in sports. Here competition truly means something. It involves the exercise of

intellectual skills that make an enormous difference later on in life when applying for quality, high-paying jobs.

Students should learn at an early age to associate academic achievement with economic success, and therefore an academic achievement endowment fund should be set up to reward monetarily honor roll students and all other notable achievers. The money awarded here should be significant and meaningful, serving as a powerful incentive to perform. Local businesses and churches, as well as civic, service and social clubs, would be called upon to contribute to this fund.

The highest status for a boy within a school should never come from being a sports star, and likewise, the highest status for a girl should never come from being the cutest or sexiest cheerleader.⁸ Are we not promoting within our schools all the wrong values? Isn't a high proficiency in math, science and English a thousand

⁸ As Reese points out, "While academic success was emphasized in striving families, for boys the highest status at school came from being an athlete, not a scholar. For girls, appearance, personality and being a cheerleader, made one popular." Ibid, p. 315. "Middle-class students above all might acquiesce and study to get decent grades to please their parents and prepare for college, but few adolescents thought academics central to their daily lives... Asked whom in their high school they admired the most, students never named a star pupil." Ibid, p. 316. "High school pupils, like the larger society, accorded higher status to athletics than to the life of the mind." Ibid, p. 328

times more useful later on in life when applying for a job than the ability to throw a ball or the ability to strut and prance as the sexiest cheerleader in town?

Students who excel in academics should no longer be looked down upon as book worms, brown-nosers, grinds or nerds. Instead they should be the most admired students on campus, enjoying the highest status and prestige. When our children begin to share a common conviction that academics, not sports, are absolutely central to their daily lives, and when peer pressure confirms and reinforces this conviction in a powerful way, then our public schools are well on their way to functioning as world-class institutions of learning.

Our goal therefore goes far beyond simply obliging students to attend study hall: our goal is to create a culture of learning. In sociological terms we might say that it is our goal to create a sub-culture of learning within the broader culture of glamour, glitz and entertainment.

Therefore, not only should we reward the student monetarily for academic performance, but we should also provide a long-term vision of the power of academic credentials within the workplace. On a regular basis the school should invite outstanding professionals who have excelled in their fields to address the student body. These events should give students clear insight into the enormous difference in life a good education can make. The heroes of the

day would no longer be sports stars, but rather mathematicians, physicists, engineers, biologists, doctors, lawyers, philosophers, historians, sociologists or whatever other profession might excite the imagination of even our poorest children. By presenting meaningful role models, the school continually reminds the student where all this hard work and effort will lead. In this way the discipline imposed from the outside gradually transforms itself into a deep internal self-discipline.

In the USA nearly one out of every three public high school students fails to graduate,⁹ and for Latinos and African Americans the dropout rate approaches 50%. It should come as no surprise that poor kids are about six times more likely to drop out of school than rich kids. Nearly half of all dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24 are unemployed, and when they do find a job, they are relegated to the lowest sectors of our economy where they must compete with low-wage immigrant labor. Ending up at the bottom of the economic ladder, dropouts go on to swell the ranks of our prison and welfare systems.

As Bob Herbert of the New York Times states so well: "For anyone deluded enough to question whether education is the ticket to a better life for black boys and men, consider that a black male who drops out of high school is 60 times more likely to find himself in

⁹ See Time, April 17, 2006, Nathan Thornburgh, pp. 30-40.

prison than one with a bachelor's degree."¹⁰ Our public school system is creating a permanent underclass of misfits and dropouts, and in an age when a high school diploma hardly suffices to get a good job, how will this underclass ever compete in a global marketplace?

It should be abundantly clear by now that the central problem in education today situates not only in the failure of teachers to teach, but also in the miserable failure of parents to provide the motivation and means for their children to learn.¹¹ Obviously the only way to correct this problem is to allow the school to assist the parents in this limited domain. By completely submersing the student in a culture of learning, the school has everything it needs to combat those deficiencies in family life that limit or constrain student response, and only then will it be in a strong position to solve the dropout problem. But the dropout problem is not the only major problem that will be solved by this study hall program.

¹⁰ Bob Herbert, New York Times, March 5, 2007.
<http://select.nytimes.com/2007/03/05/opinion/05herbert.html?th&emc=th>

¹¹ B. Pegedet, back in October 26, 2005, wrote a letter to the editor of the Opelousas Daily World stating that parents are doing a terrible job in providing the motivation and means for their children to learn: "And on other days, I get so angry because I see them in the same dirty clothes all week long, without supplies to do their work, without homework ever done. Lack of support from parents is a huge problem with most public schools."

In times past white schools within the St. Landry parish were better equipped and better staffed than black schools, and this disproportionality in resources forced the federal courts to take action. Even though in more recent times the school board has poured a lot of money and effort into solving this problem, a disproportionate number of black students in St. Landry parish are still being labeled as mildly or mentally disabled, and consequently the school board is still not free of federal oversight in its desegregation case. Even with a high degree of proportionality in teaching, we still see high degree of disproportionality in learning. How can this be?

Better teachers and better teacher training, better screening and monitoring of students with learning disabilities, special education programs more sensitive to the needs of the black child, are all useful to a certain degree, but all by themselves they do not necessarily translate into more learning, and unfortunately all by themselves they will never eliminate the disproportionate underachievement that characterizes the black student within the parish. The problem does not lie solely with the school in its capacity to teach.

If we probe a bit more deeply we see that it is not so much the black student in disproportionate numbers who does not have the ability to learn. The black student is in no way less intelligent or less gifted than his white counterpart, and therefore we can say quite assuredly that the problem lies

not with the black child in his or her innate capacity to learn.

Rather it is the black family in disproportionate numbers that does not understand the importance of providing that child with the means and motivation to learn.

Imagine a household with three or four children and no husband present. Imagine further that at the head of this household is a young unmarried or divorced mother earning a minimum wage or subsisting on welfare. Does she have a vision of her children excelling at the highest academic level? Is she going to make sure that they spend a few hours each day in learning? Simply keeping them off the streets and out of the hands of drug dealers is for her a major accomplishment.

But if a large part of the problem lies with the family, how can it ever be solved? Obviously the Justice Department cannot hold the family accountable, and yet it repeatedly and justifiably asks for a plan of action in this regard.

I suggest that with this study hall concept, we have precisely the plan of action that is required. We should make schools fully accountable for both teaching and learning as separate and distinct activities *within* the school. If the family cannot assure that the student spends two to three hours a day outside the classroom in learning, the school should have the power to demand this of the student, and if, in so doing, a specific school fails to eliminate disproportionality in

learning, the court should be able to hold that school accountable.

The moment the disproportionality problem is defined correctly as disproportionality not only in teaching but also in learning, and the moment schools are made accountable for learning through the adoption of a mandatory supervised study hall program, the disproportionality problem in St. Landry parish can be solved.

Furthermore we should redefine what is meant by unitary status. We need to come up with a definition that goes far beyond what the courts are currently demanding. We need to define it not only in terms of providing each child with the same educational resources, but also in terms of providing each child with the same motivation and means to learn.

Only by redefining it in such comprehensive manner will we go on to develop a program that will produce the results in learning that will definitively put an end to this shameful lawsuit.

Does vocational training have a place in a high school curriculum? The answer here is a controversial but unequivocal "no." The ability to do basic math and science, or to read, write and speak English as a fully literate and articulate high school graduate, represents a minimum in educational standards even for a plumber, carpenter, welder or used car salesman. Vocational training represents education at a tertiary level, and it presupposes a rich and

intensive secondary education. Only after a student receives a well rounded secondary education at a high academic level should he or she be in a position to decide whether to attend a vocational school, a college or a university.

How easy it is for rich educators to recommend that poor children attend vocational schools. Is this not a decision that the only the mature high school graduate can make? Here we speak in general of a graduate who has acquired a deep sense of internal self-discipline throughout seven full years of study hall discipline, and in this demanding process, he or she has learned how to study and how to imagine a future that might go far beyond vocational training.

Many educators passively resign themselves to the idea that schools can do nothing about deficiencies in family life, and therefore they buy into the old progressive notion of adapting the school to the low expectations and unfocused behavior of the child. In other words the school simply mirrors back to the family its distorted values and does nothing to correct the situation. But if the school is in a strong position to provide the student with the means and motivation to learn, deficiencies in family life should have little impact on the level of student response. In spite of any objections that parents might have, let us boldly adapt the child to the school, and let the school be a place of learning devoted exclusively to engaging and challenging the mind.

But most parents truly concerned about the welfare of their children should react favorably to this proposal for a variety of reasons. No longer would their children be left unsupervised at home or on the streets between the hours of 3:00 PM and 6:30 PM. Those parents who devote substantial resources to supervising their children during this critical period of the day would no longer be required to do so. Children would spend far less time watching television or playing video games. When children would return home from school, parents would have already returned home from work, and they could all spend an evening together without the hassle of homework or study. This study hall concept would greatly simplify the life of a single working mother. Rates of drug use, pregnancy and crime among high school students should drop dramatically.

Some educators and parents might feel that certain features of this study hall program – the number of study hall hours per day, the regimen of the daily test, the zero-or-100% grading system, the Saturday study hall session, the comprehensive end-of-year examinations, the summer study hall session and so forth - appear to be too tough and demanding. But what purpose is served in making this program any less demanding? The extremely competitive marketplace that our children will soon face as adults will be far more demanding than anything they might experience under this program, and surely no one

is prepared to argue that a lifetime of poverty is an easy road to travel.

Things quickly fall into perspective the moment we stand back and look at the big picture. The education that our children are now receiving to prepare for a global marketplace is simply not world-class. "The quality of education in math and science in elementary and high schools has plummeted,"¹² says Michael D. Lemonick of Time magazine, and his analysis is confirmed by the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) involving a half-million students in 41 countries.

The TIMSS report shows that U.S. fourth-graders on an international level performed poorly, middle school students performed even worse, and high school students were at the very bottom.¹³ So much of this poor high school performance is linked to weak math and science curricula in U.S. middle schools.¹⁴ We put far too much emphasis on extracurricular activities, electives and other non-essentials, and we fail to offer our children access

¹² From an article in Time, February 13, 2006, Michael D. Lemonick, p. 24.

¹³ "U.S. twelfth graders scored below the international average and among the lowest of the 21 participating nations in both mathematics and science general knowledge. The U.S. outperformed only South Africa and Cyprus on both assessments." See <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs99/1999081.pdf>

¹⁴ For a quick and shocking view of US test scores see: <http://4brevard.com/choice/international-test-scores.htm>

to high-quality academic subjects that would allow them to compete against the best in the world.

Asian countries are clearly outperforming us in advanced math and science. The International Study Center at Boston College managed a study that reveals that "44 percent of eight-graders in Singapore scored at the most advanced level in math, as did 38 percent in Taiwan. Only 7 percent in the United States did."¹⁵ Another international education test published in December 2004, from the Program for International Student Assessment, shows that "American fifteen-year-olds are below the international average when it comes to applying math skills to real life."¹⁶ As we fall behind in math and science, we fall behind in the technological advances that set us apart in the world, and those countries practicing extreme capitalism, such as China, India and South Korea, stand ready and willing to take our place.

At an enormous cost to the US taxpayer, our high schools are failing to prepare their graduates for college. On September 2, 2006, the New York Times reported that "Though higher education is now a near-universal aspiration, researchers suggest that close to half the students who enter college need remedial courses."¹⁷

¹⁵ Friedman (2005), p. 272.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/02/educ>

Elsewhere in the same article we read: "According to scores on the 2006 ACT college entrance exam, only 21 percent of students applying to four-year institutions are ready for college-level work in all four areas tested, reading, writing, math and biology." A bit further we see that many do not even master elementary and middle school math! "More than one in four remedial students works on elementary and middle school arithmetic."

About half of all students seeking college degrees begin at the level of a community college, and here we see dropout rates that far exceed what we see in high schools: "73 percent of students entering community colleges hoped to earn four-year degrees, but only 22 percent had done so after six years." But even when our students manage to graduate from community colleges, the majority of them are still not literate: "The Pew Charitable Trusts recently found that three-quarters of community college graduates were not literate enough to handle everyday tasks like comparing viewpoints in newspaper editorials or calculating the cost of food items per ounce."

We teach, we teach, and we keep on teaching, yet very little learning seems to be taking place. Surely it cannot be so difficult to identify what we are doing wrong. When will we wake up

[ation/02college.html?pagewanted=3&th&emc=th](#)

and solve the obvious problem that lies before us?

Americans invest billions of dollars each year on elementary schools, middle schools, high schools and community colleges, but look at the meager return on investment they receive in terms of learning. From kindergarten through community college, we bombard the student with teaching, and when he or she fails to learn, we desperately resort to remedial courses and even more expensive forms of teaching called tutoring. In the effort to educate a child, how can we spend huge sums of money on teaching, while totally ignoring the essentials of what it takes to learn?

Learning is not teaching and learning does not materialize as if by magic as an evitable consequence of teaching. In other words, the teacher can teach with great skill and devotion, but that does not necessarily mean that the child sitting in front of her is learning anything. Of course learning does and should take place in the classroom, but learning demands quiet, sustained, disciplined and highly motivated effort on the part of the student - each and every day. If this does not take place, teaching all too often represents the most futile and frustrating experience imaginable as well as a horrible waste of taxpayer money.

Since the teacher cannot learn on behalf of the student, the student must be taught to embrace the effort to learn as something that only he or she

can do. This independent effort to learn demands its own quiet time and space, and it constitutes and defines the essence of learning.

Instead of spoon-feeding the student and his holding hands at every step and stage of student life from middle school to community college, we should gradually de-emphasize the passive notion of being taught and call upon the student to actively take charge of teaching him- or herself. Until we create within our public school system a culture of learning in which the student learns how to learn and becomes self-taught, we will have very little to show for all the money we are spending on education.

When this study hall concept is properly implemented, we might even see a situation in the life of the mature student where spending a great deal of time in the classroom would no longer be necessary. All that would remain would be the total silence of the study hall. The teacher would be there simply to challenge, evaluate, inspire, motivate and guide, all actual subject matter lying totally within the grasp of the student. In an age of the electronic distribution of information freely accessible across the globe, all of this could happen at a relatively early age.

Teaching someone how to learn in a self-reliant and independent manner is not mind control, as some have suggested. Demagogues, tyrants and religious fanatics – all specialists in mind control - thrive in the midst of poorly educated people who never

learn to think for themselves. Our primary goal is to teach the student the enormous self-discipline needed to think independently and to take firm control of his or her own mind, precisely the opposite of what we see in the case of mind control.

Some would argue that to improve education we have only to adopt the books and teaching methods of those countries that excel academically. But how can we upgrade the curriculum to compete, for example, with a Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Flanders or the Netherlands, when the student response to the current curriculum is so poor? Imagine the frustration of a teacher who attempts to expand on a particular subject today only to discover that the student has not studied and grasped what was taught the day before. Only by closing the gap between teaching and learning will the United States be in a position to upgrade its curriculum and compete with the rest of the world.

This study hall concept, therefore, stands as a prerequisite to the raising of standards in our public school system. Without establishing and continually sustaining a high level of student response, educators will always face insurmountable obstacles and total frustration in any attempt to educate a child. Let us look now at how our St. Landry parish public schools are performing.

According to figures released by the Louisiana Department of Education in

2004,¹⁸ we see that the top six schools in St. Landry parish (Glendale Elementary, Arnaudville Elementary, Krotz Springs Elementary, Park Vista Elementary, Cankton Elementary and Grand Prairie Elementary) were predominantly white (69.44%, 89.92%, 100.00%, 70.78%, 77.72% and 83.61% respectively), and they had baseline school performance scores of 117.9, 115.6, 110.1, 107.6, 105.1, 105.0 and 101.1 respectively. Likewise, the bottom six schools in the parish (Washington Elementary, Morrow Elementary, Southwest Elementary, North Elementary, Opelousas Junior High, and North Central High) were predominantly black (83.03%, 80.39%, 100.00%, 98.13%, 73.73% and 74.56% respectively), and they had performance scores of 70.3, 68.9, 68.4, 68.2, 64.9 and 59.9 respectively.

In the fall of 2005, the top six schools in the parish (Glendale Elementary, Arnaudville Elementary, Eunice Elementary, Park Vista Elementary, Krotz Springs Elementary and Grand Prairie Elementary) remained predominantly white (72.43%, 89.16%, 62.24%, 69.2%, 100.00% and 83.39% respectively), and they had performance scores of 126.4, 117.5, 112.1, 111.9, 111.4 and 111.4 respectively. The bottom six schools in the parish (Washington Elementary, Creswell Elementary, North Elementary, Opelousas Junior High,

North Central High and Southwest Elementary) remained predominantly black (85.88%, 100.00%, 100.00%, 74.47%, 74.53% and 100.00% respectively), and they had performance scores of 74.8, 72.9, 72.6, 68.3, 66.9 and 63.2 respectively.

The average baseline school performance score of the top six schools in St. Landry parish was 110.2 in 2004 and 115.1 in 2005. Here we see progress among the top six schools in the parish. However, the average performance score of the bottom six schools was 71.8 in 2004 and 69.8 in 2005. Here we see decline among the worst six schools in the parish.

Although the average school performance score of all the schools in the parish rose 4.4 points from 87.3 to 91.7, the gap between the best six schools and worst six schools in the parish widened by 6.9 points, from 38.4 to 45.3. The best schools in the parish continue to advance while the worst schools in the parish continue to decline.

On average the top six schools in the parish were 81.91% white in 2004 and 79.40% white in 2005.¹⁹ Here we see a small increase in the number of black students attending the best schools in the parish. But the bottom six schools in the parish were 15.03% white in 2004 and 10.85% white in 2005. Here we see a significant white

¹⁸ See <http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/accountability/home.html>

¹⁹ See <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/8101.xls>

flight from the worst schools in the parish.

If we look at what happened at the level of the state, we see that the average school performance score of the top six schools in the state was 166.4 in 2004 and 168.4 in 2005. However, the average performance score of the bottom six schools in the state was an astounding and totally unbelievable 16.0 in 2004 and 16.6 in 2005. The school performance gap between the six best and the six worst schools in the state has widened from 150.4 to 151.8 points, and we cannot help but note our state has catastrophically failed its worst schools.

On average the top six schools in the state were 30.09% black in 2004 and 32.91% black in 2005. Here again we see a small increase in the number of black students attending the best schools in the state. But on average the six worst schools in the state were 88.79% black in 2004 and 92.91% black in 2005. Once again we see significant white flight from the worst schools in the state.

If we take a slightly broader view and look at the bottom 20 schools in the state, we see that on average they are over 92% black, and not surprisingly most were located in Orleans parish. It took Katrina with her high winds, broken levees and massive flooding to force us to see, to our great international embarrassment, the thoroughly wretched condition of a people whose lives education and prosperity have seldom touched.

Therefore, we see that at the levels of both parish and state, good schools got better and bad schools got worse, and the same correlation between school performance and racial composition exists at both levels. When we look at our country as a whole, this dismal story repeats itself.

A group of experts from many different fields, chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, recently issued a report called *With All Deliberate Speed*.²⁰ This report shows that “the United States now has an unequal, two-tiered K-12 system, increasingly segregated by race and income. Statistics from the Harvard Civil Rights Project show that more than 70 percent of American black students attend predominantly minority schools, while the average white student attends a school that is almost 80 percent white.”²¹

The racial diversity in education that *Brown v. Board of Education* was supposed to bring about has not been achieved, and this report calls for a fresh approach to this most vexing problem. The aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita provides a unique opportunity for us to consider all options, and no option offers more promise than that which focuses on

²⁰In 1955, the US Supreme Court issued *Brown II*, ruling that schools must desegregate ‘with all deliberate speed.’” Reese (2005), p. 229.

²¹ See <http://www.nyu.edu/publicaffairs/releases/detail/852>

closing the gap between teaching and learning. To close this gap we desperately need a quiet and disciplined environment for the student to learn - something that parents have failed so miserably to provide, and something that if left on their own, they will never provide. Therefore with a lot more emphasis upon speed than upon protracted deliberation, let us give our children all that they need to complete the learning process.

Understanding the correlation between school performance and racial composition, we see how tempting it becomes to place the best teachers in predominantly white schools where the level of student response is the highest, and to place the worst teachers in predominantly black schools where the level of student response is the lowest. Since success in teaching is so highly dependent on student response, why waste the talent of a good teacher in a school where the level of student response is not adequate? Would it not make more sense to situate the good teacher in a school where he or she can truly make a difference?

But if we were to succeed in implementing this study hall concept to the point where the level of student response would be roughly the same throughout our entire public school system, then such an argument would be totally negated. Each school would have the unconditional right to demand and receive its share of the best and most talented teachers. With the implementation of this study hall

concept, we might even see a situation where good teachers would insist on teaching in the worst schools so that their talent would have the greatest impact and serve the greatest need.

With this concept, the teacher no doubt would enjoy a level of satisfaction and fulfillment seldom seen within the public school system, and the flight of good teachers and white students from public to private schools would be arrested and even reversed. The need for private schools would diminish, and hopefully the deplorable political trend to create and sustain them with the aid of government subsidies would become a thing of the past.

In some Asian countries such as Malaysia, we witness the reverse of what we see here in the United States: the best schools in Malaysia are public and the worse schools are private. Private schools in Malaysia receive those students who fail to meet the high academic standard of their public school system.

Why should the people of St. Landry parish settle for anything less than what we see in Malaysia? If we do away with school-sponsored sports programs and the mass entertainment that dominates the culture of our public schools, and if we insist on the mastery of high-quality academic subjects by everyone, what would prevent our public schools from outperforming academically any private school in the parish?

A complex society demands that its schools, churches and sports teams

operate in an independent manner according to the rules, methods, needs and goals specific to each.

Consequently a complex society needs faith-based schools about as much as it needs faith-based sports or a theocratic form of government. Many private schools have hidden agendas relating to race, wealth and class distinction.²² They undermine the effectiveness of our public school system, they rob it of resources, and as their numbers increase, they force our public schools to function even more as the last refuge of the poor and underprivileged.

In order to test every aspect of this study hall concept, I suggest that the central office sponsor a pilot study at a predominantly black school with a relatively low performance score. Furthermore, let us look for a school within a town that has the lowest median household income, the largest percentage of families below the poverty level,²³ the largest percentage of poverty stricken individuals, and the largest percentage of households with no husbands present. In other words, let us look for a town with a median household income below \$12,200 per year, a town with more than 45% of its families below the

²² This charge of elitism is nothing new. It appears as far back as the 1840's when Catholic schools rose in prominence in many American cities. See William J. Reese (2005), pp. 23, 26-27.

²³ For a definition of poverty, see <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/threshold/thresh99.html>

poverty level, a town with more than 48% of its individuals who are poverty stricken, and a town with more than 70% of its households with no husband present.²⁴

The only school that meets all of these qualifications is Washington Elementary. By launching a pilot study in Washington, hopefully we will demonstrate the power of this concept under the most difficult and challenging circumstances. This pilot study, beginning in January 2009, would last until May and would involve all grades 6 through 8.

At the end of this pilot study, the central office should evaluate the program. If the board elects to continue the program, it would be instituted at all grades 6 through 8 throughout the entire parish, starting in August 2009. The following year all 9th grades would be added to the program, the following year all 10th grades, and so forth. This gradual introduction of the program into high schools, one grade at a time, will give adequate time for parents, children, teachers and coaches to adapt to the new situation.

Those features of this program that relate to what happens in the classroom would not have to be piloted and could be implemented throughout all grades 6 to 12 as early

²⁴ To make comparisons within the parish, one must visit the State-Capitals website of each town.

as January 2009. Here I refer to the six levels of testing, the 0-or-100% grading system, the weekly report card signed by both parents, the academic endowment fund and so forth.

Our ultimate goal is to put the children of St. Landry parish on the road to success, and with every increase in the level of student response that this study hall concept is designed to bring about, we should see an immediate upgrade in the curriculum demanding an even greater effort and response. A flexible but rigorous curriculum that continually feeds upon every increase in student response will create a self-enriching spiral of excellence that goes far beyond the strategy of No Child Left Behind. Eventually it will enable all of the schools in our parish to stand near the summit of international academic achievement.

Before concluding this proposal to reform education within our parish, I would like to address the most powerful objection that parents might have. The entertainment associated with sports means a lot to most parents, and if this concept were to be implemented at the level of the parish, many parents would feel that they had been robbed of one of the most meaningful aspects of their children's growth and development.

This objection from parents carries a lot of weight, and we cannot simply dismiss this cultural fascination with sports as misguided and juvenile. The School Board must assure parents that the displacement of sports within the

school represents the displacement of sports only within the school, and that if they want to see their children participate in sports, this would still be possible. Once again, I turn to the example of Flemish Belgium.

No area within Europe loves soccer more than this northwestern corner of Belgium. But Flemish schools do not sponsor or promote soccer. Soccer is sponsored at the level of the municipality, and just about every city, town and village within Flanders has its own soccer club that plays a positive role in establishing its identity and uniqueness as a social group. Even though the artificial boundaries created by school consolidation in Flanders cut across the natural boundaries of the cities, towns and villages that have been in place for hundreds of years, this has had no impact on how sports are celebrated at the local level. The smallest villages in Flanders take great pride in their sports clubs. The smallest villages in Flanders have their own bands or fanfares complete with all of the glitter of baton-twirling majorettes.

No one could rob the Flemish of their sports clubs, their bands or their cheerleaders, and yet not a single game, concert or parade is sponsored by a school. Even though the Flemish in general are rigid practitioners of this study hall concept, they still manage to enjoy their sports as fully as anyone here in St. Landry parish. But they have put the future of their children first, and they do not allow recreational activities to compete with

or detract from the education of their children.

Even though Flanders is not populated by large minority groups, even though family bonds and parental authority are far stronger in Flanders than here in Louisiana, even though the level of parental involvement in the education of these Flemish children is exceedingly high, the Flemish still see the need for a mandatory supervised study hall. At the same time, such cultural attitudes, in combination with other factors, have important economic consequences. The dreadful poverty that we take for granted here in Louisiana is virtually non-existent in Flanders. One can drive an entire day throughout the whole of East and West Flanders and not see a single poor man living in some substandard dwelling.

No doubt we can learn a lot as we look to Belgium and other countries in Europe and Asia who strike a balance between entertainment and education. St. Landry parish will never survive in a global marketplace if it does not learn how to strike a similar balance. Entertainment and education do not have to compete with one another. Each must be allotted its complementary place, where schools have sufficient time and resources to complete the process of learning that began in the classroom, and where even the smallest municipality has its sports teams that shape its identity and sustain local pride.

Before school consolidation took place in St. Landry parish, towns such as

Washington, Grand Prairie, Plaisance, Morrow, Melville, Palmetto, Arnaudville, Lawtell, Leonville and Sunset - all had their own basketball and track teams. Melville and Sunset even had football teams. Even though these teams were relatively small, they were incredibly popular, and they played a tremendous role in fostering a sense of community.

If our public school system should relinquish its control over sports, then these municipalities or rural areas would be free to form their own municipal or regional sports teams. In addition to leagues operating at the junior high and high school age levels, these independent sports clubs could form leagues operating at the post high school age level. All of this would not only enhance and expand the celebration of sports within St. Landry parish, but it would also revitalize and transform the spirit of many of these small towns.

In the initial stages of promoting and implementing this concept, the school board and central office should meet with all of the coaches of the parish and assure them that their jobs and retirement plans within the school system would be fully secure, and that in addition to the wages they receive as teachers within the school system, they could earn considerably more as coaches working at the same time for independent sports clubs. Coaches understand well the power and popularity of sports, and once they understand the greater power and popularity sports would have if liberated from school control and

granted independent status, they should embrace the concept without hesitation.

Once the coaches are fully behind this concept, how could anyone else oppose it using the argument of sports? But if we take away the argument of sports, what else is there? Surely there are no parents who would oppose it on the basis that they want to see their children poorly educated and therefore poorly prepared to enter the workplace and secure good jobs.

Meetings should also be set up with the mayors and town councils of all the municipalities throughout the parish. These political entities, together with the school board and the central office, should oversee the formation of non-profit sports organizations. But once these non-profit organizations are formed, they should be granted complete autonomy. Their goal or purpose, having nothing to do with education, politics or religion, should focus exclusively on the enjoyment and celebration of sports.

Grounded in nothing other than the sheer enjoyment of sports, these independent sports organizations will flourish. Easily transcending the bickering and wrangling that so often characterize small town politics, these sports organizations will become a powerful unifying force, not within the limited realm of schools, but within the much broader realm of entire municipalities or regions. Only when schools rally around academic

achievement will they truly function as schools, and likewise, only when municipalities rally around athletic achievement will they enjoy a broad sense of social cohesion that politics and religion could never provide.

As small towns become unified through the celebration of sports, racial and religious barriers would be more effectively bridged, and even the political process should function more smoothly. The school, the body politic, the church and the sports club must each focus squarely on its primary mission or goal, and in granting full autonomy to one another, each has a unique contribution to make to the proper functioning of a complex society.

Are we eliminating sports? No, not at all. We are essentially liberating and empowering this important activity to do what nothing else within our society could possibly do. Once these independent sports clubs are functioning properly, small towns, so often divided along racial and religious lines, will draw together as never before. As the glue that binds an entire municipality or region together, the function of sports is clearly defined.

Let me conclude by urging the people of St. Landry parish to focus squarely on the undeniable deficiencies within the home. It would be nice if we lived in an world where every home had a father and mother who understood the value of academic credentials and would assure that for every two hours that their children should spend in the

classroom, there would be at least one hour spent at home in learning. Sadly this is not what we see in St. Landry parish. Most homes come nowhere close to providing children the means to learn what was taught in school.

In response to this tragic squandering of human potential, we should empower all schools within the parish to take firm control of the situation and guarantee to taxpayers that serious learning take place. As taxpayers we have the right to demand that our schools be held accountable not just for teaching but also for learning. For what purpose does even the best teaching serve, if little or no learning takes place?

In order to extend the accountability of schools far beyond teaching, we should grant schools comprehensive power to make sure that all students beyond a certain age spend several hours each day in the total silence of a study hall. Only in this way will our schools truly function as institutions of learning, and only in this way will taxpayers see a reasonable return on the money they invest in education.

Furthermore, this study hall program will offer a broad range of benefits to the children of the parish. It will solve the problem of what happens to children between the time when school lets out and their parents come home from work. It will free up resources dedicated to child and teenage supervision during this critical period of the day. It will dramatically reduce rates of crime, pregnancy and drug use among high

school students. It will create a far more peaceful atmosphere at home where concerned and responsible parents do not have to continually nag their children to do homework, study or read. It will greatly reduce the amount of time children spend watching television or playing video games. It will oblige even the most detached and dead-beat parents to pressure their children to perform.

With the function of the disciplinarian clearly defined, it will reduce the emotional burden that teachers face in disciplining difficult or incorrigible children. It will allow teachers to focus fully on teaching, and the discipline it instills will reduce levels of bullying and school violence. It will reduce the rate of expulsions, and it will also serve as a powerful alternative to the unnecessary and reckless use of prescription drugs among problem learners.

This program will bestow upon teachers a sense of pride and accomplishment, thereby attracting a lot more talent to the profession of teaching. It will allow teachers to continually upgrade the curriculum so that their students can compete against the best in the world. It will foster and promote the equitable distribution of the best teachers throughout all schools, and it will motivate and inspire them to teach in the worst schools.

It will teach the student how to study and how to accomplish goals in a self-reliant and independent manner. Each day it will demand testing,

accountability and hard work. Yet at the same time, it will gradually transform the rigorous discipline imposed from the outside into a deep internal self-discipline.

It will accomplish this awakening of self-discipline by encouraging students to compete at skills that are useful over the whole of their lives, by financially rewarding those students who perform well, and by continually presenting them with meaningful role models. With the formation of a deep internal self-discipline, dropout rates will plummet, disproportionality in learning between whites and blacks will disappear, and as this program transforms peer pressure into a powerful ally of education, our public schools will begin to function as world-class institutions of learning.

This program will raise the standard of education in our public school system, and it will severely undermine the need for private schools. It will take education more and more out of the hands of special interest groups whose goals do not always coincide with the more universal needs of the state. It will expose the racism and elitism implicit in many private schools, and it will encourage churches to educate their members within the strictly religious context of bible studies, revivals, retreats or whatever other programs they find necessary to fulfill their teaching mission.

To those who feel that this program might cost too much, let us respond by saying that the underlying philosophy

of this program is about spending money wisely on education. Schools should be run on a lean and disciplined budget, and just as in the running of any good business, we should never take our eyes for one moment off the bottom line. All extra-curricular frills that do not promote academic excellence should be eliminated. The time, money and emotion currently devoted to entertainment, sports and games should be reallocated toward assuring and incontestably confirming that real learning takes place. This program would even encourage schools to lease or rent their sport's facilities to municipal sports teams and other organizations. This alone should cover the cost of this study hall program.

With more students moving up the ladder of academic achievement and into the marketplace of high-paying jobs and finally into that arena of the pride and human dignity that these jobs create, far less money will be needed to fund our prison and welfare systems. When serious learning takes place, taxpayers will see that the money allocated to education is not being wasted, and that education indeed has the power of lifting people permanently out of poverty.

To those who feel that this program might cost too much, let us throw the question back to them and ask how they might justify spending taxpayer dollars in any other way. Every dollar spent on learning will allow every dollar spent on teaching to have a far greater impact, and ultimately it will allow us to spend a lot less money on

special education, tutoring, remedial courses, corrective action initiatives and other learning deficiency programs that fail to deliver a comprehensive solution. This program is all about eliminating waste and letting our schools truly function as the institutions of learning any reasonable person should expect them to be.

Imagine what would happen if our public school system took the time, money, energy and enthusiasm currently devoted to sports in school and shifted all of this toward learning. Within just a few years we would see levels of achievement in advanced math and science leap far beyond anything seen within the public school system in America. Soon afterwards we would see large numbers of students receiving scholarships to some of the finest universities in the nation. Eventually we would see levels of professionalism within our work force that exist nowhere else within the United States. And finally a new generation would come into being that would never really know what it means to be poor.

Obviously this program will not eliminate sports. It simply places these recreational activities under the sponsorship of an association or club closely linked to a municipality or geographical region. In so doing, it will restore a sense of pride and unity at the local level that school consolidation has taken away. It essentially liberates and empowers sports to function as a powerful source of social cohesion, that is, to do

what nothing else within a complex society could possibly do.

With a new generation of truly educated citizens in place, this program will attract big companies to set up shop in this part of Louisiana, it will provide them with a more educated and disciplined workforce, it will stimulate investment and economic growth, it will create high-paying jobs, and consequently it will encourage our children to live in this area and not migrate to Houston or Atlanta in search of economic opportunity. Eventually it will create a larger tax base that will allow us to devote more money to education and to increase the salaries of teachers.²⁵

But best of all, it will allow many people in this area to liberate themselves from the bondage of welfare and to lay claim to their share of the American dream. It clearly represents the best hope that we have of breaking the cycle of poverty so widespread in this part of Louisiana.

With a more educated and sophisticated voting public in place, the political process should function more smoothly with a lot more talent and far less corruption. As we elect more honest politicians, we will create a better environment for businesses to flourish, and hopefully Louisiana will shed its infamous distinction of being the third most corrupt state in the nation.

²⁵ "Louisiana ranks at 46th in paying teachers." Elbert Guillory, Daily World, Thursday, March 2, 2006.

As long as their children are able to get a good education, parents will no longer focus on the predominant color of a school. Consequently this program will enable our public school system to incorporate the principles of Brown v. Board of Education in a less uncontrived, less legalistic, more natural and far more efficient manner. Here we lay a strong foundation upon which a truly integrated society can stand. Also, by reducing white flight from black schools, this program will uniformly enhance property values so closely linked to the performance of schools.

Even though it represents perhaps the biggest change in education since the Brown decision, this program is not some bold experiment filled with risk and unknown danger. This concept has been tried, tested and proven for many decades throughout most of Europe, and for many European countries it forms the backbone or cornerstone of their success in educating their children. Somehow these eccentric Europeans have understood that the goal of teaching is learning, and they make sure that their children learn.

One last objection to this proposal that we will surely encounter: "Well all of this sounds good, but here in Louisiana we just don't do things that way." Let's make no bones about it. This is the ultimate expression of cultural arrogance - a nonsensical, whimsical and blind defense of the status quo that assures that Louisiana will always stand at the end of the line and take its place among the poorest

and most backward states in the nation. With such dreadful poverty in our area, we cannot tolerate such apathy and indifference, and we should boldly demand that the people espousing such mindless conservatism outline a better and more cost-effective strategy to close the gap between teaching and learning.

But is it enough to define what is wrong with public school system simply in terms of a problem in learning? Let me respond by pointing to problems in two other areas that also demand immediate action. One has to do with teachers and the other with our school board.

Take a look at the bad teachers within our public school system. By this I mean teachers who have little or no ability to improve the test scores of the children they teach. Back in the early 20th century perhaps it made sense to protect teachers from meddling and patronizing politicians by granting them tenure. But is the concept of tenure not totally antiquated?

Today there are many federal and state laws that adequately protect workers from arbitrary dismissal. Why should teachers be granted a level of job security that exists nowhere else within our society? Why should the central office not have the freedom to fire bad teacher? Why at the same time should it not have the freedom to reward good teachers with high salaries that reflect the high test

scores that they skillfully know how to get from their students?

So let us get rid of tenure, let us fire bad teachers, let us hire good teachers, and let us pay good teachers high salaries reflective of their ability to teach.

But when we do all of this, we must make sure that this study hall program is fully operational, otherwise even good teachers might be tempted to blame the bad situation in the home for low test scores that their students might get. If the school does not have total control of the environment that surrounds the learning process, teachers will always have a convenient excuse if their students fail to perform. If students do not learn when this study hall is operational, it will be the teacher, and no one else, who should bear primary responsibility.

Finally let us abolish that constantly bickering body of political overseers known as the St. Landry Parish school board. In the place of a school board, we might create an oversight body composed of all teachers within the parish. This new entity composed entirely of good teachers would meet every few years to elect a superintendent and key administrative personnel, and it would give them broad powers to operate our public school system as efficiently as any well-run business. If we depoliticize this overseeing function, the central office would have far greater freedom and flexibility to improve the quality of teaching and

learning within our public school system.

So with the school board dissolved, with good teachers in the classroom, and with a mandatory study hall program firmly in place, our public schools should begin to function as real institutions of learning.

Toward the end of his book on the history of America's public schools, William J. Reese concludes: "Finally, I have underscored the reality that historically the public schools have never succeeded in making intellectual achievement, never mind high intellectual achievement for all, their central purpose."²⁶ Such a sobering conclusion should stir us to take action and to do everything within our power to let our schools truly function as schools.

Why should a public school be any thing other than a place of learning focused exclusively upon high intellectual achievement? Why should it not demand high intellectual achievement of everyone, especially the poor who stand in greatest need of a good education? Why should it so often assume the condescending and patronizing attitude that the poor are not capable of learning and that real academic prowess is primarily the preserve of the rich? Why should it not offer all students access to high-quality academic subjects, and why, at the same time, should it not provide them with unflinching motivation,

²⁶ Reese (2005), p. 331.

absolute means and ample opportunity to master these subjects? Why should it not insist that everyone perform according to the highest academic standards to be found anywhere in the world?

Here in Louisiana, about as far down in the Deep South as one might possibly go, we are all too familiar with what motivated one race to deny the means of high intellectual achievement to the other. Historically and culturally we have inherited a mess, and we cannot go on contributing to this mess by depriving children of the means and motivation they need to excel at the highest academic level.

If we do not focus on high intellectual achievement for everyone, then what hope can we offer the poor of St. Landry parish? Do we not understand that most employers offer quality jobs only to those with academic credentials?²⁷ Do we have any indication that this demand for academic credentials will ever go away? In an age of increasing globalization and international competition, our public schools can no longer stand by and watch as large groups of people within our parish are perpetually condemned to either low-paying service jobs or the bondage of welfare. They must take into account that there is a lot more to learning

than teaching, and they must make sure that all children, especially the poor and underprivileged, submit to the rigor and discipline of serious student response.

How can we possibly get rid of the dreadful poverty we see in our parish, if we do not make education our top priority? And how can we make education our top priority, if we go on neglecting the essentials of what it takes to learn? Our public school system has become a gigantic monster spitting out in horrifying numbers a permanent underclass of misfits and dropouts, and funneling them straight into the gates of our welfare and prison systems. This awful interplay of poor education and heart-stopping poverty simply cannot continue.

In the last pages of his book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman tells the story of Abraham George who started an elementary school in Shanti Bhavan, a small village outside Bangalore, India. This school is designed to help India's untouchables, a caste of people who live in the most abject poverty imaginable. "Our goal," said George, "is to give them a world-class education so they can aspire to careers and professions that would have been totally beyond their reach and have been so for generations." A bit further he says, "When we talk about the poor, so often it is talking about getting them off the streets or getting them a job, so they don't

²⁷ "Low education means low-paying jobs, plain and simple, and this is where more and more Americans are finding themselves." Friedman (2005), p. 262.

starve. But we never talk about getting excellence for the poor.”²⁸

Likewise, when we talk about the poor of St. Landry parish we often think about food stamps and welfare, and we overlook the fact that what they need above all else is excellence in education, a quality of education that truly rivals anything found in Europe, India or Asia. If Abraham George can succeed in giving the untouchables of India a world-class education, why can't we do the same for the poor of St. Landry parish? The endless cycle of poverty that we see in our area simply must be broken.

To eliminate the poverty and hopelessness we see all around us, we must implement radical and far-reaching reform. But this reform lies not so much in putting up new buildings or installing new computers. Instead it reaches down into the depths of the American spirit and targets certain cultural values that are rotting away the foundation of everything that makes this nation great. This reform calls for discipline in the place of permissiveness, hard work in the place of hand-outs, strength in the place of weakness, creativity in the place of boredom, entertainment only after we have worked, and self-congratulation only when we have accomplished something truly significant.

Raising school performance scores in our parish by an average of 4.4 points

²⁸ Friedman (2005), p. 466.

means very little when we are so far behind the rest of the world, and in no way should we try to take comfort in the popular myth that while the overall performance of our students on an international level may be poor, American education is far superior to the education in countries such as China or Japan in that it stresses creativity, not rote learning.

Microsoft legend, Bill Gates, is utterly dismissive of such a naive point of view: “In his view, those who think that the more rote learning systems of China and Japan can't turn out innovators who can compete with Americans are sadly mistaken.”²⁹ Many public schools in Europe and Asia routinely graduate large numbers of students who in math and science are at least three to four years ahead of even our best high school graduates here in St. Landry parish,³⁰ and these

²⁹ Ibid. p. 264.

³⁰ My son, Robert Olivier, upon graduating a secondary public school in Flanders and moving to the States, received a scholarship at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. After enrolling in environmental science and business, he discovered to his great delight that he did not have to work very hard, for it was not until his third and fourth year at this prestigious university did he learn anything new in math and science. Also, when he graduated secondary school in Flanders, he was proficient in four languages: Dutch, French, Spanish and English, and all of this in addition to the unique Flemish dialect that he spoke at home.

I owe a lot to the Flemish public school system with its mandatory, supervised study hall, and what it accomplished with my son was truly remarkable when viewed from an

ambitious and highly motivated foreign graduates are far more creative and innovative than we could ever imagine. Let us honestly and humbly admit that we are in a state of deep crisis, and we had better wake up to the challenges we face as we head into the 21st century.

Perhaps no one captures better the urgency of the situation than Thomas Friedman when he writes: “We are blithely sailing along, heading straight for the storm, with both politicians and parents insisting that no dramatic changes or sacrifices are required now.”³¹

If we continue along our present course and do nothing to reform education in St. Landry parish, we will soon find ourselves in an utterly hopeless economic and social situation. Our standards are too low, our goals are not ambitious, and so often our eyes never rise above the fence in our back yard.

Still there is hope, provided we have the courage to learn a powerful lesson that Jared Diamond stands ready to teach us: great cultures are those that

adapt in times of economic and social decline. We must change. We must adapt. We cannot fail the children of St. Landry parish. For they all deserve a bright and prosperous future.

Having clearly identified the problems that afflict and cripple our schools, St. Landry parish has everything needed to lead our state and to lead our nation in pioneering the most significant and far-reaching reform program ever to be carried out in the history of America’s public schools.

This text is still a work in progress.

All ideas are welcome.

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American perspective. But from the perspective of European education in general, I suppose that the Flemish public school system is somewhat commonplace and ordinary. And I owe a lot to my father, Robert Oliver, (former principal at Washington High) who was, no doubt, one of the best disciplinarians in St. Landry parish. May his disciplined yet loving spirit live on in every child who benefits from this program!

³¹ Friedman (2005), p. 255.