

## **It's the Students, Stupid!**

**Will Fitzhugh**

*The Concord Review*

The billionaires' club, with their long retinue of pundits, researchers, and other hangers-on, are giving their attention, some of the time, to education. But they are not paying attention to the academic work of students, or to their responsibility for their own education.

Mr. Gates spent nearly two hundred million dollars recently on a program for teacher assessment, but does he realize that in almost every class there are students as well, and that they have a lot to say about what the teacher can accomplish?

One pundit came to speak in Boston. When told that lots of good teachers were being driven out of the profession by the absence of discipline among students, he said, "They need better classroom management skills." I don't think he had ever "managed" a classroom, but I told him this story:

When Theodore Roosevelt was President, he had a guest one day in the oval office, and his daughter Alice came roaring through the room disturbing everything. The guest said, "Can't you control Alice?" And Roosevelt said, "I can be President of the United States, or I can control Alice, but not both."

Lots and lots of teachers have students in their classes who have not been taught by KIPP, to "Work Hard, Be Nice." Their inability to control themselves and behave with courtesy and respect for their teacher and their fellow students frequently degrades and can even disintegrate the academic integrity of the class, which damages not only their own chance to learn, but prevents all their classmates from learning as well.

In 2004, Paul A. Zoch, a teacher from Texas, wrote in *Doomed to Fail* (p. 150) that: "Let there be no doubt about it: the United States looks to its teachers and their efforts, but not to its students and their efforts, for success in education." Nine years later that remains the problem with the Edupundits and their funders.

Of course, one problem for the edureformers is that you can fire teachers but you can't fire students. If students fail, largely through their own poor attendance, inattention and destructive behavior in class, we can't blame them. Only the teachers can be held to account. This is beyond stupid, verging on willful blindness.

Indiana University, in its most recent Survey of High School Student Engagement, interviewed 143,052 U.S. high school students and found that 42.5% of them spend an hour or less each week on homework and 82.7% spend five hours or less each week on their homework. The average Korean student spends fifteen hours a week on homework, and that does not include evening *hagwon* sessions of two or three hours. Can anyone see a difference here? And, by the way, American students spend 53 hours a week playing video games and using other sorts of electronic entertainment.

While they play, and consume expensive products of the technology companies, students in other countries are studying hard, behaving in class, and taking their educational opportunities seriously so they can eat our lunch, which they are starting to do.

But let's blame the teachers in the United States and ignore what their students are doing, in class and after class. That will work, won't it?

Of course what teachers and all the other employees of our school systems do is important. But ignoring students and their work, and blaming teachers for poor student academic performance, would be like blaming a trainer if his boxer gets knocked out in the ring, while not noticing that the boxer stands in front of his opponent with his hands at his sides all the time.

We need high academic achievement, but we will not get it by blaming teachers and driving them out of the profession, while not noticing that students have an important, and even crucial, responsibility for their own learning.

Ignoring the role of our students in their own education, which at the "highest" levels of funded programs we do, is not only dumb, it will virtually consign all the other efforts to failure. Think about it.