

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Rich man's epiphany

On Tuesday, we pointed out the "inconvenient" truth that schools have a limited impact on academic performance.

Here's the perspective of a multi-millionaire who reluctantly reached the same conclusion, in an essay he wrote for *The Nation*:

By Nick Hanauer

LONG AGO, I WAS captivated by a seductively intuitive idea, one many of my wealthy friends still subscribe to: that both poverty and rising inequality are largely consequences of America's failing education system. Fix that, I believed, and we could cure much of what ails America.

This belief system, which I have come to think of as "educationism," is grounded in a familiar story about cause and effect: Once upon a time, America created a public-education system that was the envy of the modern world. No nation produced more or better-educated high-school and college graduates, and thus the great American middle class was built.

But then, sometime around the 1970s, America lost its way. We allowed our schools to crumble, and our test scores and graduation rates to fall. School systems that once churned out well-paid factory workers failed to keep pace with the rising educational demands of the new knowledge economy. As America's public-school systems foundered, so did the earning power of the American middle class.

Taken with this story line, I embraced education as both a philanthropic cause and a civic mission. ...

All told, I have devoted countless hours and millions of dollars to the simple idea that if we improved our schools—if we modernized our curricula and our teaching methods, substantially increased school funding, rooted out bad teachers, and opened enough charter schools—American children, especially those in low-income and working-class communities, would start learning again.

Graduation rates and wages would increase, poverty and

inequality would decrease, and public commitment to democracy would be restored. But after decades of organizing and giving, I have come to the uncomfortable conclusion that I was wrong. ...

What I've realized, decades late, is that educationism is tragically misguided. American workers are struggling in large part because they are underpaid—and they are underpaid because 40 years of trickle-down policies have rigged the economy in favor of wealthy people like me.

Americans are more highly educated than ever before, but despite that, and despite nearly record-low unemployment, most American workers—at all levels of educational attainment—have seen little if any wage growth since 2000. To be clear: We should do everything we can to improve our public schools. But our education system can't compensate for the ways our economic system is failing Americans. Even the most thoughtful and well-intentioned school-reform program can't improve educational outcomes if it ignores the single greatest driver of student achievement: household income.

If we really want to give every American child an honest and equal opportunity to succeed, we must ... invest not only in our children, but in their families and their communities. We must provide high-quality public education, sure, but also high-quality housing, health care, child care, and all the other prerequisites of a secure middle-class life. And most important, if we want to build the sort of prosperous middle-class communities in which great public schools have always thrived, we must pay all our workers, not just software engineers and financiers, a dignified middle-class wage.

This column is abridged from the original because of space limitations.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



MULTI-MILLIONAIRE Nick Hanauer, writing in The Nation, reached the conclusion that schools can't solve inequality in America.