

OPINION:

America's academic meltdown

By Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Register, May 7, 2011.

In September 1939, as Hitler's Panzer tanks rumbled over Poland, King George VI delivered an address over the BBC to the entire world, one written by Winston Churchill and now famous thanks to the film "The King's Speech."

He began:

"In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in history, I send to every household this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself."

For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war.

America is now in a war for the survival of our civilization – not a war of tanks and aerial blitzes, but a culture war for the very heart and soul of our country that is caused by the meltdown of our public schools. In 1983, the "Nation at Risk" report warned: "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Twenty-eight years after that first warning salvo, that mediocre performance has become a catastrophic collapse.

Our greatest enemy isn't a foreign power or even al-Qaida; it is the National Education Association, the most powerful special interest group in America with its 3.2 million members, and the rest of the public school monopoly.

That NEA has corrupted politicians across the nation with bribes to turn their eyes away and pretend that they don't see the cruelty to our children. In recent Democratic national conventions, about 20 percent of the delegates were NEA members, but its corrupting influence has also included the Republican Party. Its agenda is to make it all but impossible to fire an incompetent or even abusive public school teacher.

With public schools having so totally lost their way, America's public school teachers almost uniformly now come from the bottom 25 percent of their college classes. By contrast, our international competitors are recruiting their best and brightest to teach in their elementary and high schools.

In our once-great country, which a generation ago held an insurmountable lead in education over the rest of the world, our high school students are taking a shellacking in tests of science and math, not just by high-schoolers from China and India, but by those of dozens of other countries. Especially alarming was the recent quote from the Washington Post of Howard High of Intel Corporation.

"We are going where the smart people are," High said. "Now our business operations are two-thirds in the United States and one-third overseas. But that ratio will flip over the next 10 years."

In a country in which high school graduation was once the norm, around 1985 our dropout rates started to climb again. The response of the education departments of all 50 states was to lie.

In 1999 our group, California Parents for Educational Choice, persuaded a reform-minded State Board of Education to mandate reporting of graduation rates, and the shock that a third of our students weren't graduating was front page news in all of the state's largest newspapers. In 2002 Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute took this data to the national level, and the battle was largely won.

What remains of that lie, however, is crucial. Throughout the nation, 15 percent of all dropouts flee public schools in middle school, before even starting high school. Once again, all 50 of the states' departments of education have concealed these especially tragic dropouts. This spring, California is mandated by a new state law to be the first to report these middle school dropouts – but then again, it's possible the California Department of Education will postpone the report on the basis that funding cutbacks have hampered their data collection.

Our deep recession was caused by the housing crisis rather than the dropout catastrophe, but the vast numbers of twenty-somethings who are dropouts and therefore unemployable have made it depressingly tough to pull out of our jobless slump.

And dropouts are cramming our prisons to overflowing. California, for example, is now spending as much on our prison system as on all of our public universities combined, with 85 percent of the incarcerated inmates high school dropouts. We will pay a crushing price for at least the next half-century for those dropouts.

The campus violence, gangs, bullies, drugs, and sexual assaults that have become the norm in our public schools are intimately linked to those high dropout rates. When asked why they dropped out, the most common reason cited by dropouts is fear of assault on campus. And those who have seen the recent videos of public school teachers inflicting \$6 million in vandalism to the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin know that the teachers are often part of the problem, not the solution.

To quote King George and Churchill from 1939 again, it is "the mere primitive doctrine that might is right," which leaves our children in fear every day.

By contrast, study after study has shown that school choice dramatically reduces dropout rates. When families can choose a school that is right for them, whether a school of the sciences, or a Montessori school, or a Hebrew Academy, or a bilingual school, they have made a commitment to that school, and the kids feel a sense of community, of home, even of family, that keeps them in school and sees them safely to graduation.

The other big lie of the public education establishment, however, has proven tougher to refute, and that is the claim that per-student spending in our public schools has declined. Of course it has dropped modestly during the current recession, but it climbed sharply for the last 50 years prior to that, and remains higher than the per student spending in almost any other country. And per-student spending in our public schools is very dramatically higher than that of our charter and voucher schools.

CARTOONS:

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The collapse of our public schools has also decimated our families. When well-to-do families go shopping for schools for their children, either by paying for a private school or buying a house in a rich suburb with "good" public schools, it is

a bonding exercise for couples, and the kids sense that care and nurturing. And the communities engendered by schools of choice bind families together.

For poor minorities, however, the only shopping they will ever do for better schools is entering a long-shot lottery for coveted slots in charter schools, a profound frustration dramatized in the film "The Lottery." Disadvantaged parents feel enraged and powerless in the face of a giant and uncaring bureaucracy, and sometimes despair and simply give up, especially if they are also unemployed.

Nowhere is this more damaging than in our African-American families, who are trapped in separate and very unequal public schools that have inflicted a 44 percent dropout rate on Black youths. Today 20 percent of young African-American men have served jail time. Of all Black families, 57 percent are headed by a single mother. The tragic reality is that African-American families were far stronger in the decades following the abolition of slavery than they are today. To give the African-American single mom who empties the wastebasket at night the right to choose the best school for her children is the unfinished mission of Abraham Lincoln.

Our Hispanic families come to us from Mexico and other Latino countries with some of the strongest family values known on this planet. But the warning signs are clear: given a chance, the public school monopoly will destroy Hispanic families, just as it has destroyed African-American families.

It is telling that Census Bureau data shows that public school teachers are sending their own children to private schools – including private religious schools – at a 40 percent higher rate than the public. And politicians do so at higher rates still.

Americans were awakened to many of these issues by the blockbuster film "Waiting for Superman," a film that has become to the school choice movement the same kind of symbol that Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was to a previous civil rights movement. But the focus on charter schools left us with a big question: May Superman pray? And to return that now-departed quest for meaning and purpose in the lives of our children, we need also school vouchers for faith-based schools that are proudly religious. We already have models at the higher education level in Franklin Roosevelt's G.I. Bill of Rights.

Our public schools suffocate the spiritual lives of our children. When nondenominational prayer ended, for a while we could at least take inspiration from George Washington's daily prayers at Valley Forge. Or, think of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," with its immortal words "Mine Eyes have seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord." Now, not only is that inspiration censored, but gone as well are any teachings of values – of trustworthiness, valor, or service to others.

What is at stake therefore is that we may well be the first generation that not only doesn't pass on to the next the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, but which also fails to pass on the values of our American civilization.

Let's do a fast forward and imagine we are two years into the future, and attending the inauguration of a new president who has won a hard-fought battle and who is an unswerving friend of our children. Let's imagine he says this in his first address to our nation:

The greatest enemy facing us today is not a foreign power, but the catastrophic collapse of our public schools. We must end tenure in our schools, for the plain reason that we cannot have incompetents teaching our children. And we must dramatically increase school choice, including religious schools. Such reforms are based on our American values of freedom of choice, freedom of religion, and the sanctity of the family.

Imagine now if our new president were then to fittingly quote King George VI with the ending of his speech in 1939 as the free world entered an earlier war in which the survival of our civilization hung in the balance:

This is the ultimate issue which confronts us. For the sake of all that we hold dear, it is unthinkable that we should refuse to meet the challenge.

The task will be hard, but we can only do the right as we see it. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful and ready for whatever service or sacrifice it may demand, then with God's help, we shall prevail.

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