

Opinion

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION: THE INTERNET DESTROYED SCHOOLS' MONOPOLY

By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.

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The Internet will transform us more than the Gutenberg press and the Industrial Revolution combined. The Web has compressed time and space and revolutionized business, science, and play. It has changed the way we think about ourselves and brought about a meritocracy of the quick and the bold.

That democratization is already obvious in Silicon Valley. An extraordinary percentage of Internet CEOs speak English with the clipped cadences of the Indian subcontinent or the singsong tonalities of those for whom Mandarin or Cantonese is the mother tongue. These immigrants share the same hope as those who landed at Ellis Island: the willingness to trade hard work and sacrifice for their chance at the American dream.

Tragically, while some ethnic minorities born overseas are full participants in the information revolution, our home-grown American minorities have been largely left out, victims of the meltdown in our public schools. In Silicon Valley's largest school district, San Jose Unified, a staggering 24.9% of entering ninth-grade freshmen fail to graduate four years later. These dropouts will not only be locked out of the Information Age, but will be lucky to find any job better than flipping burgers or removing asbestos.

Moore's law, formulated by one of Intel's founders, predicted correctly that the power of computer chips would double every eighteen months, while their price dropped by half. Unfortunately, the corollary in our public schools is Moron's law: ever-higher spending for public schools yields ever-poorer results.

For those of us accustomed to the unlimited 24/7/365 choices of the Web, impatience with a dysfunctional public school monopoly in which school assignment is compulsory will explode. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall was prodded by the frustrations of East Germans who could see on Western television the freedom and prosperity they lacked, and just as China can no longer impose censorship because of the skyrocketing number of its citizens who log onto the Internet, in the Information Age the ability of the public school monopoly to deceive the inhabitants of Oakland or South Central Los Angeles about the quality of their schools can't last.

One of the hallmarks of Internet startups is the flat organizational charts that most of them boast. In a no-necktie culture and with open offices unimpeded by so much as a cubicle, the lowliest techie can feel free to suggest to the CEO a "value proposition"? techspeak for an idea. By contrast, our public schools today could hardly be more hierarchical and bureaucratic, with the real decisions made in Sacramento or Washington.

The rapidly expanding school voucher challenges to that public school monopoly? first in Milwaukee, then in Cleveland, and now in Florida? are proof that the monopoly will end. And in California, our charter schools? public schools of choice? were

expanded in 1998 by the efforts of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, Reed Hastings.

The Gutenberg press and the Industrial Revolution were both opposed by those who feared new ideas. The word *sabotage* comes from the French *sabot*, or clog. French workers who were unwilling participants in factories threw their old wooden shoes into the machinery, literally clogging it up.

The teachers unions are today's Luddites. Their modern-day sabotage is to crank out one phony study after another purporting to show that we wouldn't benefit from choice in education.

In an Information Age, the public school monopoly is toast. The progress toward choice and competition through school vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools cannot be stopped. Our revolution in information technology will soon be surpassed by an even greater revolution in education.

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