

# In Search of the Education Establishment: Pondering the Character of Our Content

by Lawrence Baines

Lately, everyone seems to be taking shots at the Education Establishment. Apparently, the Education Establishment is wholly responsible for the frightful state of American public education today. Thomas Sowell has written: “The time is long overdue for the educational establishment . . . to face a day of reckoning.”<sup>1</sup> Meyerson characterizes the Education Establishment as “an evil empire,” akin to the repressive regime of the Soviet Union in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Barry Simon, the chair of the mathematics department at the California Institute of Technology, has had enough, too: “The dumbing down of high school education in the United States, especially in mathematics and science, is a crime that must be laid at the doorstep of the educational establishment. We must demand that the level of high school science and mathematics being taught be improved, starting, of course, with Euclidean geometry.”<sup>3</sup>

So, who belongs to the Education Establishment and what do they have against Euclidean geometry? I decided that I needed to find out.

Some consider the Education Establishment to be the teachers unions, the largest of which is the National Education Association, which claims a membership of 2.5 million. The NEA’s code of ethics states:

The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and the nurture of the democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all. The educator accepts the

responsibility to adhere to the highest ethical standards.

Those principles did not sound too heinous, so I dug a little deeper. In a newly released document, *The Opportunity to Excel*, the NEA offers seven suggestions to the Bush administration and the 107th Congress:

- Help low-performing schools
- Ensure quality teachers
- Modernize the schools
- Offer ample prekindergarten and kindergarten opportunities
- Fund special education
- Hold schools accountable for student performance
- Expand accessibility to higher education

I have never been much of a union man, but NEA’s seven priorities seem not out of sync with what most of us would want. I found the last two of the seven rather surprising, for they align well with President Bush’s well-known fondness for yearly testing and his rhetoric concerning the advantages of a college education.

Despite these good intentions, I figured that NEA probably was a part of the Education Establishment. Next, I considered the professors in colleges and universities who prepare America’s teachers. Chester Finn (2000) has called teacher education “Mickey Mouse,” “a waste of time,” and “just plain foolish.”<sup>4</sup> Despite Finn’s invective, most institutions that offer teacher preparation programs operate under the aegis of state departments of education. If a representative of the department of education says, “Jump!” the professor at a teacher education institution can either say “How high?” or look for employment elsewhere. The state government sets the standards for teacher certification, and institutions must follow the state’s suggestions or

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they will be stripped of their ability to certify teachers. For example, many states have mandated that all teacher education institutions within its boundaries be NCATE-accredited. Thus, in one small stroke, the state puts professors in all non-NCATE-accredited teacher education programs out of work.

A second development has been that most state departments of education now require prospective teachers to take a content-area exam before they enter the classroom. If enough students fail the content-area exam, the state punishes the education department—not the content-area specialty program—by shutting it down. This is the same logic that your parents used when they grounded you if your brother got in trouble. Last year, the Colorado legislature was seriously considering a bill that would have done away with teacher certification altogether, but teacher certification was granted a reprieve on the condition that all institutions dramatically alter the content and scope of their courses. Institutions would abide by the new directives of the legislature and implement the suggested reforms in six months or their programs would be terminated. Although one would think that the Education Establishment would not be so vulnerable to the whims of others, Finn says that teacher education programs are part of the Education Establishment, and he must be right.

Of course, the most obvious place to look for the Education Establishment is among teachers. In *Conspiracy of Ignorance*, Martin Gross, who has never taught in a public school or in a teacher education program, names names. Gross identifies the Education Establishment as “the 5 million ‘professionals,’ from classroom teachers to state education commissioners, who constitute the near-monolithic force that controls our public schools, from kindergarten through senior high school.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite Gross’s confidence that he has fingered the culprits, I confess that it was difficult for me to think of teachers as the education establishment. As a former teacher, I do not recall that I often felt like a “near-monolithic force.” Instead, I felt rather helpless against the torrent of legislative, administrative, and parental mandates that seemed endemic to the beginning of each new school year. At my school, teachers who did not follow orders were fired.

I majored in English in college and simultaneously took the required education courses that led to certification. For the most part, my educa-



tion courses were rigorous and highly relevant. Although my first year of teaching was not perfect, I am certain that without my coursework in education and extensive field experience I would not have survived the first week. In my first year of teaching (in 1980), my gross pay was \$1,000 per month, including a stipend for coaching three sports. I had a twenty-minute lunch, taught 195 students including three classes of history (though I was certified only in English), and spent most of my free time after 7 p.m. grading papers and planning lessons at home. If Gross is right, and America’s 3 million teachers and I are the incompetent and menacing architects of the

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downfall of American public education—we want to renegotiate our contracts.

Perhaps it is possible that the critics who continually find fault with the Education Establishment fundamentally misunderstand schools as social institutions. Douglass writes:

No social institution outstrips the ideals set for it; on the contrary, it never reaches them. Were an approach to the ideal made, the immediate result would be a higher standard. This, many of the critics of the schools either fail to realize or ignore. The constant gap between what is hoped for and what is done should be taken to account in attempting to appraise the work of a social institution.<sup>6</sup>

As social institutions, schools serve the ends of society and are controlled by elected representatives of the people. Thus, the Education Establishment is not some “other” out there. The Education Establishment is created by each of us through our ideas, conversations, and actions every day.

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Some of us join in the fray in order to try to improve it. Some of us are content to sit in our cozy, well-appointed offices and criticize the struggle from afar. Only those who do absolutely nothing can claim to be outside the Education Establishment. I would suggest that they look into the debacle of Euclidean geometry, but apparently, they already have.

In this issue of **educational HORIZONS**, our contributors (all members of the supposed

“Education Establishment”) examine the tensions between content and process. Sam Hausfather argues that any learning theory which disregards content knowledge is based on fundamental—and potentially catastrophic—misunderstandings. James Loewen describes some of the damnable effects of inaccurate teaching in history, while a high school teacher, Greg Stanley, describes the innumerable ways that schools devalue subject-area expertise. Richard Ingersoll addresses the policy issues accompanying out-of-field teaching, a widespread practice that undermines the quality of children’s education. Lawrence Baines, Jackie McDowell, and David Foulk, all teacher educators, provide reasons why teacher quality may get worse before it will get better. A Title One teacher, Lisa O’Rourke, sounds an eloquent warning about the dangers of using standardized exam scores as the sole indicators of student success, and a professor-teacher, Ken Tobin, describes some of the insights he has gleaned through teaching science in urban secondary schools in Philadelphia.

What a teacher should know and how a teacher should be taught are key issues for American public education. Our contributors have not pulled any punches. I think you will find their articles enlightening and a little unsettling.

### Notes

1. Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas* (New York: Free Press); also cited by Brandon Dutcher, “Education Establishment Must Acknowledge Failure, Face the Music,” September 1999, Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs website, <http://www.ocpathink.org/Education/EduEstab.html>.
2. Adam Meyerson, “Education’s Evil Empire,” *Policy Review* 93 (January-February 1999). Available: <http://www.policyreview.org/jan99/editor.html>.
3. Barry Simon, “Blame Education Establishment for Dumbing Down Math Curriculum,” *Detroit News* (March 15, 1998). Available: <http://detnews.com/1998/outlook/9803/26/03150015.htm>.
4. Chester Finn, “Improving, Empowering, Dismantling,” *The Public Interest* (Summer 2000). Available: [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/\\_pi\\_improving.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/_pi_improving.htm).
5. Martin Gross, *Conspiracy of Ignorance*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 10.
6. Aubrey Douglass, *Modern Secondary Education* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 765.