

Schools' futures depend upon us

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March 10, 2009

Across the country, school districts are threatened by such terrifying budget predictions that it seems possible that life-as-we-know-it may be about to end for public education.

The expected millions of federal stimulus package dollars probably will prevent instant collapse, but it won't be enough, experts say, to preserve the status quo. Kevin Carey, of the think tank Education Sector, says schools are going to have to learn to make do with much less.

Some folks consider the upcoming and ongoing financial situation an opportunity to stimulate reform in a system whose values and methods — they maintain — have long been ripe for massive overhaul. Nicholas D. Kristof of the New York Times, for example, recently called education "our greatest national shame." Even optimists admit that U.S. students ought to be better prepared to compete with graduates from around the world.

Americans — though currently short on money — do have, as usual, plenty of opinions and suggestions. Some are reactionary, and seek merely to maintain tradition. Others, such as the Chalkboard Project's recommendations for correcting school transportation and business practices, would be reasonable in any economy. A few are downright radical.

No lesser figure than the new cabinet secretary of education has proposed a change that would be radically unpopular with kids: adjusting daily hours and yearly calendars to more closely match the longer school days and longer school terms of countries whose students consistently outperform ours. He also recommends refitting testing standards and procedures to coordinate with international benchmarks, so we can more clearly compare our schools and students with their foreign counterparts.

In New Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina wiped out an entire school district, charter schools have proliferated and student achievement in those new schools has improved. Some educators suggest creating more charter schools nationwide, or at least applying some of their features, such as increased autonomy for individual schools, to regular public school management.

One radical idea for improving education while saving money appeared in response to one of my columns. Why, the online voice asks, can't we get rid of expensive hardcover textbooks? The pecuniary outlay for a set of new books is so great that schools are forced to keep using them until they're comically out of date, and they're so heavy that teens develop back trouble from carrying them around. Instead of traditional textbooks, he (or she) suggests, schools use "disposable" softcover books that would be replaced every year. Or turn to technology for e-books and online resources.

When coffers feel comfortably full, it's tempting to try to solve every problem by just throwing money at it. When financial resources have plainly evaporated, difficult times inspire more imaginative solutions.

Americans throughout their history have overcome catastrophe through cooperation, seat-of-the-pants self-reliance and cowboy creativity. For the sake of our children's education,

can we do it again?

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