Back to the Future: The Ongoing Costs of Inadequate Education

By Henry M. Levin

President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” education package has focused national attention on the high educational‐gap spilling that all children must be 100 percent proficient in reading and math by the end of fundamental skills by 2014. The program has drawn fire from both sides of the aisle. On the one hand, there are those who feel that its goals are still unspecified (the notion of “proficiency,” for example, is left to the states) and raised questions and funding. On the other, many resent the penalties it exacts on entire schools and districts when even small subgroups of students underperform.

In my view, however, “No Child Left Behind” reinforces a message that all Americans—the rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, con‐ servative or liberal, white or of color—should heed, which is that the social costs of inade‐ quate education in our country are too high. Not only does the inept performance of many of our states and districts have an important stake in closing the educational equity gap, but if current trends continue, we will do so now and in years to come.

This issue has long been close to my heart. In 1972, I was asked by a Senate com‐ mission directed by Walter Mondale to undertake a study of what inadequate education cost America. This was the prevailing sentiment then, and the data available and the means for parsing it were crude. Still, the numbers my team came up with were stag‐ ening, even by today’s stan‐ dard.

Young men 25–34 who dropped out of high school were losing $257 bil‐ lion in lifetime income (in 1972 dollars), costing the nation about $71 billion annu‐ ally in foregone tax revenues. We also estimated the proba‐ ble cost of enabling these men to finish high school at about $40 billion—about $200 billion less than what the country was paying up front for high school dropouts. Still more impor‐ tantly, we found that each dol‐ lar invested in model preschool programs would have generated about $6 of national income over the lifetime of these men, and that the revenues generated by such an investment would have exceeded its costs by more than $50 billion. Pretty convincing stuff, I thought. In fact, with the naive years of my life (I was 33), I believed our findings would eventually have an impact on educational poli‐ cies and spending. After all, why wouldn’t reasonable people see the logic in paying less in advance to avoid paying much more later on—and generating even more wealth in the process? Long story short: I was wrong. Other issues were looming large in the national consciousness at that time—the Vietnam War, inflation, wage and price controls, white flight to the suburbs. All were more politically com‐ pelling than the fate of poor children in bad schools.

The problem continued to fester, even as the 1980s drew near. At a Teachers College sym‐ pposium held last month, a group of leading social scientists from around the country pre‐ sented findings generated by sophisticated analytical and statistical programs showing that the country is still hem‐ orrhaging money, directly and indirectly, because of how poorly we educate millions of young people from less advan‐ taged backgrounds (see statis‐atical chart at right). On a more encouraging note, they presented figures reflecting what could be saved if the country were to invest—and invest wisely—in improving educational equity.

For instance, by improving educational attainment among all recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, food stamps, and housing assistance, America stands to save $7.9 billion to $10.8 bil‐ lion annually by removing many of these recipients from the rolls. Because high school graduates are less likely to commit crimes, increasing the high school graduation rate by just 1% for all men ages 20–60 would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by as much as $1.4 billion per year.

A one-year increase in aver‐ age years of schooling for dropouts would reduce mur‐ der and assault by almost 50%, motor vehicle theft by 20%, arson by 15% and burglary and larceny by about 6%.

Finally, participation in model preschool programs has shown to increase academic achievement, reduce dropout rates, and lower the risk of teen pregnancy, drug use and criminal vio‐ lence. The economic benefits of such programs are as high as $7 for each dollar invested. It may be 30 years later, but I’m still naive enough to hope that our country will soon be discussing No Family Left Behind and No Community Left Behind.

Leo Bogart, Expert on Mass Media and Culture, Dies at 84

Leo Bogart, a sociologist who ana‐ lyzed the effects of mass media on culture, died Oct. 15 in Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. He was 84.

Specializing in the study of human groups and their reactions to adver‐ tisements, Bogart, taught in several schools of Columbia University, where he was a senior fellow at the Center for Media Studies. He also served on the facul‐ ties of New York University and Illinois Institute of Technology, and was a Fulbright research fellow in India.

Born in Poland, Bogart came to the United States with his fami‐ ly. After graduating from Brooklyn College in 1941, he joined the Army Signal Intelligence Corp, where his knowledge of German helped inter‐ cept German communications. After writing a book about his 1941–46 experi‐ ences, he returned to his studies, earn‐ ing a doctorate in sociology at the University of Chicago.

Bogart’s numerous books about advertising, propaganda, the press and television include Over the Edge, pub‐ lished in January 2005, subtitled “How the pursuit of youth by marketers and media has changed American culture.”

A leader in his field, Bogart was active in many associations and was the first, along with George Gallup, to be elected to the Market Research Council Hall of Fame. At the time of his death, he was a director and senior consultant for an interna‐ tional media consulting firm.

Legendary Basketball Coach Lou Rossi: Dead at 84

Lou Rossi, the basketball coach whose epic career spanned half a cen‐ tury on the New York City sports scene, died Oct. 21 at his home in Sewell, N.J., at age 84.

A Bronx native, Rossi played basketball at Theodore Roosevelt High. Entering St. John’s University in 1940, the 6-foot freshman learned from head coach Joe Lapchick the fundamentals of basketball, includ‐ ing defense strategy—lessons he never forgot.

Rossi left college to serve in the Air Force, coaching basketball at air bases After World War II, he went to Teachers College at Columbia, where he earned a B.S. in physical education and began working as the junior varsity basketball coach, event‐ ually moving up to assistant and then head coach. Just before the 1950–51 season, head coach Gordon Ridings suffered a severe heart attack, and Rossi became act‐ ing head coach of the Lions, who went on to win every game. As the nation’s only undefeated team that year, they went to the NCAA Championships, only to lose to Illinois in the first round.

After the season, Ridings retired and Rossi became permanent head coach. Over the next half century, under Rossi’s coaching, the Lions finished second in the Eastern or Ivy Leagues three times. In 1995 Rossi and the Lions went to New York University as head coach, where the Violets became one of the nation’s leading teams, and Rossi resigned in 1971, shortly before NYU dropped basketball.

From 1986–1999, Rossi was adjunct professor at the Staten Island campus of St. John’s, teaching two courses, including the very popular “Psychology of Coaching.” In 1997, he was inducted into the New York Basketball Hall of Fame. In 2000, Rossi was inducted into the New York Athletic Club.

The costs of a poor education today:

A high school dropout earns about $260,000 less over a lifetime (present value in cur‐ rent dollars) than a high school graduate and pays about $60,000 less in taxes.

The country’s 23 mil‐ lion high school dropouts (ages 18–67) cost the federal and state governments to lose more than $50 bil‐ lion per year in taxes.

America foregoes $192 billion—or 0.5% of GDP—in combined income and tax rev‐ enue by each group of 18–year-olds who never complete high school, increasing the educational attain‐ ment of those groups by only 2 years would recoup nearly half those losses.

The average 45-year‐ old high school graduate earns $200 more than the average 65-year-old high school graduate. High school dropouts have a life expectancy that is 9.2 years shorter than graduates.

Source: Inside 11.3 (Teachers College, 14 Nov. 95), p. 2.

Stalwart Alumnus Victor Futter: Dead at 86

Victor Futter, prominent New York lawyer and professor of law, died Sept. 21 at his home in Manhasset, New York. He was 86.

Futter, professor of law at Hofstra University School of Law for almost two decades, was mentor, guide and friend to hundreds of students. He helped develop the Center for Families and the Law.

Active in the American Bar Association, Futter specialized in non‐profit organizations and practiced law with two prestigious firms and handled corporate law while serving as vice president and counsel to the legal department of Allied Signal, Inc.

A loyal alumnus, Futter graduated from Columbia College in 1939, with honors in Government and English. In 1942, he earned his J.D. from Columbia Law School, where he was on the Law Review. From 1972–1974, he served as president of the Columbia College Alumni Association, and in 1999 he received the President’s Cup. One of his surviving children, Ellen Futter (Bar ’74), is a former presi‐ dent of Barnard College.

Remembers