

Guest Editorial

The Urgency For a Global Approach to Immigrant Education

by Jerry F. Cammarata

E pluribus unum means Americans are not bound together by a common ethnicity or common religion, by a single culture or the ties of consanguinity traced back to ancient tribal roots. The American people are tied together only by their common ideals.

The schools of America are the locus for the development of this unique civilization, and for the transmission of that culture to each new generation; a culture, which embraces the richness of its diversification.

Today, however, our schools across urban America are in crisis and are struggling to prepare students adequately for the exciting new opportunities and possibilities of the next millennium. What is significant and dramatic about this situation is that the portion of schools which have the worst performance – and are in a true academic exigency – are also the schools with the highest percentage of new immigrants and often from the poorest of countries; thus, it's the uniqueness of our *e pluribus unum* which threatens our schools.

These low performing schools cannot get right to work with these immigrant children – foundational skills are missing. Regrettably, a student who does not possess these skills, who is illiterate in his or her original language, who has had little of what we would call formal education at all, is facing a terrible impediment to acquisition of material when starting school in America. Before he or she even starts to overcome the language barrier, or starts to learn other subject matter – the study of which is the reason the child is learning English in the first place – he or she must learn how to learn, how to sit in a classroom, how to do homework or even how to read a book or paragraph for comprehension.

We have some 20,000 new immigrant students entering the New York City school

system alone each year, from places as far removed from one another as the Dominican Republic, the Russian Republic, Bangladesh, Guyana and Ethiopia, to name a few. Specifically, underdeveloped Third World countries with heavy emigration to New York City, demonstrate an obvious correlation between poor national literacy rates and the shortage of trained teachers leading to the employment of unqualified personnel in foreign schools, lack of textbooks, and over 70% of primary schools offering partial programs of study. We know, thanks to a study last year by the National Research Council, that an immigrant child who fails to complete high school will create a net loss of some \$13,000 for American taxpayers over his or her lifetime, but that an immigrant who gets a high school diploma will actually generate \$198,000 in taxes more than he or she consumes. In short, we already know the scope and magnitude of the problem, and the immediate consequences of failure. We also know what needs to be done for these youngsters.

The congressionally created U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, chaired by Shirley Hufstедler, who was the nation's first Secretary of Education, provided a basic outline in a report they issued last October. They stated that: Rapid acquisition of English should be the paramount goal of any immigrant language-instruction program. Federal funding for students who speak a language other than English should be tied to performance outcomes based on students' English-language acquisition and mastery of academic subject matter. Data should be collected on immigrant students, including data on their linguistic and academic performance.

Programs that are responsive to the needs of immigrant children and that orient them to American school systems and communities should be encouraged, such as so-

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resources for immigrant students and eventually move them into the mainstream. Students should be taught the "common civic culture that is essential to citizenship." Federal immigrant education funding should better keep pace with the actual needs of schools serving immigrant students. These deal with the needs of these students once they reach U.S. shores, but can't we be creative and daring, and envision something more? Is it not time we boldly took pedagogy into a new dimension?

Let us also not shy away from the urgency of the situation. The future of public education in our own country could be jeopardized if we do not embrace the reality that in our new "cyberworld," we have passed beyond the global village to the lightning-fast technology of the cybervillage. The speed of communications has not merely increased information exchange rates quantitatively, but has had such a profound effect on our culture that there has been a qualitative leap into interdependence. We must go to the source of the problems that will clog a global information superhighway, rather than waiting for those problems to come to us in the form of an illiterate young student. We must also recognize that even with the unprecedented global boom in technology, the nations of the "Third World" will never be able to get "on line" quickly enough on their own to make a real difference in the quality of education they offer to the child who may immigrate to the United States. It will take teachers from school systems throughout the nation - Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and yes, New York City - getting into the pedagogical trenches in villages all over the world and working with emerging government departments of education to grow school systems with new and better learning environments for young people. I therefore propose a new paradigm for the education of children, one based on the understanding of the interdependence of school systems around the world. To insure that we give all of our children, including immigrant children, the best possible education in our public schools, we must now begin to see to it that they receive an adequate education in their home countries. We must prepare them for school here before they immigrate. This idea is not completely without precedent. There are domestic programs in place that encourage young people to become teachers in our inner cities. We have the Peace Corps, which certainly provides a model for a mechanism by which Americans could be sent abroad to build indigenous corps of native teachers in other nations. Why not use these successful programs to analogize a new international corps of educational professionals? What the Peace Corps did for basic economic development in the past, this new corps could do for education now. The commitment shown by President John F. Kennedy in founding the Peace Corps in the 1960s changed the way the world looked at America, and changed the way Americans thought of themselves in relation to the rest of the world. It is time for a President and Congress to start a new revolution of ideals now. In this era of corporate

mega-mergers, like Daimler-Benz's and Chrysler, the greatest consolidation of interests in history could be the alliance of the education departments of the world's nations in a comprehensive, coordinated attempt to level the playing field for all children - who will one day all be competitors in the global marketplace - by raising the level of academic support for all of them. This challenge is so significant that were an American president to ignore it, were the leaders of Congress to pass it by, it might quite legitimately become the major issue upon which to center the platform of a party and a candidate. Let us also incorporate into the arena of dialogue an ultimate mission statement to the purpose at hand: the organizational leadership of teachers and administrators - The American Federation of Teachers, The American Association of School Administrators, The National Education Association, to name a few. Interestingly, while several organizations, including the Peace Corps, have undertaken education work in the past, what would be different about this program would be the level of international cooperation that could be involved toward a single goal: the actualization of the ideal that the United Nations enshrined in the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It was in that document as far back as 1959 that the world community declared, "The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgment and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society." But who would pay for such a massive undertaking? The very same nations that suffer from inadequate educational systems also provide the labor to produce consumer items for the American market. Companies that produce sneakers to sell to American youngsters for over \$100 a pair rely on labor pools in nations where the minimum wage is a tenth or a twentieth or a fiftieth of what it is in the United States. Why not draw new, young teachers not only from America, but also from those European and Asian nations with successful public education systems? This would have the added advantage of creating a forum for cross-pollination between the educational establishments of the major industrialized nations.

The synergy that might result could advance the proficiency of educators in each nation exponentially, and also enhance the rapidity with which less developed nations build their own professional departments of education to monitor and advance educational standards themselves. This process would also endorse having the receiving countries send some of their teachers to America, Europe and Asia for training. In all, the possible outcomes of raised academic standards globally can be limitless, and could give great purpose to the next millennium. We should create some funding system, possibly administered by the United Nations, which would have the corporations most dependent on the workers of these nations fund an inter-

national organization similar to the United States' Peace Corps dedicated solely to education. The World Health Organization organizes medical relief; why not some sort of World Education Organization?

It is true that American commercial interests will probably foot a large part of the bill, and as mentioned above, our national interest in supporting such a program is to prepare those children who do immigrate to succeed in our schools. However, certainly not all children in these countries will immigrate to the United States. In fact, only a small percentage will. Yet the investment will be worth the time and trouble and funds - if not for the purely humanitarian motives of easing the sufferings of others and spreading the light of literacy and the empowerment of education (which tends to strengthen democratic impulses). Also, an educated populace in other countries will provide a vast new demographic of consumers for the product which America is best at producing now: information. In the information age, a business owner in a "Third World" nation will have very little reason to buy American software or computers if he cannot read what appears on the screen. Furthermore, as a population's educational level increases, its income will increase, and so will its spending power. Clearly, if we believe in a new global commitment to the delivery system of education, we can surely devise a funding source which is fair and appropriate.

However, is this educational imperialism? Schools were used in previous centuries as a means of controlling the populace of poorer nations and of exterminating local culture, after all. What is proposed here, though, is not to culture the use of education to proselytize and propagandize. The curriculum would be something universally applicable, and useful to a child no matter where life takes him or her. The crux of the program would be on reading and writing with appropriate introduction to useful mathematics - yes, the Three "R's." Literacy and facility in one's native language constitutes a sort of "learning readiness," which, if the child were to immigrate, would give the student a head-start in acquiring the language of his or her new country. If the child remains in his or her native land, on the other hand, he or she can be that much more productive and technologically literate as a citizen and that much greater a participant in the world community thanks to a formal education.

For almost two and a quarter centuries, we have been building one society from the many individuals who play a part in our nation's life. As communication, technology and transportation efficiency increase, our world is rapidly becoming a singularity of profoundly interdependent parts. The village school's administration by a single master has given way to the municipal board of education, the state education commissioner, and even to a federal department. Let's take the next step and globalize our approach to maximize our educational dividend for the world, for our own nation, and most importantly, for each child.#