

Educ -  
Business

# Public schools need to go way of business

By Louis V. Gerstner Jr.

The competition is over, the results are in, and the United States has finished third from rock bottom. Not in the mountains of Nagano, where the Winter Games concluded recently, but in an arena far more important. Results of the Third International Math and Science Survey show that American 12th-graders finished ahead of only Cyprus and South Africa in math and finished sixth from the bottom in science.

If our Olympians had turned in a similarly dismal performance, we can imagine the outcry and the humiliation we would have felt as a nation. How do we feel about these academic results? The problem isn't hard to identify. U.S. school standards are too low, our curriculum too broad and unfocused, and our tests too easy. Perversely, our system retards national competitiveness. Our performance in math and science actually declines from fourth to eighth to 12th grade.

In a way, American public education today resembles American business as it was 15 years ago. We weren't competi-

## Poor grade in math

U.S. 12th-graders finished ahead of just two countries in a survey on math literacy:

1. Netherlands
2. Sweden
3. Denmark
4. Switzerland
5. Iceland
6. Norway
7. France
8. Australia
9. New Zealand
10. Canada
11. Austria
12. Slovenia
13. Germany
14. Hungary
15. Italy
16. Russia
17. Lithuania
18. Czech Republic
19. United States
20. Cyprus
21. South Africa

Source: Third International Mathematics and Science Study

tive. We had been resistant to change. In international comparisons, especially with our Asian competitors, we lagged behind. Our economy was in the doldrums, and our workers — like our schoolchildren today — were the victims.

## Respond with change

U.S. businesses were faced with a stark choice: change or close. They changed. They began to invest in substantial transformation, new methods of production, new kinds of worker training. Most important, they continually benchmarked performance against one another and against international competition. They invested capital to adopt and adapt methods used by the most successful companies, no matter what geography. And it worked. The clearest evidence of that success is the state of the U.S. economy and the virtual elimination of the federal budget deficit.

This ongoing economic boom is also an opportunity. We are witnessing significant state budget surpluses for the first time in decades:

a combined \$28 billion for 1997 and an estimated additional \$24 billion this year. And several governors have pledged to target much of it to education. The question is: Will American education, like American business, invest in long-term, structural changes? Or will it simply throw money at the problem?

That's the opportunity. Here's the challenge. The state of education today is less the result of underfunding or lack of talent than of poor accountability for performance. The problem is that we haven't kept up with the rest of the world or with the economic and technological changes sweeping the planet. Core structural aspects of education — the lengths of the school day and school year, outmoded teacher training, multiple-choice testing and use of school time — haven't changed in generations. Our schools are oddly insulated from marketplace forces and the discipline that drives constant adaptation, self-renewal and a relentless push for excellence.

As state proposals are refined, only those directly linked to real change should win the backing of lawmakers. We should invest only when, as a quid pro quo, we get the highest academic standards, tests aligned with those standards and real accountability for performance. We should invest only where it is clear what children should be able to know and to do in order to advance. If they aren't able to do it, they shouldn't advance.

## Invest wisely in addressing student needs

We should invest only in teacher training and professional development programs that have been made more relevant to student needs (for example, replacing lecture classes with hands-on experiences and skill building in key areas like math and science). We should invest only in pay increases for teachers and administrators that are keyed to performance.

There's one more investment we should make, and it's the most important: our time. Real change will come only when we all take responsibility for fixing the system. This is one more lesson from the business world. The greatest gains in productivity, creativity and competitiveness have come not from management dictates but from an empowered workforce.

If your child's homework is too easy, challenge the teacher to make it tougher. If students in your hometown are routinely promoted based on "seat time" rather than real achievement, object publicly. If the state where you live hasn't set standards, call the governor and find out why. (Achieve, which recently brought together 19 states, is benchmarking standards across the states.) If you see political and school leaders who are committed to change, support them. There's money to be spent, and the people charged with spending it care about what their constituents think. Let's make sure this unique opportunity isn't wasted. Let's join the fight.

Louis V. Gerstner Jr. is chairman and CEO of IBM.

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## If airfares were based on miles . . .

I say bunk to the Opposing View on airline fares by Carol B. Hallett, president and CEO of the Air Transport Association ("Airfares are a bargain," Rising Airfares Debate, Friday).

The airport in the small city where I live is serviced by two airlines. To fly 225 miles from Pasco, Wash., to Seattle costs \$169 round trip. That's more expensive than frequently advertised fares from Seattle to Chicago. I've flown the 3,000 miles from Seattle to Miami for just twice that fare.

As to the question about why people continue to fly through hub airports, we're not given a choice. It's not my choice to go to Miami via Minneapolis; it's the air carrier's. I'd rather go straight to Miami.

Don't try to tell me what a bargain it is to

fly. And don't quote me inflated figures on how much air travel is up. The figures quoted from 1978-97 average slightly more than 4% annual growth. That doesn't represent a huge increase.

At the same time fares are going up, service is going down. Meals are lousy, planes are frequently overbooked, flights are canceled, luggage is lost or damaged. And that's on the airlines' best days.

If anyone really wants airlines to give us a break, let them calculate their fees based on air miles traveled instead of the lack of competition. Then, maybe, we might see an increase in air travel that would be shocking.

Michael E. Lauman  
Kennewick, Wash.

## Susan McDougal serves Clinton, not country

I don't understand why people keep interviewing Susan McDougal because I don't believe anyone cares what she thinks about independent counsel Kenneth Starr or anyone else.

But her comments Monday in Larry King's People column were, to say the least, typical when you take into consideration the source ("McDougal, doing time 'for my country'").

If memory serves me correctly, she was sentenced to jail time for contempt of court stemming from her refusal to answer one simple question: Did President Clinton tell the truth in his deposition in the Whitewater scam? All she has to do is tell the truth, answer yes or no, and she refuses. She says she is not going to be the person who ruins someone's life.

In analyzing her statement, apparently the only way she could ruin someone's life is to answer no, he wasn't telling the truth, because she would be ruining his life by making a liar out of him. If he was telling the truth, all she has to do is answer yes, but she hasn't. Why? Could it be that if she said yes she would be lying and committing perjury? It is such a simple question, but she chooses to be another soldier in a long line of good soldiers who are willing to fall on a sword for Clinton. One cannot but wonder what her reward will be.

As far as doing this for "her country," that's a joke. I know her country is surely not my country. I do not want to live in a country where people do not care about their leaders' moral character, where as long as they get "theirs" they couldn't care less whether their leaders



McDougal: A letter writer wonders why she won't answer a simple question about Clinton.

possess integrity.

Well, I come from the South, just like Bill Clinton and Susan McDougal, and we have a name for people like these two. As I said, consider the source.

Gretchen Berry  
Port Allen, La.

## Arafat flap reveals Holocaust Museum flaw

Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel has called the treatment of Walter Reich, director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, a "gross injustice" in the wake of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat's ill-fated proposed visit to the memorial.

The sad fact is that the museum is the victim of a gross injustice.

Its essential mission of Holocaust awareness and education has been obfuscated and, in fact, jeopardized by the conflicts and crises of the past few weeks.

It is imperative the governance problems that have been brought to light by these distressing events be resolved efficiently and effectively.

A critical inquiry into the operational structure of the museum must be undertaken now because business cannot go on as usual.

Clearly, as usual is not good enough. The Holocaust is the greatest atrocity Western civilization has both permitted and endured. Providing people with the opportunity to learn about the Shoah and its crucial lessons is far too important a purpose for the museum to be the target of such mudslinging.

Deborah Dwork  
Rose professor of Holocaust history  
Director, Center for Holocaust Studies  
Clark University, Worcester, Mass.

## Dairy farmers deserve return on investment of money, labor and time

USA TODAY's editorial about the dairy program raising consumer prices is without merit ("Dairy programs jack up prices, hurt consumers," Our View, Debate, Monday). Contrary to the tone of the editorial, dairy farmers are not attempting to gild the lily and make huge profits based on government payments for their milk.

Dairy farmers from North Carolina to California are merely attempting to stay in business by providing a fresh supply of wholesome milk and milk products to an increasing population in the United States. North Carolina has lost more dairies in the past 10 years than we have left, due to decreasing prices for raw milk combined with increased production and environmental costs.

We pushed Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman for a minimum price floor for raw milk long before national attention was drawn to the industry through legal proceedings.

We were simply asking for a minimum wage, so to speak, for our dairy farmers. Glickman initiated movement in that direction so we may stem the downward spiral of this industry.

The Northeast Dairy Compact implemented last year has allowed dairy producers to sell milk at a profit and not raise the price of milk to consumers.

As Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., so aptly stated in his response, the price increases for milk in the past two decades have come after the milk leaves the farm, leaving the farmer with less money when inflation is factored than before ("Keep price protections," Opposing View).

The bigger picture, however, is the overall demise of the dairy farmer across our country. Milk, like every other food commodity, is produced by an American farmer who's willing to get up at 4 a.m., seven days a week, to milk cows so we can have a stable supply of fresh milk on our tables.

## Let family members in ERs

Gerald Strauch of the American College of Surgeons is dead wrong when he says family members should not be present when patients are being resuscitated in the emergency department ("Some hospitals now let family members in ERs," Cover Story, News, Thursday).

Who is he to decide what is best for patients and their families?

It is this paternalistic attitude from physicians that angers families and makes their experiences in the emergency department even more horrible.

Every family should be given the option to be with a loved one.

I am a board-certified emergency nurse, and it should be no surprise to readers that nurses are taking the lead on this issue. I am fortunate to work with physicians who are tuned into the needs of our patients and their families. But, as the story points out, not all physicians have an empathetic perspective.

More than ever, USA TODAY's story illustrates why we all must fight cutbacks in the number of registered nurses caring for patients in our hospitals. Every patient deserves a nurse — a person who will be a tireless advocate for patients and their families.

Patricia Carroll  
Meriden, Conn.

## Visit to Washington canceled by Security Council business

The claim of Judy Keen's article in Monday's USA TODAY is that United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan canceled his trip this week to Washington because Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., declined to meet with him ("U.N. chief cancels trip after rebuff," News).

This is incorrect.

The secretary-general had numerous sessions scheduled with the president and other senior administration officials, the Senate Foreign Affairs and House International Relations committees, the House leadership and others.

He postponed the trip to Washington when it became clear that the Security Council in New York would be considering at the same time a resolution endorsing his agreement with Iraq, and he needed to be at U.N. headquarters for those council sessions.

Certainly, questions have been raised by some in Washington about the memorandum of understanding signed in Baghdad, but the secretary-general would have been ready and willing to discuss what he feels is a solid agreement.

The secretary-general plans to reschedule his trip to Washington at an early opportunity.

Joe Sills, director  
U.N. Information Center  
Washington, D.C.

## To comment . . .

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