

WORKER BEES

The Industrial Logic of American Public Education — and Its Consequences

A Position Paper

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THE DOCUMENT THEY WROTE IN PLAIN ENGLISH

Before we talk about what is wrong with American public education, we need to talk about what is right with it — which is to say, what it was designed to do and how effectively it has done it.

In 1902, John D. Rockefeller founded the General Education Board and began funding what would become the architecture of the American public school system. The Rockefeller family would eventually contribute over \$180 million to that effort. We are taught to think of this as philanthropy. The record, however, suggests a more precise description: it was investment. Gates's own writings make clear that the Board expected a return — a population shaped toward specific economic ends rather than toward independent thought.

Historians of American education have documented the General Education Board's substantial influence on the standardization of curriculum, teacher training, and school structure across the country during the early twentieth century — a period when the industrial economy was the dominant force shaping every major institution. The GEB funded schools, shaped pedagogy, and helped establish the model of mass standardized schooling that most Americans still experience today.

The intent behind that model was stated plainly in 1913 by Frederick T. Gates, Rockefeller's chief advisor and the primary architect of the General Education Board's

Rockefeller's chief adviser and the primary architect of the General Education Board's vision. Gates wrote it down in a document called "The Country School of Tomorrow," published as Occasional Papers Number 1 of the General Education Board. Here is what he wrote:

"In our dream we have limitless resources, and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand. The present educational conventions fade from our minds; and, unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive rural folk. We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or of science. We are not to raise up from among them authors, editors, poets, or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians, nor lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have an ample supply."

— Frederick T. Gates, *The Country School of Tomorrow*, Occasional Papers No. 1, General Education Board, 1913, p. 6

Read that again slowly. This is not a conspiracy theory. This is a primary source document written by the man who helped build the system. He stated exactly what he was building and why. Perfect docility. Grateful and responsive. Not philosophers. Not scientists. Not artists. Not lawyers. Not statesmen.

Workers.

And then \$180 million helped institutionalize a model of schooling whose outcomes still resemble Gates's vision today.

THE DESIGN OF THE MACHINE

The structure of American schooling bears a striking resemblance to the organizational needs of the industrial economy that funded its standardization. Bells that signal when to move. Rows of desks oriented toward a single authority figure. A curriculum that rewards memorization of predetermined answers over independent reasoning. Grades that measure conformity to a standard. Standardized tests that measure a student's ability to take standardized tests.

Whether by deliberate design or by the powerful gravitational pull of the industrial model on every institution it touched, the result is the same: a school day that resembles a factory shift more than it resembles an environment engineered to produce curious, capable, independent human beings.

The industrial economy that Rockefeller and his peers were building at the turn of the twentieth century required a specific kind of human being. Not a thinker. Not a creator. Not an independent agent capable of questioning authority or building something of their own. They needed someone who could show up at a specific time, perform a specific task, accept a specific wage, and not ask too many questions about any of it.

The available evidence suggests the school was the training ground. Historians including David Tyack (*The One Best System*, 1974) and Joel Spring (*Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, 1970) have documented the influence of industrial on

the Rise of the Corporate State, 1972) have documented the influence of industrial-era philanthropy on the standardization of American schooling. Whether Gates's explicit vision became a governing principle in every school district in America is a question historians continue to debate. What is not debatable is the outcome: a system that, measured by any standard of critical thinking, civic literacy, or economic preparation, has produced results consistent with Gates's stated goals more than with any alternative vision of what education could be.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

The following figures do not establish motive. They establish outcomes. Each is drawn from federal assessments, peer-reviewed research, or government reports.

Reading and Literacy

31% of fourth-grade students read at or above proficient level — meaning 69% do not

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024

40% of fourth graders read below the most basic level — the highest percentage in 20 years

Source: NAEP, 2024

34% of eighth graders scored “below basic” in reading — the highest percentage in NAEP's 32-year history of testing reading

Source: NAEP, 2024

According to the federal NAEP database, the average fourth-grade reading score in 2024 was not significantly different from 1992 — the first year the assessment was administered. That is the average. Among the lowest-performing students — those at the 10th and 25th percentiles — scores in 2024 were actually lower than in 1992. The students who most need the system to work for them have lost ground over more than thirty years of education spending. (Source: nationsreportcard.gov, 2024 Reading Assessment, National Trends)

Adult Literacy

45 million of U.S. adults are functionally illiterate, reading below a fifth-grade level

Source: National Center for Education Statistics / PIAAC Survey

54% of U.S. adults have literacy below a sixth-grade level

Source: National Literacy Institute, 2024

50% of unemployed adults ages 16–21 cannot read well enough to be considered functionally literate

Source: National Literacy Institute, 2024

60% of prison inmates are illiterate; 85% of juvenile offenders are functionally illiterate

Source: National Literacy Institute / American Bar Association

Low literacy costs American taxpayers an estimated \$20 billion each year in remediation, lost productivity, and social services. School dropouts cost the nation an estimated \$240 billion in social service expenditures and lost tax revenues.

Funding Inequality

\$2,700 less per student received by school districts serving the highest proportions of

students of color compared to those with the fewest students of color

Source: Learning Policy Institute, 2025

\$13,000–\$14,000 gap in per-pupil funding between the highest- and lowest-funded states — a disparity that has persisted for over a decade

Source: Education Law Center, Making the Grade 2024

Nearly one third of states provide less funding to high-poverty school districts than to low-poverty districts. The reliance on local property taxes to fund schools means that the wealth of a neighborhood determines the quality of education available to children who live there — a structural reality that no amount of individual effort can overcome.

Discipline Disparities and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Black students: 3–4x more likely to be suspended than white students — a disparity that appears as early as kindergarten

Source: Multiple peer-reviewed studies; ERIC / GAO 2024

A 2024 Government Accountability Office report found that Black girls accounted for 45% of out-of-school suspensions for behaviors categorized as defiance and disruption — despite comprising only 15% of the female student population. Research consistently shows no evidence that this over-representation reflects higher rates of actual misconduct.

Students who attend schools with high suspension rates are substantially more likely to be arrested and jailed as adults — a finding confirmed by a landmark longitudinal study of over one million students. Youth are twice as likely to be arrested during periods when they are suspended or expelled from school.

The connection between literacy and incarceration is documented even if the causal chain is complex. High school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than college graduates (Northeastern University, 2009). 85% of juvenile offenders are functionally illiterate. A student not reading at grade level by the end of third grade is four times less likely to graduate high school on time. These are not metaphors. They are measurements of a pipeline.

None of these statistics proves the thesis of this paper by itself. Together, however, they present a question that demands an answer: if the purpose of public education is to produce literate, informed, economically capable citizens, why have these outcomes remained so persistent across generations, across administrations, and across trillions of dollars in spending? The evidence does not prove intent. It requires an explanation.

WHAT A CENTURY OF THIS PRODUCES

We are now more than a hundred years into the experiment. The data above are consistent with the outcomes such a system would be expected to produce.

Children moving through twelve years of schooling and emerging unable to read a lease, understand a ballot, or evaluate the credibility of information placed in front of them. A workforce trained for an industrial economy that no longer exists, without the critical thinking tools to navigate the one that replaced it. A civic body that cannot name its representatives, cannot read the legislation written in its name, and cannot tell the difference between a press release and a news report.

This is not a failure of intelligence. The children sitting in those classrooms are not less capable than their grandparents. They are the products of a system that was not designed to produce capable, independent adults. It was designed to produce compliant ones. And a compliant adult who has never been taught to think critically is not equipped to navigate a world that is changing faster than any previous generation has experienced.

The jobs that the system trained them for are gone. The factories closed. The assembly lines automated. The work that required showing up on time and following instructions has been absorbed by machines that do it cheaper and better. And the human beings trained for that work — and only that work — are standing in the rubble of an economy they were never given the tools to understand, let alone reshape.

And now we say the system is broken.

The system is not broken. The evidence presented in this paper supports an inference that is difficult to avoid: it is producing outcomes remarkably consistent with the purposes articulated by its early architects. Whether that consistency reflects original design, institutional inertia, or both is a question worth debating. What is not worth debating is the consistency itself. The problem is that those purposes no longer serve anyone — not even the people who originally funded them.

THE BLACK COMMUNITY AND THE DOUBLE DESIGN

For Black Americans, the outcomes documented above are not distributed equally — they are concentrated. Researchers across multiple disciplines have argued, and the data support, that this concentration is structural rather than accidental.

The general population was educated into compliance. Black children were educated into compliance plus invisibility. The same system that trained working-class children to be workers trained Black children to be workers who also understood — through underfunded schools, curriculum that erased their history, low expectations embedded in disciplinary practice, and a tracking apparatus that sorted them away from college preparation — that they occupied a specific and limited place in the economic order.

School funding tied to property taxes means the school in the poor Black neighborhood is funded by the poverty of the poor Black neighborhood. Districts serving the highest concentrations of students of color receive on average \$2,700 less per student than districts with the fewest students of color — not because of accident, but because of a funding architecture whose structural inequity has been documented, litigated, and largely left intact for over fifty years.

The disciplinary apparatus routes Black students out of classrooms at rates three to four times higher than white students — rates that research consistently shows do not reflect higher rates of actual misconduct, but rather differential treatment by institutions. The downstream effect is documented: suspension predicts arrest. Arrest predicts incarceration. And some states plan their prison capacity around their elementary school reading scores.

These outcomes are not the result of any single act of intention. They are the cumulative product of a system whose design, funding structure, and disciplinary architecture produce predictable results — and whose response to those results, decade after decade, has been to document them more precisely rather than to change the structure that produces them.

THE DAYCARE CENTER THAT CALLS ITSELF A SCHOOL

Walk into a school in any under-resourced community in this country right now. What you will often find is a containment facility with a curriculum — a place where children are managed through their mandatory school years rather than educated through them.

Teachers who are not failing their students — teachers who are themselves navigating a system that under-resourced them, overloaded them, and gave them a standardized test at the end of the year to evaluate their performance regardless of what they were given to work with. Teachers managing thirty children in rooms with inadequate materials, insufficient support staff, and accountability structures designed to measure their students' compliance with a predetermined standard rather than their growth as thinkers.

A child who cannot read by the end of third grade has a dramatically reduced probability of graduating high school. A child who does not graduate high school has a dramatically reduced probability of economic stability. An economically unstable adult is less able to advocate for themselves, less able to participate in civic life, less able to challenge the structures that produced their instability. This is not a cycle. It is a machine. And the data show it is working.

THE CURRENT DISMANTLING — AND WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS

Today the public school system is under direct political attack. The defunding of public education, the elimination of curricula that teach critical thinking about American history, and the redirection of public funds toward private and charter school systems operating under varying levels of public accountability and oversight are central priorities of the current policy environment.

We are told this is about parental rights. About local control. About freedom from government overreach.

What it is about is the same thing it has always been about: who decides what the next generation knows. Who determines which history is taught and whose history is erased. Who defines what a citizen is and what a citizen deserves to understand about the country they live in.

The irony is exact and total: a political movement that claims to oppose elite control is dismantling the one institution — however flawed, however compromised, however inadequate — that still represents a public commitment to the idea that every child deserves access to knowledge, regardless of their family's wealth. Replacing it with systems that, in many states, answer to private operators rather than elected school boards, that may operate under different accountability structures and curricular requirements than traditional public schools, and that are under no universal obligation

to serve every child who walks through the door.

Rockefeller's General Education Board built a system to produce worker bees. This movement is building a system to produce worker bees who don't know they're in a hive.

WHAT IT WOULD TAKE

This paper is not a policy prescription. Policy prescriptions require a political will that does not currently exist. What this paper is is a statement of what we are looking at when we look at the American public school system — clearly, without the language of “failing” and “improvement” that pretends the system is attempting something it is not.

What it would take to actually educate children is not a mystery. Smaller classrooms. Teachers paid as the professionals they are. Curricula built around critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and honest history. Schools funded equitably across zip codes rather than by the wealth of the surrounding neighborhood. A fundamental rejection of the standardized testing apparatus that measures compliance and calls it achievement.

And most fundamentally: a decision, as a society, about what education is for. If it is for producing workers, we have a very good system. If it is for producing citizens — people capable of governing themselves, understanding the forces that shape their lives, and building something new rather than simply maintaining what exists — we need to start over from a different premise.

Gates wrote in 1913 that the task was “very simple as well as very beautiful”: to train children “to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way.”

That is a definition of a society that does not change. That does not grow. That does not produce anything its parents did not produce.

That is a definition of a society that is already over.

The question is whether the children sitting in those classrooms right now — the ones being managed rather than educated, the ones being prepared for jobs that no longer exist — will be the ones to decide it isn't.

A NOTE ON SOURCES AND STANDARDS

This paper distinguishes between documented primary sources, peer-reviewed research, federal data, and interpretation. Where the evidence is strong, we state it directly. Where the argument moves from documented fact to structural analysis, we say so.

The Gates quotation is a primary source document, published by the General Education Board itself and available in the historical record. The literacy and NAEP data are from federal assessments administered by the National Center for Education Statistics. The funding disparity data are from the Education Law Center and the Learning Policy

Institute. The discipline disparity research is from peer-reviewed journals and the Government Accountability Office.

The viral quote widely attributed to John D. Rockefeller himself — “I don’t want a nation of thinkers, I want a nation of workers” — cannot be verified to any primary source. FATV does not use unverified attribution. We don’t need to. The documented record is damning enough.

What Gates actually wrote is worse than the misquote. Read it again.

“The people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand.”

That is not a misquote. That is a man stating exactly what he built and why. The least we can do is take him seriously.

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