

a public policy essay

*The Importance  
of  
Quality Teachers*

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The Bahamas  
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## Introduction

This essay is the second in a series on Bahamian education. The first was “Educational Achievement in the Bahamas” that was released to the media in April 2008 and can be accessed at [www.nassauinstitute.org/articles/article719.php](http://www.nassauinstitute.org/articles/article719.php)

## The Author

Ralph J Massey, the author, was born into modest circumstances in Cleveland Ohio in 1929.

He graduated from Case University *magna cum laude* with a bachelor’s degree in economics and as a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society.

He entered the University of Chicago as a Harry A Millis Fellow in Labor and Industrial Relations, earned a masters degree in Economics and left the University as a Research Associate in the Department of Economics. His course advisor was Milton Friedman, the Nobel Laureate.

His business career covered 37 years with four major companies. At Kimberly-Clark Corporation, for instance, he was Assistant Treasurer and at Chemical Bank he was the offshore banking manager of the Bank of New Providence.

He was a founding member of the Nassau Institute and since late 2004 has been a contributor to the work of the Coalition for Education Reform.

**A**drian Gibson in the June 30<sup>th</sup> Tribune called Bahamian public education an “inadequate sham” and described this year’s public high school leavers in colorful terms. Up to 60% of them do not graduate; and in fact, they are, according to Mr. Gibson, a horde of “arithmetically-challenged halfwits” who get a certificate of attendance instead of a diploma. They are sexually permissive, speak and act offensively and are unprepared to enter the workforce. Yet...they attend lavish and wildly garish graduation proms.

According to Mr. Gibson, irresponsible parents are the principal root cause of this educational failure if not the only cause. They do not teach morals and values; they dodge teachers and duck PTA meetings. In short, they take no interest in their children’s intellectual development except delivering them to school each morning; and, on leaving school, they treat their “under-achieving children” to “a spendthrift, materialistic exhibition”, the graduation prom.

According to Mr. Gibson, the Department of Education also contributes to this situation because it does not go beyond “fine-tuning” the existing system. He contends that the Department’s “cronies, nepotists and position seekers” are vindictive and repress progress. He believes that such progress could occur if the Department would initiate specific programs that should include, for instance, mandatory academic standards that eliminate social promotion and summer school for failing students.

This portrayal of the public education is indeed colorful. However, it failed to do a number of things. It never talked about the importance of teachers, or the consequences of the status quo, nor the difficulty of reforming the system. This essay will address those issues.

### **Another Perspective.**

Now more than ever, this Bahamian reality has grave economic consequences for the future of those students who fail. But also...their collective failure deprives the nation of the skills necessary to fuel sustained economic prosperity.<sup>1</sup> These consequences may not be fully appreciated in the Bahamas; but there is universal agreement among the world’s leading economists in this regard.

The logic of their position is this. Because of the extent of its illiteracy, the country has a massive cognitive skills shortage. These are the basic skills that facilitate all learning and are the ones needed to create prosperity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This skills shortage explains the increasing need of Bahamian businesses large and small to import foreign labour to fill their legitimate needs.

Gary S. Becker, the 1992 Nobel Laureate in Economics, goes so far as to say –

“New technological advances clearly are of little value in countries that have very few skilled workers who know how to use them.” Economic growth closely depends on the interaction between new knowledge and a country’s ability to learn. “Large increases in education and training have accompanied major advances in technological knowledge in all countries that have achieved significant economic growth.”

If one measures success in education by the standard measure of “universal education for a country,” then –

The Bahamas was very successful after Majority Rule. “There was according to the 1970-2000 census data a significant increase in the number of years of schooling of the adult population.”<sup>2</sup> However,

The rapid expansion of secondary education was accompanied by a precipitous reduction in the academic qualifications for new teachers and in the academic standards for students.

If one measures success in education by what children learn and can do, the knowledge and skills actually acquired, then -

Public education in the Bahamas has been stalled in a long-standing educational malaise.

This is evident in the annual BGCSE examination<sup>3</sup> scores that have fluctuated between D+ and D- since this testing began in 1993 and the Government High Schools graduation rate that reportedly hovers around 50% of the total students leaving school. The overall BGCSE results in 26 subjects for public and private schools combined are released annually to the public whereas the public high school graduation data is not released in any form whatsoever.

One must note, however, that the Bahamas is not alone in this regard.

In the case of the United States the academic achievement of high school leavers peaked in 1964 just as it began a half-century of sustained growth in education expenditures. The national government spent \$125 Billion Dollars from 1965 to 2001 “to improve the quality of education in high-poverty schools and/or give extra help to struggling students.” In constant dollars, the funding doubled. Yet...the test scores on academic achievement showed no significant improvement.

## **High-Performing Teachers.**

There are many reasons given by social scientists, teachers and unionists for the poor academic record of public education in the Bahamas, the U.S. and elsewhere over the past 50 years. In the case of the Bahamas, however, this essay identified one, a decline in the quality of teachers.

First, in November 1996 a U.S. study, the “Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement”, concluded -

“Students benefiting from regular yearly assignment to more effective teachers have an extreme advantage in terms of attaining higher levels of achievement.” In the case of mathematics achievement, the advantage would raise a student from a “remedial math” to an “accelerated learning” level, a result labeled as “awesome.”<sup>4</sup> The consequences of a series of years with poor teachers resulted in the “near-permanent retardation of academic achievement.”

In September 2007, McKinsey & Company studied the primary and secondary education systems in 25 countries that included the ten with the highest academic scores in the OECD's Programme for International Assessment. It concluded that -

**“At the primary level, students that are placed with low-performing teachers for several years in a row suffer an educational loss that is largely irreversible...they stand very little chance of recovering the lost years.” Whereas students placed with high-performing teachers, progress three times as fast.**

**The bottom line is “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”<sup>5</sup>**

In addition, two new international systems of testing student academic outcomes were developed, one by a group of U.S. and Pacific Rim countries, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)<sup>6</sup> and the other by the Organization for Economic Development (OECD), the Programme for International Assessment (PISA).

Also during the last 50 years some countries did not get caught in the same malaise, as did the Bahamas and the U.S. These countries included Ireland and Finland in Europe and Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea in Asia. Education became their springboard into the global economy.

Furthermore, the analytical focus shifted from explaining what went wrong in the poor performing countries to what was being done right in the successful countries. The seminal work was “How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top” by McKinsey & Company. Hereafter, this work is referred to as “The Study.”

The Study looked in detail at 25 school systems including the ten best that are included in the OECD's Programme for International Assessment (PISA).

**The answer to the “How do they do it” question is that they are more effective in getting more talented people to become teachers, developing these teachers into better instructors, and ensuring that these instructors deliver consistently for every child in the system.”**

According to the Study, the top-performing systems -

- **Recruit from the top-third of each group of graduates from their school system. For example, South Korea recruits from the top 5 percent, Finland the top 10 percent and Singapore and Hong Kong the top 30 percent. In contrast, the United States recruits from the bottom third.**
- **Have more effective mechanisms for selecting teaching candidates. They are selected before they start teacher training and in most cases they have already completed a three-year or a four-year undergraduate program.**
- **Pay starting salaries that are in-line with other graduate starting salaries so that strong candidates will view the teaching alternative favorably.**
- **Operate within a society that values teaching and teachers highly. “In Singapore and South Korea opinion polls show that the general**

**public believes that teachers make a greater contribution to society than any other profession...New teachers in all of the systems studied consistently reported that the status of the profession is one of the most important factors in their decision to become a teacher.”**

## **Bahamian Reality and Reform.**

The knowledgeable Bahamian upon reading the above elements will quickly realize the enormity of the task of changing its present education paradigm to accommodate these features.

For instance, there must be flexibility in hiring, promoting and separating personnel that does not now exist. Determining merit in teaching means that pay and promotion based on the number teacher training courses taken and years in service becomes a thing of the past. The proposed system includes a merit pay component that relates teacher or principal compensation to the skills acquired by students. Reform also requires a major restructuring of Teacher Education in the College of the Bahamas.

But, the scarce resource in this reform effort ultimately is the supply of outstanding teacher candidates, teachers and principals. Any program that expands too rapidly will outrun the supply and thus inadvertently compromise reform.

These concerns were the reason why the July 2005 Coalition Report proposed a laboratory school that followed the specific format used in the successful 65-school Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP).<sup>7</sup> Such a school could be established as a Charter school that would give concerned, lower income parents in the public school system a viable and affordable option for their children.

**The bottom line is that the inherent difficulty in implementing successful educational reform is enormous and will require strong national leadership and a supportive public awareness. However, a failure to change condemns the country to lower economic growth and mounting social instability.**

**Ralph J Massey**

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion of these skills please refer to Ralph J Massey, “Educational Achievement in the Bahamas: a Public Policy Essay” on [www.nassauinstitute.org/articles/article719.php](http://www.nassauinstitute.org/articles/article719.php).

<sup>2</sup> Coalition for Education Reform, *Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource*, July 2005, page 20. One can access the complete document on the Bahamas Employers Confederation and Nassau Institute websites.

<sup>3</sup> The Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations are given to public and private school leavers in 26 subjects and the results are graded on an eight-point scale (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and U). The Public high schools use the traditional five-point scale (A, B, C, D and F) in awarding diplomas.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Sanders and June C. Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on future Student Academic Achievement*, University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, Knoxville, page 8.

<sup>5</sup> McKinsey&Company, *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*, September 2007, pages 2 and 12.

<sup>6</sup> Coalition for Education Reform, page 17.

<sup>7</sup> Coalition for Education Reform, pages 18-19 and Google “kipp”.