

Teach the Best and Stomp the Rest: The American Schools ... Guilty as Charged?

William C. Knaak

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The education system fails to educate everybody, but Knaak says "National Purpose" will give us a passing grade.

Despite the education system's attempts to make sure no child is left behind, the author of this mammoth treatise argues that nearly two-thirds of American students are almost guaranteed to continue to fail due to inherent and long-held fallacies, unless major changes are undertaken on a national scope. A longtime educator, William C. Knaak traces the history of various attempts over the past sixty years to make the system equitable to all. *Teach the Best and Stomp the Rest* is a fascinating, though repetitive, read on a subject that affects everyone in some way.

Education majors, of course, are aware of the different learning styles as identified by psychologist Howard Gardner. These include bodily kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, and logical-mathematical. The latter two types of learners are, according to the author, the students who benefit most from the way schools are currently organized. The book's eye-catching title alludes to this one-third of students that the author deems "The Chosen."

Knaak expounds on what he sees as the "failed initiatives" of such timely and sometimes controversial topics as school choice, vouchers, charter schools, merit pay for teachers, and the Obama administration's push for Race-to-the-Top education funding for states. He believes charter schools have even further separated the "haves" and the "have-nots," while citing evidence that offering annual bonuses to teachers "had no effect on student test scores." He cites numerous sources to substantiate his claims, such as former US education secretary Richard Riley, who said vouchers "pull enormous public resources from one system that is accountable to another system that is not." While local school districts must answer to their taxpaying patrons, charter schools are often set up by entities that answer to no one but themselves.

Knaak's answer is to make a federal education construct, redesigning the present US Labor Department into the Federal Human Resources Accommodation Department, which will establish standards and testing procedures and define jobs by both knowledge and skill requirements. Knaak believes schools should be geared to this purpose. He says it is detrimental that "America has morphed into a society where millions of people have individual purposes." His desired future is to have a "National Purpose" with civic responsibilities and expectations clearly laid out.

Supplementing the sometimes dry text are humorous cartoons by James E. Zaiser, including one that shows a wall of classroom test-score charts. Pointing to one chart depicting a score far better than the others, one character intones to another, "Of course her students all scored above average; they're from Lake Wobegon."

Readers will find this a lengthy but intriguing look at how American schools have evolved over the past sixty years, especially from 1980 to 2013. Knaak appears to be very knowledgeable about his topic and has a specific opinion on it; this is evident in his writing.

The author is passionate about what he knows, and this comes through. But careless mistakes in punctuation, sources' names, and the occasional referencing of sources that aren't fully mentioned until later chapters distracts somewhat.

Bold text and numbering assists the reader in following the plethora of information presented. Some may not totally agree with Knaak's final recommendations for the overhaul of education, but it sure is an interesting journey getting there.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (September 23, 2013)

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