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The American education system: Rising to the challenge -- as always

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By Roger Rada

Over the last 50 years public education in the United States has been under fire. In President Barack Obama's last State of the Union address, he talked about a Sputnik moment -- that time in 1957 when the Soviet Union launched a satellite into orbit around the Earth, causing great alarm across America.

Thirty years later, as Japan appeared to challenge the United States economically, the Reagan administration published a report entitled "Nation at Risk." It placed blame for our apparent second-rate economy squarely on the shoulders of public education.

So here we are, 54 years after Sputnik. We've defeated the Soviet Union and left the Japanese economy in the dust. But the rise of a robust Asian economy, led by India and China, again causes alarm and comparisons to the challenge we faced when the Soviets launched their space program.

As I conclude 40 years as a public educator and reflect on the challenges we've faced, I don't need a history book to explain worldly events and their effect on our education system. I lived it. As a third-grader I went outside with my family to watch Sputnik cross the October sky.

Well, the new math must have worked. We beat the Soviets to the moon and tore down the Berlin Wall.

As an administrator in the late '80s and through the '90s, I witnessed and participated in development of a standards-based educational system and its partner, statewide assessments of student achievement. School and district test scores were soon being regularly published on the front page of The Oregonian, and the race was on.

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Now as we take on our latest perceived threat, the economic explosions in India and China, pundits again find public education lacking. They note that American students lower on international assessments of achievement than students in many Asian and European countries.

Response from national leaders to this latest "crisis" is to tighten the noose on educators and the educational system. Teachers are assumed to be incompetent unless they can prove themselves by winning the student test-score game, and the curriculum is seen as lacking focus. One hears arguments that there are too many electives and not enough hard-core academics classes.

But after 40-plus years of seeing public education scapegoated for our country's perceived lack of competitive stature and seeing the country time and again rise to meet each and every challenge, I wonder what's really at play.

From the first international comparisons nearly 50 years ago, U.S. students have always finished in the middle of the international pack, trailing countries such as Finland, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Germany. Based on our country's experience, test scores don't appear to have a direct correlation with a country's economic success or its status among nations.

Yet critics still point to these international comparisons as an illustration of the failure of the American school system. What they fail to recognize is the incredible challenge that system has faced and met over the last century.

In the early 1900s, millions of immigrants from Eastern Europe immigrated to America, and our educational system was the institution that made them productive members of our economy and society. During the last 40 years we've seen another influx of immigrants, this time from Southeast Asia and Latin America, and once again the American educational system has stepped forward to meet the challenge of integrating this population into our economy and society.

None of the countries that score better than our students have faced this sort of challenge. For the most part their populations are homogeneous. They share a common language and a common culture. By contrast, in Oregon City there are 409 students whose primary language is something other than English, and these students represent 17 different languages. And Oregon City's numbers are small compared to our country's large urban centers.

It's easy to imagine the challenges that this diversity creates for our schools, and yet it's this diversity that makes our country exceptional among nations. Diversity brings different perspectives, which lead to different ways of viewing problems and challenges, and eventually lead to creative solutions.

We are by far the leading nation in exporting information and ideas. Students from around the world seek to attend our universities, and international visitors come to find out the secrets of our educational system. The secrets they seek are the way we honor diversity, the way we encourage creativity and the way we teach problem solving.

And so it seems, we approach a crossroads. Or perhaps we've already passed it. Do we continue to blindly follow the test-score-driven strategies that limit curriculum offerings in favor of basic skills? Or do we play to our strong suit -- our creativity and innovation, and our entrepreneurial spirit. We need to seek a balance, and my sense is that the balance has tipped sharply from creativity to basic skills.

And do we focus on having all students achieve acceptable academic performance at the expense of not helping the most capable students excel? Again, we need to find the right balance.

The American education system is among the best in the world, and the latest challenge it faces won't be its last. Our system has always responded well, and it will continue to do so. However, we must be sure that we seek a balance between basic skills and creativity, and between having all students meet educational standards and helping our most capable students excel.

Our educational system ranks high among the factors that make this country exceptional among nations, and I'm proud to have been part of it.

Roger Rada, superintendent of the Oregon City School District, retires in June.

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
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 **quatermass** May 06, 2011 at 4:57PM

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Of course our educational system is a success, just look at the number of teachers and administrators who will retire in comfort and security. The New Math was a failure. Our public schools are failures for far too many students. To see a superintendent so far out of touch at the end of his career is instructive beyond words.

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 **jconnor** May 06, 2011 at 6:52PM

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Really, it is your predictably fact-free "observations" that are instructive.

You've got a big mouth, but it writes checks that your a*s can't cash.

Go to school. Learn the material. Get a Master's Degree. Apprentice somewhere in the real world public school system, if you can find someone kind enough to take you. Try and get hired. See how it goes.

After five years or so, you may or may not have something worth saying. But at least you will have some superficial experience and knowledge of what you obviously are ignorant of now.

Not tough enough? Haven't got the intellectual bandwidth? Don't want to work the 12 and 14 hour days that most teachers work? Pay scale too low? Tired of know-nothing ignorami spewing nonsense in your direction?

Is that what's got you down, Bunky?

Thought so.

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 **Triple6** May 07, 2011 at 8:58AM

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Give 'em hell my good boy! You are one of my best students. Believe the lies, don't see the truth, be more like me, you are almost there. It would help if you could be a little more uptight. Call me, we can work on that. See you in hell, my good boy.

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Job well done. 666

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Triple6 May 07, 2011 at 9:20PM

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My comment above was to jconner in case anyone wondered. 666

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quatermass May 07, 2011 at 2:11PM

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While getting my degree at PSU, I and many others observed that the school of education provided the least rigorous curriculum for its students. Some classes offered an "A" for simply showing up. Apparently, that example of educational attainment is being perpetuated. As far as the PERS angle is concerned, had the practice of rewarding public employees with 50% of final three years average been continued, the entire state would be in a healthier financial position.

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FallForIt May 08, 2011 at 2:00PM

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What are you talking about? The current practice is that teachers earn less than 50% of their highest average salary (3 highest years) and that they contribute 6% each year to this fund.

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Lorca May 08, 2011 at 10:12PM

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elmexijedi May 06, 2011 at 6:08PM

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Roger Rada - are you retiring under PERS Tier 1? How much will you make in your PERS retirement? How does that compare to your NORMAL salary?

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barkbeetle May 06, 2011 at 6:25PM

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PERS Tier1 = Yes
PERS retirement = Mucho dollaros, way over six figures
2011 salary = \$136,000

"Oregon City School District Superintendent Roger Rada oversees a district with about 8,200 and his salary is \$136,000."
source = http://www.westlinntidings.com/news/story.php?story_id=130211789107016100

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elmexijedi May 06, 2011 at 6:32PM


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looks like his pay was not under fire. Want to see the annual PERS payments he will receive.

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Munchausenbaron

May 06, 2011 at 7:36PM

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The rats always guard their stolen cheese.

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walt1er

May 06, 2011 at 8:07PM

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Can anyone post a link to a private school that publishes teacher and administrator salaries? How about a link to a private school that posts its students' scores on the same state tests that public schools are required to post?

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elmexijedi

May 06, 2011 at 8:35PM

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One is supported by tax dollars one is not . . . thanks for playing

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walt1er

May 06, 2011 at 8:54PM

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Since they are not tax-payer funded they don't have to post the information. Got it. So what prevents a private school from posting its administrator and teacher salaries?

The Vancouver School of Arts and Academics is a public school that restricts entry similar to the way many private schools restrict entry. At VSAA 100% of the teachers meet NCLB highly qualified standards. The on-time graduation rate is 98.7% and extended is 100%. The vast majority of students succeed on the state mandated tests.

Here's the link: <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=499&reportLevel=School&orgLinkId=499&yrs=&year=2010>

And the link to a private school that provides the same information, plus salaries so we actually can compare them, is...?

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lemmyschild

May 07, 2011 at 8:20AM

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you are correct, but you are ignoring the fact that the public schools have to pay somewhere near the same for staff.

if you are going to reduce the wages, won't the best people who would be inclined to go into education decide to pursue careers in the private sector? which means less teachers, which means schools districts will have to pay more to attract people into the profession?

supply and demand doesn't take a holiday just because we are talking about tax payer funded salaries.

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