

Painful path to the polls

As I write this, it is election time here. Leading up to November 2, Americans have been bombarded for months with reminders of our failings and inadequacies.

These are brought up continually and painfully by the warring political parties, each blaming the other for all of our failures. Even factions within parties are warring against each other. There is no discussion of any successes as media consultants all agree and have convinced the candidates that negativity sells better than positive news.

Most of this bad news is delivered via very expensive TV ads which is why the better funded candidates usually win and the ones lacking funds spend more time fundraising than actually campaigning. They don't want to do this, but are forced to.

So, we are used to hearing

Fighting to come out of recession, every country needs to rely on a strong base of educated and skilled workers. Poorly educated students lead to poor workers, which does not bode well for our future.

about failed economic policies, high unemployment rates, double-dip recessions, unfathomable deficits, crippling tax plans, questionable wartime strategies, scandals and legal miscues and elected officials who have lost touch with the electorate.

Even moral and religious issues were raised and in this election played an important role in voting decisions.

Considering that a recent survey indicated that atheists know more about religion than the faithful, that is of great concern. Yes, atheists tested better when asked questions about specific beliefs and tenets of the major faiths. Perhaps we should only let atheists vote?

Stressed and depressed

The litany of bad news is endless. We are stressed and depressed enough here under normal circumstances. But election time really drives it home. We never hear what a candidate plans to do that is constructive and positive – and some of them do have good ideas.

(Remember Steve Forbes who advocated a flat ten per cent tax rate for everyone? No loopholes. No exceptions. The lawyers and accountants rioted in the streets!)

All we hear about are their opponents' failings as human beings or how their voting records will sink us all further into poverty and joblessness – all except those working for the federal government, that is. They take care of their own.

Now, more bad news comes in from an unexpected source.

Well, sort of unexpected.

President Obama said in a speech on September 27, that

our educational system is dysfunctional and failing. The drop-out rate is frighteningly high. Many teachers may be incompetent so merit pay bonuses are recommended. The academic year is short on learning and long on vacation times (sounds like the French public sector employment model!). Calling many underperforming schools across the country 'drop-out factories', the President said there are 2,000 schools where drop-out rates exceed 50 per cent.

President Obama is right. Our schools are underperforming. Our students have less classroom time than most schools around the world, often by a month or more. That is a huge deficit. Every parent is aware of this as vacations get longer and longer.

This is not because of student pressure but teacher union pressure.

When we try to eliminate a winter or spring week-long break, it is the teachers who scream, not the students or parents. Parents of college age children (me) see this all too painfully. While tuitions have increased 1,000-1,500 per cent in the last 30 years, the amount of time actually spent in school has decreased: Christmas holidays are often between four and six weeks. Thanksgiving has expanded from two days to a full week. There is also a week-long spring break as the students are stressed out and overworked and need to relax and recover. Schools start later and end earlier.

I remember having exams on my birthday. My birthday is May 26. And I went to a 'Southern' school – they have always been known for starting

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earlier (August) and ending earlier. Now, most colleges are out by the first week in May.

Primary and secondary schools aren't much better.

Things are so bad that President Obama has had to place his daughters in private schools instead of enrolling them in the Washington DC school system. But really, that's more of a security issue to protect his daughters, I'm sure.

So is it any wonder our educational system compares poorly with those of other countries?

Educational statistics

According to the US National Center for Education Statistics and the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), the US ranks 21 in science achievement. Finland is number one, followed by Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, the Netherlands, Korea, Germany, the UK and Czech Republic. In mathematics, the Finns lead the way again followed by Korea, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Belgium and Australia are tied, and Denmark. The UK is tied at 18th with Poland.

The US ranks 25th.

Rightly, President Obama is most concerned with inner city and poor schools where drop-out rates are so high. Locally, in my state, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) which is given to high school juniors and seniors and is a key selector used by most colleges, shows that the wealthier the community, the higher the average score.

Parental resources for preparatory courses plus tutoring along with family values

stressing education are factors. So where does that leave students from poor families in poor communities?

Fighting to come out of recession, every country needs to rely upon a strong base of educated and skilled workers. Some countries have such low birthrates that replenishing the work force and paying all those retirement pensions has become a huge problem.

Here, we have the population plus immigration. But poorly educated students lead to poor workers which does not bode well for our future.

The US, even with its deficits, has huge amounts of capital to

throw into worthy causes. Let's hope that over the next several years, our elected officials demonstrate that rarest of all traits, common sense, and start to prioritise.

US businesses will thank them – and not just with campaign contributions.

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