

Remarks of Marc Tucker
On Accepting the
James Bryant Conant Prize
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This was a quite unexpected honor, for which I am deeply grateful. There are few among us who would not be touched by this sort of recognition for our life's work.

It is customary on such occasions to acknowledge the support we have received from our family and colleagues. But that conveys the notion that the people who are acknowledged were just standing around supporting the honoree. That is certainly not true in my case. My family, my colleagues and I all have our strengths and our weaknesses. To the extent that we have achieved something worth achieving, it is because we are a team. Yes, I have their support. And they have mine. We support each other. We have each other's back. We set high standards for ourselves and we know that we can accomplish more together than any of us can individually. To my family and my colleagues, I say thank you, for a life that has been immeasurably rewarding.

But I would be less than honest if I did not tell you that I come before you dispirited. Years ago, Correlli Barnett, a British historian, wrote a book titled *The Pride and the Fall*. In it, he explored the causes of the greatly reduced standing of Britain in the world following World War II. He had expected to tell a story about failures of foreign and military policy. But he followed the evidence where it led him, and it led him to tell a story about the failure of Britain to build a modern education system. It was not for lack of evidence of decline or clear warnings of the danger Britain faced if it failed to build the kind of education system its competitors were building. There were plenty of warnings, from commission after commission.

I would like to read to you from the preface Barnett wrote to the American edition of his book.

This book portrays a great nation, which, even in the pride of apparent world power, was already rotting towards its fall. It portrays a nation blinded by that very pride to the signs of decay...of its strength....The book...documents how Britain failed to match the education and training efforts at all levels being made by her challengers to supply the highly skilled and motivated workforce and professional management essential for continued industrial success....It reveals how these factors of poor education and training...compounded with appalling urban living conditions to produce a workforce in no way a match for the competition in terms of developed intelligence and capability....And finally, the book analyzes how and why this outwardly still great nation and world power failed to embark on the necessary profound adaptation of itself as an industrial society—and so by default left the way clear for the fall that was to come after the pride. Although this history concerns itself with a particular nation in a particular time, other nations in other times might profit from the moral.

When it was published, the Times Literary Supplement, said of Barnett's book that, "It has a cutting edge rare in academic writing, because its author is clearly in a towering rage." So am I, and for much the same reason.

I commend to you another book, *The Race Between Education and Technology*, by two Harvard professors, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz. In it, Goldin and Katz describe a glorious history. They show how the United States led the world through the 19th century in providing a free public basic elementary school education to the ordinary people of American society, on a scale never before seen in the world. Then they show how, in the first half of the 20th century, we again led the world in education, this time by providing a free secondary school education to the American people, well before other countries did so, and again on a scale far greater than any others had achieved. And finally, they show how, after the Second World War, we did it again, this time leading the world by extending higher education to ordinary Americans, until then a privilege extended in virtually all countries only to elites. The authors make it very clear that some, especially this country's former slaves, were conspicuously left out of this vast expansion of educational opportunity, but show in some detail how this uniquely American investment in ordinary people led ineluctably to this country's steadily rising dominance of the global economy through much of the 20th century.

But then, Goldin and Katz point out, something happened. Following a century long ever-expanding extension of educational opportunity in the United States, it all came to a stop in the 1970s. I invite you to look at the historical education statistics maintained by the Department of Education. You will find a chart that shows the rise in access to education abruptly halting in the 1970s and then leveling off. It has not risen since, and neither has the American economy. Eventually, productivity, too, stopped rising and, in the long run, productivity growth is the only source of economic growth.

When the economy was growing, as we moved into the seventies, the United States had one of the most even distributions of income in the industrialized world. But, when access to education stopped growing, and then the economy stopped growing, the way income was distributed among Americans changed, and we now have the most unequal distributions of income in the industrialized world. Goldin and Katz make a powerful case that our economy stopped growing and the distribution of income increased in no small measure because we were no longer a world leader in education.

Which, of course, raises the question as to which countries had taken our baton and gotten to the head of the world education league tables and how they got there.

First, it is very important to note that the key measure of world leadership in education had been changing over the decades. In the century or so that the United States had been leading the world, that measure was access, the proportion of the cohort that was in school at the elementary, secondary and higher education levels. That was the measure on which the United States had excelled year after year for a century.

But, in the years following World War II, many other nations that had been far behind on this measure had caught up to us. For a long time, it had been true that they had provided first secondary education and then higher education only to a small elite, while we were educating everyone. But, by the closing decades of the 20th century, this was no longer true. They had caught up on this crucial measure and many had already surpassed us.

But, as the 20th century was coming to a close, the game had changed and we failed to notice. It was no longer just about equity of access. That was assumed in the developed countries with the best education systems. It was now also about quality. That is what is mainly measured by the international comparative surveys of student achievement. What led to this was the changing terms of global trade. Jobs requiring relatively low skill levels and involving mostly routine work were being automated and going offshore at every-increasing rates, putting ordinary workers with 8th grade levels of literacy at risk of struggling economically for the rest of their lives.

But the American education system, the one we have now, was designed to produce an 8th grade level of literacy for most school graduates more than a century ago, at a time when a country whose workforce had an 8th grade level of literacy was virtually guaranteed a leading position in the global economy

If you look at the American system with fresh eyes, it is easy to see what we did when we designed the system we have now. Because we needed only a few graduates who could go on to the relatively few colleges we had, we did not need highly educated teachers. But we needed lots of them. So we built our system around cheap teachers. Because few graduates would become professionals and top managers, it was perfectly OK to have teachers from low-status higher education institutions with undemanding admissions standards and undemanding curriculum. Because we did not need highly educated teachers, we did not have high licensing standards, as we did for occupations where the the quality of education and training really mattered, like medicine, architecture and engineering. For the same reason, we thought it was perfectly OK to waive our low standards for teachers in the face of teacher shortages. No one thought that much harm would be caused by having licensed English teachers teaching mathematics in the face of a shortage of math teachers. Indeed, it was no big deal if the standards were waived altogether in the face of teacher shortages, so states regularly provided ‘emergency certificates’ to anyone who can fog a glass in the face of such shortages.

The system I just described is the system we have today. And, guess what? It is still producing the same results it was designed to produce a hundred years ago. It is still producing high school graduates the majority of whom are still educated only to an eighth grade level of literacy. We are expecting our schools to produce students with the knowledge and skills needed for the 21st century with an education system designed to produce a workforce with an 8th grade level of basic literacy.

Our top competitors are riding circles around us because, unlike us, they are not expecting the old system to meet an entirely different requirement. They understood years ago that they would succeed in the new global economy only if they completely

redesigned their education systems to meet a very different challenge. What they had to do, they realized, was build a system designed to get almost all students to a standard of quality in education that they had up to that time expected only from their elites. And they had to do that without spending much if any more money than they had up to that time spent on a system from which they had expected much less.

I will get to the strategies our most successful competitors have turned to in a moment. But, before I do that, I want to make a point about the current education reform agenda in the United States. While other countries were realizing that they had to build a new education system to cope with new economic realities brought on by globalization, we were getting angry with our teachers and their unions, blaming them for the failures of a system they did not create to accomplish goals for which it was never designed. We set out to blow up the system with market forces, using charters and vouchers as the main instruments of war. We threatened our teachers with dismissal if they did not produce the results we want, using standardized tests of English and mathematics as our sharp knife. Citizens and politicians set out to destroy the teachers' unions. But the teachers did not design a system that depended on the use of cheap teachers. They did not decide to waive the all the standards for teachers in the face of teachers' shortages. It was not they who decided to put more money behind the education of students from wealthy families than those who were much harder to educate. It was the rest us who did that and much more. We were beating up the teachers for failing to dramatically improve student achievement using a system they did not design, a system that could not possibly do the job.

Not one of the top performers are using teacher evaluation systems driven by test-based accountability as the drivers of their reform programs. Not one of the top-performers is driven by an American-style charter school system. Not one believes that competition among schools will drive their public schools to make the necessary improvements. Not one is trying to reach the top levels of performance through 'disruptive change,' that is, by attacking their public school system from the outside in the hope that challengers to the system will force it to improve. Not one celebrates alternative routes for people who want to enter the teaching force by making an end around the institutions that most people are expected to go through to become teachers. Not one of them expects technology to make it unnecessary to have first class teachers. Every one of them has staked its future on having first class teachers for all of its children. And, by the way, all of them spend less than we do per student on their schools.

I stand before you to say that the mainstays of the bipartisan American education reform agenda have not worked. None have been used by the growing number of countries that are outperforming us. That is because they cannot work. For starters, we cannot do what has to be done by using cheap teachers who are treated like blue collar workers.

Lets look for a moment at what the countries with the most successful education systems have done. Instead of recruiting their teachers from the bottom quarter of high school grads, they have recruited from the top quarter. We used to get far better teachers than we deserved because college-educated women and minorities had few choices other than

teaching, but that is no longer true. Now we are getting what we deserve, given the compensation and working conditions we are offering. Instead of making teaching one of the easiest careers to pursue in college, our competitors have made it as hard to get into teaching colleges as it is to get into the institutions preparing students for high status careers. Instead of offering a quick way into teaching for those who know their subject, is if anyone could teach, they insist that teachers learn their craft. Some have been moving the preparation of teachers into their research universities. They have greatly raised licensing standards.

They knew they could not have done any of this without making the occupation of teaching much more attractive to young people who could easily chose high status professions. So they have been completely restructuring the occupation of teaching, creating real career tracks, making fundamental changes in the way they compensate teachers, using a professional model that rewards increasing teacher competence with more pay, more responsibility and more status as teachers work their way up a steep career ladder— a professional model that creates the possibility of a real career in teaching instead of the prevailing blue collar model. These countries have greatly increased the amount of time available for teachers to work collaboratively to improve the curriculum, design lessons, create better ways to figure out whether students are learning what they expected to learn, hour by hour, minute by minute.

Schools are being reorganized as professional workplaces with professional cultures, so that the professionals are accountable to each other for their performance, working to improve the performance of colleagues who are not pulling their weight and getting rid of those who will not or cannot improve. A lot of effort is going into grooming, recruiting and training school principals who can play key roles in building and managing these new professional environments. These countries are building powerful, coherent instructional systems set to internationally benchmarked standards. They are providing more resources to schools serving students who are hard to education than they are providing to schools serving students from more favored backgrounds. There is more to this agenda, but that is enough to give you an idea of what we have to do here in the United States.

The question that leaps off the page here is why the United States has found it so hard, thus far, to develop and implement an agenda like this.

The first answer is American exceptionalism, the belief that we are different, so different that we have nothing to learn from other countries. You have, I am sure, heard the whole list. “We educate everyone and they only educate a small elite.” “Their population is homogeneous while we are a nation of immigrants.” “We would be listed among the top performers if only we took our poorest kids out of the statistics.” And so on. Not one these things are true, but large numbers of average Americans, education professionals and policymakers continue to comfort themselves by denying the validity of these comparisons to other countries.

And then there are the excuses based on a long list of things that are impossible to do here in the United States. “We can’t fund our schools in a fair and effective way because we will never give up local control.” “We can’t have the state set curriculums, as all the top performers do,” for the same reason. “We can’t get competent people to run our state education agencies because the legislatures will never pay them competitive salaries.” “We can’t set higher standards for admission to our teachers colleges because those colleges are cash cows for the universities of which they are a part.” I have spent a professional lifetime listening to an endless list of things that Americans cannot change while at the same time watching other nations changing the very things we say we can’t. That is the choice we are making. I’m sick of it. Why can a lengthening list of other countries from all points on the compass make such basic changes in their system while we find it impossible to do so? I thought we were Americans. I thought we were famous for being able to do anything we set our minds to.

We can continue to insist on American exceptionalism. We can continue to make excuses. If we do that, Corelli Barnett will have turned out to have been quite prescient when he addressed the preface of the American edition of his book to us with the admonition that we could all too easily be another Britain, losing our position in the world by failing to listen to those who warned that failure to make fundamental changes in our education system would lead ineluctably to economic decline.

I love this country. I am 74. I should have retired by now and left my organization in the hands of younger people with fresh ideas. But I find that I cannot do that. I am desperate to find a way to sound the alarm. This country is pursuing a bankrupt education reform agenda at a time when the path is clear to a more effective one.

It is not too late. Years ago, when David Kearns left IBM to run the Xerox corporation, Xerox was the Google of its day. But not long after Kearns arrived to take up his new position, a group of engineers just returned from Japan told him that a tiny company called Ricoh was bringing very high quality copiers to market in half the time the Xerox could do it. The price to the consumer, including marketing, sales, shipping and profit, was less than Xerox’s cost of production. The engineers said there was no way Xerox could match that. They advised Kearns to sell Xerox to some unsuspecting buyer before the Japanese shut them down. Kearns turned to the engineers and said, “Look, the Japanese put on their pants one leg at a time, just like you do. Go back to Japan, figure out how they do it, then figure out how we can do it better.” The Japanese put many leading American manufacturers out of business, building higher quality machines and selling them at lower prices on the world market. But Xerox and many other American firms willing to learn from their competitors not only survived but prospered, getting far stronger in the process.

What David Kearns said to his engineers holds here. There is nothing these other countries are doing in the field of education that we cannot do at least as well as they if we put our mind to it and buckle down. But we will have to swallow our pride and find out how they are getting to the top of the world’s league tables. Yes, many hallowed

features of our system will have to be changed. But American history is a history of one revolution after another. We can do it again

Winston Churchill once said that Americans always do the right thing after they have exhausted all the alternatives. The people in this room are the leaders of American education. The direction we go in is up to you. Please...prove Churchill right.