



# THE NEW YORKER

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## SCHOOLWORK

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*Excerpt only*

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It should raise questions when an enormous, complicated realm of life [school reform] takes on the characteristics of a stock drama. In the current school-reform story, there is a reliable villain, in the form of the teachers' unions, and a familiar set of heroes, including Geoffrey Canada, of Harlem Children's Zone; Wendy Kopp, of Teach for America, the Knowledge Is Power Program; and Michele Rhee, the superintendent of schools in Washington, D.C. And there is a clear answer to the problem—charter schools. The details of this story are accurate, but they are fitted together too neatly and are made to imply too much. For example, although most of the specific charter schools one encounters in this narrative are very good, the data do not show that charter schools in general are better than district schools. There are also many school-reform efforts besides charter schools: the one with the best sustained record of producing better-educated children in difficult circumstances, in hundreds of schools over many years, is a rigorously field-tested curriculum called Success for All, but because it's not part of the story line it goes almost completely unmentioned. Similarly, on the issue of tenure, the clear implication of most school-reform writing these days—that abolishing teacher tenure would increase students' learning—is an unproved assumption.

In higher education, the reform story isn't so fully baked yet, but its main elements are emerging. The system is vast: hundreds of small liberal-arts colleges; a new and highly leveraged for-profit sector that offers degrees online; community colleges; state universities whose budgets are being cut because of the recession; and the big-name private universities, which get the most attention. You wouldn't design a system this way—it's filled with overlaps and competitive excess. Much of it strives toward an ideal that took shape in nineteenth-century Germany: the university as a small, elite center of pure scholarly research. Research is the rationale for low teaching loads, publication requirements, tenure, tight-knit academic disciplines, and other practices that take it on the chin from Taylor, Hacker, and Dreifus for being of little benefit to students or society.

Yet for a system that—according to Taylor, especially—is deeply in crisis, American higher education is not doing badly. The lines of people wanting to get into institutions that the authors say are just waiting to cheat them by overcharging and underteaching grow ever longer and more

international, and the people waiting in those lines don't seem deterred by price increases, even in a terrible recession.

There have been attempts in the past to make the system more rational and less redundant, and to shrink the portion of it that undertakes scholarly research, but they have not met with much success, and not just because of bureaucratic resistance by the interested parties. Large-scale, decentralized democratic societies are not very adept at generating neat, rational solutions to messy situations. The story line on education, at this ill-tempered moment in American life, expresses what might be called the Noah's Ark view of life: a vast territory looks so impossibly corrupted that it must be washed away, so that we can begin its activities anew, on finer, higher, firmer principles. One should treat any perception that something so large is so completely awry with suspicion, and consider that it might not be true—especially before acting on it.

We have a lot of recent experience with breaking apart large, old, unlovely systems in the confidence of gaining great benefits at low cost. We deregulated the banking system. We tried to remake Iraq. In education, we would do well to appreciate what our country has built, and to try to fix what is undeniably wrong without declaring the entire system to be broken. We have a moral obligation to be precise about what the problems in American education are—like subpar schools for poor and minority children—and to resist heroic ideas about what would solve them, if those ideas don't demonstrably do that. ♦