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The Myth Of Education:

A Second Look

By Francis X. Hezel, S.J.

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“The Way We Were” Island Topics #24

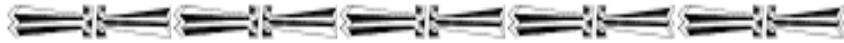
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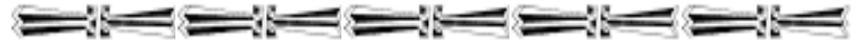
The Passing of the Old Myth

In the past a good education was the equivalent of a winning lottery ticket. The formula was a basic truth of life: success in high school meant a chance to attend college, which in turn translated into a good job and guaranteed material prosperity (and perhaps fame) for the individual, not to mention lasting security for his or her family.

After a couple of decades of disillusionment, however, the Micronesian public has become skeptical about the myth of education. Back in the 1960s and 1970s there may have been government positions ready for graduates to step into, but there aren't anymore. Governments everywhere are trimming their work force due to cuts in US assistance. Private jobs, which still depend largely on government spending, are limited. Whatever happened to the gold-lined promises that education held out for the population? People today are looking around at those who hold elected positions and are noticing that a good number of legislators, mayors and other functionaries have had little formal education. In fact, some holding these positions have not even finished elementary school. Successful businessmen are not always the star pupils of thirty or forty years ago, either. People are drawing the obvious conclusion that to get ahead, you don't need much of an education.

The old formula—education equals a good job—is no longer an axiom in our day as it was thirty or forty years ago. Perhaps this is inevitable after a generation of college-educated young people returned home to discover that the jobs they expected were not to be found. Their parents learned that the sure investment that education once seemed to be doesn't always pay off.

Young Micronesians going overseas today reflect this change in mentality. In the early 1970s when federal program grants for college were first made available, there were long lines of young men and women at the departure gate of airports everywhere in Micronesia headed for college in the US. Some may have gone



already exists in some of our better schools, public as well as private. Why shouldn't it be possible to create such a climate in any community that wants its schools to be good? There are some fine public schools in every part of Micronesia—schools of excellence, they might be called—that could serve as models for other schools as they embark on their own efforts to improve. Likiep and Wotje Elementary Schools in the Marshalls come to mind, as well as the public schools in Melekeok and Peleliu in Palau. In Pohnpei, Ohmine and Seinwar schools have long been considered among the best, although other schools such as Net Elementary are beginning to challenge them. Maap Community School and Dalipebinaw are two of the better schools on Yap, while Utwe and Lelu are at the top of the list on Kosrae. In Chuuk, Mechitiw seems to have replaced Sino Memorial on Tonoas as the premiere school, while Moch has become the top school in the outer islands, a position once held by Namoluk.

There are other public schools that might well be the equal of those mentioned here, for this list is far from exhaustive. The purpose of this list is not to serve as an honor roll for public schools in the region. It is simply to remind us that there are schools, whether they are named here or not, that stand as beacons of hope for educational excellence. If they can provide quality education, perhaps all our schools can.

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This is the third of four education articles written in collaboration with PREL, and through PREL's financial assistance.



management, not just at the departmental level, but within the schools themselves. The nub of the task is to raise expectations so that people look to each other to demand more of themselves and their colleagues. Even as this is being done, controls must be established that will ensure that these expectations are translated into practice.

Hope for the Future?

For all the problems that schools in Micronesia have faced over the years, we should not forget the richer side of the educational legacy we have inherited. Some of the most remote atolls have produced the most remarkable results, the fruits of an island ethic that urged its young people to achieve far beyond what their small population would seem to warrant. Eauripik, one of the atolls in Yap State, has turned out a disproportionate number of men who have gone on to hold lofty positions in government and business. The outliers of Pohnpei and Chuuk were well known for educating young people who had successful careers after graduating from high school. Years ago someone told me that adults on one outlier of Pohnpei would tell their boys and girls, when they left home to pursue their education abroad, not to return until they had completed their degree, no matter how long it might take.

Palau, too, has long been known for the way its people prize education. At the end of World War II, when people were told that they would have to build and staff their own schools if they wanted education, Palauans scoured their villages dismantling old structures and scavenging any building materials that could be found. Often enough the first building to be put up in a village was the school. Only after the school was finished would people begin rebuilding their own homes. By the end of that first year of US rule they had built nine schools, one in every village. Such was the value Palauans put on education in those early years.

Recalling our achievements of the past, can we hope that a climate of success be established in Micronesian schools today? It



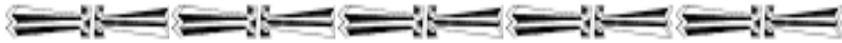
away for the adventure of it all, as their ancestors did a century and a half earlier when they signed on whaling ships as hands to see the world. Most probably saw college as an opportunity to obtain a share of the good life that a steady job and a good salary made possible. Nowadays, Micronesian students no longer have to register as college students to justify their stay in the US as they did during the pre-Compact days. Now that they can enter and leave the US freely, young people ask themselves why they should sit in a classroom when they can be out making eight dollars an hour—a fortune compared with what they would be earning back home.

Eight dollars seems like a bonanza compared to the two or three dollars an hour that new workers might be making on their own island. It's only later that young people find out that their eight dollars an hour, which puts them close to the bottom of the food chain in the US, is barely enough to support a single person much less a family, given the cost of rent, insurance, health care and other necessities. Belatedly they learn that the best way to climb to a more secure job status is to get an education. By that time, unfortunately, they have already left school, beguiled by what once seemed like a huge salary.



Back to the Village--Still an Option?

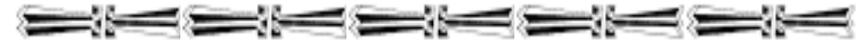
Even in the earlier halcyon years, most people took an ambivalent attitude toward education. While they were quick to recognize



the material value of an education, there have always been other, more immediate needs that cried out for satisfaction. There were small children to be cared for, household tasks to be performed, food to be gathered and cooked. The family could always use another hand to help out in these tasks. Some families might send their sons and daughters to school on a trial basis. If the children did well, they might be urged to go on for further education upon their graduation. The family was usually prepared to dig deep into its savings to invest in the education of someone who gave signs that he might be a star someday. If a youngster proved slow, on the other hand, he or she might be pulled out before finishing school to help the family at home. The theory was that the child could retreat back to the land and live a productive and happy life in the village.

Times have changed a bit since then. Today that same child might be sent to Guam or Saipan or the United States, where he or she would be expected to find a job a week or two after stepping off the plane. The same young people who, as they lost any hope of finding employment, might have retreated to the village in the past often fly off to a distant US city today. There they will probably find wage employment, if only as a security guard or shop clerk. They will be expected to become fluent in English. They will have to adjust to a new although not entirely unfamiliar culture.

For the past fifteen years Micronesians have been leaving in large numbers to find wage employment in a radically different social environment. Even those who choose to remain in Micronesia will be living in a very different economic climate from those of a generation or two earlier. Youth who went off to college in the early 1970s might have returned to find open positions waiting to be filled, but graduates today will have to make jobs for themselves and create their own work opportunities rather than merely fill existing positions.



is an accountability system in which the lines of responsibility run in several different directions.

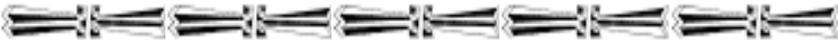
Summing It Up

Education, once regarded as the passkey to a golden future, doesn't seem to fit very many doors today. The surplus of high school and college graduates and the declining job opportunities in the islands have discredited the old myth about education. Micronesians today are learning that jobs are to be had, but only if they are willing to travel abroad to find them. They are also learning that they do not need much of an education to qualify for these entry-level jobs (although some find that an education counts for much more as they seek more advanced employment opportunities).

The pity is that many are giving up on education at the very time that the Micronesian nations are entering the global economy, for in the competitive global economy skills and smarts count more than ever. Even those who would have looked for a refuge in the village may find that an education has become essential today as modernization makes deeper inroads into the villages and outer islands.

As the crisis of confidence in education mounts, the Micronesian nations are struggling with huge problems in their school systems while trying to raise educational standards to what they could and should be. In their valiant efforts to bring about reform in the schools, education administrators will have to face the key issues squarely if they hope to be successful. Even before they pick up the broom to sweep house, they must decide just what they expect schools to do, evaluate honestly the present performance of the schools, be confident that it is within their power to improve education, and convince local communities to take ownership of their schools.

At bottom, genuine educational reform depends on good



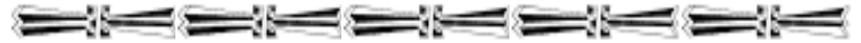
church leader. The function of this champion is to keep pressure on the principal and faculty of the school to do everything needed to raise the standards of the school and keep them high.

The climate of success in a school is a product of a combination of forces, as we see in the more successful public and private schools. The principal advertises the expectations of the school among its clientele and enforces it with his teachers, but with encouragement and support from the local community. The teachers communicate this to students, but the community is again there to back up teachers when they enunciate this message.

In such a system there are strong controls, forces brought to bear on the trustees of our young to do everything they can to make their educational experience a success. When a positive environment is in place, the different stakeholders exercise influence to make sure that the quality of education is maintained. Principals supervise their teachers not just because they feel that this is part of their job, but because they know that the community will call them to account for what happens in the school. Teachers exercise influence on one another inasmuch as they are part of a team in which each person must do his job well or else the success of the whole operation will be in jeopardy. They perform well in part because they are ashamed to let one another down. At the

same time, the education department is pushing for quality education from the other side, creating a push-pull situation in the school. Principal and teachers are caught between the local community and the department of education,

with both demanding results from the school. In the best schools there



The Need for Education in an Age of Globalization

Globalization has arrived both as an opportunity and as a threat. Micronesians, now scattered across half the planet, experience the links between distant places in more powerful ways than ever. These new Pacific island nations have taken their place alongside the older countries just as their people have long dreamed of doing. Micronesians are now competing on the same terms as people from other nations in the world marketplace, just as Samoans and Hawaiians and Cook Islanders have for years.

Some years ago Len Mason, an anthropologist with a longtime interest in the islands, wrote an article describing what he called the “two Micronesias.” One Micronesia was the simple island society of the anthropology textbooks in which people ate the fish they caught and the breadfruit or taro they harvested, using the little cash they earned for luxuries. The other was the new town, with store shelves heaped with imported food, traffic problems, television, and all the social problems that grow out of modernization. Today there are no longer two, but three Micronesias: the village, the town, and the migrant community settled somewhere in Texas or Oklahoma or Arkansas. More importantly, the cultural distance between the town and the village has shrunk.

Even outlying islands are no longer culturally insulated from the forces of modernization, as changes in lifestyle in these places indicates. Some of the outer islands now have government power, refrigerators and computers. A retreat into a completely traditional island setting is no longer an option.

In past years families sometimes considered education an option reserved for children who were brighter and more intellectually nimble. Those who weren’t so capable could stay in school as long as their education did not greatly inconvenience the family. Now, in the era of the “three Micronesias” and the diminishing difference between town and village, there is no place left for the young person without schooling. He is becoming a



misfit, no matter what sector of society he inhabits. Education is becoming a necessity for everyone, not a luxury reserved for the specially talented.

Education is the training camp that prepares our young people to compete successfully with other societies for a share in the market. An education gives people what is sometimes called “cultural capital”—that is, a fund of knowledge on many issues that can eventually be converted into something marketable. It offers people choices—in employment, in entertainment, in lifestyle—that they would not otherwise enjoy. Even more, education makes it possible for a person to comprehend what is happening in his world. Without a good education, the individual lacks the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the tongue to speak to today’s people.

Before We Can Improve Our Education

As important as education has become, our school systems in Micronesia are in need of major surgery. Our public schools are only a fraction as effective as they could be. They are performing not nearly as well as private schools, despite the limited resources with which the latter are forced to operate. They are still far from attaining the national education standards that have lately been put in place. Many of our public schools, especially our high schools, are unable to reach the level that they attained twenty-five or thirty years ago.

In view of the growing importance of education for everyone Micronesia, improvement of our schools is a critically urgent need. Before genuine education reform can take place, however, certain conditions must be met.

- First of all, our confusion about the goals of education must be dispelled. We have to be clear on what we’re trying to do in our schools. At present, public opinion on the purpose of education is very much divided.



If the climate of success depends on what level of expectations exists in the school, it also depends on the strength of the controls that operate within the school system. It’s one thing to raise expectations and quite another to enforce them. Expectations are translated into reality by an effective management system that imposes controls on principal, teachers and students. Educators often use their own terms for expectations and controls; they refer to this linked pair as standards and accountability.

If a school is to function as it should, principals must make demands on their teachers, beginning with the demand that teachers show up every day for class. Teachers must be prepared for class and put real effort into teaching. Principals must establish the ground rules for the school while making it known to their staff that mediocrity is unacceptable. This is to say that the principal has the primary responsibility of elevating expectations in all quarters of the school.

Principals can and should take the lead, but they are not wonder-workers. They can not single-handedly bring about the changes needed in the school. They dare not risk making enemies with their staff since they, like everyone else, will have to deal socially with their teachers during off-hours. To improve the climate of the school and to raise expectations of their staff, principals will need the support of their community. In the end, it is the community that must get out word that its school will only be satisfied with excellence; spotty attendance records and half-hearted efforts by the staff will not be tolerated.

There are some communities incapable of providing such support, either because they are hopelessly divided or because they are simply uninterested in their schools. In such cases, some influential figure in the community must be found to become a champion of educational reform. This figure could be a congressman or a legislator; he could be a government official or a traditional leader; he could even be a successful businessman or

spare moments during the week. To the surprise of my students, they found that they could read the book and do the report in the allotted time.

My students surprised themselves often during those years—by the amount they read and the number of papers they wrote, and perhaps also by the growing ease with which they were able to do such assignments. Yet, I was only imposing on my students in much the same way that my teachers imposed on me during my own years of schooling. They made demands of me that I gladly would have squirmed out of if I could, but our education system didn't permit enough wiggle room for that to happen. Expectations of students in my high school were lofty and the summons to perform was strong. When we would begin to falter from time to time, we would hear the old refrain from teachers, echoed by our parents, ringing in our ears: "Canisius High students don't come to school without finishing their homework... or fail state exams... or eat pretzels during class... or speak without raising their hand."

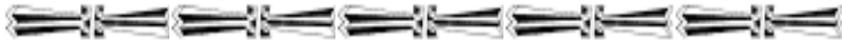


Most of us, when we are young, have no idea what we are capable of achieving. Only with the help of patient but demanding teachers, teachers who lay down standards for us that we would never have had the audacity to set for ourselves, can we discover what we can accomplish and what we can become.

The Other Key to Reform: Strong Controls

Some think the schools should be training a future work force. Others expect the schools to teach the basic skills: perhaps the three R's and some thinking skills. Still others see the schools as the sole means of preserving cultural heritage and would like them to bond the young to their culture. In a fruitless attempt to please all parties, we throw in a little of this and some of that without taking clear aim at what we are attempting to do. In trying to do everything, we risk accomplishing nothing. If we are to avoid the pitfall of trying to do too much, we will need to obtain a consensus on the goals of education.

- Second, we will have to take a clear-eyed look at just how well our education system is doing now—where it's succeeding and where it's failing. This will require an honest effort to evaluate the performance of our schools, to release the findings of the evaluations, and to acknowledge the results even when they show that some of our schools are not meeting minimum standards. We must communicate the results of this evaluation honestly and directly to the public that is being served by the schools rather than disguise the results to avoid embarrassment for ourselves or others. In addition to test results, we may have to use records on teacher performance and other data to help us discover what is need of repair in the schools.
- Third, we will have to rid ourselves of the self-serving myths that we and some of our consultants have perpetuated to explain the defects of our education system. Our past studies and reports have often suggested that if only our teachers were paid better or had more training, if only our schools had more textbooks or more up-to-date textbooks, if only our students did not have to learn in a second (or third) language, our education system would be able to crawl out of the hole it's in. This is not to deny that funding and textbooks and language background are important; it is simply to say that they should not bear all



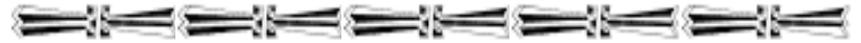
the blame for our failures. With what we do have, our schools could and should be doing much better. As long as we cling to these myths, we absolve ourselves from the responsibility of doing anything significant to improve education, for all the elements that we claim to be bringing about the malaise in our schools are beyond our control.

- Finally, we must harness the energy of the community. Ordinary people must take an interest in and responsibility for improving education. Unless they come to expect more of the system and voice their concerns, in whatever culturally appropriate way they might choose to do so, educational reform will never happen. Things happen in any society when people make them happen. Only when communities take real ownership of their schools will principals, teachers and students be put under pressure to perform. Education must be a partnership between the education department and the people in the community.

We can do a great deal to improve our education systems once we know what we want of our schools and where we're falling short of our expectations. Once we stop blaming fate or calamities beyond our control for our education problems, and once we resolve to accept the responsibility to work for good education, we're half way there.

One Key to Reform: High Expectations

Good education doesn't just happen. It emerges from a school environment that encourages learning. Principal, teachers, students and the local community support one another in the educational enterprise, but they challenge one another as well. The school environment may not be as easy to define as some of the other elements we are used to looking at—well maintained buildings,



teacher-student ratio, per pupil expenditures—but it is far more critical in determining how well the school and its students perform.

High expectations are a critical part of a productive school environment. If principals think of their teachers as unproductive and lazy, chances are that is just what they will be. If teachers think of their students as stupid and sluggish, students will live up to what is expected of them. On the other hand, if they sense much more is expected of them, we will be pleasantly surprised to find how they will elevate their performance to what is being asked of them. This is a psychological phenomenon that has been affirmed again and again in education and management studies.

Let me offer a personal example. After a recent operation on my shoulder my doctor suggested that I undergo therapy with trained professionals in order to recover full movement of my left arm. At first I wondered why I couldn't be given a booklet with instructions and left to do the therapy exercises on my own. My first session, however, removed any doubt in my mind that the therapy was a necessity. I could never have forced myself to stretch my arm beyond the threshold of pain to what I feared was the breaking point. It simply would have hurt too much if I had to do this on my own. With the therapist gently twisting my arm backward, however, I was able to expand the limits of motion well beyond what I thought was possible. Forcing the shoulder backward and forward was necessary if I was ever to recover the range of motion that I once had.

During my fifteen years at Xavier High School, I was assuming a role similar to that of the physical therapist. Just as the therapist forced me to do things I never would have chosen to do, I tried to demand of my students work that they would have preferred to avoid. I can still remember the look on their face when I walked into class and announced that they would have two weeks to read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and submit a paper on the book. "But when do you expect us to do all this?" they asked. I

casually replied that there were weekends and evenings and other