



RISING EXPECTATIONS. PHOTOGRAPHER: GABRIELLA DEMCZUK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Bursting the Great American Bubble: High School

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By Amity Shlaes

There are commodity bubbles, stock bubbles, bond bubbles – and education bubbles. American high schools are a classic education bubble, if by bubble we mean a mismatch between a commodity's real-world value and the value the public places on the commodity.

The value many Americans place on their own local high schools is “great.” Principals assure their schools are successfully launching generations of Sergey Brins into a global economy. Teachers repeat the “science, technology, engineering and math” mantra as if that alone ensures their pupils will conquer the world. Many parents too share this image. Since 1985, about half of families have been ranking their local public schools “A” or “B” in Gallup polls.

But American high schools are not great. They are not even good.

A comparison with real-world value makes this obvious. The broadest international study of high school competence is the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, which tests a half-million 15-year-olds on math, science and reading in the 34 OECD nations and some partner countries. In 2012, U.S. teens ranked 27th out of the 34 in math. Americans’ average scores in reading (17) or science (20) were better, but nowhere near stellar.

The scores were about the same as the scores from a prior round in 2002, before U.S. education reform efforts such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top and umpteen state testing rewrites, which are aimed at getting results educators, students and parents like better.

Precious then is any effort to hold high school pupils to standards from outside our high school bubble: international standards, or true college work standards, especially those from math or science. Some schools try to accomplish this by training high performers for the International Baccalaureate, which at least theoretically qualifies successful candidates for European schools. But the IB emphasizes humanities in an era when science and engineering matter more and more.

Simpler is the reality check provided by Basis Schools. Founded in Arizona almost two decades ago, this network of publicly financed charters has grown to number 21 in the U.S. Basis Schools admit students on a first-come, first-served basis or, when demand is high, by lottery, meaning that not all the kids are born top performers.

The goal is what the name says: “a basis” for young adults and basic competence in a STEM world. The idea came from co-founder Olga Block, a Czech immigrant who was appalled by her first encounters with U.S. middle and high schools. She admired the “spirit of the American public school,” as she once put it, but sought to create institutions that would apply the rigorous standards she grew up with.

At this, Basis succeeds wildly. In 2015, six Basis charter schools met the criteria that permitted their students to take the PISA test. The Basis pupils scored higher than students in Shanghai, Korea, Germany or Singapore, not to mention U.S. private and public schools. In math, the average Basis student performs better than the top 10 percent of U.S. public schoolers.

Basis students also stand out when it comes to the one U.S. test that is more closely tethered to reality, the College Board’s challenging Advanced Placement exam, designed to measure whether students have so mastered a subject that colleges will give them academic credit for it. Most suburban high schools consider prep classes for two or three AP tests plenty. Basis requires all students to prepare for and take six APs. Most Basis students graduate with 10. In its ranking of American high schools, U.S. News put three Basis schools in its top 10.

Whence these achievements? The answer is that Olga Block, along her economist husband and co-founder, Michael Block, think economically, in terms of results, comparative advantage and bubbles. To apply such thinking, they’ve ruthlessly dumped some assumptions about high school that the education establishment has considered un-dumpable.

The first is the public-school preference for teachers with education degrees. Basis has some ed-school graduates running home rooms. But its teachers don’t have to have teaching certificates. They have to be professionals in their areas of instruction: physicists teach physics, chemists teach chemistry, grad students in classics teach Latin, and so on. Such “subject specialists” (what Basis calls them) can impart enthusiasm in the way a random educator, often simply assigned to a subject, will not.

The second assumption Basis skips is that high schoolers can do it all: STEM, football, band and the charity work that college admissions offices so often encourage. As parents can attest, public and private schools cancel classes for “Spirit Days,” sports events or even social-awareness sessions. The Blocks’ view is that schools, like any well-run business, should play to their comparative advantage, which in the case of secondary education is course work.

The pacing of education is another way in which Basis differs. U.S. public middle schools have allowed their 11- to 15-year-olds to dawdle through, smorgasbord style, sampling geology one month, for example, and computer science the next. Then, around 10th or 11th grade, the same authorities turn up the heat and demand that kids scramble to internalize giant blocks of single-subject content.

The Basis curriculum, by contrast, starts with serious subject training in fifth grade. Kids take their first AP test, the one in government, by eighth or ninth grade. They take others early, too. This means there’s less of a crush in the sophomore and junior years.

Predictably, the Basis iconoclasm drives orthodox educators into displays of spitting contempt. “I couldn’t help thinking of my own grandchildren and how I would never want them treated like miniature college students by the Basis Subject Specialists,” said Gene Glass, an emeritus professor at Arizona State with a degree in educational psychology.

True, Basis does not work for all families, and a significant number of them have pulled out their kids, so there is a winnowing effect. Still, many unexpected successes (at least by parents) occur. And for many students and parents, Basis is less stressful than a top suburban high school because there is no competition between course work and testing. Heavy testing early “also allows kids to fail, which they need,” said Olga Block when I interviewed her and her husband recently at a new Basis school in Brooklyn. Once they fail, the kids know what it takes to succeed. “The AP exams are my Olympics,” as one student told a College Board interviewer.

These days the Basis founders are moving into the traditional private-school business. In New York City, in addition to the Brooklyn school, one will open in Manhattan in 2017. The tuition at the Basis independent schools runs a little more than half of what the standard private school charges. That’s intentional: “We want a school two professionals can pay for,” Michael Block told me.

As impressive as one experiment can be, the point is to welcome all experiments to the field of education. The pressure of international competition and technology isn’t likely to weaken.

As in the case of most markets, the only open question in the education market is who will have bet correctly when this bubble finally pops.

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