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“Education’s Inconvenient Truth”

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The education community can learn a thing or two from Al Gore’s acclaimed documentary and best selling companion book, both titled “An Inconvenient Truth”. In fact the lessons from “An Inconvenient Truth” have almost as much relevance to education as they do for the environmental movement.

First, there is Al Gore as an educator’s role model. As Mike Petrelli of the Fordham Foundation recently wrote in a surprisingly complimentary article in the Gladfly, “... Al Gore can be seen as a true role model. He knows his stuff, he cares passionately about the topic, he connects with his audience, and he uses powerful media ... surely you’ll agree: Al Gore for teacher of the year!” That’s quite an endorsement from an unlikely source and I couldn’t agree with it more. (Full disclosure I have been an avid admirer of Gore for almost 30 years).

Second, there is Gore’s use of scientific evidence in demonstrating the nature and scope of an impending crisis. Those of us in the knowledge industry in education who support the concept of evidence-based education should be thrilled by Gore’s effective use of scientific evidence in articulating the global problem. In much the same way, education has its own body of knowledge about an American crisis of significant magnitude and complexity. Not a week goes by without another report on the growing number of underachieving and undereducated young people in the USA who will not be sufficiently equipped to function effectively in the flattening world of a knowledge-based global economy. (An interesting aside, the climate crisis and the American education crisis are both related to the same core concept of global interdependence).

Third, there is Gore’s acknowledgement that even strong evidence has not been enough to mobilize an adequate response to the crisis. He argues that, so far, the financial and political forces advantaged by the status quo have trumped science. Here too we find an analogy in education. Over 20 years ago the “A Nation at Risk” report presented evidence of a major crisis in k-12 education (Ironically, at about the same time when Gore sponsored Congressional hearings on global warming). Since, we have made only slight progress in breaking the status quo, boosting achievement relative to our international competitors and closing achievement gaps within the US.

Last, there is Gore’s somewhat hopeful message that disaster can still be averted. He touts forward thinking commercial and government investments in research and development for new crisis-solving technologies. Gore speculates that, propelled in part by a strong R & D enterprise, the global market for green technologies and sustainable development innovations will grow and diversify rapidly in transformative ways in the coming decade. If R&D is a life blood of innovation and transformation in the

environmental sector, so it can also be in education.

Here is education's inconvenient truth. Simply put, education lacks a knowledge infrastructure of sufficient size and capacity to address the k-12 crisis. Certainly there are pockets of excellence and exceptional accomplishment, but k-12 R&D in the U.S. is not structured or positioned for scalability or sustainability in concert with the growing crisis.

The problem starts with the unconscionably meager federal investment in education R&D. The US Department of Education's budget for research, development, and statistics is less than one percent of its total discretionary spending, making it the lowest of any federal agency. Consider other areas where government's role is central to the public's well-being. The Department of Defense allocates 17% to R&D, NASA 68%, Health and Human Services 42%, and the National Science Foundation 74%. Funding alone is not the solution but as we witnessed with the National Institutes of Health, a significant boost over several years can set in motion the development of a robust knowledge market and a world class R&D enterprise.

Without the full force of a far reaching R&D infrastructure, education is destined to remain "inconveniently" stuck in the status quo. I fear, for example, that, without the infusion of strong R&D support, the legacy of the No Child Left Behind Act might well degenerate into a tangle of technical compliance issues rather than blossom into a coherent set of knowledge-based solutions for every child.

Isn't it about time to deal with education's inconvenient truth?

National Education Knowledge Industry Association (NEKIA)

NEKIA is a non-partisan, non-profit national trade association dedicated to the expanded use of rigorous knowledge-based solutions in policy and practice in k-12 education. Through public policy and industry leadership, the association advocates for evidence-based education and the use of knowledge in guiding improvement and innovation throughout the country. NEKIA's 21 institutional members are committed to high quality research, development, dissemination, technical assistance and evaluation at the federal, regional, state, tribal, and local levels. Contact Jim Kohlmoos kohlmoos@nekia.org <http://nekia.org/>