

Low Educational Expectations are Crushing America's Future

by

Jeffrey Race

This true-life story illustrates how much of today's discussion of educational reform wastes time and opportunity by missing the essential: great improvements can happen without big budgetary burdens.

My three daughters grew to maturity in Bangkok. For each English was her second language.

Jasmine, daughter number three, studied for several years at Harrow and Shrewsbury, Bangkok branches of British private schools, but feeling too little challenged she enrolled in and completed a multi-year Japanese supplementary maths program called Kumon.*

We sent Jasmine for her last two years (English "A Levels") to Cheltenham Ladies College. Founded in 1853, it was the first UK girls school, focussed we might cheerfully say on raising up the wives of the Empire's ruling class. From its start until this day it is one of the world's top schools, the female equivalent of Eton. Jasmine's Kumon training qualified her for Advanced Maths.

School managements devote considerable effort to maximizing their rating in the UK's "league tables," which rank every school by educational outcomes. Some years back, perhaps fearing insufficient English roses to keep its top ranking, Cheltenham embarked on a campaign to recruit the world's top girls, now coming from every continent. Jasmine was the only American there.

During long breaks girls return home. English girls are picked up by their families, some in their Daimlers and Rolls Royces. Foreigners all fly home.

During the 2010 Easter break, Jasmine flew to Boston as my wife and I were here then. Then on April 14 the Eyjafjallajokull volcano exploded in Iceland, blocking much of the world's air travel, but fortunately upper air currents allowed Jasmine to fly back to London. School resumed normally.

Except Advanced Maths, which could not restart *because every student in the Advanced Maths class had been educated in Asia*.

Do not misunderstand this striking fact to be about elite education, or about results in a specialized subject. It is about the behavioral principle that applies to top schools just as it does to those at the bottom and everywhere in between. Expectations count. Fiercely.

For proof in America of this same principle at the bottom, view the film *Stand and Deliver*. Like my family's experience, it is a true story. Many viewers feel like crying at the end.

No one is qualified to render an opinion on educational reform in the United States who is not prepared to explain publicly and in detail how his views are compatible with the stunning evidence in that film.

Vanessa, Melissa and Jasmine have each told me how easy it is for them in America, and why: because standards and expectations here are so low.

* "Kumon's Math Method": Obituary of Toru Kumon

<<https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/27/obituaries/toru-kumon-innovator-81-in-math-studies.html>>

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