

"It's psychotic! They keep creating new ways to celebrate mediocrity."

—Mr. Incredible, *The Incredibles*

I'm coming clean: One of my favorite movies is a Pixar-Disney animation called *The Incredibles*. (I know; I'm a nerd. It's a well-established and widely documented fact that I'm reminded of frequently by friends, family, coworkers, and passing strangers, so there's no sense trying to conceal the fact now.) *The Incredibles* tells the story of superheroes in hiding, trying to suppress their incredibility by pretending to be ordinary citizens. They live in tract housing, drive economy cars, hold down boring day jobs, etc., etc. A favorite theme in the movie is the idea that society strives to elevate the average as wonderful and suppress the extraordinary as something suspicious. Saying that everyone is special, a gifted child observes, "is another way of saying no one is."

While it is nice to think of everyone as special, there's nothing special about being average. I'm thinking "average" thoughts these days based on a news story that I just read in the Materials Education Community of our Materials Technology@TMS web site (www.materialstechnology.org). It provides more statistical reinforcement of the generally downward spiral into average being achieved by the "educated" public within the United States.

The story comes from the College Board's Commission on Access, Admissions, and Success in Higher Education. The College Board is the association that gives us the SAT and Advanced Placement programs. So, they've got some street cred to comment on such matters. (Does saying "street cred" make me sound hip? Or, did I just blow it by saying "hip"?) The new report, *Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future*, shows the U.S. working hard to convert an incredible educational system to an average one. The bad news comes fast, as reflected in this excerpt from the first paragraph of the Executive Summary: "The United States, which led the world in high school completion rates throughout the 20th century, ranked just 21st out of 27 advanced economies by 2005. And our college completion rates have dropped dramatically—from number two in the world for younger workers (age 25–34) to number eleven. The United States is on the verge of losing the great global educational competitive edge it has long enjoyed." By the way, dropout rates for U.S. high school students have tripled in the last 30 years.

The College Board advocates that the United States ensure that at least 55 percent of citizens ages 25–34 hold at least a community college degree by 2025. The current mark is about 40%. Big task. Suggestions include providing voluntary preschool education that is universally available to children from low-income families, aligning the U.S. K–12 educational system with international standards and college admissions expectations, improving teacher quality while focusing on recruitment and retention, and making financial aid processes more transparent and keeping college affordable.

Good suggestions, but they require commitment, planning, effort, and money. The latter, thanks to a severe and global recession, is in short supply. With this fearful confluence, will the Gathering Storm ramp into the Perfect Storm?

What are the prospects? As I write, I see on the CNN web site that U.S. President-elect Barack Obama has named Arne Duncan, chief of the Chicago public school system, to be education secretary. I don't know much about Duncan, but I do know that in the presidential campaign Obama showed himself to be savvy to Gathering Storm issues. Let's hope that he is.

Of course, it will take a lot more than hope to reverse the downward trends articulated in report after report. Most importantly, the new president and new secretary of education can't afford to be average. They can't even be incredible. They need to be miraculous.


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