T HIS is not hyperbole to say that today’s school-reform debate is critical to our national destiny. The challenge is a thrilling one: to make every child the possessor of a kind of intellectual competence once available to only a small minority. This inspiring and new task means granting all young citizens the conviction that they can invent theories, analyze evidence and make their personal mark on this most complex world. Such a transformation of the idea of why children go to school would in turn transform the American workplace, as well as the very nature of American democratic life.

Yet given the opportunity to join in this exciting debate, the public has offered responses that are often troublingly sour and cynical. Citizens have largely missed any hope that their ideas on education might be heard and implemented. Most discussion now takes place within the most narrow professional and policy-making circles. Why?

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Getting over the ‘golden days’

SCHOOLS

from Page 1C

The answer lies in a story the nation tells itself so forcefully and so often that mere historical fact has little power to intervene; the myth that, in the past, schools taught more effectively and children learned more. And this myth of the past, in turn, props up some equally pernicious myths of the present and hobbles our national discussion of the future. The widely held view that our public school system has declined from some golden past is causing some serious mischief. The ground must be cleared of such myths and lies.

In fact, until World War II the average American did not graduate from high school. Most teen-agers were expected to leave school for unskilled or semiskilled work. The average American attended school for only nine years, and 20 percent attended for less than four.

In the 1940s, even elite, “talented” students rarely took more than two years of high school math, science or history, and virtually none took calculus — a college course in those days, but today such a staple of moderately advanced high school seniors that it was a dramatic proof of Jaime Escalante’s pedagogic success in the movie “Stand and Deliver.”

The hard data concerning what students “used to know” about history and science defy the casual conversation about what they don’t today. As Jonathan Kozol recently reminded us in his powerful book “Savage Inequalities,” America created a revolution of rising expectations among those most in need while depriving them of precisely the resources offered those least in need.

The myth of a golden educational past allowed many to ignore the reality of inadequate commitment and crushed expectations for nearly three decades. But some myths of the present were needed as well. If schools are broken, who is at fault? The scapegoats are the usual suspects: teachers, unions, TV, drugs, divorce, “diversity” (read: too many African-Americans and Latinos), welfare, permissiveness, single motherhood, sexual revolution, feminism, relativism, lack of patriotism. The implication is clear: Just toss out those troublemakers, and the task of creating good schools is no big deal. And then there’s the equally misleading myth...
golden days' myth of education

ducational standards, national competitiveness on the assembly line of malign neglect of unately rediscovered skills — though not without reason. Former Education Secretary Alexander Hamilton complained that the education system was failing to prepare students for the workforce.

Inventing a whole new system

Privately, though rarely publicly, such leaders and the think tanks behind them — the National Alliance of Business, the Carnegie Corporation, the Education Commission of the States, for example — acknowledged that the problem was not restoring old standards but inventing a new system, making fundamental, "bottom-up" changes. They argued for the need to involve teachers and parents and avoid blaming the poor. They revived John Dewey's pre-World War II proposals for progressive education, dressing them up in new language and quoting new research, focusing on different forms of governance that paid heed to the role of parents and teachers, as well as on students' critical "higher-order thinking" in contrast to rote memorization.

But the think tankers' talk of reform played poorly. The proposed changes were generally resisted by bureaucrats, teachers, school boards and unions — and were viewed with suspicion by parents and students as well.

Given this climate of resistance, two simpler reform ideas arose among educational opinion-leaders — ideas that were seemingly easier to enact but that spoke to a more cynical and despairing vision. One solution lay in increasing the power of professional experts at the state and federal levels to require school reform, whatever local communities might say about it. The other solution was to abandon public control altogether in favor of the magic of the marketplace. Either local control or public control (or both) must go because, today's impatient reformers argue, they impede needed change.

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