

Why Steve Jobs, not Bill Gates, Was the True Education Visionary

When it comes to education reform, there are generally two camps: those who want to improve the existing mass compulsory schooling system through tweaking and tuning and those who want to build something entirely new and different. Not surprisingly, Apple co-founder Steve Jobs was in the “think different” camp, advocating for school choice and vouchers, while Microsoft’s Bill Gates backed the Common Core State Standards and other incremental reforms within the conventional mass schooling model.

The Efforts of the Gates Foundation

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into K-12 education over the past 20 years, including \$280 million toward Common Core, which people of all political persuasions came to despise for its standardization and government overreach. Earlier this week, the Gates Foundation announced an additional \$10 million to train teachers on “high quality” curriculum. The charity is on track to reach its goal of dedicating nearly \$2 billion dollars to K-12 education by 2022.

These huge philanthropic efforts, combined with the nearly \$700 billion a year that US taxpayers spend on K-12 mass schooling, means Americans spend more on education than any other country but with far more dismal results. Chipping away slowly at standard schooling may not be doing much good.

Jobs Saw the Need for Disruption

Steve Jobs recognized this. He saw that true educational transformation requires disrupting the entire mass schooling model. As he did with his revolutionary Apple products, Jobs envisioned an education system that is innovative, experimental, and individualized for each learner. In a 1995 interview with the Smithsonian Institution, Jobs asserted his support for vouchers and entrepreneurial educators:

I believe very strongly that if the country gave each parent a voucher for forty-four hundred dollars that they could only spend at any accredited school several things would happen. Number one, schools would start marketing themselves like crazy to get students. Secondly, I think you’d see a lot of new schools starting...You could have twenty-five-year-old students out of college, very idealistic, full of energy instead of starting a Silicon Valley company, they’d start a

school. I believe that they would do far better than any of our public schools would. The third thing you'd see is, I believe, is the quality of schools again, just in a competitive marketplace, start to rise. Some of the schools would go broke. A lot of the public schools would go broke. There's no question about it. It would be rather painful for the first several years...But far less painful I think than the kids going through the system as it is right now.

For Jobs, vouchers were only one piece of the education transformation puzzle. He realized that an incremental approach to reforming the existing mass schooling model does not work because of the power structures and bureaucratic tendencies inherent in conventional schooling. In the same Smithsonian interview, Jobs said:

I'd like the people teaching my kids to be good enough that they could get a job at the company I work for, making a hundred thousand dollars a year. Why should they work at a school for thirty-five to forty thousand dollars if they could get a job here at a hundred thousand dollars a year? Is that an intelligence test? The problem there, of course, is the unions. The unions are the worst thing that ever happened to education because it's not a meritocracy. It turns into a bureaucracy, which is exactly what has happened. The teachers can't teach and administrators run the place and nobody can be fired. It's terrible.

Two Different Experiences, Two Different Outlooks

The vastly different education policy approaches favored by Gates and Jobs may be due in part to their own childhood schooling experiences. Gates attended a private day school, Lakeside School, in Seattle, Washington, and said in 2005: "Lakeside was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

Jobs, on the other hand, had a far less favorable reaction to his public schooling. He recalled:

School was pretty hard for me at the beginning. My mother taught me

how to read before I got to school and so when I got there I really just wanted to do two things. I wanted to read books because I loved reading books and I wanted to go outside and chase butterflies. You know, do the things that five-year-olds like to do. I encountered authority of a different kind than I had ever encountered before, and I did not like it. And they really almost got me. They came close to really beating any curiosity out of me.

While both of these tech moguls dropped out of college to start wildly successful businesses, their opinions on K-12 education policy reflect many of the differences that came to symbolize their respective companies. Apple's visionary motto of "Think Different" challenges the status quo, while Microsoft's "Empowering Us All" may just capture the next incremental change on a well-trodden path.