The schools differed so widely in their curricula, methods of assessment, and graduation requirements that it was impossible to know with any degree of certainty if students were being well educated. Although powerful changes were transforming some schools, the outlook was utterly hopeless for two-thirds of them.

If you thought this criticism was a page torn from a study of K-12 schools today, you’d be wrong. It was from the landmark Flexner Report in 1910 that evaluated medical schools across the country.

While it's always risky to compare professional education with general education, there are parallels that constitute a cautionary tale if the United States ever expects to fulfill its duty to the young. This caveat is particularly timely as the presidential election approaches and the demands of the new global economy make education a priority issue.

Alarmed by the uneven quality of the more than 150 medical schools enrolling some 25,000 students in the late 19th century, the American Medical Association created the Council on Medical Education in 1904 to investigate ways to restructure the existing system of educating doctors. The council in turn asked the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for help. Its president, Henry S. Pritchett, chose Abraham Flexner in 1908 to head the study because of his experience as a professional educator.

What Flexner reported about medical schools almost a century ago mirrors many of the charges aimed today at K-12 schools in the inner cities and in remote rural communities. He described the California Medical College, for example, as "a disgrace to the state whose laws permit its existence." He termed Chicago's 14 medical schools "the plague spot of the country." No city or state escaped Flexner's scathing indictment.

Yet he also gave high praise to schools meeting his exacting standards, including Johns Hopkins, Pennsylvania, Harvard, Yale, and Western Reserve. If he were alive today, he would have little trouble identifying K-12 schools that deserve the label of excellent or execrable.

What Flexner firmly believed was that the best way to improve medical schools was to establish a single curriculum with uniform assessment. Why should the location of a medical school determine what students learned in first-year anatomy? By the same token, why should location determine what students learn in 8th grade math?

This question has direct relevance to the debate today. On one side are those who want to allow each
state to establish its own definition of proficiency and develop its own curriculum. They believe in local control. They say that raising standards will exacerbate the already appalling dropout rate.

On the other side are those who demand a single standard of proficiency and a national curriculum to assure its achievement. They believe in a central authority. They want a high school diploma to mean something beyond certifying seat time. They ask why geography should play such a decisive role in determining what students learn.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, it is the former group that currently holds sway, despite the acknowledged disparity in knowledge and skills between students from state to state, and between scores on state tests and scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Flexner realized that raising the bar in a democracy was much more difficult than doing so in an autocracy. Organizing a universal curriculum in America would be an uphill battle, he knew, because of the stigma attached to differentiation in education. But Flexner refused to be deterred.

The duel between differentiation and democratization in K-12 lives on today, even though virtually all our competitors abroad separate out students as early as the end of elementary school. While we can disagree over when and how to do so, the reality is that college is not for everyone. That's why vocational education deserves greater recognition and respect.

In fact, if Alan S. Blinder, the former vice chairman of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System, is correct, the only jobs that will be secure in the next decade will be those that can't be sent offshore electronically. That means auto mechanics, electricians, and plumbers, for example, will be working steadily while college graduates are collecting unemployment checks.

Abraham Flexner was no doubt buoyed by his belief that the nation was ready for a change. The timing of his report coincided with the zenith of the Progressive movement. Today, the country also seems poised to embrace fundamental change in the way it educates the young. That's because the achievement gap between the socioeconomic classes persists despite the investment of huge sums of money and countless hours of intervention over the years. Patience, after all, has its limits, even among zealous supporters of public schools.

The legacy that Flexner leaves is his belief that education without high standards ultimately shortchanges all stakeholders. While his focus was overwhelmingly on medical schools, his message applies to K-12 schools as well.

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