

Education's case of senioritis

By Jonathan Alter, Newsweek

Bill Gates is raising his arm, bent at the elbow, in the direction of the ceiling. The point he's making is so important that he wants me and the pair of Gates Foundation staffers sitting in the hotel conference room in Louisville, Ky., to recognize the space between this thought and every lower-ranking argument. "If there's one thing that can be done for the country, one thing," Gates says, his normally modulated voice rising, "improving education rises so far above everything else!" He doesn't say what the "else" is—deficit reduction? containing Iran? free trade?—but they're way down toward the floor compared with the arm above that multibillion-dollar head. With the U.S. tumbling since 1995 from second in the world to 16th in college-graduation rates and to 24th place in math (for 15-year-olds), it was hard to argue the point. Our economic destiny is at stake.

Gates had just finished giving a speech to the Council of Chief State School Officers in which he tried to explain how administrators could hope to raise student achievement in the face of tight budgets. The Microsoft founder went through what he sees as false solutions—furloughs, sharing textbooks—before focusing on the true "cost drivers": seniority-based pay and benefits for teachers rising faster than state revenues.

Seniority is the two-headed monster of education—it's expensive and harmful. Like master's degrees for teachers and smaller class sizes, seniority pay, Gates says, has "little correlation to student achievement." After exhaustive study, the Gates Foundation and other experts have learned that the only in-school factor that fully correlates is quality teaching, which seniority hardly guarantees. It's a moral

issue. Who can defend a system where top teachers are laid off in a budget crunch for no other reason than that they're young?

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