

Upfront

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WE BELIEVE IN OUR MYTHS. EVERY COUNTRY, EVERY community of people has an original story to tell. As the author Joseph Campbell wrote, "Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths." Thus, we borrow from a communal identity to shape our own beliefs and attitudes.

Our American story is one of boundless capacity. From the fateful years of independence-making, we have stretched our minds, our industry and our reach. Our youthful ingenuity has never acquiesced; No. 2 is not in our lexicon.

Within our mythology, of course, the American Dream of opportunity and achievement remains fully intact. But what happens when reality chips away at the myth? Do we protect the myth as we would a bruised ego? Or do we look squarely in the mirror for this moment's reality? Do we balk or do we respond?

That any little boy-or-girl-can grow up to be president is the branding message of our mythology. Work hard and the sky's the limit. But opportunity in America, in 2007, isn't that simple. As a recent report published by Princeton University and The Brookings Institution suggests, "Americans need to pick their parents well." The cherished economic mobility that allowed the sons and daughters of the working class to flourish is not what it once was. When compared with other advanced nations, we are not No. 1. Quite the contrary, measures of intergenerational mobility place the United States near the bottom of the list.

Back at the dawn of the American Dream, there was little talk of income status. The new world was hard scrabble for most. Now, as income inequality is on the rise and the middle class continues to shrink, the Princeton-Brookings study warns of an enclave of wealth at the top and a poverty trap at the bottom.

If a remedy exists, a catalyst to shake up the economic strata, surely it is the nation's educational prowess. Just check the myth-the world's best system of education. Really? American high school students fare poorly on international assessments, and more than a quarter of our students never see a high school diploma. In the nation's eminent cities, the numbers are debated but dreadful no matter how you cut them. From New York to Los Angeles, Detroit to Miami, barely half of entering freshmen are graduating in four years. Of those who do cross the threshold to college, about 55 percent are under-prepared for college level courses. In the cities the rates often reach 80 percent.

Is there a critical methodology, a strategy that will turn the momentum? The answer is yes, unequivocally. It's not as if some alien creatures dropped into America's classrooms and we just can't figure out how to reach them. They're just you and me in baggy pants with an iPod. We know full well what to do. The depth of understanding and creativity would move you.

But all this know-how will be for naught until we're willing to let go of the myth. We have hard questions to consider: Do we have the stomach to acknowledge the depth of the challenge? Do we grasp the profound risk to our communities and our nation if these trends persist? Are we ready to do whatever is necessary to fix the schools of this country? Until we answer yes to these questions, we'll be living a myth.