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**The Case Against
Education: Why the
Education System Is a
Waste of Time and
Money**

Made by Blinkist



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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Discover why education is vastly overrated.

The idea that education is good for us, and ultimately good for society, is so widely accepted that it's come to seem self-evident and irrefutable. But what if the arguments for education are overstated? What if extra years of schooling can sap your bank balance and turn into a bad investment? And what if the extra education is even worse for society than it is on an individual basis? Would that change your mind about things?

How could education be a bad thing? It expands our minds, unlocks opportunities, and often leads to lucrative employment down the line.

These blinks lay out the argument against education in compelling detail. They'll take you behind the naive sloganeering and reveal that education's downsides are greater than you may have ever suspected.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why more education doesn't always improve society;

- what the notion of “signaling” tells us about college; and
- how we can fix our educational woes.

Lots of what US students learn in school is totally irrelevant to their lives.

If you're like the average American student, you probably spent most of your school days staring out the window, wondering why you were studying yet another irrelevant topic.

Some students enjoy Shakespeare, geometry, and Spanish. But many others wonder about the value of focusing on such subjects. Do they really provide students with

the knowledge they'll need later in life?

The short answer is no. For most people, there's a clear mismatch between the things they study and the skills and knowledge modern life actually requires.

The key message here is: Lots of what US students learn in school is totally irrelevant to their lives.

Take foreign languages. Almost nobody who grew up speaking only English becomes fluent in French, Spanish, or Mandarin at school. In the United States, the

vast majority of people who can speak a second language fluently picked it up at home – not sitting in class year after year.

What's more, all attention devoted to potentially useless subjects is a distraction from subjects that might be more profitable, such as statistics. Statistical reasoning underpins many important, real-world decisions. But less than 8 percent of American high school students ever pass a statistics class.

Many educators object to this line of criticism, however. Studying new things isn't just

about acquiring knowledge, they say; it's about learning how to think. According to teachers, writing English essays teaches critical thinking, and studying geometry can impart the principles of logic. In short, they believe there's more to education than meets the eye.

But do these claims hold water? Well, not really. Researchers have investigated our ability to apply what we learn in school to real-world situations – and time after time, they've found this so-called *transfer of learning* to be notoriously unreliable.

For example, although going to college does improve critical thinking, it only does so in a classroom setting. Outside of the exam hall, college students are no less likely to rely on mistaken reasoning than their less-educated peers.

As this research suggests, the problem of irrelevant learning extends well beyond high school. In fact, the vast majority of college majors also do very little to prepare students for the workplace.

So why do college graduates earn more than people who leave education after high

school? As we'll discover in the next blink, there are two competing solutions to that puzzle.

“Typical students burn thousands of hours studying material that neither raises their productivity nor enriches their lives.”

Signaling helps to explain college graduates' increased earnings.

One of the main reasons young people go to college is to reap the financial rewards that come with possessing a bachelor's degree. In some ways, this makes sense; people who've studied for longer really do benefit from an *education premium* that increases their earnings – and a few years' extra schooling often seems a small price to pay for a long-term financial bonus.

But accounting for this bonus can be tricky, and economists

often rely on something called the *human capital theory* when they try to explain it.

According to this idea, getting a degree increases your earnings because education trains you to be a more skilled and productive worker. More productive workers, in turn, get higher wages. Sounds pretty straightforward, right?

**The key message here is:
Signaling helps to explain college graduates' increased earnings.**

It may sound straightforward – but the reality is a lot less clear cut. You see, human capital

theory relies on the idea that education works purely by imparting useful skills. But, as we'll see, this idea is flawed. Luckily, another theory, called *signaling*, provides a better explanation of why college grads earn more.

So what exactly does signaling mean? In short, this theory suggests that employers value educational achievement because it “signals” desirable, preexisting traits like intelligence, obedience, and diligence.

As opposed to the human capital theory, which suggests

that education is all about acquiring skills, signaling contends that education is valuable because it “certifies” employable characteristics. In other words, if you’ve finished college with good grades, you signal to employers that you also have what it takes to succeed in the workplace.

What’s useful about this theory is that it helps to explain why even irrelevant qualifications can boost graduates’ earnings.

Human capital theory struggles to account for the fact that a degree in, say, English can increase the salary of someone

who ends up working as a business consultant. But signaling provides an answer; an English graduate might not have learned any skills that make him a particularly effective consultant – but a good college degree still tells potential employers that he’s smart, hardworking, and willing to follow rules.

Of course, this isn’t to suggest that college equips you with no skills whatsoever – that would be a drastic overstatement. What signaling reminds us, though, is that the human capital theory, on its own, is an

inadequate account of
education.

Going to college isn't always worth it.

“Go to college” sounds like good, uncontroversial advice. Education opens doors and broadens the mind, after all, and can also add a tidy premium to our earnings. What's not to like?

Actually, a few things. To start, commentators often overestimate the education premium – usually because they fail to recognize that people who graduate from college are generally somewhat smarter and more conscientious than those who don't.

When pundits look at the difference between high-school and college graduates' earnings, they often suggest, incorrectly, that education alone explains the disparity. This means they ignore the preexisting differences between the groups and end up substantially overvaluing third-level education.

The key message here is: Going to college isn't always worth it.

Put simply, going to college is a bad decision for lots of students. Many who start a degree don't finish it. Others would be better off if they took

their tuition money and invested it in the stock market; over the long run, they'd probably make a better return.

But college isn't a bad idea for everyone – so how can we determine who should go? It's simple; we take out our calculators. By working out the various ways education can affect our lives, and then crunching the numbers, we can figure out to what extent college pays off for students of differing abilities.

You can do this on your own. But, for now, let's skip the math and dive straight into the

results. For most students, college just isn't a good deal. If you're a good student or even an excellent one, then going to college might be worth it – but if you're of a lower academic calibre, your time and money could be put to better use elsewhere.

Even if you consider yourself a good student, it's important to make sure your degree is a sound investment. How can this be done? First, pick an employable, practical major. Go for science, technology, engineering, or mathematics – the STEM subjects. Or choose business or economics. Second,

go to a good public school.
Most students don't pay full tuition and, even if you do, public colleges tend to be inexpensive.

Finally, work full-time after you graduate – you won't make good on your educational investment unless you put your degree to use and try to maximize its return.

College can sometimes be a good idea – but not always, and not for nearly as many students as we suppose.

More education isn't always good for society.

So on a personal level, education isn't always a positive. But what about for society as a whole? Does greater education lead to social improvements and a stronger economy? Do the benefits of education actually justify the costs?

Instinctually, we'd like to say yes. The idea that education makes a society more innovative, more productive, and thus richer seems plausible – at least until you remember how irrelevant school curriculums are.

But what's the more considered answer? Is expanding education a good idea? Do education's rewards ultimately offset its costs?

The short answer is no – much of the money spent on education does society little, if any, good.

The key message here is: More education isn't always good for society.

Signaling – the idea that education serves to verify employable traits – helps to explain why education is often a bad investment. Just how bad

depends on the size of the role you assign to signaling in education; the greater its importance, the worse the investment.

Why so? Well, let's break it down. As we've seen, signaling allows people to demonstrate that they have the traits needed to succeed in the workplace.

For example, a job applicant with a BA has proved her intelligence and sticking power in a way that a high school dropout hasn't. All else being equal, then, the college graduate will probably be the preferred candidate for a job – even if her

degree is in an entirely unrelated field.

The problem is that when more and more people get degrees, it gradually becomes harder to stand out from the crowd. Just like with currency, this can cause a kind of inflation which devalues credentials over time and raises the bar for entry-level jobs. Soon, you need a bachelor's degree where before you needed only a high school diploma, and an MA where you once only needed a BA.

When we fund education, we inevitably contribute to this *credential inflation*. Although

more education does help to raise workers' skills somewhat, a lot of money is wasted on a futile and expensive status competition in which the stakes are constantly being raised.

The benefit to society?

Practically nil. Numerous studies have failed to find that education does much to improve living standards.

In theory, expanding education may sound appealing. But in reality it's a wasteful way to invest taxpayers' hard-earned money.

Education can indeed enrich the soul – but it's too uncommon to really count.

Educators sometimes assert that economic arguments against education miss the point. Of course, they acknowledge, education doesn't always make sound financial sense. Teaching the young is expensive and rarely easy – that's a given.

But education deals with something loftier than budgets and credentials. It's not merely about what makes *sense*. It's about what nourishes the soul.

This argument – that education is a soul-enriching experience – can be all too easy to dismiss. To many, it seems a little bit overblown. But it contains a grain of truth; education can sometimes impart a love of learning, art, and culture. But, as things currently stand, this happens far too rarely to really matter.

**The key message here is:
Education can indeed enrich the soul – but it's too uncommon to really count.**

The main problem with the idea that education is a form of soul enrichment is that two key

ingredients are usually missing from the classroom: skillful teaching and eager students.

Teachers need to be competent and enthusiastic if they're going to inspire the young with a love of learning and culture. Too often, however, they care little more than their students do about whatever topic they happen to be teaching.

The result? Teachers and students alike just go through the motions, and nobody comes away having benefited much.

The other problem we mentioned is student apathy.

Can you recall the confused, droning voices high school students use when they're asked to read Shakespeare aloud? If so, you probably have a good idea of just how much enthusiasm the young can muster for high culture: close to none.

One line of argument claims that education can undermine this apathy. By “force-feeding” students culture now, we can help them to develop a sincere appreciation for art and learning down the line. Right?

Well, take a look around. Today's adults were once students. For years, they were exposed to

canonical works of art and groundbreaking ideas. Has that experience instilled a love of culture in most of them? Far from it.

In fact, the internet makes clear just how little most people care about the high culture they were exposed to in school.

Googling “Kim Kardashian” brings up about twenty times as many results as the name of the famous composer Richard Wagner.

In short, there’s something noble about the idea that education should nourish the soul. Too often, however, it

remains just that: a noble idea,
with little basis in reality.

“Education definitely can be good for the soul. But that hardly shows actually existing education achieves this noble end.”

A few simple steps could drastically reduce the wastefulness of education.

So education isn't all it's cracked up to be – far from it. As we've seen, it's often a distinctly wasteful use of taxpayers' money. For the 2010–11 school year in the United States, spending on education alone came to \$1.1 trillion. That's not to mention the emotional cost of the billions of hours students collectively spent being bored stiff!

So is the situation hopeless? Is there anything we can do to

reduce this astronomical expenditure and waste?

Well, yes and no. There are some simple things we could do to cut the wastefulness of education. But the naive idea that “education matters at all costs” means that there’s little will to put them into practice.

The key message here is: A few simple steps could drastically reduce the wastefulness of education.

So what are the reforms that we could make? Well, to start with, we could drop the less practical material from the curriculum.

Given that most students forget almost everything they know about Shakespeare and history soon after they graduate, this actually wouldn't be such a loss.

At the level of college, we could stop subsidizing education at taxpayers' expense. In such a scenario, education would become more expensive and the number of students graduating would drop – which is precisely what we want in order to reduce credential inflation.

But it's not enough to cut back on education; we need to replace it with a more efficient

system. That's where *vocational training* comes in.

Vocational training refers to a type of hands-on education that prepares students to perform specific jobs. It involves learning practical skills that help in the workplace rather than studying irrelevant and soon-to-be-forgotten coursework. In short, vocational training adopts a learning-by-doing approach.

The best type of vocational training? Normal work. Young people should be encouraged to get jobs at an early age and, according to the author, child-

labor laws should be amended to help them.

This last point often shocks people. Aren't child labor laws in place to protect the young from exploitation? Isn't that in their best interest? Not really.

Sending young people out into the world with years of experience under their belt is a better strategy than throwing them out of the classroom and into the job market.

If we want to trim the fat from our education system, we should remember this: the notion that more education is

always better is exactly what got
us into this mess.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The benefits of education are vastly overstated. A lot of what we study in school is utterly irrelevant, and a lot of expensive schooling only helps us to win futile status games. Although there are some simple reforms we could make to tackle these problems, the political will doesn't currently exist.

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What to read next: *Creative Schools*, by Ken Robinson

Now that you're familiar with the case against education, you might be wondering whether there's still a case for it. In *Creative Schools*, Ken Robinson, a world-renowned advisor on education in the arts, argues that change is possible. Whereas traditional education bores students and stifles their natural creativity, education can be made more effective, more

imaginative, and ultimately more enjoyable. Head over to our [links to *Creative Schools*](#) to find out how.

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