

ONLY IN AMERICA

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When my grandparents emigrated from Russia to the United States in the second decade of the last century, the phrase “Only in America” conjured visions of the limitless good and opportunity that this country offered to those who assimilated, worked hard, and availed themselves of the American way of life. Indeed, whenever one of my grandparents uttered the phrase “Only in America” with respect to some American phenomenon, the phrase evoked the feeling that the United States delivered even more than they had dreamed that it would. It was the ultimate expression of the have-nots that they too could become the haves. That the passport to have-dom in this country was education pursued responsibly and diligently was impressed by my grandparents on my parents, and by my parents in turn on me, with a zealous vengeance. And I and other children of children of immigrants believed it just as zealously.

Oh, how things have changed. Nowadays, the phrase “Only in America” can be used only to designate the ways in which the United States has loosened its grip on the vision of its Founders and has lost its integrity as a nation of boundless possibility for those who shoulder the responsibility of shaping their own fates.

The perceived threat posed by illegal migrants to our nation’s legal integrity and to our social and economic well-being, however justified such a perception may be, has led to feelings that seem to eventuate in the desire to withdraw the welcome mat even from legal immigrants. The have-nots, whether native or migrant, see the horizon of the haves receding ever farther away from them. No longer is a rigorous education seen as the sine qua non of the good life. Indeed, any teacher can testify that parents and students have cultivated an indifference to preparation for school that would have been unthinkable in earlier generations. Why should disciplined student-hood be valued when social promotion is the rule rather than the exception—a rule that allows too many students who are functionally illiterate to move effortlessly through the public education system?

The educational phenomena that would evoke the phrase “Only in America” today would include the following

Only in America would pre-college schooling be seen as a sanctuary for the preservation of the mirage of an idyllic childhood rather than as a thoroughgoing and rigorous preparation for entrance to responsible adulthood and citizenship.

Only in America would requiring mastery of the native language for high school graduation be considered unfair.

Only in America would an educational bureaucracy flourish that is dedicated to the ways in which students are *incapable* of learning.

Only in America would academic competitions be managed to produce all winners and no losers.

Only in America would fringe groups be allowed, even encouraged, to influence the content of textbooks and curriculum.

Only in America would demands of amateurs or local control of schools be seen as more important than rigorous national standards determined by competent professional scholars.

Only in America would walking across the stage at high school graduation be considered more important than truly completing all the specified requirements for graduation.

Only in America would the goal of schooling be a diploma rather than an education.

Only in America would second-language proficiency as a requirement for college graduation be debatable.

Only in America would the skills of school administrators as money-raisers or as public relations managers be considered more important than their competence as scholars and educators.

Only in America would requiring teachers to know abstract teaching methods be considered more important than requiring them to possess comprehensive knowledge of subject matter.

Only in America would homework assignments be considered an onerous imposition on the free time of students rather than an opportunity for them to perfect their knowledge through practice.

Only in America would the assertion that there is a national language be considered xenophobically divisive rather than communally enriching.

Only in America would an elected leader who fancies himself an “education president” joke about his inability to use the English language properly.

Only in America.

Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.