



Debunking Seven Myths About Public Education

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Myth #1: Public Education is “Failing”

Since the launch of Sputnik and especially since publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, public education in America has taken a beating from policymakers and the media, and conservative pundits have constantly predicted doom for the nation’s economy. Yet, public education produced the engineers who enabled the U.S. to win the space race, and our economy has been strong and resilient. Public education’s major role in these achievements should be celebrated, not ignored.

At the same time, it is true that schools educating low-income children face debilitating challenges caused by the highest poverty rates in the developed world and denial of essential resources, and this is indeed inimical to the civic and economic health of our country. We must extend the high achievement in suburban schools to our urban and rural schools, by implementing measures necessary to overcome the effects of poverty.

Myth #2: NAEP Scores are Flat

Over the past 35 years, black and Hispanic students have both achieved double-digit increases in all grades in both reading and math on NAEP* tests, and achievement gaps have narrowed. How, then, can critics claim that NAEP scores have been flat over those same 35 years? Simpson’s Paradox. Simpson's paradox occurs when population shifts hide rising scores. Scores for all subgroups are rising, but the overall average NAEP scores have moved only modestly upward because the lower scoring groups – students of color and students of low-income families – are now a much larger proportion of those being tested. On fourth grade reading tests, for example, black students have improved by 30 points, Hispanic students by 20 points, and white students by 15 points. The “average” increase was only 11 points!

* National Assessment of Educational Progress

Myth #3: Private and Charter Schools are Educating Kids Better

Private and charter schools do, on average, no better a job of educating children than public schools, and they sometimes do a worse job. NAEP scores of private school students are no better than those of public school students, after correcting for socio-economic background. The “benefits” of private schools may be nothing more than the benefits of attending schools with students from predominantly affluent backgrounds.

Stories of high-performing charter schools are frequently provided without context. At some charter schools, such as the KIPP academies, there is a high rate of student attrition; the students who have the most difficulty frequently leave (and return to their regular public schools). In addition, in KIPP schools and similar schools, students have *60 percent* more learning time, through a longer school day, weekend classes, and summer school. Comparing these schools to regular public schools is comparing apples to oranges. Bringing this model to scale would require a major influx of funds.

Myth #4: Per Pupil Spending on Education Has Tripled Since 1960

The landscape of public education has drastically changed since 1960, with most new spending going to programs that serve children who had been ignored by the system and who require special services. Beginning in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act added federal dollars targeted toward schools educating low-income children. In 1974, English language learners secured the right to appropriate services if they attend public schools, and in 1975 Congress began to require public schools to provide services to students with disabilities. Between 1960 and 1978, inflation-adjusted per pupil expenditures on public education increased much more rapidly than they have in the years since then. Furthermore, the costs of services, such as education, have a much faster rate of inflation than the CPI (the traditional measure). Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute has estimated that since the 1960's, "real school spending" has grown nearly *40% slower* than many pundits claim.

Myth #5: The U.S. Spends More on Education than Other Nations

Among the 30 countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – a body that comprises the world's most affluent nations – the United States ranks fourth in per pupil spending on K-12 education; this is not an unreasonable position to hold. In addition, about 8 percent of U.S. education spending is for health insurance, while other nations account for these costs in their health systems. Finally, if one instead looks at preprimary-secondary education expenditures as percent of GDP, which some economists think is a better measure of education spending, the United States falls to 14th.

Myth #6: U.S. Schools Are Asked To Do No More than Other Nations' Schools

Social policy in the United States stands in sharp contrast to that of most other developed nations. While most of these nations have an array of supportive social services to help families and children in poverty, the U.S. looks primarily to its schools to help children overcome the barriers to opportunity caused by poverty. Seven million children in the United States (one in every nine) have no health insurance coverage, whereas nearly all other developed nations have universal health coverage. One in five children in the U.S. live in poverty; among blacks and Hispanics, child poverty is one in three. In Western Europe, this figure averages less than 10 percent. The U.S. also faces a large and growing need to educate students who are not native English speakers. Eleven percent of students nationwide receive English Learner services.

Myth #7: International Test Scores Predict Future Success

The focus of U.S. policymakers on test scores is moving in the opposite direction of other nations. Educators from high-scoring nations in Asia recognize that test scores measure only limited learning and not the *skills* students need to be successful. As Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the minister of Education from top-scoring Singapore has said: "There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well – like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition."

Xu Ziwang, one of Goldman Sachs's first mainland Chinese partners, told the *New York Times* about the job performance of top Chinese university graduates: "There's a price for 12 years of prep for an exam, and that's to always think there's a narrow, right answer. If you give precise instructions, they do well. If you define a task broadly, they get lost and ask for help." Many educators in the U.S. agree: too much emphasis on test scores and "right answers" is actually having a detrimental effect on American education.