

A P P E N D I X 1 0

Public School Facts

Dispelling Some Common Myths

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A December 2000 column by *Washington Post* Education Reporter Jay Mathews provides a simple, yet effective rebuttal to the broad-brush criticisms of public schools that public school advocates should remember: “Whatever their problems, American public schools are educating a bigger slice of society at a higher level than has ever been achieved in human history. That should be worth a favorable word or two.”¹

A bit of investigative work by Mathews also illustrates how easily misinformation about American education can spread. In late 2000, the group Campaign for America’s Children, headed by Wall Street financier and voucher advocate Ted Forstmann, ran a \$20 million television and print ad campaign criticizing public schools and essentially promoting vouchers. The group’s Web site included this shot: “Despite a 14-fold increase in inflation-adjusted spending since 1920 ... test scores have stagnated or declined, and our international rankings in math and science are at the bottom among industrialized nations.”² The statement echoed a typical theme by voucher advocates, who claim the United States spends too much money on education and gets too little in return.

But Mathews uncovered a problem with the Web site statement. “The only flaw in this widely held belief is that it has almost no basis in fact,” he wrote. When Mathews asked for evidence of flat or falling test scores since 1920, the organization could only refer him to a book by education analyst Diane Ravitch. Yet Ravitch confirmed to Mathews that she made no such claims of test scores’ “stagnation” since 1920. Mathews correctly points out that the past 80 years have been “a period in which literacy rates, high school graduation rates and college attendance rates soared in the United States.” Forstmann’s organization removed the incorrect allegation after Mathews’ inquiries.³

Another example of false information taking on a life of its own concerned adult literacy rates. In recent years, reading foundations, business executives, think tanks, and others have claimed that 20 percent of American adults are illiterate. A 1999 advertisement in *The Washington Post* stated, “40 Million People in America Can’t Read This,” while *USA TODAY* ran a front-page article in 2000 declaring that one in five high school graduates could not read their diploma.⁴ Public school critics had more ammunition to make their frequent allegation about the “dumbing down” of American education.

But as a *Washington Post* article later revealed, these claims were simply wrong.⁵ The mistaken assumptions originated from a 1993 federal study that found that 20 percent of U.S. adults with a high school diploma scored in the lowest scale on a literacy test. The project director of that study said people drew incorrect conclusions about what the lowest scale scores actually meant. For example, among the adults deemed by some to be “illiterate,” 70 percent read a newspaper every week. “This is not illiteracy,” the study’s director said.⁶

Student Achievement on the Rise

American students today are performing better in reading, math, and science than did their peers from three decades ago, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), called the nation's report card.

- Between 1971 and 1999, NAEP reading scores increased for students in all three age groups tested (9, 13, and 17). The recent scores were significantly higher for 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds—despite the fact that the number of different types of reading materials in the home decreased for students in all age groups between 1971 and 1999. NAEP also found that fewer 17-year-olds saw adults reading in their home in 1999 than in 1984.
- NAEP math scores increased significantly for students ages 9, 13, and 17 between 1973 and 1999. Math scores in 1999 were at their highest levels ever for all three age groups.
- NAEP science scores increased for students ages 9, 13, and 17 between 1977 and 1999. The recent scores were significantly higher than those in 1977 for all three age groups.
- NAEP scores have risen notably for minority students in the past three decades. For example, reading and math scores are up for African-American and Hispanic students in all three age groups. The achievement gap in reading and math between white and African-American students has narrowed in all age groups since the early 1970s. Science scores have risen among African-American students at age 9 and 13 and for Hispanic students in all age groups. The achievement gap in science between white and African-American students narrowed since 1970 for 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds.

(Source: NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance, August 2000)

Record Numbers Taking College Entrance Exams

Although more students than ever before are taking the nation's college entrance exams (the SAT and ACT), scores are at their highest levels in three decades. Record numbers of students took the SAT in 2001, and one-third were minorities—the highest percentage in history. Record numbers of students also took the ACT in 2001. While just 40 percent of all 18-year-olds took the SAT or ACT in 1976, 59 percent did so in 2001.

The average math score on the SAT in 2002 was at its highest level in 32 years.

The average verbal score on the SAT has remained steady since the late 1980s despite far more students taking the exam, including those for whom English is not their first language. The 2002 average verbal score was higher than in 1990 and about equal to the score in 1979.

The average score on the ACT has held steady in recent years and has not declined in more than a dozen years, despite the fact that the number of students taking it has increased by almost 30 percent during that time. In 2001, almost 64 percent of ACT-tested graduates had completed a core academic curriculum (four years of English and three years each of math, natural sciences, and social sciences), a record high. Just over half of ACT-tested graduates had done so in 1991.

(Sources: The College Board and ACT.)

U.S. Students Compare Favorably with International Peers

American fourth-graders outscored students from every country except Finland on an international reading exam.

(Source: "Who Puts the Standards into Standardized Tests?" The New York Times, July 18, 2001.)

American eighth-graders scored above the international average in math and science, according to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study-Repeat survey.

(Source: TIMSS-R, 1999.)

Students Taking More Challenging Coursework

Far more 12th-graders are taking Advanced Placement exams than their peers from the 1980s. The number of students taking A.P. exams more than doubled between 1984 and 1997. Among African-American students the rate more than quadrupled, and among Hispanic students it more than tripled during that time span.

(Source: The Condition of Education, 1999, National Center for Education Statistics.)

More students are taking advanced courses in math, science, English, and foreign languages since the early 1980s. Between 1982 and 1999, the number of high school graduates taking advanced courses in English and foreign languages increased by 30 percent; the proportion taking advanced math rose from 26 percent to 41 percent; and the percentage taking advanced physics increased from 31 percent to 60 percent.

(Source: "U.S. education report faults progress of students as flat," Washington Times, June 1, 2001.)

The percentage of college-bound seniors taking pre-calculus rose from 33 percent in 1992 to 45 percent in 2002.

(Source: "SAT Math Gains, Verbal Drops Reflect High School Curricula," Education Daily, Aug. 28, 2002)

Graduation Rates on the Rise—U.S. a World Leader in Graduation Rates

The United States is first among the world's seven richest countries in the percentage of adults who are high school graduates.

(Source: "Report opens window on U.S. education," Associated Press report in Raleigh News & Observer, June 1, 2001.)

The high school graduation rate reached a record high, 86.5 percent, in 2001.

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001. The Census Bureau tracks the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who graduated from high school or earned an equivalency diploma.)

The percentage of U.S. adults ages 25 or older with a high school diploma (or equivalency diploma) was at an all-time of 83 percent in 1999. By comparison, less than 25 percent of Americans had completed high school in 1940.

(Source: "Number of Americans Finishing High School Hits All-Time High, Education Week, Sept. 27, 2000.)

Nearly 80 percent of African-Americans over age 25 have a high school diploma today, compared to just 50 percent in 1980 and just 37 percent in 1960.

(Source: "Closing the Education Gap," Wall Street Journal, June 2, 2002.)

More Students Attending College and Graduating

The percentage of all adults who earned a bachelor's degree by age 29 increased between 1983 and 1998 from 26 percent to 31 percent.

(Source: The Condition of Education, 1999, National Center for Education Statistics.)

Approximately 17 percent of African-Americans have a college degree today, more than double the percentage in 1980 and up from just 3 percent in 1960.

(Source: "Closing the Education Gap," Wall Street Journal, June 2, 2002.)

63 percent of high school graduates go to college immediately after graduation, the highest percentage in U.S. history.

(Source: "Report: Greater Percentage of Americans Educated," USA TODAY, June 5, 2002.)

Public School Bureaucracy Smaller Than Business Bureaucracy

Contrary to frequent claims that public schools have a glut of high-paid administrators, the private sector actually has more administrators per employee, according to the Educational Research Service. For example, the manufacturing sector employed 5.8 people for every executive, administrator, or manager in 1999. In the communications industry, administrators

supervised just 3.6 employees. In contrast, there were 12.8 employees per administrator in elementary and secondary schools.

(Source: John Marlowe, "Mythbusters: What's wrong with American education? A lot less than the critics charge," *American School Board Journal*, July 2000.)

Endnotes

¹ "Class Struggle: U.S. Schools Not as Bad as Portrayed," *Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 2000.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Millions of adults illiterate no more," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2001.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.