

Responding to disinformation about public schools

Since the Reagan Administration's 1984 report on education, "A Nation at Risk," attacks on public education and the performance of American students have become commonplace. Dr. David Berliner, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the College of Education at Arizona State University, grew weary of these unsubstantiated attacks and has collected data to refute some of the charges.

The material below is excerpted from his paper, "Education Reform in an Era of Disinformation," first presented at a 1992 conference of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Charge: Today's youth are not as smart as students used to be.

Response: This statement is false.

Intelligence test scores in the U.S. are up. Since 1932 the mean IQ of white Americans ages 2 to 75 has risen three points per year. Today's students actually average about 141 IQ points higher than their grandparents did, and seven points higher than their parents. The number of students with IQs above 145 (designated as "genius" level) is now about 18 times greater than it was two generations ago.

Charge: The Scholastic Aptitude Test has shown a marked decrease in mean score over the last 20 years, indicating the failure of our schools and our teachers to do their jobs

Response: This is a patently misleading statement.

The SAT performance of students who match those who took the test in 1975 has increased significantly. This is true even though the Education Testing Service, the developers of the SAT tests, has admitted that the SAT is more difficult today than it was in 1975. The decline referred to can be easily explained by the increases in the number of students in the bottom 60% of their class who have been taking the test.

As educational opportunities and higher education became available to rural Americans and to members of traditionally under-represented minorities, more of these students started taking the SAT. Since they are more frequently poor and from schools that offered poorer academic curriculum, it is not surprising that they tended to attain lower scores than advantage, suburban, middle-class white students. However, from 1975 to 1990, the mean SAT scores of high school students in each demographic group (white, African-American, Asian-American, Native American, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican) have gone up steadily.

Charge: The performance of American students on standardized achievement tests reveals gross inadequacies. Despite our best efforts and increased expenditures, test scores for many schools stay below the nation's average.

Response: This is false.

Data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that since the 1970s modest gains have been the rule. The NAEP tests are given to a national



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sample 9,13,17 year olds in mathematics, science, reading, writing, geography, and computer skills. In an analysis completed by the Sandia National Laboratory, researchers state unequivocally that the "national data on student performance does not indicate a decline in any area."

Further, when we investigate the way in which achievement levels are set by the companies which developed standardized tests, we find that it takes a higher score now to hit the average rank than it did in previous decades. For example, on average, students in the 1980s had to score higher on these tests to reach the achievement level of similar students in the 1970s. Test-makers have consistently raised the base-line scores of their tests (a process known as renorming) to accommodate the annual gains made by successive waves of students. As a result, around 85% of today's public school students score higher on standardized tests of achievement than did their parents. But the high-jump bar keeps getting higher, and it takes a higher jump today than it did in 1965 to hit the average score.

Charge: Money doesn't matter. There is no relationship between the amount of money spent on education and the productivity of the schools.

Response: Money has been shown to be important in several ways.

When we compare the percentage of high school seniors who take the SAT in each state with the money spent by each state on education, we find that the highest spending states posted scores that were below the lowest spending states. But those same high spending states posted a 1,150 percent increase in the number of high school seniors taking the SAT.

There is additional evidence about the positive influence of money on education. In one study the salaries currently being earned by individuals were matched to the educational expenditures of the states where they received their schooling. It was found that states that spent the most produced students that had also earned the most.

Other studies have found that higher teacher salaries attracted teaching candidates with higher academic ability and that this academic proficiency of teachers explains 25% of the difference across districts in the average scores made by students on academic achievement tests. The smarter the teacher, the smarter their students appear to be. Further, teachers with more years of experience have students with higher test scores, lower drop-out rates, and higher rates of taking the SAT. The effects are such that an increase of 10% in the number of teachers with nine or more years experience within a district can be expected to reduce drop-out rates by about 4% and increase the percentage of students taking the SAT by 3%.

The influence of money can also be reflected in class size. One researcher found that each additional pupil over 18 students caused district academic achievement to fall significantly. Thus, the average performance of a typical fourth grade class of 25 students could be predicted to score a full one-third below a similar class with only 18 students.

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