

Five popular myths about America's public schools

According to the Educational Research Service, there are five popular myths about public education. Glen Robinson and David Brandon explore these myths in their article, "Perceptions about American education: Are They Based on Facts?"

Myth #1: Do SAT scores show a decline in achievement? The SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) was designed to predict a student's potential for success in college, not to directly measure achievement. "The SAT was not designed as a measure of the educational quality of American schools over a period of time or of the relative quality of education among specific states, school districts or schools" (p.2). It is true that the average SAT score began to decline in the 60s, bottomed out in the 70s, improved slightly in the 80s, and remains relatively stable in the 90s. The question is, why?

The major factor affecting average SAT scores is who and what percentage of students take the test. The facts show that in 1972 "more students taking the SAT ranked academically in the top 20 percent of their high school graduating classes, while in 1990 there were substantially more students ranking in the second and third academic levels of their high school graduation classes who took the test" (p.3). In addition, in 1981, 33 percent of high school graduates took the SAT while in 1990, 40 percent took it. "Thus, although an increased portion of students in lower academic class ranks and a higher percentage of students overall have taken the SAT, mean scores have remained relatively stable in recent years. Rather than indicating failure, the scores would indicate an accomplishment of American education" (p.3).

Myth #2: Are schools costing more and producing less? The authors say the relationship between school costs and pupil achievement is not simple and direct. School costs are determined not just by the number enrolled, but by the individual characteristics and special education needs of students. The number of students enrolled in special education classes has "...increased dramatically. The per pupil cost for special education is more than twice the cost of general education" (p.13).

In recent years, public schools have been given "many additional responsibilities by court order, federal guidelines, and state mandates, which involve substantial additional costs that are often unrelated to total school enrollment" (p.13). This includes asbestos removal and increased school security measures. Finally, "in general, public school students today are performing significantly better on standardized achievement tests than the average scores of their parents a generation ago" (p.13).

"Thus while public schools are producing more academic learning than ever before, they are also providing a wide variety of programs that have not been previously included in the popular concept of the neighborhood school" (p.12).

Myth #3: Could money spent on administration be redirected to improve schools? The authors indicate that local school districts are major enterprises performing public functions with substantially fewer management personnel than found in business and industry. For example, the ratio of workers to supervisors in the transportation industry is 10:1, in the food product industry 8:1, in the manufacturing industry and in the communication industry 5:1. In education the ratio is less than 14.5:1 (p.15). "The facts show that there is not a large bureaucracy or administrative overhead that could be substantially reduced" (p.15).

Finally, they report that "data indicate clearly that in the typical



a jcea backgrounder

school district's budget there is little, if any, money presently going to administration that could be realistically reallocated to improve other functions and programs" (p.19).

Myth #4: Is business bearing the brunt of remediation or re-education? According to one study, only 14 percent of businesses even offer remedial education to their employees (p.21). Most prefer to simply keep looking for more qualified employees.

Secondly, the majority of training dollars are spent on the college educated, not on the frontline workers. Only 34 percent of all training dollars (including job training other than remediation) are spent on the 70 percent of non-college-educated work force (p.21). They also point out that the costs involved amount to "no more than a few hundred dollars per person" (p.22) and a relatively small amount of that goes to remediation. "Only two percent of those responding consider remedial training an urgent need for the immediate future" (p.22).

Their research supports the belief that American businesses are not suffering from a basic academic skill deficit in the workplace and that, while the outcry is for highly skilled technical workers, people skills and personal qualities are emphasized by business as desired skill areas. Finally, the authors point out that the quality of America's work force is high in productivity time spent at work and level of education (p.24).

Myth #5. Should our education system be more like Japan's? Robinson and Brandon explain that to understand this issue one has to look closely at the cultural elements involved. "One important cultural difference is the valuing of ethnic unity and social conformity....These characteristics greatly simplify Japan's education challenge compared with those faced by multi-ethnic nations such as the U.S." (p.25).

Secondly, "Japan focuses on the group, while Americans focus on the individual" (p.26). In American schools that translates into teacher responsibilities for addressing individual student needs which necessitates smaller classes and different teaching strategies. Third, a very important cultural difference in Japan emphasizes the importance of effort, while American schools focus on the aptitude and ability of students. Because Japanese culture emphasizes effort and provides opportunities for all students who "try hard," there are no special programs for either gifted or special education students. "Traditionally, Americans have valued education but have not typically had a passion for academic learning. In fact, often there are pressures for American students not to achieve, not to appear 'too smart,' or be known as an 'egghead'" (p.27).

Other differences are that in Japan nearly 50 percent of all funding comes from the national level, while in the U.S. only about 6.2 percent is federally funded. Second, "Japanese respect for teachers is reflected in a salary structure in which beginning teacher salaries are higher than those of beginning engineers, businessmen, and other professions. "In contrast in the U. S., teachers' salaries are extraordinarily compressed when compared to other occupations demanding college degrees. They start low and remain low" (p.27). Third, "Japanese parents, especially mothers, provide enormous support for the education of their children, from birth through the final examination. In contrast, societal changes in work and in family composition in the U.S. have greatly reduced the role of parents in the education of their children" (p.29).

There are differences in comparative international test scores. These differences, however, appear to be more curricular in nature and result from decisions each country has made about "what should be taught to which group of students" (p.30). **(1993)**