

Comments to Northwestern D.C. Journalism Class, November 5, 2007

1. Introductions.
2. Comments on journalists.
3. Paraphrase of a comment in a *New York Times* article by Paul Krugman: "Memo to editors: If [someone] says something completely false, it's not 'in dispute.'" In other words, the opinions on both sides of the issue are not equal. There is a correct answer. As you gather information in your reporting, the challenge will be to distinguish between several types of information: (1) factual information/research findings that are well-supported (e.g., school choice findings); (2) research information based on flawed studies (e.g., international test-score comparisons); (3) policy implications drawn from research findings, but which are irrelevant to those findings (e.g., the U.S. will not be able to compete economically because of its ranking on international mathematics tests); (4) rhetoric (e.g., "no child left behind"); and (5) value judgments that are a matter of opinion and cannot be "proved" one way or the other (e.g., should we have elite tracks for the highest-achieving students?). *Distribute quote from Aristotle ("Politics," 330 B.C.).* As we discuss various issues today, I would like you to think about how these various categories apply.
4. Discussion organized around a set of myths (only a few of many). These myths did not originate with journalists, but journalists have often played a major role in disseminating them. I will bring in international examples to place U.S. education in a broader context.

- *Myth: We can "fix" our schools without addressing the problems of poverty.*

The "achievement gap" is the most significant problem in all countries and accounts for about 75% of the variation among schools in the U.S.

Other factors: social policies, school finance, tracking (e.g., Germany, Sweden (and definition of greed), U.S.

Equity advances in most countries; but the achievement gap remains the most important educational problem in all countries. (Dave Grissmer's RAND study is relevant.)

- *Myth: Other countries have found the "magic bullet" for strengthening schools and have accomplished this without facing any tough choices.*

(And often described as “Europe does it this way” as if Europe were one country.)

**Centralization/decentralization:** France, Sweden, Israel, Turkey, Russia, China. **Continued decentralization:** Canada, Australia, Germany. **Decentralization to centralization:** England.

**Tough choices:**

**Parental contributions to public schools:** South Africa, U.S.

**Student tracking:** England, U.S.

**Testing practices:** China.

- *Myth: School choice will solve our education problems, or—conversely—it will destroy our education system.*

**Research findings from U.S. and other countries:** achievement, stratification, parental views.

- *Myth: International test-score comparisons are valid measures of (1) the quality of education and (2) international competitiveness.*

**General description/sampling/societal context, especially poverty.**

**Implications drawn for the quality of our education system and for international competitiveness:** Sputnik; no evidence that countries with high scores are our main economic competitors, wages, etc.

- *Myth: We can overcome our educational problems by holding educators accountable for student test-scores.*

**An educator interviewed for a study we conducted put it this way (paraphrased):** We expect our schools to solve the problems of poverty. And now we expect tests to solve the problems of our schools. By inference, therefore, we expect tests to solve the problems of poverty.

**International Perspective:**

**First, to put *No Child Left Behind* in context:** Few countries hold educators accountable for students’ test scores, and I am aware of no country that has accountability requirements similar to those found in NCLB. Ironies of (1) lack of accountability practices in many of the countries we most admire and (2) flexibility and rote learning.

**Most countries: Testing (typically subject matter tests) used for tracking, student selection into academic secondary schools, and university admission, but not to hold educators accountable. Testing creates a lot of anxiety in all countries.**

**Examples:**

**England, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Singapore (including physical fitness and weight!).**

**Japan, China, Germany, Sweden, Canada, France (more than 60% of the population earns the *baccalaureat*; the Ecole Nationale d'Administration—ENA—is the elite school).**

**Positive and Negative Incentives created by NCLB:**

**More focus, more attention to students who have previously been ignored; narrowed curriculum, student placement and retention decisions, attention to students closest to meeting proficiency goals, increased problems in recruitment and retention in high-poverty communities (examples of findings from dissertations).**

**Problems in interpreting test-score comparisons:**

*Distribute SAT/NAEP rankings.*

**What else can affect test scores in addition to poverty and student selection? Practice effects (and new tests), tutoring, difficulty of tests and proficiency cutoffs/ state tests/NAEP differences, year by year fluctuations.**

*African American SAT scores in Montgomery County.*

*New York City test scores and graduation rates.*