

Education: The Crisis Is Real

Just as most Americans are beginning to take our education crisis seriously, we are faced with a number of articles implying the education crisis is a hoax. One such article, by Iris C. Rotberg [op-ed, Nov. 21], who is identified as having directed research programs for the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Education, says that "international test comparisons . . . are seriously flawed and irrelevant."

Rotberg claims that, in these studies, the U.S. scores reflect the achievement of *all* our students—from top to bottom. Other countries that allow a cross section to be tested also look bad. Those who look best send only their best students to be tested.

But even if Rotberg is right about these tests being flawed, that does not mean U.S. students are doing well. The tests are only one piece of evidence, and Rotberg ignores other evidence that would not support her case. She doesn't talk about the small number of students with high SAT math scores. And she doesn't talk about the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores over 20 years, which show that only 5 percent of our high school graduates are ready for college math, as against 30 percent of students in Germany and 25 percent in France.

Additional evidence can be found in the small percentage of college students who take math courses, the number of college students who have to take remedial courses and the testimony of college professors on the competence of their students. It can also be found by looking at the demanding exams students in competitor nations like France and Germany pass in order to be admitted to university and comparing them with the SAT and ACT exams our students

take. Rotberg challenges one piece of evidence but ignores a host of others.

The other major argument Rotberg makes is that the "quality of our scientific output and the skill of our science and engineering majors are extremely high." But she gives no evidence that we are maintaining our lead in these areas. And even if she could demonstrate our continuing primacy, is it the result of scientists and engineers in the work force who went to college in the '40s, '50s and early '60s—before standards were radically changed? How much of this leadership is due to talented immigrants and is therefore a reflection of the excellence of our political—not our education—system?

Rotberg correctly points to crucial issues of poverty, disparities in education expenditures between rich and poor districts and the high cost of higher education, all of which can be barriers to talented students who are poor. She also points to major problems in our economy and correctly says that none of these issues will be addressed by another round of international tests: "Nor will test comparisons provide a better education for low-income students who attend schools with inadequate resources."

It's true that getting a temperature reading does not cure the patient, but it gives us important information to act on. And in the case of U.S. education, it is especially important to get this reading. It tells us that not only are the kids at the bottom of the economic ladder doing poorly; those at the top, who constitute some of the most advantaged kids who ever walked the face of the Earth, aren't learning much either.

—Albert Shanker

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the American Federation of Teachers.*