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LETTER

Global Education Myths

A Commentary Author Responds

To the Editor:

My recent Commentary **"Quick Fixes, Test Scores, and the Global Economy"** (June 11, 2008) elicited **two letters** to the editor, both in the July 16, 2008, issue, to which I would like to respond.

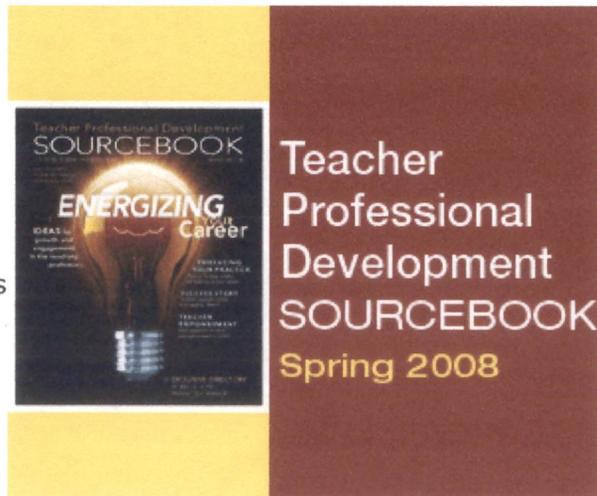
I am grateful to Eric A. Hanushek for providing an example of the use of "straw man" arguments that will serve as an excellent case study in my classes. Rather than commenting on each of the straw men embedded in his letter, I will limit my comments to two points.

Mr. Hanushek argues that "we have clear scientific evidence that the growth of national economies is strongly related to the skills of the population as measured by international math and science assessments." He further states that "while some developing countries do not have universal secondary education (and thus, by implication, have spotty test-taking on international tests), neither do we have universal secondary education." Two points are worth noting. First, China and India, two countries currently perceived as our main economic competitors, do not participate in the international math and science assessments. Second, although American graduation rates in some high-poverty communities leave a lot to be desired, I'm sure Mr. Hanushek is aware that our problems in this area are not in the same league as those, say, in China, where less than half the age group is even enrolled in upper-secondary school, or in India, where less than a third is enrolled.

In his letter, Neal P. McCluskey questions the existence of large inequalities in school resources. Yes, it is true that average per-pupil expenditures do not vary greatly based on district poverty levels. But these comparisons mask the major differences in resources available to children attending high-poverty schools as compared with those in more affluent schools.

First, a comparison of national averages masks the significant variation in spending among states, among school districts, and among schools within districts. This variation often works to the disadvantage of children in high-poverty schools. Millions of high-poverty children go to schools with substantially lower per-pupil expenditures compared with other schools in the same district, the same metropolitan area, or other parts of the country. These students will

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not be helped by data showing roughly comparable levels of average per-pupil spending.

Second, a comparison of averages masks the fact that high-poverty districts have a far greater proportion of students who require special, and more expensive, services—students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities, and low-income students. Funds are typically insufficient to cover the needs of these children. Moreover, the amount left to serve the remaining students is less than the amount that would be available to them in more affluent districts.

Third, comparisons of average per-pupil expenditures also mask the fact that students in high-poverty schools are less likely to have highly qualified teachers, more likely to have teachers teaching out of field, and more likely to be educated in substandard facilities, with less access to books and computers—amenities that their more affluent peers take for granted.

Mr. McCluskey argues that the “ ‘resource inequalities’ myth is one that needs a lot more bustin’.” Unfortunately, that “myth” remains all too true.

Iris C. Rotberg

*Research Professor of Education Policy
Graduate School of Education and Human Development
George Washington University
Washington, D.C.*

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