Renegade Researchers Offer Rebuttal: U.S. Schools Are Better Than Many Say

By Susan Chira

April 8, 1992

Renegade Researchers Offer Rebuttal: U.S. Schools Are Better Than Many Say

A spirited debate leaves questions unanswered.

A Dropout Is Named Teacher of the Year

Kentucky Proves Crackdown on Local School Mismanagement, Charging 4 People

More Military Retirees Going Into Classrooms

See the article in its original context from
April 8, 1992, Section A, Page 23 Buy Reprints

VIEW ON TIMESMACHINE

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

Forget all the bad news about American schools. There is no crisis in American education, say a number of renegade researchers whose ideas have touched off a bitter debate with broad implications for education policy in an election year.

By falsely claiming that almost all American schools are failing, these critics charge, the Bush Administration and others divert attention and money from the real crisis: poor inner-city and rural schools.

The debate itself reveals how little Americans know about their schools' performance and how far away the country is from defining just how good its schools should be.

The defenders of American education wave a batch of surprising statistics: test scores and dropout rates have held steady for at least 15 years, the percentage of top-scoring students is roughly the same as it was 15 years ago, and comparisons that show American students trailing those in nearly every other country are distorted by faulty methodology. Improvement Since 1981?

"Most schools in America are better than they were in 1981," said Harold Hodgkinson, director of the Center for Demographic Policy, a research organization in Washington. "I'm interested in a focus on the worst kids in the worst schools. Given the fact that everyone agrees that the bottom third of our kids are awful, they get very little spent on them."

But the purveyors of bad news are regrouping, charging the renegades with complacency and fighting them statistic by statistic. Even if schools over all are not much worse than 15 years ago, they say, they are nowhere near good enough, and they still trail America's competitors.

"The critics are wrong in saying the schools are just as good as they ever were," said Diane Ravitch, an Assistant Secretary of Education. "That is deeply damaging; it inspires complacency and a false sense of self-esteem. To say we do as well today as we did 20 years ago -- our kids today are not going to be competing with their parents, but with children being educated in other countries."

Although most Americans probably believe that schools are worse than ever, the defenders of American schools argue that they are as good or even better than before. Many indicators -- test scores, dropout rates, the performance of the top-ranked students -- have varied little in the past 15 to 20 years, they say.

They believe that whatever declines do exist have occurred because schools now, unlike those of a generation or two ago, are trying to educate everybody -- more immigrants, more minorities, more students who once would have dropped out and gotten good jobs on the assembly line. And they say international comparisons are flawed because American students as a whole are being compared to other countries' elites.

For example, the number of 17-year-olds who complete high school rose from 10 percent in 1910 to about 75 percent in 1965 and has stayed at about that level since, said Gerald W. Bracy, an educational consultant and former researcher for the National Education Association, who cites as his source the National Center for Education Statistics. Even that figure understates the number of students who eventually receive a high school diploma or its equivalent, he says; 91 percent of the class of 1980 had done so by 1986, according to a Department of Education study.

Not only are more children staying in school, but more are going to college, and so it makes sense that scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test would dip somewhat, said Mr. Bracy and a report by the Sandia National Laboratories of Alburquerque, N.M., which is financed by the Department of Energy.

Since the 1960's, they argue, more white students with lower grade-point averages and lower ranks in class and more minority students who historically have not scored well on the tests have taken S.A.T.'s. This accounts for the 5 percent decline in average S.A.T. scores in the last 20 years, the Sandia report said. Even so, Mr. Hodgkinson said, S.A.T. scores of 31 states actually rose between 1980 and 1990.

Moreover, children are scoring at about the same level on the most reliable standardized tests -- the federally financed National Assessment of Educational Progress, widely known among educators as the nation's report card. Reading scores are about the same as they were 20 years ago. Math scores have held steady since 1973. Science scores are somewhat lower than they were in 1969, but scores of 9- and 17-year-olds have improved steadily during the 1980's. Both these tests and S.A.T. tests show that scores for minorities have also risen.

Mr. Bracey and Mr. Hodgkinson contend that America's top-scoring students do as well as ever. Scores on the Graduate Record Examinations, required for graduate school, have risen even though more students have taken them. Average scores on tests required to attend business schools also rose. The percentage of students scoring above 600 points (out of 800) on the S.A.T. math and verbal scores fell until 1975 but has held steady since.

Yet for virtually every statistic the researchers produce, critics of American schools offer a rebuttal. Scores on the "nation's report card" tests may have stayed about the same for 20 years, but they are stuck at low levels, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, part of the Department of Education. Still Not Good Enough?

While American schools still produce some brilliant students, Ms. Ravitch argues that even at the top there is reason to fear. The percentage of students who scored above 600 on the verbal S.A.T. may have stabilized since 1975, she says, but go back only three years, to 1972, and the numbers will show a drop of 35 percent in the last 20 years.

Many scholars argue that the researchers are right to say that schools have not gone downhill, but are drawing the wrong conclusions.

"It's true, but it's irrelevant," said Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, a Rochester research center. "Doing as well or slightly better than we used to do is doing appallingly badly relative to the rest of the world."

Here, too, the renegades contest conventional wisdom. Iris C. Rotberg, a senior social scientist at the Rand Corporation, argues that international science and mathematics comparisons are flawed because Americans are compared to other countries' elites, and curriculum differences are not weighed. Strong in Research

Although the tests indicate that, on the average, Americans trail all other students, comparisons from 1991 show that the top 10 percent of American students tested well compared with the top 10 percent of other countries. American scientists, Ms. Rotberg says, still account for one-third of all research papers -- far more than any other country.

While it may be true that existing international comparisons are imperfect, there is every reason to believe that America's major economic competitors are educating more of their students to a higher standard, said Ms. Ravitch, Mr. Tucker and a number of other scholars.

Some countries may have included only their elite students in math and science tests, but several of the United States' most important economic competitors, like Japan and South Korea, keep virtually all their students in school through age 16. Even if those countries tested only students in elite high schools, other researchers have found that Asian children are ahead of Americans in math as early as first grade.

Harold W. Stevenson, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, and his colleague, James W. Stigler, compared children's math performance in Japan, Taiwan and the United States over a 10-year period. They found that Asian children's scores were better in first grade, and that the older the children got, the further behind the Americans fell. Nor were many American children among the highest scorers, Mr. Stevenson said, so it was not just a question of the lesser students' bringing down the Americans' average.

"I'm convinced there's really a serious problem," said Mr. Stevenson, co-author with Mr. Stigler of "The Learning Gap," the new book about their study published by Summit Books. A 'Triage' in Education?

The debate, both sides say, has crucial implications for education policy. The revisionists argue that exaggerating the crisis in all American schools distorts policies that should be focused on poor schools where children are really failing.

"The top are doing as well as they need to," Mr. Hodgkinson said. "The middle are going to take care of themselves better than the lower third will. It's triage."

By contrast, the Bush education plan assumes that all schools must do better. "To say the only problem we have is inner-city schools is misleading," Ms. Ravitch said.

"There are lots and lots of good suburban schools where kids have not gotten a good education. It's not the inner-city kids who are dragging us down."

A debate about which schools are in trouble, Mr. Tucker said, misses the point. "Our competitors haven't made these choices" between the best and worst students, he said. Instead, they teach most of their citizens the skills they need to find productive jobs and lead full lives. For example, Mr. Tucker said, the top 2 percent of American students perform as well on math tests as the top 50 percent of Japanese students.

In the end, he said, what this debate reveals is how few answers there are to the important questions -- how well are schools and students doing compared with other nations, and how will Americans know when their schools are good enough?