

# U.S. SCHOOLS: THE BAD NEWS IS RIGHT

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By Diane Ravitch  
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The greatest obstacle to those who hope to reform American education is complacency. Most people believe that the schools were good enough when they were children and that they are good enough now.

But the dynamic growth of our system of education has spawned serious problems of educational quality. When you succeed at keeping almost everyone in school, you must figure out ways to educate everyone you keep in school.

Recently several researchers have nevertheless asserted that concern about the quality of American education is vastly overstated. Gerald Bracey, formerly of the National Education Association, argues that public schools in the United States have never been better. A group from the Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque asserts that all is well except for the schools in the inner cities. Iris Rotberg of the National Science Foundation (not speaking for that agency, which does not endorse her views) claims that the international assessments on which our students perform so poorly are invalid measures.

If the bearers of good news were right, we could all sit back and relax. Unfortunately, they are not.

Claiming that "achievement in American schools is as high as it has ever been," Bracey insists that there has been no SAT score decline. But there has been an SAT score decline, especially on verbal aptitude, during the past 20 years. In 1972, the SAT verbal average was 453, and the SAT math average was 484. In 1991, the SAT verbal reached a historic low of 422, while the SAT math leveled off at 474.

Both Bracey and Sandia hold that any apparent decline in the SAT score can be attributed to the addition of low-scoring minorities to the pool of test-takers. It is true that the percentage of minorities who take the test has grown from 16 percent in 1977 to 28 percent in 1991, and it

is also true that the average scores of minority test-takers are lower than the average scores of whites. But it is not true that this demographic change alone has dragged down the scores, because the white average fell by 10 points since 1976, the first year scores were available by ethnic group.

The SAT is a measure of developed ability, developed largely in school. The rising scores of black students (up by 19 points on the SAT verbal and by 31 points on the SAT math since 1976) demonstrate that the schools can, through deliberate policies, improve student achievement on the SAT and other tests.

Surely the addition of minority students is not the cause of the sharp drop-off of high-scoring students on the SAT verbal during the past 20 years. In 1972, 116,630 students scored higher than 600; by 1991, that number had fallen by 35 percent to 74,836. The high-scoring students were 11.4 percent of the test-takers in 1972, but only 7.2 percent in 1991. If this decline in verbal scores were attributable to more minority students taking the SAT, we would expect a similar decline in math scores. Yet during the same period, the number of high-scoring students in math remained stable.

Many studies have found that during this period, schools assigned less homework, textbooks contained easier vocabulary, required courses were often replaced by nonacademic electives, and grades were inflated. Are we to believe that these trends had no affect on student achievement?

Sandia and Rotberg belittle the importance of international assessments of mathematics and science, on which our students' performance has been lamentable. They claim that comparing our students with their counterparts in other countries is like comparing apples and oranges.

"We educate everyone," say the critics, "while they educate only their elites." This is not true for Japan, which retains even more students in high school than we do, and Japanese students consistently outperform ours. In fact, the designers of international assessments have taken care to point out what percentage of the age cohort is in school. In most cases, the comparison is clearly between oranges and oranges.

For example, in the international mathematics assessment of 1988, our 13-year-old students were compared with their counterparts in Ireland, Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada and Spain. In all six countries, enrollment for that age group is 99 percent. Our students received the lowest average scores of any nation in mathematics, but they registered highest in



believing that they were good at math.

When our best students are matched against their peers in other countries, they perform poorly. In an international science assessment in 13 countries, our elite 12th-grade students ranked near the bottom on tests of biology, chemistry and physics when tested with equivalent students from other nations. When our top one percent of students was matched against the top one percent in an international mathematics study in 1988, our students received the lowest scores.

Critics decry these international comparisons because, they say, our culture is different from that of other countries. They say it is not fair to compare ourselves to countries like Japan and Korea because they value education and we do not. But that misses the point. We should not be willing to accept current attitudes toward education as part of our culture. We must learn to place a higher value on education.

Or, say the critics, the international assessments are unfair because students in nations like Japan and Korea have a better curriculum than ours; their students get a steady dose of math and science from kindergarten through 12th grade. But that is an accurate description of the kind of change we must make to prepare our students for the 21st century.

Why do Asian students perform so much better than our own? According to Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, who has studied schools in the United States, Japan and China for more than a decade, the difference lies partly with the schools and partly with parental attitudes. In his studies of elementary school mathematics, Stevenson found that the highest-scoring American school ranked below the lowest-scoring Asian schools.

Asian schools expect more of students than ours do; there is more time for learning, and it is time better spent. Asian parents stress their children's effort, not their innate ability; American parents are more complacent, more easily satisfied than Asian parents, regardless of their children's performance in school.

It is possible to recognize the great successes of our schools in extending educational opportunity while acknowledging that we must improve the quality of education. We should not write off the poor performance of a large proportion of our children and attribute it to their race, gender or social class. We should not cry "unfair" when we don't like the results of international comparisons.

We must be prepared to learn from others, and we should not be satisfied until we can provide

an education of quality for all of our children. Opportunity without quality is an empty promise.

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