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## *We Know Where the Bad Schools Are*

In her Nov. 17 op-ed article "U.S. Schools: The Bad News Is Right," Diane Ravitch suggested that people like Gerald Bracey, Iris Rotberg and myself are advocating complacency as the proper attitude toward America's schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. What we are arguing is that the data used to frame the conventional wisdom—that all schools are in terrible shape—are questionable.

We know where the bad schools are—in the middle of our largest cities. Iris Rotberg does not advocate complacency but the careful comparison of many international dimensions, particularly teaching methods, which may be more reasonably assessed than test scores. I believe that Iris Rotberg would criticize the methodology even if American students were leading the world in test scores.

If one compares Scholastic Aptitude Test scores from 1981 and 1991, one finds that 32 states improved their scores during the decade on either verbal, math or both. The national SAT verbal declined by only two points in the 10 years, and math improved by eight points. Certain states made spectacular gains: Alabama went up 46 points in verbal and math combined, Louisiana, 39; Missouri, 36; South Carolina, 52; Hawaii, 29; the District, 47. I am not suggesting complacency. I am suggesting that we look at the states that

improved and find out how they did it. My data are for the past 10 years; Diane Ravitch opts for 20 years and neglects state score differences. Where you put your baseline is where you come out.

Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk," emphasis has been placed on how bad all schools are. What the small voices in the wind have been trying to get heard is a different idea: Tarring all schools with the same brush is misleading, encouraging political strategies like allowing one "New American School" for each congressional district. Most Americans now live in the 30-plus largest metro areas in the nation. In the suburban areas of these metro centers we find most of the nation's best schools. In the core cities, we find most of the nation's worst schools. Why do we not use federal leadership to target people, ideas and finances to these most difficult of schools in order to improve the academic performance of their students?

No one is advocating complacency. No one is recommending that we "write off the poor performance of a large proportion of our children," as Diane Ravitch believes. These are straw men. We know the minority of schools are in deep trouble. Why not target our efforts on the schools that can benefit from them the most?

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