

Why Do Our Myths Matter?

BY IRIS C. ROTBERG

Our K-12 policies are largely influenced by myths about the status of education in the United States compared to other countries. These myths originate from highly publicized test-score rankings that are used to argue that U.S. schools cannot compete with schools in other industrialized nations.

The public believes these rankings must be meaningful because, after all, they are based on “hard” data. Yet the fact is that the rankings tell us little about the quality of education in any country.

First, the rankings are compromised by the serious sampling problems inherent in conducting the comparisons. These problems make it virtually impossible to ensure the samples are comparable with respect to the representation of low-income students, language-minority students, special education students, poor regions of the country and vocational education programs.

Second, test-score comparisons — whether conducted across countries or within the same country — tell us a lot more about the socioeconomic status of the students taking the test than they do about the performances of principals and teachers.

Unfounded Premises

We compound our myths about test-score rankings with a variety of unsupported premises.

► *Other countries have discovered the “magic bullet” for raising test scores.*

Perhaps the solution can be found in Singapore’s approach to teaching mathematics or France’s emphasis on a centralized curriculum. Better yet, we might be able to find the country with the “best” education system and transplant its practices here.

The fact is we cannot change our education system without first defining what we mean by “best,” a value judgment that depends on our beliefs about how our society should be structured. Do we value most high test scores in math and science? For what proportion of the students? How much time should schools spend on literature, foreign languages, history, music, and arts and community service programs? How important are strict test-score cutoffs to determine grade promotion and graduation? Elite tracks for the highest-achieving students? Do we want higher education to be accessible and affordable for 20 percent or 80 percent of the population? How important are programs designed to meet students’ individual needs? Inclusion of students with disabilities? A system integrated by socioeconomic status? Equitable distribution of resources? A voucher system?

These are controversial matters and go to the heart

of our value systems and traditions. The policy choices we make involve difficult tradeoffs among conflicting values. The fact is we cannot have it all.

► *Our educational problems are unique.*

The reality is that countries throughout the world are struggling with the same basic problem — the large achievement gap between children from high-poverty families and their more affluent peers. Poverty is the main correlate of low educational achievement in all countries. Educational policies can exacerbate or reduce the gap but cannot eliminate it.

Germany, for example, has a high achievement gap based on socioeconomic status, in part influenced by its heavily tracked education system, which sorts children into separate schools as early as 5th grade. The gap in the United States, although lower than Germany’s, is considerably higher than Sweden’s — not surprising, given Sweden’s much lower income and wealth gap, its social service system and its more equitable school-finance system. But even in Sweden the achievement gap based on socioeconomic status remains the basic educational problem.

Driven By Tests

► *We can overcome our problems by holding educators accountable for students’ scores on standardized tests.*

It is argued if we simply hold educators accountable, we can overcome the factors contributing to low educational achievement.

The fact is the countries we most admire for their high rankings (for example, Canada, Finland, France, Japan and Sweden) rarely hold educators responsible for students’ test scores, and some do not use standardized tests at all in elementary or middle school, except for purposes of monitoring student achievement trends.

I am aware of no country that has accountability requirements similar to those found in No Child Left Behind. It is clear, moreover, that our current focus on test-based accountability has detracted attention from the much more basic issues of child poverty and the inequitable distribution of educational resources, which disadvantages mostly students from the poorest families.

Why do myths matter? If we define our problems based on misleading information, questionable assumptions and unarticulated value judgments, we will inevitably choose remedies that are irrelevant or counterproductive to solving the most important problems.

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