

ECF Education Briefs

Issues in Public Education: Research and Analysis
from the Education Consumers Foundation

August 2001 • v1n8

Schoolbook Simplification and Its Relation to the Decline in SAT-Verbal Scores

By Donald P. Hayes, Loreen T. Wolfer, and Michael F. Wolfe

American Educational Research Journal, 33(2), 1996, pp. 489-508

Found online at http://education-consumers.org/research/briefs_0801.htm



Education Consumers Foundation

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209
www.education-consumers.org

Schoolbook Simplification and Its Relation to the Decline in SAT-Verbal Scores

Donald P. Hayes, Loreen T. Wolfer, and Michael F. Wolfe

Eighth grade reading materials of today are no more difficult than the 5th grade texts of 1945.

That is exactly what is reported in one of education's most widely respected journals.

Writing in the *American Educational Research Journal*, Cornell University researchers D. P. Hayes, L. T. Wolfer, and M. F. Wolfe show that not only are reading levels lower but that a well-intentioned schoolbook simplification of the late 1940s may have created the broad-based educational decline that the education standards movement has been trying to reverse for over a decade.

Between 1963 and 1979, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores dropped abruptly and unexpectedly. The SAT was and is America's best-known college entrance exam and declining scores indicated that students were increasingly less well prepared for college. It was the single most visible indicator that something was wrong in America's schools. Suspected causes included everything from family birth order to weak discipline, poor nutrition, excessive television, and even lead poisoning. An increase in the number of disadvantaged students going to college became the most popular explanation among educators. In truth, it now seems likely that the problem was self-inflicted.

Using a computer-based assessment of elementary school reading books, Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe show that SAT-Verbal scores began to decline sharply as students who were taught with the easier schoolbooks began to enter college. Publishers began simplifying schoolbooks shortly after World War II because American reading experts believed that simplification would make schooling accessible to a broader range of students. Popular educational doctrines of the time called for reducing the academic curriculum to a lower common denominator. British educators, by contrast, did not adopt the trend until 1963—some years after it had gained sway in the U. S.

Hayes and his colleagues examined American and British newspapers from as early as 1665 and found reading levels to be remarkably stable. Over three centuries they increased by only one unit of difficulty per century. By comparing schoolbooks with newspapers, the authors were able to measure changes in the relative difficulty of school reading materials.

Beginning in the late forties, elementary textbooks were made easier by reducing the length and complexity of sentences and by eliminating unusual words. In fact, the changes for grades one through three were so great that parents protested. Similar changes eventually took place in high school subjects as well. For example, today's twelfth grade English literature text has a lower reading difficulty level than seventh or eighth grade readers of the prewar era.

The Hayes study's "cumulative knowledge deficit hypothesis" predicted that "dumbed down" reading materials would reduce student familiarity with the knowledge base tapped by the SAT and, correspondingly,

undermine student preparedness for college. In fact, roughly twelve years after the widespread adoption of the post-WW II textbook rewrites, SAT scores began a precipitous 16-year decline.

Critics like the late Jeanne Chall correctly identified the problem in 1967 but her assessment was largely dismissed. Hayes likens educators' unwillingness to accept the link between schoolbook simplification and the SAT decline to the longstanding refusal of tobacco companies to accept smoking's relationship to lung cancer.

Hayes' findings not only explain much about the present state of schooling, they implicate the education community's reliance on theory instead of rigorous research as a basis for the ill-fated decision--a habit that remains prevalent today. Moreover, they suggest that lay policymakers should be more mindful of the need for independent advice with regard to education policy decisions. Education's effects become visible only in the long term; and it is children, parents, and society who bear these consequences, not educators. As regulated monopolies, the public schools and their expert advisors are little affected no matter how faulty their decisions.

As proponents of higher standards have found, reintroducing a rigorous curriculum after decades of lowered expectations is very much of an uphill battle. Market forces govern the readability of schoolbooks so publishers are reluctant to redesign their offerings without clear support from both educators and policymakers. Yet such support is problematic. Most educators continue to be schooled in the doctrines that led to the flawed decisions of the 1940s; and despite education's well known history of fads and failures, lay officials continue to defer to the recommendations of education's in-house experts.

Clearly, the educational interests of parents and taxpayers are at risk if policy continues to be guided by the same kind of decision-making that led to the SAT decline and today's diminished curriculum. In the interest of avoiding more self-inflicted harm, policymakers should seek independent second opinions. At a minimum, prudence requires that they exercise both greater independence and greater diligence in the execution of their duties. Without it, the time-tested principle will apply: "Those who ignore the past are destined to relive it."

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com