

Appendix I: The Public is in the Dark

From Reversing American Decline (2013) by J. E. Stone

<https://education-consumers.org/research-areas/schooling-society/reversing-american-decline/>

Cutting Through the Fog of Misleading Data

The greatest barrier to a factual understanding of local school performance is the widely held perception that all is well. Surveys have repeatedly shown that most people understand that there are problems with public education but they believe that their local school or district is the fortunate exception. The evidence, however, is often otherwise and sometimes shockingly so. Most school districts have at least one failure factory—an unsurprising fact in light of the national statistics. Again, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“The Nation’s Report Card”) has for decades found that two out of three students have not mastered reading by the end of the fourth grade.⁴⁶

People think they are informed about their local schools because they often see reports in the local news. In truth, most of this information is a product of the well-funded efforts by school districts to build their image. Just like other large organizations, most school districts have a public relations officer and many have fully staffed PR offices. Their job is to propagate the good news and mitigate the bad. It is not uncommon for education reporters to move into the better paying district PR positions—further muting any unflattering coverage by the media.

School PR is no small enterprise. Most of what local people know about their local schools comes directly or indirectly from the steady stream of news releases that originate with the schools themselves. A PR office in a large district may have a staff of 10-15 or more. There is a National School Public Relations Association with chapters in 33 states. In addition to the organized PR efforts, parents and others in contact with school personnel and facilities typically form favorable impressions with regard to matters unrelated to student learning. All contribute to a sense of public satisfaction.

Prior to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, school district accountability for student achievement was optional. In most states, local school performance data was compiled and often reported only to the local school board. Most people, including most school board members, simply trusted that district leaders were monitoring school performance and ensuring that schools were doing all that could be done—given the available resources.

In retrospect, the acceptance of unaudited self-reports from schools may have signaled a certain public complacency about schooling outcomes. Inevitably, such reports maximized the good and minimized the bad and the ugly, thus the public and even school board members rarely understood the full dimensions of student achievement issues prior to recent years. School district control of local performance data and messaging have all contributed to the regulatory capture phenomenon.

⁴⁶ National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2011). Grade 4 State Results. Retrieved from http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/state_g4.asp?printver

John Jacob Cannell's 1987 discovery of "the Lake Woebegone effect" was one of the first red flags.⁴⁷ Cannell was the West Virginia physician who discovered that not only were the achievement test scores of West Virginia students grossly inflated but that the state averages of every state were above the national average!

As mandated public reporting has become commonplace and deficiencies more visible, employers, policymakers and the public have gradually become more skeptical about school successes reported in the media. However, despite the vast amounts of school performance data that are available, the problems with student achievement remain mostly invisible to the public. Even where data are available, few non-educators feel competent to decipher what are sometimes jargon-filled and poorly presented reports. As a result, parents, taxpayers, and school board members routinely defer to school personnel in drawing conclusions about school performance.⁴⁸

Because data access and interpretation can be inordinately time-consuming, concerned citizens need to seek independent, consumer-friendly sources. Parent-teacher organizations can serve as watchdogs but they are clearly hampered by the fact that they represent both consumer and provider interests. State education agencies provide data, but they depend on the cooperation of school districts—thus their reports are often muted. Various online advocacy and parent organizations are available, but not all are well informed, and some are essentially proxies for educator or other special interest groups. Education Consumer Associations are community organizations specifically designed to liberate consumers and enable them to develop an independent point of view about how local schools are performing.⁴⁹

Gathering sound information from the Education Consumers Foundation and similar sources may take a bit of time, but it is the most accessible option, and sound information is the key to being a credible spokesman about the problem. Without citizen and parent awareness of school performance, schools and school boards have little incentive to change the practices that are expanding America's dependent population and sinking its economy.

Winners Need Recognition

Schools are like teams playing in a stadium without a scoreboard. A school can be doing a great job or a mediocre one, but that fact will be known only to a few insiders. There is little "crowd reaction" to success or failure, and given the absence of customer choice, there is little influence by consumers.

A community that pays attention can make all the difference. Just as the case with the crowd at the football game, not everyone has to pay attention all of the time, but the cheering or booing of those who are fully engaged does prompt others to look at the scoreboard or instant replay.

⁴⁷ Phelps, R. P. (2010). The source of Lake Woebegone. *Nonpartisan Education Review*, 1(2). Retrieved from <http://nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Articles/v6n3.pdf>

⁴⁸ Hess, F. & Meeks, O. (2010). *Governance in the Accountability Era*. Washington, DC: National School Boards Association, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, & Iowa School Boards Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HessFeb2011.pdf>

⁴⁹ Education Consumers ClearingHouse (1998). *Education Consumers Associations*. Retrieved from http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc_eca.php

In the absence of “fan” attention, schools do business as usual. They adopt new programs and practices on the basis of educator enthusiasms, not on the grounds of what best serves the public’s aims. Successes or failures often draw little comment. Effective programs may be replaced because a grant ran out or personnel changed. No one is held accountable when programs turn out to be a disaster. In the typical school district, there is an ongoing churn of grants and programs. The pattern is cyclical. Fads come and go and reappear as the latest innovation.⁵⁰ Experienced teachers are able to see them coming.

When school boards and district leaders hear no cheers or boos, they pay little attention to performance—and that inattention is seen throughout the district. For teachers, the lack of feedback can impact their enthusiasm for their job. Teaching’s most important outcomes are not visible until years after the fact, and the immediate rewards of doing a good job in the classroom can be few and far between. Given the often-skimpy recognition given for producing measured learning outcomes, frequent teacher burnout is not surprising.

If consumer satisfaction is to have any influence on schools, well-informed feedback is critical.

⁵⁰ Stone, J. E. & Clements, A. (1998). Research and innovation: Let the buyer beware. In Robert R. Spillane & Paul Regnier (Eds.). *The superintendent of the future*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers. Retrieved from http://www.education-consumers.org/ECF_RandI.pdf