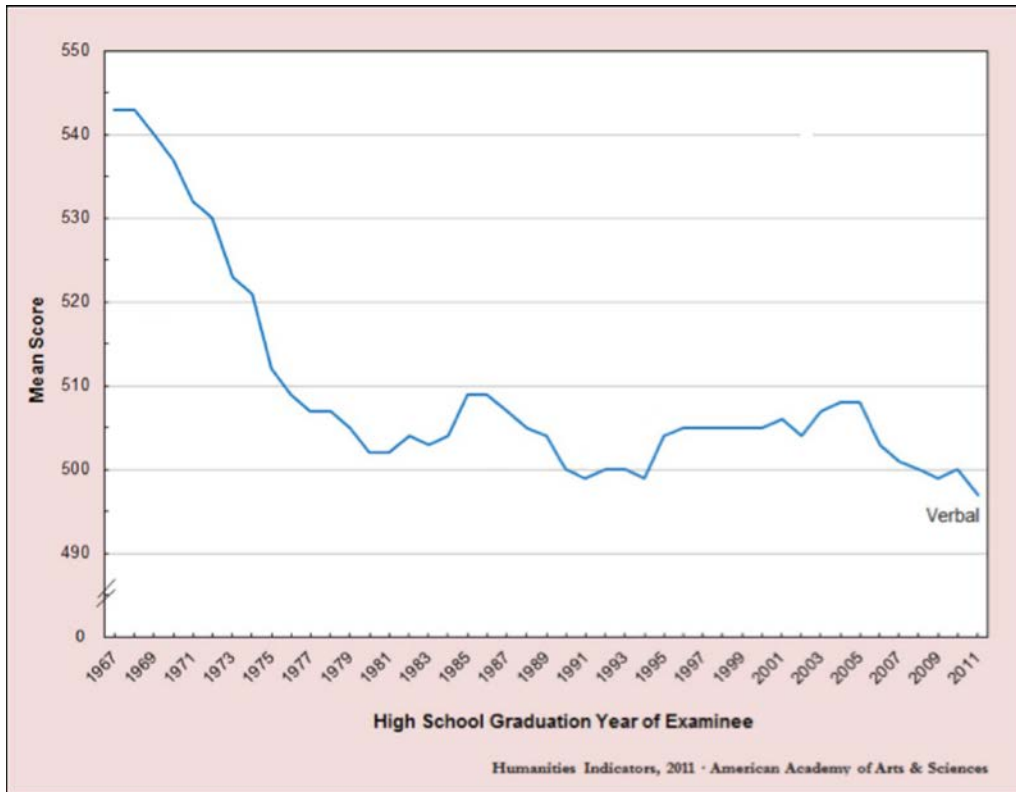


# ECF Education Briefs

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



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## Reversing American Decline by Reducing Education's Casualties

By John E. Stone

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Education Consumers Foundation

## **Reversing American Decline by Reducing Education's Casualties**

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John F. Kennedy warned that in a democracy, the ignorance of one voter impairs the security of all. Today, his warning has frightening relevance.

The issues on which America's future hinge are largely incomprehensible to a huge swath of today's electorate. For forty years, ineffective public schools have flooded the population with citizens who are hobbled with minimal educational skills and minimal economic prospects. Nearly half the U. S. workforce-80-90 million adults-lacks the education to obtain or to advance in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage. Inevitably, they live in economic dependence.

The result has been economic, civic, and cultural decline. Individuals with limited education, access little beyond popular culture. Excluded from print by marginal reading skills, much of the electorate is unacquainted with public affairs and increasingly susceptible to demagoguery. The rising tide of mediocrity forecast in *A Nation at Risk* is now a flood.

Virtually every school district in America contributes to the problem, yet every year casualties mount and the taxpayer burden grows-about \$40,000 per student for outlays in health, public safety, and welfare alone. Click [here](#) for a local estimate. Every year, school reports are examined, plans for improvement drawn, parents reassured, and the unpleasant facts shelved for another 12 months.

Failure to teach disadvantaged students to read is the primary bottleneck. Nationally, only one of three fourth graders masters reading - and not because they are incapable of it. The result is a lifetime obstacle to learning. Students with marginal reading skills become the discouraged learners, the behavior problems, the dropouts, and not

infrequently, the captives of pop culture, prepared for neither college nor the workplace.

The problem is correctable, but proven solutions are stymied by inertia and the accepted pedagogical wisdom. Historically, public education was seen as a road out of poverty. However, in the course of the War on Poverty, the belief that economic disadvantage poses an insurmountable barrier to school success gained traction and eventually became entrenched. Throughout the period, effective schools and programs emerged, but their practices were little propagated and often forgotten. Over time, a focus on theory and the quest for social justice overshadowed all. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were sent to the rear of the classroom.

Today, teaching remains idealized as a process of deriving lessons and classroom activities from theory and delivering them in a way that is tailored to the social and developmental needs of students. In essence, each class is an experiment and every teacher's career a voyage of discovery that may never arrive. Published curricula are available but they are based mostly on analyses of teachers' market preferences, not objective studies of the learning they produce. Tested and proven curricula are available but little used. Meanwhile the mounting decades of schooling failure cry for change.

Tighter state requirements for school and teacher accountability are driving greater use of proven classroom practice; but in most school districts, there is little sense of urgency. Despite the vast sums spent on improvement and accountability, school improvement is slow because the public is in the dark and few school boards exercise close oversight in academic matters. Few people (including school board members) are well informed about school outcomes beyond those found in the carefully phrased reports and media releases disseminated by school districts. The net effect is the widespread perception that public education has its problems but that "our" local school or district is the happy exception.

As evidenced by voter inattention to school board elections, the public's limited understanding of school outcomes leads to limited oversight and little demand for improvement. School board elections are dominated by teachers and special interest groups with economic and political ties to local schools. Even the issues raised during election campaigns and the discussions that take place during board meetings are usually limited to an agenda set by the districts themselves. Items like needed funding and attractive new programs are frequently found in the public eye. Topics like test

scores, school rankings, and other indicators that might invite critical scrutiny, however, are given little notice.

What concerned parents, taxpayers, and elected representatives need to know is that there are easy-to-use, consumer-friendly, online sources where they can see school performance data for themselves. Candidates for school board and other offices that make decisions about schools and budgets should be familiar with these independent sources. Candidates and officials who lack awareness or who are familiar only with local reports must be considered doubtful stewards of their responsibilities, our children- especially in the case of schools and districts that are virtual failure factories.

Public education's casualties can be substantially reduced and America's decline reversed by increasing the number of children who acquire the tool skills necessary to benefit from their subsequent schooling. As matters now stand, however, over forty percent of 3rd graders enter their last 9 years of schooling destined to drop out or to finish grade 12 unprepared for college or a career.

With each succeeding grade in school, success increasingly depends on reading. Simply put, kids who have not mastered reading cannot fully benefit from school, and failure in future endeavors becomes a high probability.

Proficiency in reading by grade three is the indispensable building block, and that performance indicator is available in an easily understood graphic for virtually every public school in the country at [www.education-consumers.org](http://www.education-consumers.org). Other independent sources of data and opinion include [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org) and [www.schooldigger.com](http://www.schooldigger.com).

Meaningful improvement will require focused leadership from elected local officials and that change is unlikely to take place until concerned citizens begin to inform themselves as to the now-accessible facts:

1. Visit [www.education-consumers.org/national.htm](http://www.education-consumers.org/national.htm) and check out your schools.
2. Encourage others to do the same. Alert friends or write an open letter to your school board.
3. Support school board candidates who know school quality facts and have taken a clear stand about improving them:
4. [www.education-consumers.org/RAD\\_steps.pdf](http://www.education-consumers.org/RAD_steps.pdf) Read more about how failing schools are linked to American decline:  
[www.education-consumers.org/RAD.pdf](http://www.education-consumers.org/RAD.pdf)