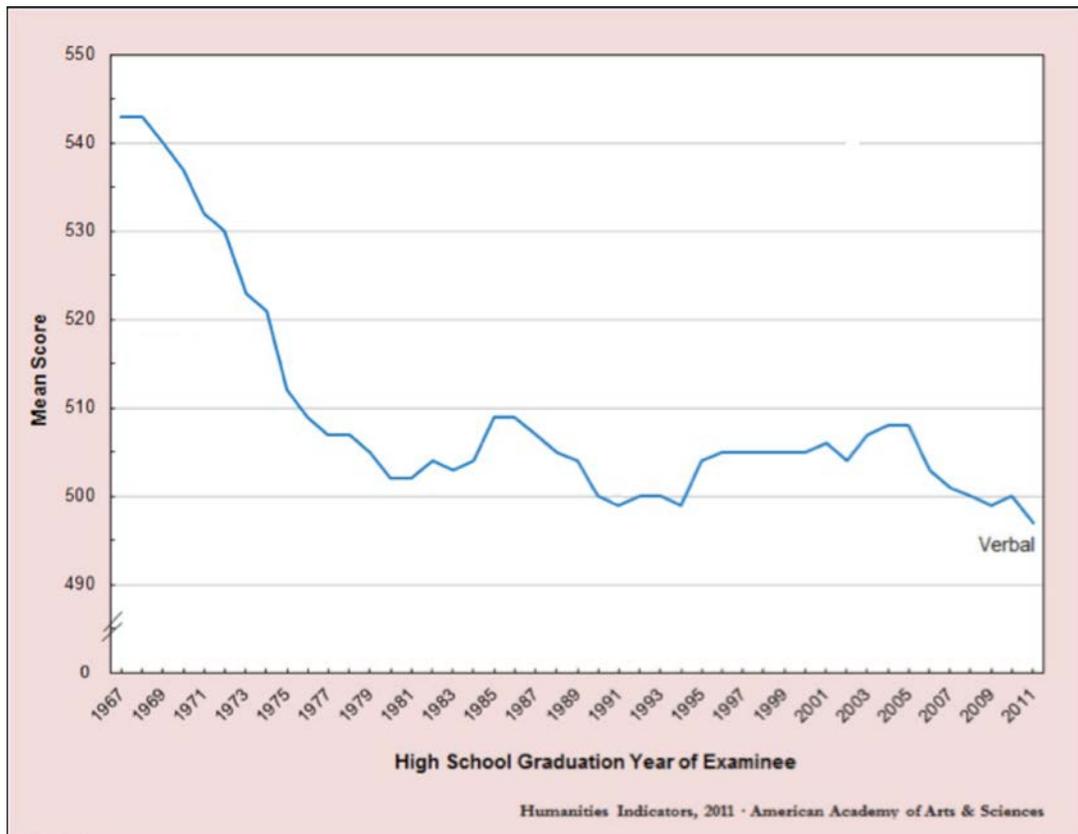


# ECF Education Briefs

Research and Analysis  
from the Education Consumers Foundation

## Reversing American Decline by Reducing Education's Casualties

By J. E. Stone



Mean SAT Verbal/Critical Reading Score of College-Bound Seniors, 1967–2011



Education Consumers Foundation

1629 K St. N.W. Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20006

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# Reversing American Decline by Reducing Education's Casualties

*First, we need to recapture our school boards*

J. E. Stone

Education Consumers Foundation

March 13, 2013

*...the ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all...*

—President John F. Kennedy, May 18, 1963

Remarks in Nashville, Tennessee, at the 90th

Anniversary convocation of Vanderbilt University

John F. Kennedy said that the ignorance of one voter impairs the security of all, yet the issues on which America's future hinges are irrelevant and incomprehensible to a huge swath of today's electorate. Think of economic opportunity, low taxes, and limited government. Think of Keynesian economics, quantitative easing, social democracy and a host of other issues.

The intended audience for these ideas has neither the education nor the literacy skills to grasp their significance, much less the wherewithal to avail itself of their benefits.<sup>1</sup> There are the tens of millions of low-skill, low-information adults<sup>2</sup> whose functional level of education more or less permanently relegates them to some level of economic subsistence, to dependence on government, and to the margins of the debate. To these casualties of public education, the national public conversation about such matters is only background noise.

Underlying this growing state of affairs is a correctable long-term cause: the failure of public education. Economic decline, disconnection from moral and cultural anchors, low information voters, the rise of pop culture, shortsighted fiscal policies, demagogic political rhetoric, a widening loss of faith in institutions, and all of the rest, did not emerge because common sense was somehow overwhelmed by the mass media. Rather, these troubling

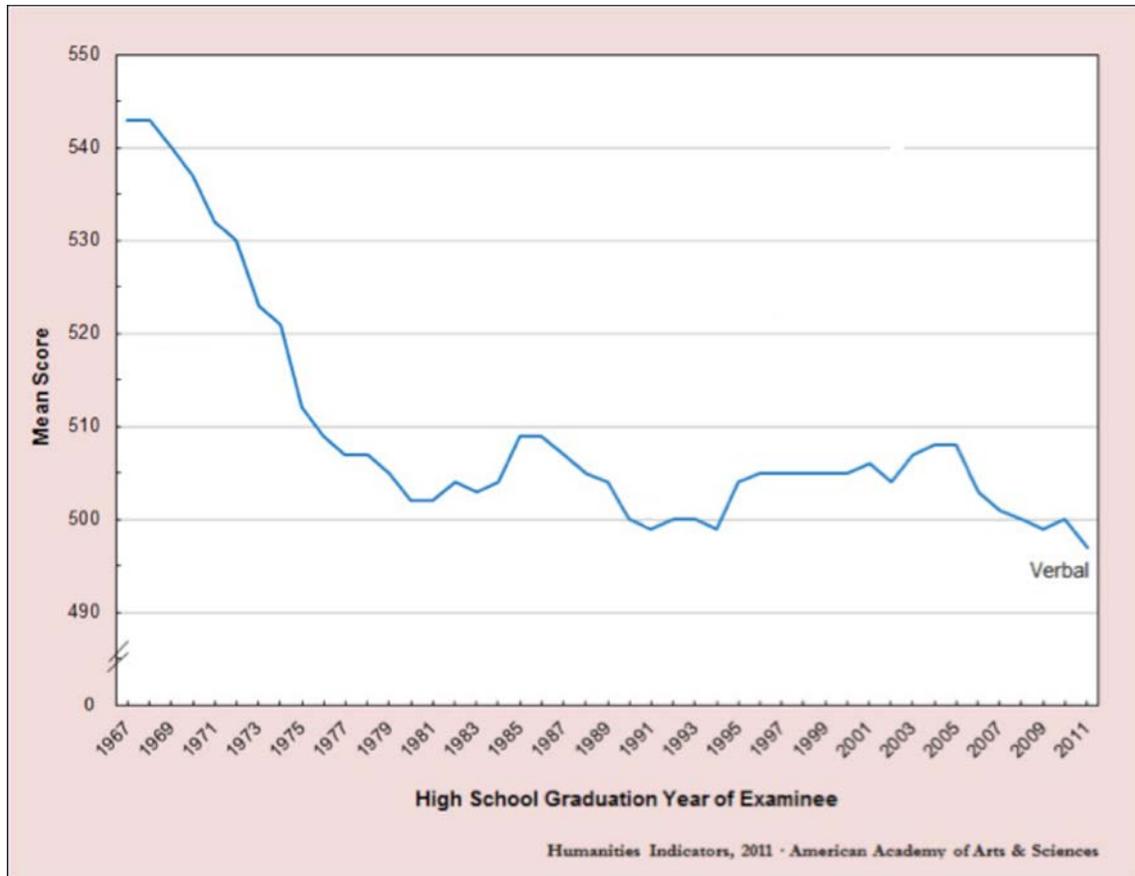
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<sup>1</sup> Hedges, C. (2008). Forget red vs. blue -- It's the educated vs. people easily fooled by propaganda. *Alternet*. Retrieved from [https://www.alternet.org/2008/11/forget\\_red\\_vs\\_blue\\_-\\_its\\_the\\_educated\\_vs\\_people\\_easily\\_foiled\\_by\\_propaganda/](https://www.alternet.org/2008/11/forget_red_vs_blue_-_its_the_educated_vs_people_easily_foiled_by_propaganda/)

<sup>2</sup> Turcotte, J. and Goidel, R. K. (2014). Political Knowledge and Exposure to the 2012 US Presidential Debates: Does Debate Format Matter? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 47. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096514000377>

trends have steadily grown because fewer and fewer Americans have sufficient grounding in the literate culture to respond to them.

Decades of failed public schooling have created a growing population of adults who are unprepared to be informed citizens or financially self-sufficient. They include persons who may have a job, a high school diploma, and in some cases a college degree, but who, in reality, lack the knowledge and skills necessary to earn a living wage or follow the national conversation. They are casualties of failed schooling who would like to find a path to a better life, and in many cases, have been given to believe that their educational experiences have prepared them for as much.



Mean SAT Verbal/Critical Reading Score of College-Bound Seniors, 1967–2011<sup>3</sup>

Job market reality, however, is another matter. In today's workplace, poorly prepared job seekers simply do not have the requisite knowledge and skills to compete. As public education's casualties, the promise of expanded opportunity for advancement offers nothing because they see themselves (accurately) as ill-equipped to take advantage of it.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from American Academy of Arts & Sciences. (2011). *Performance on SAT Verbal/Critical Reading and Writing Exams*.

According to the National Commission on Adult Literacy, 80-90 million adults — about half of the U. S. workforce—lack the basic education skills to obtain or to advance in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage.<sup>4</sup> These numbers include school dropouts, high school graduates, and significant numbers of college graduates who are far less equipped for the workplace than their credentials imply. A 2005 study by the

*Over 1 out of 3—more than a million students per year—fail to reach even the basic skill level. These children are casualties of faulty and ineffective schooling.*

American Institutes for Research found that college graduates performed better than high school graduates, but less than half of them met an adult standard of “proficient” in literacy, e.g., were able to summarize the argument in a newspaper editorial.<sup>5</sup>

### **The underlying problem and its consequences**

Volumes have been written about why the United States is sinking educationally, but the importance of one item is acknowledged by all accounts: Enormous numbers of children are not mastering reading; and in the vast majority of cases, that deficiency permanently damages their academic and career prospects.

For decades, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (known as “The Nation’s Report Card”) has shown that 2 out of 3 students are not proficient in reading by the end of the 4th grade—the first year of schooling in which reading is an essential tool skill.<sup>6</sup> Over 1 out of 3—more than a million students per year—fail to reach even the basic skill level.

These children are casualties of faulty and ineffective schooling. Readers should bear in mind that 4th graders are children who have already been attending school for five or six years. Reading is the most basic of the basic skills. Students cannot fully benefit from subsequent schooling without it—even if they have the best teachers—and these early failures have had a predictable impact on education quality all the way through the college graduate level.

Children who have not mastered reading by 3rd grade are the poor readers seen in the 8th grade and the students who struggle with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills. They become the discouraged learners, the behavior problems, the drop-outs, and the high school graduates who need remedial instruction in college. Essentially, their lack of early reading mastery predicts failure in school, college, and eventually in the workplace.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> National Commission on Adult Literacy. (2008). *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*. Retrieved from <http://www.caalusa.org/ReachHigherBUSINESSPullout/ReachHigherBUSINESSPullout.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Baer, J. D., Cook, A. L., Baldi, S., & American Institutes for Research. (2006). *The Literacy of America’s College Students*. Retrieved from [https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/The20Literacy20of20Americas20College20Students\\_final20report\\_0.pdf](https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/The20Literacy20of20Americas20College20Students_final20report_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2011). *Grade 4 State Results*. Retrieved from [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2011/state\\_g4.asp?printver=](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/state_g4.asp?printver=)

<sup>7</sup> Anne E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of the Third Grade Matters*. Retrieved from [http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early\\_Warning\\_Full\\_Report-2010.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf)

All of this takes place at an enormous economic and human cost. Poor readers drag down the level of instruction that is offered to other students and generally make schooling less efficient and costly. In addition, they

overburden adult training programs, absorb the lion's share of public assistance, and fill up the prisons. Approximately “. . . 43 percent of prison inmates do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 56 percent have very low literacy skills.”<sup>8</sup>

The personal and societal costs of early reading failure and its domino effects are incalculable. The satisfactions of a productive life are lost to generations of children and their families—almost before they have had a chance to start.

Moreover, the subsequent disappointment and frustration of having few economic prospects after years of schooling may be having significant social, political, and legal consequences. For example, the ACLU recently filed a lawsuit on behalf of students enrolled in a Detroit, Michigan area school district that argues, “. . . if education is to mean anything, it means that children have a right to learn to read.”<sup>9</sup>

Of equal importance are the attitudes and habits that are unintentionally taught to struggling students in the course of their school experiences. Students who advance through school by virtue of rosy report cards and watered-down educational standards are effectively taught that subject mastery is less important than playing the game, i.e., if you pretend to study, your teachers will pretend that you are learning.<sup>10</sup>

It is a lesson that creates a false sense of accomplishment and one easily generalized to the workplace. Schools that give recognition to phony merit are poor preparation for a world that expects real results.

Improved early reading may be the single most important step that educators can take to increase the quality and reduce the cost of public education. Better early reading outcomes will not inoculate children against subsequent educational problems, but learning to read will open a critical gateway to future success for an enormous number of students.

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<sup>8</sup> National Commission on Adult Literacy. (2008). *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*. Retrieved from <http://www.caalusa.org/ReachHigherBUSINESSPullout/ReachHigherBUSINESSPullout.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Layton, L. (2012, July 12). ACLU alleges Michigan school district violated students' 'right to learn to read.' *Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/aclu-alleges-michigan-school-district-violated-students-right-to-learn-to-read/2012/07/11/gJQArf1jeW\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/aclu-alleges-michigan-school-district-violated-students-right-to-learn-to-read/2012/07/11/gJQArf1jeW_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> Roosevelt, M. (2009, February 17). Student expectations seen as causing grade disputes. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/18/education/18college.html>

## Societal, cultural, and political implications

Beyond the economic and personal costs of reading failure are its societal, cultural, and political implications. Children who do not master reading do not stop learning; instead, they are taught by the default influences, i.e., the popular culture transmitted through their social world and the non-print media. The outcome is virtually inevitable. Education's

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casualties become captives of the popular culture and of the commercial, political, and social influences that drive it. Without reading, a world of images accompanied by “childish narratives and clichés” may be the only culture to which they have access.<sup>11</sup>

Many argue that so-called “cultural rot” grows because it is propagated by Hollywood, television, and the social media, but are they confusing effect with cause? To the contrary, it may be that cultural rot expands because an expanding population that lacks an alternative continually demands more. For the unlettered young—especially those who grow up without meaningful school, family, or community influences—sensationalism, emotionality, and mindlessness may be all there is.

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Then there is the impact of so many citizens simply lacking the background knowledge needed for meaningful political participation. People who read little and are otherwise limited primarily to popular television are at the core of what political scientists call low information voters.<sup>12</sup> Lacking literacy skills, they are permanently disconnected from the knowledge base against which their better-educated peers are able to check facts and opinions.<sup>13</sup> Debate regarding the great issues of the day is mostly over their heads, and the development of independent perspective or well-founded opinion is unlikely. They are easily demagogued and, for the most part, confined to public opinion.

For low information voters, public conversations about the views of the founding fathers or the influence of transnational progressivism or the implications of American national debt are terra incognita. The same could be said about the role of state health care exchanges or the effect of economic sanctions in foreign policy. An individual who can't balance his or her checkbook is unlikely to understand the dangers posed by sub-prime mortgages or credit default swaps.

The danger to America is as Jefferson said: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

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<sup>11</sup> Hedges, C. (2008). Forget red vs. blue -- It's the educated vs. people easily fooled by propaganda. *Alternet*. Retrieved from [https://www.alternet.org/2008/11/forget\\_red\\_vs\\_blue\\_--\\_its\\_the\\_educated\\_vs\\_people\\_easily\\_foiled\\_by\\_propaganda/](https://www.alternet.org/2008/11/forget_red_vs_blue_--_its_the_educated_vs_people_easily_foiled_by_propaganda/)

<sup>12</sup> Smalley, S. (2008, May 31). Just how low will they go. *The Daily Beast*.

<sup>13</sup> National Endowment for the Arts. (2004). *Reading At Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/ReadingAtRisk.pdf>

## Disillusionment, cynicism, and the appeal of radical views

The crisis faced by America is not simply a product of failed economic policy or hard times. It is, in substantial measure, the result of a failure to honestly address educational problems that have been growing for decades.

For generations, students and their parents have been encouraged to view education as the high road to the American Dream, so imagine their disappointment when the graduates encounter adult reality, i.e., employers who are unimpressed with their diploma and colleges that say they need remedial coursework. Worse yet, imagine the chagrin of poorly qualified college entrants who complete a program suited to their preparation and end up with an unmarketable degree and a pile of student debt.

Since the 1970s, elementary and secondary schools have masked underachievement with inflated grades, social promotion, and misleading public reports. The annual reports required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act are a prime example. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the percentage of students who are proficient in basic reading and math are roughly half of the rates reported by the states.<sup>14</sup> Education insiders recognize that the state reports are misleading, yet with the exception of a few states, they remain unchanged. Again, the public is being kept in the dark.

Analogous deceptions can be found at the college level. Colleges and universities have accommodated the increasing numbers of marginally prepared high school graduates by placing them in areas of study that require less preparation but afford limited intellectual challenge and market value.<sup>15</sup> Social work and physical education are popular examples. The effect has been to instill students with high expectations but leave them with unmarketable skills. Today, significant numbers of high-paying jobs go unfilled, not because of economic recession but because unemployed high school and college graduates are not prepared to fill them.<sup>16</sup>

Given the continuing growth of this arrangement, it isn't hard to see how young people and their parents could adopt the view that the free market is inherently unfair or that employers are exploitative and greedy or that citizens cannot survive without an expanding social safety net. Young people have been given to believe that investing in education is the key to their future, but then find that the promised opportunities and rewards are not there. In truth, they have been sold a fantasy and are now blaming their disappointment on everything but the seller.

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<sup>14</sup> Education Consumers Foundation. (2012). Are States Reporting the Truth About Student Achievement? Retrieved from <https://education-consumers.org/states-reporting-truth-student-achievement/>; U. S. Chamber of Commerce. (2007). *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. Retrieved from <http://www.leadersandlaggards.org/>

<sup>15</sup> Rooney, J. (2012). *Will data mining end student educational reform?* Retrieved from <http://www.onlinecolleges.net>; Stone, J. E. (1995). Inflated grades, inflated enrollments, and inflated budgets: An analysis and call for review at the state level. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/654/776>; Vedder, R. J. (2012). Twelve inconvenient truths about American higher education. *Center for College Affordability and Productivity*. Retrieved from <http://centerforcollegeaffordability.org/research/studies/12-inconvenient-truths>

<sup>16</sup> Dahl, D. (2012, June 27). A sea of job-seekers, but some companies aren't getting any bites. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/28/business/smallbusiness/even-with-high-unemployment-some-small-businesses-struggle-to-fill-positions.html>

The problem exists because America's schools and colleges turn out large numbers of students who, by international standards, are poorly prepared—and that isn't something that can be fixed by altering tax policies or tweaking the regulatory environment.<sup>17</sup> The issue grows because of institutionalized academic and intellectual self-deception, and it will continue to expand until schools and colleges become more transparent to the consuming public.

*America's schools and colleges turn out large numbers of students who, by international standards, are poorly prepared—and that isn't something that can be fixed by altering tax policies or tweaking the regulatory environment.*

### Why schools have failed to address the problem

A hidden tragedy underlies all of the above. Schooling that is capable of substantially alleviating reading/literacy problems has been available for decades but remains little used.

Every state has at least a few schools that successfully teach disadvantaged children to read and to thrive academically. Their exceptional results are visible in official published data.<sup>18</sup> Some, like the schools in the KIPP Academy network, are charter schools.<sup>19</sup> Many others, however, are simply high-performing public schools. Examples of exceptionally effective schools have been around for decades. They include High-Flying schools identified by the Education Trust and the No Excuses schools identified by Samuel Casey Carter, both in the late 1990s.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the evidence from successful schools, there are teaching methodologies that have been carefully researched and shown to be effective in bringing disadvantaged students to grade level by the 3rd grade. Although often used with special education students, they are demonstrably effective in preventing almost all reading failure when implemented in kindergarten as part of the general education curriculum. Direct Instruction, a program originally developed and tested in the 1960s and 70s, and Success for All, developed in the late 1980s, are two well-known examples.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Kutash, J., Nico, E., Gorin, E. Rahmatullah, S., & Tallant, K. (2010). School Turnaround Field Guide. Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-School-Turnaround-Field-Guide.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Education Consumers Foundation (2012). *Are the Schools in Your State Teaching Children to Read?* [Interactive graphic comparing schools within states on 3rd grade reading proficiency]. Retrieved from <https://education-consumers.org/school-performance-nationally/>

<sup>19</sup> KIPP (n.d.). *Mathematica Study on KIPP Middle Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.kipp.org/mathematica> ; Education Consumers Foundation (2012). *KIPP Academy Nashville in Charter Tug-of-War*. Retrieved from <http://www.education-consumers.org/KIPP.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Carter, S.C. (2000). *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.carter-research.com/wp-content/uploads/No-Excuses-Lessons-from-21-High-Performing-High-Poverty-Schools-by-Samuel-Casey-Carter-1.pdf> ; Finn, C., Jr. (2001, December 20). Dispelling the myth revisited: Preliminary findings from a nationwide analysis of "High-Flying Schools." *Gadfly*. Retrieved from <https://edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly/2001/december-20/dispelling-the-myth-revisited-preliminary-findings-from-a-nationwide-analysis-of-high-flying-schools.html>

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, J. (2011, January 3). Effective reading program shelved, then amazingly reborn. *Washington Post*; Barbash, S. (2012). Clear teaching: With Direct Instruction, Siegfried Engelmann discovered a better way of teaching. Arlington, VA: Education Consumers Foundation. Retrieved from [http://www.education-consumers.org/CT\\_111811.pdf](http://www.education-consumers.org/CT_111811.pdf)

Since solutions to America's massive reading problem are available but are not being used, one must ask why?

The answer has to do with the mission of public education, the federal education policies of the 1960s, and the historic aversion of teacher-educators to direct, skill-focused forms of teaching.

Since the days of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, most educators have recognized that public schooling's greatest challenge was the one of how to bring economically disadvantaged children up to the performance levels of their more advantaged peers. Typically, these students are well below average at school entry; and without intervention, they remain so throughout their school careers.

However, where educators and teacher-educators are often at odds with parents and policymakers is with respect to whether schools should be held responsible for overcoming the problem. Historically, the mission of public education has been to equip all children with the knowledge and skills they need to become responsible and productive citizens — regardless of their circumstances of birth.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the schools were founded as an anti-poverty program and they well served that purpose for generations. The federal No Child Left Behind Act tacitly assumes that the public schools are responsible for carrying out that historic mission.

Despite the clear aims of policymakers and the public, many educators continue to question whether schooling can succeed in the face of poverty and a growing number argue that school accountability for the achievement of disadvantaged students is neither realistic nor fair. These (mostly academic) critics refer to the notion of schooling as a remedy for economic disadvantage as a “normative view.” In the alternative, they have mounted a “Broader, Bolder” approach to the problem – one that concerns itself with matters such as community action and “strong steps” designed to reduce income equality.<sup>23</sup> It is a throwback to the War on Poverty era.

Historically, the War on Poverty failed to produce lasting improvements in education and is widely believed to have institutionalized poverty.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, recent reports are equally unsupportive. For example, the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that children in poor families who were moved from high poverty neighborhoods fared no better educationally so long as they attended schools similar to those in their original neighborhoods. According to the authors, “These findings raise questions about whether investing directly in schools might be more effective for improving schooling

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<sup>22</sup> Meyer, P. (2012, February 16). The poverty myth persists. *Education Next*. (Blog entry.) Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-poverty-myth-persists/>; Hanushek, E. & Rivkin, S. (2006). School Quality and the BlackWhite Achievement Gap. *National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 1261*. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12651>

<sup>23</sup> Ladd, H. (2011). *Education and Poverty: Confronting the Evidence*. (p. 16) Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536952.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Cove, P. (2012). *What I learned in the poverty war*. Retrieved from <http://www.city-journal.org/html/what-i-learned-poverty-war-13513.html>

outcomes among economically disadvantaged youth (see a recent review of literature in Duncan and Murnane, 2011).<sup>25</sup> (p. 160)

In short, educators are divided between an education-focused approach and a comprehensive approach, i.e., one that addresses social and economic conditions. Successful

*Historically, the mission of public education has been to equip all children with the knowledge and skills they need to become responsible and productive citizens regardless of their circumstances of birth. A growing number of educators, however, want to take schooling back to the War on Poverty days.*

schools use an education-focused approach, i.e., one that addresses the needs of disadvantaged children by focusing on teaching, learning, and mastery of critical tool skills such as reading and math. Teacher-educators, in particular, deride such skill-focused lessons as a “push-down curriculum” and as “drill and kill.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, they train teachers in a variety of theory-driven pedagogical perspectives and tools that have relatively little empirical support, but are in harmony with the Broader, Bolder initiative and its focus on social and economic context.

Bottom line, teaching practices that would substantially reduce America’s reading problems are little used because many teachers and most teacher-educators baselessly characterize them as risky and of dubious value.

### **The comprehensive approach**

Two very influential studies of the 1960s—one by James Coleman and the other by Christopher Jencks—bear significantly on the divide in educator opinion. As a result of their statistical analyses of student achievement data, Coleman and Jencks concluded that schooling has very little impact on economically disadvantaged students.<sup>27</sup> Within a decade, their demography-is-destiny view became the conventional wisdom and it wasn’t until years later that more sophisticated statistical methodology showed that teachers and schools, in fact, had a profound effect on a child’s academic progress.<sup>28</sup> By then, however, demographic determinism was settled wisdom and the foundation of education policy.

The deterministic view led to a change in the goals of teacher education. Teachers were taught to focus less on lifting children to meet standards and more on accommodating schooling to the aptitudes, skill levels, and even behavioral patterns of poverty’s victims.<sup>29</sup> The objective became one of maintaining a school environment that would facilitate the

<sup>25</sup> Gennetian, L. A., et al. (2013). Long-term effects of moving to opportunity on youth outcomes. *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 14(2). Retrieved from <https://scholar.harvard.edu/lkatz/publications/long-term-effects-moving-opportunity-youth-outcomes>

<sup>26</sup> Taub, J. (2003, August 3). New York’s new approach. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/education/new-york-s-new-approach.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

<sup>27</sup> Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools, translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books>

<sup>28</sup> Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (2003). The effect of classroom practice on student achievement. *Research Brief*, 1(11). Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/researchbrief/v1n11/toc.aspx>; Fallon, D. (n.d.) Case Study of a Paradigm Shift (The Value of Focusing on Instruction). Retrieved from <http://research.mathmeister.com/Documents/FallonTeacherEffect.rtf>

<sup>29</sup> Foster, H. L. (1974). *Ribbin’ jivin’ and playin’ the dozens: The unrecognized dilemma of inner city schools*. New York: Harper Collins.

emergence of the child's intellectual talents, and, otherwise, stand ready to ease the child into academic studies at such time he or she was thought to be developmentally ready.

The success of the education-focused approach was at least partially demonstrated in several programs that were a part of the War on Poverty's massive Follow Through Project. Children were directly instructed in needed academic and social skills in their earliest days of schooling.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, however, Follow Through's findings were forgotten by all but special education teachers. Had the lessons of Follow Through been better disseminated and absorbed, public education's trajectory over the past 40 years might have been vastly different.<sup>31</sup>

Over time, the demography-is-destiny view proved agreeable to a new generation of teacher educators. Teacher training programs and their accrediting body—the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, now called the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation—began to emphasize student self-esteem as well as equity, diversity, social justice and a global world view.<sup>32</sup>

*Since students were presumed unable to learn, relaxed standards were necessary*

Beyond its direct impact on teacher training, the demography-is-destiny view exerted downward pressure on the standards thought necessary for college and workplace readiness. In other words, since students were presumed unable to learn, relaxed standards were necessary.

Inflated grades became acceptable. Social promotion became routine. Grade retention for insufficient academic progress was abandoned. Suspensions, dismissals, and enforcement of student conduct rules became more lenient. Innovations such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, hands-on-learning, and a host of other faddish accommodations were encouraged as a means of adapting instruction to classrooms with impossibly diverse levels of student preparation.

Only later did public concerns about education quality and standards begin to emerge—most notably in the Nation at Risk report: “. . . [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”<sup>33</sup>

Over the years since the Coleman and Jencks studies, demonstrably effective programs for teaching the basics to disadvantaged children emerged repeatedly, but with little lasting effect on educational practice. Direct Instruction—initially demonstrated in the Follow Through

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<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia. (2012, December 21). *Project Follow Through*. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project\\_Follow\\_Through](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Follow_Through)

<sup>31</sup> Watkins, C.L. (1995-6). Follow Through: Why didn't we? *Effective School Practices*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Walsh, K. (2006). Teacher education: Coming up empty. *FWD*, 3(1). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED493850.pdf>; Gideonse, H. D., Ducharme, E. R., Ducharme, M. K., Gollnick, D., Lilly, M. S., Shelke, E. L., & Smith, P. (1993). *Capturing the vision, reflections on NCATE's redesign, Five years after*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

<sup>33</sup> National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A Nation at Risk*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49151492/A-Nation-at-Risk>

project—has been limited primarily to special education.<sup>34</sup> The Effective Schools Movement has been largely forgotten.<sup>35</sup> The High-Flying Schools and the No Excuses projects identified clear examples of schools that beat the demographic odds, but they have generally been ignored.<sup>36</sup>

Within the last 10 years, charter schools such as the KIPP Academies have shown that disadvantaged students can not only succeed in elementary and secondary schools but can become scholarship students in Ivy League colleges.<sup>37</sup> Critics, however, have sought to discredit their successes by arguing that they have an exceptional student population and unusually dedicated parents.

Despite the wealth of evidence that contradicts the demographic-limitations orthodoxy, most disadvantaged children still fail to master reading, and virtually all schools cite poverty when asked to explain low outcomes. The decade-long federal policy emphasis on closing the “achievement gap” continues to be impeded by educators who would rather offer excuses than go beyond the perceived wisdom and shoulder the responsibility for learning outcomes.

*Within the last 10 years, charter schools such as the KIPP Academies have shown that disadvantaged students can not only succeed in elementary and secondary schools but can become scholarship students in Ivy League colleges. Critics, however, have sought to discredit their successes.*

### **The education-focused approach**

From an education-focused standpoint, the challenge presented by economically disadvantaged children can be thought of as a question of how to “catch them up,” i.e., how to bring their knowledge and skill levels to that of their peers.

*Some school districts have regular failure factories and others “merely” produce a small but steady flow of people who are going to be on the margins for the rest of their lives. Collectively, however, they are producing an economically indigestible number of students who are not ready for college, the workplace, or engaged citizenship.*

For children who are one to three years below grade level at entry to kindergarten to be proficient by grade 3, they must make a demonstrably attainable 1.25 to 1.75 years of academic growth per year in grades K-3.<sup>38</sup> Differences of opinion exist as to the most effective ways of accelerating academic growth, but there is plenty of evidence that some

<sup>34</sup> Watkins, C.L. (1995-6). Follow Through: Why didn't we? Effective School Practices, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Lezotte, L. (n.d.). *Revolutionary and evolutionary: The effective schools movement*. Retrieved from [http://www.brjonesphd.com/uploads/1/6/9/4/16946150/revolutionary\\_and\\_evolutionary\\_the\\_effective\\_schools\\_movement\\_-\\_dr\\_lawrence\\_w\\_lezotte.pdf](http://www.brjonesphd.com/uploads/1/6/9/4/16946150/revolutionary_and_evolutionary_the_effective_schools_movement_-_dr_lawrence_w_lezotte.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Carter, S.C. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED440170.pdf>; Finn, C., Jr. (2001, December 20). Dispelling the myth revisited: Preliminary findings from a nationwide analysis of “High-Flying Schools.” *Gadfly*. Retrieved from <https://edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly/2001/december-20/dispelling-the-myth-revisited-preliminary-findings-from-a-nationwide-analysis-of-high-flying-schools.html>

<sup>37</sup> KIPP Schools. (2013). Independent Reports. Retrieved from <http://www.kipp.org/results/independent-reports>

<sup>38</sup> Fielding, L., Kerr, N. & Rosier, P. (2007). *Annual growth, catch-up growth*. Kennewick, WA: New Foundation Press.

schools regularly attain those rates of growth. Schools in which a high percentage of disadvantaged students reach proficiency in reading by the 3rd grade are easily identified in most states via the Education Consumers Foundation's online graphics.<sup>39</sup>

Proficiency in 3rd grade reading does not inoculate students against future educational failure, but it does allow them to move through a critical gateway.<sup>40</sup> Having 90% of students reach proficiency is an attainable goal for general education students, and one that would greatly increase the number of children who are equipped to take advantage of their subsequent educational opportunities.

Despite the existence of successful schools and well-researched programs, improved K-3 reading instruction has been very slow to diffuse. Over time, a given school's average percentage of proficient third graders tends to stay the same—an outcome that might be expected when accountability is minimal and most educators believe that demography is destiny.<sup>41</sup>

### **What can concerned citizens do?**

Virtually every school district in America is contributing to the problem! Education's casualties don't disappear when they reach 18, they add to the workforce statistics.

The decline in workforce quality, cynicism and pessimism about the future, the perception that free market economics are unfair, and cultural rot are all built on the steady stream of marginally educated young people coming out of the public schools. Some school districts have regular failure factories and others “merely” produce a small but steady flow of people who are going to be on the margins for the rest of their lives. Collectively, however, they are producing an economically indigestible number of people who are going to live on the margins of productive society for the rest of their lives.

Here are some things you can do to uncover and raise awareness of the facts in your school and district:

#### ***Step #1: Investigate: Are your local schools a part of the problem?***

Citizens need to inform themselves about the state of student achievement in their local schools—especially 3rd grade reading proficiency rates—and take the lead in raising public awareness. (For more on why the public is in the dark, see Appendix A.) Early reading is not the only metric by which school performance can be judged, but its importance is recognized by everyone, it is universally available, and it is the gateway to subsequent

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<sup>39</sup> Education Consumers Foundation (2012). Are the Schools in Your State Teaching Children to Read? [Interactive graphic comparing schools within states on 3rd grade reading proficiency]. Retrieved from

<https://education-consumers.org/school-performance-nationally/>

<sup>40</sup> Kieffer, M. J. (2012, August). Before and after third grade: Longitudinal evidence for the shifting role of socioeconomic status in reading growth. *Reading and Writing*, 25(7). Retrieved from

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11145-011-9339-2>

<sup>41</sup> West, M. R. (2012). Is retaining students in the early grades self-defeating? *CCF Brief #49*. Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/is-retaining-students-in-the-early-grades-self-defeating/>

educational success.<sup>42</sup> Reading proficiency in 3rd grade reflects how well a child has been taught in his or her first 4 years of school, i.e., kindergarten thru grade 3.

The data are a click away. The Education Consumers Foundation displays the state-by-state data provided by official sources in easy-to-understand graphics:

<http://www.educationconsumers.org/national.htm>.

Other objective sources are available and should be consulted in cases where there is a discrepancy between local perceptions and the available data. The state report cards are a good place to check for school information beyond student achievement scores. Also useful are commercially supported websites like [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) and [schooldigger.com](http://schooldigger.com). They provide a wide array of information including parent opinions.

### **Step #2: Share the facts with your friends, neighbors, and community.**

After reviewing local school performance information, it is vital for concerned citizens to share their sources, findings, and concerns with family, friends, and neighbors.

Surprisingly few people are aware that there are significant differences in the effectiveness among schools—even among schools with equal funding and the same demographic mix of students. It is a critical hole in public awareness that has important implications for public understanding of school performance. Concerned citizens can create local momentum for improvement by learning which schools are in need of improvement and talking with educators and leaders about their observations. Word will get around.

There are other simple but effective actions by which any informed citizen can help focus public and school board attention on the student achievement issue:

1. Write a letter to the chair of the school board about your observations and concerns, and request that the board recognize the challenges and set goals for resolving them.
2. Send a copy of the letter to the school board, to other community officials, and to the local news outlets.
3. Raise questions or make a statement about the issue at a school board meeting.

These actions do not need to be accusatory or offensive. They just need to highlight the school achievement issue to the board and to other members of the community who have similar concerns. The objective is to raise public awareness of the facts.

For more suggestions as to steps you can take to raise local awareness, learn about Education Consumer Associations at [http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc\\_eca.php](http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc_eca.php).

### **Step #3: Support school board members who treat student achievement as an unrivaled priority**

Student achievement is not schooling's only important outcome, but it is the only indispensable one. Without question, test scores are not all that matters. However, it is equally true that a school that fails to bring about subject-matter mastery cannot be counted

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<sup>42</sup> Anne E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of the Third Grade Matters*. Retrieved from [http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early\\_Warning\\_Full\\_Report-2010.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf)

as a good school—regardless of its other virtues. Parents and taxpayers want growth along many dimensions, but mastery of knowledge and skills is a must.

A recent survey found that the top educational priority for most school board members was “helping students fulfill their potential and find satisfying lives.” These widely held views may account for the neglect of achievement in school board discussions. A Tennessee study, for example, found that school boards spent less than 10% of their time on the topic of academic outcomes.<sup>43</sup> Board meeting agendas may be the problem. Every special interest has vocal advocates, but in most districts, the meat and potatoes of student achievement is brought up only once per year.<sup>44</sup> (For more about why school boards fail to advance the public’s priorities, see Appendix B.)

## Conclusion

Unhappily, the number of Americans who are capable of being socially, emotionally, and financially self-sufficient is diminishing noticeably, yet the institution that has historically prepared the next generation continues to be shaped by the priorities and constraints that have prevailed for decades. It is no wonder that well-known education reformers are calling for the abolition of school boards as an institution.<sup>45</sup> Grassroots action such as that proposed in this paper is vital to reform.

Happily, change is attainable. Reversing American decline may seem like an overwhelming task, but reversing the trend in local schools is not. School improvement has millions of fans and now there is a scoreboard. All that you need to do is show the way.

*J.E. Stone is an educational psychologist and professor in the Clemmer College of Education at East Tennessee State University. He is the president of the Education Consumers Foundation (<http://www.education-consumers.org>).*

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<sup>43</sup> Seifert, L. E. (2009). *Evaluation of the work of Tennessee schoolboards and their effect on student achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (AAT 3365061)

<sup>44</sup> Hess, F. & Meeks, O. (2010). *Governance in the accountability era*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HessFeb2011.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Miller, M. (2008, January/February). First, kill all the school boards. *Atlantic Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/first-kill-all-the-school-boards/306579/>; Campbell, J. "Is it time to abolish school boards?" *Baltimore Sun*. 17, Feb. 2011.

# Appendix I:

## The Public is in the Dark

### 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.

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<sup>46</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2011). *Grade 4 State Results*. Retrieved from [http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2011/state\\_g4.asp?printver](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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>

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.

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

<sup>48</sup> 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>

<sup>49</sup> Education Consumers ClearingHouse (1998). *Education Consumers Associations*. Retrieved from [http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc\\_ea.php](http://www.education-consumers.com/ecc_ea.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 that which 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.<sup>50</sup> 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.

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<sup>50</sup> 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\\_Randl.pdf](http://www.education-consumers.org/ECF_Randl.pdf)

## Appendix II:

# The Unnoticed Role of School Boards

### School Boards: Agent or Double-Agent?

The heart of the challenge faced by schools is unfocused local leadership. School superintendents and supervisors have neglected the educational plight of economically disadvantaged children by failing to insist that teachers in the earliest grades adopt practices that are equal to the challenge—particularly in the area of reading instruction.<sup>51</sup> Instead, they have accepted the excuse that poverty, dysfunctional families, community apathy, inadequate funding, and other factors outside of the school thwart effective teaching—all despite evidence that effective schooling can substantially mitigate these factors.

Moreover, the inattention to these problems has been aided and abetted by the failure of school boards to press for improvement and to exercise due diligence in matters of teaching and learning. District leaders and their boards are stewards of the public trust, but when it comes to student achievement, too many districts have simply failed to step up and confront their district's problems.<sup>52</sup>

The reason for this lack of focus on parent and taxpayer priorities may be the conflict of interest that is inherent in the role of school boards. In theory, school boards are expected to act as an advocate of the public's interest in quality schooling. In practice, however, they are monopoly providers of a public service that is inevitably influenced by the self-indulgent concerns of its employees.<sup>53</sup> Despite their best efforts at advancing the public's interests, they are regularly immersed in education issues as seen from the provider standpoint. In addition, they are subject to the political influence of the school district's internal stakeholders, i.e., the teachers, aides, administrators, bus drivers, janitors, etc., all of whom are voters and many of whom are represented by a union.

The result is regulatory capture on steroids—especially in large school districts.

Although, consumers (i.e., parents and taxpayers) are far more numerous, they are primarily interested only in certain children, they rarely maintain close contact with the school board, and unlike teachers, they have no organization acting as the exclusive representative of their interests. By contrast, education's providers are smaller in numbers but vitally interested in school affairs, have day-to-day contact with board members, and are often members of an organization that aggressively seeks to advance their interests.

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<sup>51</sup> 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>

<sup>52</sup> Cawelti, G. & Protheroe, N. (2007). The school board and central office in district improvement. In H. L. Walberg (Ed.), *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement* (pp. 37-52). Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.adi.org/about/downloads/Restructuring%20Handbook.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Lieberman, M. (1993). *Public education: An autopsy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Parent-teacher organizations provide a limited form of consumer representation, but like the boards, they are limited by an inherent conflict. They are designed to represent the interests of students on issues that are mutually agreed upon by parents and teachers but not ones to which providers would object.<sup>54</sup>

The bottom line: school boards can scarcely avoid issues that concern providers but, unlike business entities, they can disregard consumer interests with virtual impunity—if only one or a few parents voice concern.

Board members are decent and public spirited individuals who are elected to advance the public's aims and priorities but who typically are able to do little more than accept the present level of outcomes as the best that can be obtained with the available resources. They typically run in elections that attract few voters and are dominated primarily by school employees, their families, friends, and neighbors. Instead of representing the public's goals to the schools, they more often find themselves cheerleading for the district leadership's programs and priorities.<sup>55</sup>

School boards with a clear focus on student achievement and strengthened public support are critical to America's future. Concerned citizens acting both individually and in concert with like-minded individuals and organizations need to convey this message to their local school boards.

The good news is that organizations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are already engaged in promoting “. . . a sense of urgency for reform” and others are specifically targeting early reading.<sup>56</sup> The Anne E. Casey Foundation has been a national leader in this area.<sup>57</sup> The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is an early reading initiative supported by the Casey Foundation, the U. S. Conference of Mayors, and dozens of other organizations.<sup>58</sup>

The bad news is that most communities have not yet recognized the problem.

The need is not for wholesale changes in school board memberships. Rather, the need is for liberation from regulatory capture. Specifically: School improvement will require increased public awareness of local achievement outcomes, voter attention to local school board elections, and ultimately a reordering of school board priorities.

### **Isn't student achievement every school's top priority?**

That schools should treat outcomes such as college and workforce readiness as a top priority may seem self-evident, but it is not to educators. Since the early twentieth century, schools of education have taught that improved student achievement is simply one educational aim among many. John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, for example, opposed the idea of

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<sup>54</sup> Haar, C. K. (2002). *The politics of the PTA*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>55</sup> Education Writers Association. (2003, May). *Effective superintendents, effective boards: Finding the right fit*. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Pages/Effective-Superintendents-Effective-Boards-Finding-the-Right-Fit.aspx>

<sup>56</sup> Institute for a Competitive Workforce (2012). *School Board Case Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/publication/edu/School%20Board%20Case%20Studies.pdf> (p. 6)

<sup>57</sup> Campaign for Grade Level Reading <http://gradelevelreading.net/>

<sup>58</sup> Campaign for Grade Level Reading <http://gradelevelreading.net/>; Cardiff, M. (2013, January 28). Mayors stress importance of third-grade reading proficiency. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Mayors.

school boards establishing “preordained” outcomes for schooling.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Dewey and the Progressive Education movement argued that education was all about intellectual growth led by the student’s proclivities—a view that appears to still be favored by a significant number of school board members—and perhaps for an understandable reason.<sup>60</sup> In a recent survey, between one-quarter and one-third of school board members identified themselves as former educators—again, an indication of regulatory capture.<sup>61</sup>

The priorities of school board members in districts that produce college-and-workplace ready graduates stand in sharp contrast. According to a recent National School Board Association study of high-performing districts, not only do their boards treat student achievement as a top priority, they have detailed knowledge of local achievement data and are “not shy” about discussing performance trends.<sup>62</sup> The same report also found that the boards in low-performing districts relied exclusively on interpretations of school data made by the superintendent and tended to blame students, families, and teachers for school performance issues.

Regulatory capture is evident in the issues that are highlighted in the course of school board elections and even in the training received by board members once they have been elected. In particular, public conversation about student achievement is conspicuous by its absence—and, in part, for understandable reasons. Without an easily accessed source of consumer friendly data, candidates who would want to make achievement an issue face a daunting task. They have to explain hard-to-confirm facts to an audience that is familiar with little more than the school district’s carefully crafted public image.

Finally, even the training in “boardsmanship” given to new school board members encourages members to defer to the education community’s views of sound schooling practice. For example, the National School Board Association recommends that new board members consult materials on achievement testing and accountability that scarcely mention the need for, and benefits of, standardized testing—an emphasis that is entirely consistent with the diminished role for standardized testing favored by the education community.<sup>63</sup> Instead, board members are strongly cautioned to consider multiple outcome measures and to avoid any hard and fast conclusions.<sup>64</sup> Again, these are recommendations congenial to the notion that objectively measured learning outcomes deserve to be considered as only one indicator among many, i.e., that they are not the indispensable outcome.

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<sup>59</sup> Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Macmillan Company. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Stone, J. E. (2000). Aligning teacher training with public policy. *The State Education Standard*, 1(1), 35-38. Retrieved from <https://education-consumers.org/aligning-teacher-training-public-policy-article/>

<sup>61</sup> Hess, F. & Meeks, O. (2010). *Governance in the accountability era*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/HessFeb2011.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Center for Public Education. (2011). *Eight characteristics of effective school boards*. Retrieved from [https://www.masc.org/images/events/2015/jtc-15/handouts/11-5\\_1045\\_8-Characteristics-of-Effective-School-Boards\\_Handout.pdf](https://www.masc.org/images/events/2015/jtc-15/handouts/11-5_1045_8-Characteristics-of-Effective-School-Boards_Handout.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> Herman, J. & Dietel, R. (2005, December). A primer on accountability. *American School Board Journal*.192 (12).

<sup>64</sup> Herman, J. & Dietel, R. (2005, December). A primer on accountability. *American School Board Journal*.192 (12).

Given the comfortable fit between the guidance given board members and the education community's view of critical schooling issues, it is little wonder that school boards are ineffective in bringing about improved student achievement. Boards are too often the captives of the organizations they are entrusted to oversee. Board members run in little contested, low-turnout elections in which teachers and various special interest groups are overrepresented.<sup>65</sup> Instead of contests among candidates vying to best serve the interests of education's consumers, the issues of greatest importance to parents and taxpayers are ignored and employee issues like pay and benefits are highlighted.

Improved student achievement and the best interests of "the children" are always the nominal goals but the results speak for themselves. Pay, benefits, and facilities go up—but not test scores. School board elections are mostly focused on what education's internal stakeholders want, not what the public wants or needs for the next generation. The net effect is continuing cultural, social, political, and economic decline facilitated by educational surrender.

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<sup>65</sup> Moe, T. (2006). The union label on the ballot box. *Education Next*, 6(3). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-union-label-on-the-ballot-box/>