



JULY / AUGUST 2006

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## Put to the Test

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY WILLIAM DUKE



Debate about the state of U.S. public schools heated up with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, better known as No Child Left Behind. The measure assesses every school's performance through standardized testing of pupils in grades 3 through 8, and requires that alternatives be provided for students in schools judged inadequate. We asked two experts for their perspectives on reform and this controversial policy. **Terry Moe**, chair of political science and a Hoover Institution senior fellow, is a member of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. **Gerald W. Bracey**, PhD '67, is an independent education researcher in Alexandria, Va., and author of *Reading Educational Research: How to Avoid Getting Statistically Snookered* (Heinemann, 2006).

### Terry Moe Thriving on Failure

America needs to improve its public schools. There are a few dissenters who want us to believe that the schools are doing just fine, and that calls for reform are part of a right-wing conspiracy. But the conspiracy, it turns out, includes virtually everyone in a position of knowledge or public responsibility. The broad consensus among our policy makers—Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, from all corners of the country—is that the public schools are not delivering the goods.

This consensus is not new. It emerged in the wake of the most influential report ever issued on the quality of American education, *A Nation At Risk*, which argued in 1983 that the United States was facing "a rising tide of mediocrity" in its schools. The response at the time was remarkable: a frenzied push for reform that, within just a few years, left no state untouched. Even more remarkably, this frenzy has continued unabated, to the point that education reform has become the new status quo. Every president aspires to be the education president, every governor the education governor.

There is something admirable about all this dedication and effort. But there is also

something pathetic about it. For the fact is, the reform process has never ended because the reforms have typically led to disappointment—and to constant demands for still more reforms. This is a movement that thrives on its own failures. So here we are, after two decades of perpetual reform, and the state of public education remains troubling.

- Many urban school districts are in crisis, often failing to graduate even half of their students. In Detroit the graduation rate is just 42 percent. In Cleveland it is 45 percent. In Sacramento it is 48 percent.
- Minority children consistently score much lower on tests of student achievement than white children do, and the differences are huge. On the 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, black 17-year-olds scored at about the same level as white 13-year-olds in both math and reading.
- For the nation's students generally, NAEP scores indicate that achievement growth during the past 30 years—a very long time—has been modest, and that most of our children simply do not know what they need to know.
- Compared to students in other developed (OECD) countries, American students score well above average in the early grades, but they lose ground by the middle school years, and by high school they are near the bottom of the rankings.

Why are our public schools so difficult to improve? The answer rests with two fundamental problems that stand in the way of progress. The first is a problem of incentives. The second is a problem of power.

The incentive problem is readily apparent in the traditional organization of American schooling. Teachers have jobs with lifetime security, and their pay is based on a salary schedule that has nothing to do with how much their students actually learn. Good teachers are not rewarded for their talent, effort or success in the classroom, and they know their productivity will be rewarded only if they leave teaching for another career, which many of them do. Mediocre teachers have the same lifetime security and pay as good teachers, and they have every reason to stick around, because almost nowhere else (outside government) would their poor performance be tolerated. The same incentive problems apply to most administrators, who, like teachers, are traditionally compensated and secure regardless of whether students learn anything.

For any organization, public or private, the key to effective performance lies in getting the incentives right, and thus in motivating employees to pursue the organization's objectives as productively as possible. This is Management 101. Yet traditionally, public education has failed to follow this simple principle. And for that it has paid a heavy price, not just in lackluster performance, but in reforms that disappoint.

Huge amounts of money have been pumped into the schools, with spending up more than 75 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars per student since 1980. Yet the recipients have had little incentive to spend it efficiently, and they haven't put it to productive use. Similar problems apply to virtually all other mainstream reforms. The push for smaller classes, for example, is extraordinarily expensive, has only modest effects on student learning—and does nothing to change anyone's incentives. A mediocre teacher in a smaller class is still a mediocre teacher.



The education system can only be reformed through politics, and **political power is stacked in favor of employee groups that staunchly defend traditional arrangements.**

If we want significant improvement, we need to target the incentives at the heart of the system. Fortunately, there are potent reforms capable of doing that: school accountability and school choice. Accountability shapes incentives from above through effective management. Under a well-designed system, the states develop rigorous academic standards, measure whether the standards are being met, and attach rewards and sanctions to the outcomes—thus putting a laser-like focus on achievement, and giving educators and students strong incentives to promote it.

School choice, by contrast, shapes incentives from below through grassroots action. When parents are able to vote with their feet, and when they are given alternatives—charter schools or private schools—to the regular public schools, the latter are put on notice that they stand to lose kids and money if they don't perform. And their incentives are enhanced accordingly.

Neither accountability nor choice can be an immediate fix, because institutional reform is a complex and imperfect process. Each of these reforms can be designed and implemented in countless ways, and some may prove much better than others. Success turns on well-intentioned efforts to move—over time, with experience—toward frameworks that adjust for the inevitable early problems and promote school improvement most effectively over the long run. There is nothing ideological about this and nothing conspiratorial. It simply calls for a practical, much-needed search for an appropriate mix of accountability, choice, and traditional schooling—a mix that gets the incentives right and really boosts student learning.

From a technical standpoint, such institutional innovation is well within the capabilities of our policy makers. But this is where the problem of power comes into play. Reform is unavoidably a political process, not just a technical one, and the employees who run the public schools—and have a vested interest in keeping the incentive system as it is—are extremely powerful in politics. The teachers unions are the de facto political leaders of these insiders, and indeed of the entire public school system. They have more than 3 million members; they have tons of money for campaign contributions and lobbying; they have activists in virtually every electoral district in the country; and they are far and away the most powerful force in the politics of American education.

The teachers unions are opposed to school choice, even for disadvantaged children trapped in the nation's worst schools, because they don't want one child or one dollar to leave the schools in which their members work. They have used their political power with a vengeance to drastically limit the spread of choice programs. Today there are a handful of small voucher programs: in the districts of Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, D.C., and in the states of Florida and Utah. There are also roughly 3,600 charter schools attended by some 1 million students nationwide. While choice options are slowly increasing, all of this is currently a mere drop in a 50-million-student bucket, and provides little competition—and few new incentives—for the regular public schools.

The unions are also opposed to accountability. They say they support it, because they can hardly say otherwise given its broad popularity. But what they really support are standards—which in themselves are not threatening—without any real consequences for failing to meet them. They do not want teacher pay to depend on how much students learn. Indeed, they do not even want teacher performance to be measured. And above all else, they do not want anyone to lose a job merely because they are no good at teaching.

The unions could not stop the enactment of No Child Left Behind, the landmark federal accountability law, but they did succeed in weakening some of its key provisions. And since its passage they have done everything possible to impede its implementation, undermine its popularity, and pressure for key changes that would render it impotent.

There can be little surprise, then, that success is so elusive in American school

reform. The education system is literally not organized to be effective, yet it can only be reformed through politics, and political power is stacked in favor of employee groups that staunchly defend traditional arrangements. As they see it, reform is fine as long as it doesn't really change anything, and it is especially fine if it promises more money and more jobs.

So this is mainly the kind of reform we get. The fact that it has little or no impact on student learning is beside the point. Those rare, especially promising innovations that bring children and their academic achievement to the motivational center of the system, on the other hand, are regarded by employee groups as mortal threats. They do everything they can to defeat these efforts, and (failing that) to put roadblocks in the way of progress.

The problem of incentives, then, cannot be dealt with until the problem of political power is somehow resolved. Until this happens, real reform will be a constant uphill battle, and the public schools will continue to disappoint.

## Gerald W. Bracey Believing the Worst

In his 1990 book, *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, historian Lawrence Cremin observed that the growth of American education after World War II had been "nothing short of phenomenal." The proportion of high school graduates among those 25 or older had grown from 34 percent to 74 percent, while college graduates had increased from 6 percent to 19 percent. "And yet," mused Cremin, this expansion "brought with it a pervasive sense of failure. The question would have to be 'Why?'"

That still is the question.

Criticism of schools, always present, intensified in the tense Cold War era, when CIA chief Allen Dulles fed the Pentagon statistics indicating that the Soviet Union was producing twice as many engineers, scientists and mathematicians as the United States. Then, in October 1957, the Russians launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit the earth. Everyone blamed the U.S. lag on the current condition of schools even though those working in rocketry had long since departed them. (Cremin quipped that Sputnik proved only that the Russians' World War II German scientists had gotten ahead of our World War II German scientists.)

In red letters against a black background, *Life* magazine's cover of March 24, 1958, shouted "Crisis in Education." A stern-looking Alexei Kutzkov in Moscow and an easy-smiling Stephen Lapekas in Chicago, both high school juniors, stared out at the reader. Pictures showed Kutzkov conducting complicated experiments in physics and chemistry and reading aloud from *Sister Carrie* in his English class. Lapekas was seen walking home with his girlfriend, dancing in rehearsal for a musical and retreating from a geometry problem on the blackboard. "Stephen amused his classmates with wisecracks about his ineptitude," read the text.

One leaves the *Life* article convinced that without massive and immediate school reform, the Russians will bury us. (Lapekas became a Navy pilot, then a commercial pilot for TWA; I am told Kutzkov works for the Russian equivalent of the FAA. The article so devastated Lapekas that he will not talk about it even today.)

The schools never recovered from Sputnik, getting pummeled by report after report. Current reform efforts were launched in 1983 by *A Nation At Risk*, from the National Commission on Excellence in Education. A treasury of selected, spun and distorted statistics, it was often called "the paper Sputnik."

These reports produced a syndrome we might call "The Neurotic Need to Believe

the Worst.” Americans uncritically accept gloomy statistics about their public schools. For example, claims that in 2004 China produced 600,000 engineers, India 350,000 and the United States a mere 70,000 flowed without resistance from a 2005 *Fortune* article into a National Academies report, the *New York Times* and popular culture. The real figures emerged from a Duke University study in late 2005: China, 341,000; India 112,000; United States 131,000—more per capita than either of the others. Yet spring 2006 found the bogus numbers in the *New Yorker* and in speeches by Sen. John Warner, Education secretary Margaret Spellings and Commerce secretary Carlos Gutierrez. Bad statistics are hard to kill.

Similarly, in his book *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman reports that many immigrant children do unusually well in science talent searches. He writes: “[Andrei] Munteanu started American school in the seventh grade, which he found a breeze compared to his Romanian school. ‘The math and science classes covered the same subject matter I was taking in Romania when I was in fourth grade.’”

Friedman relies on Munteanu’s memory and doesn’t check the facts. He doesn’t need to. We all know American schools are lousy. But there are facts that can be checked, in an assessment known as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). At the eighth grade level (Romania did not participate in the fourth or 12th grade tests), the test score results showed this:

### Trends in Math and Science

		MATH	SCIENCE
TIMSS 1995	Romania	482	486
	United States	500	534
TIMSS 1999	Romania	472	472
	United States	502	515
TIMSS 2003	Romania	475	470
	United States	504	527

The American advantages over Romania in math and science can be characterized as substantial and large, respectively.

While the media treat putatively negative outcomes on the front page, they often ignore positive outcomes. When the results from PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) appeared in 2003, only four newspapers carried bylined stories. For three of them—the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald* and *Hartford Courant*—the story was of local interest: Boston College performed much of the technical work.

Of the 35 nations in this study of fourth graders, eight scored higher than the United States, but only three of those scored statistically significantly higher. The average U.S. score of 543 floated well above the international average of 500 although somewhat behind the leading nation, Sweden, at 562. When the U.S. Department of Education broke down PIRLS scores according to the different poverty levels of U.S. schools, it found this:

### Poverty and Literacy in U.S. Schools

% OF STUDENTS IN POVERTY	SCORE	% U.S. STUDENTS
< 10	589	13
10 - 24.9	567	17
25 - 49.9	551	28
50 - 74.9	519	22
> 75	485	20

The far right column indicates the proportion of all American students attending schools with a given poverty level. Thus the 13 percent in the schools with the lowest poverty level scored considerably higher than students in the highest scoring nation, while the 17 percent in schools with moderately low-level poverty scored slightly higher.

If the students in U.S. schools with 25 to 49.9 percent poverty constituted a nation, it would rank fourth among the 35 countries in the study. Only in schools where the poverty level exceeded 75 percent did the score fall below the international average.

One might reasonably object, "Yes, but other countries have poor children, too." True, but not nearly as many as the United States, at least among developed nations. UNICEF Child Poverty in Wealthy Nations found a 21.9 percent child poverty rate here. Among the 20 countries studied, only four others exceeded 15 percent (New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Portugal); 10 had rates below 10 percent (Denmark: 2.4 percent).

A 2006 report published by a Columbia University research center found public schools outperforming private schools but received scant media attention. The study, *Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematical Data*, concluded that private schools score higher than public schools only because they contain more high-income students, fewer low-income students, fewer minority students, and many fewer special education students and English Language Learners. When these differences are controlled for, the public schools do better. Despite press releases sent to 1,500 media representatives, only one major newspaper, the *New York Times*, devoted a story to it.

Media and critics also fail to note that educators from nations that test higher than the United States, especially Asian nations, visit U.S. schools regularly. They want to learn how to produce innovative people. *Newsweek* pundit Fareed Zakaria observed that students in Singapore score much higher than American students; but 10 or 20 years later, American students are ahead. "Singapore has few truly top-ranked scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, business executives or academics. American kids test much worse, but seem to do better later in life and in the real world."

Some have attributed this outcome to the quality of American universities. But to contend this would be to deny that elementary and secondary education has any consequences. A more plausible explanation is that multiple-choice tests taken by 13-year-olds don't count for much in the long run.

The Singapore minister of education affirmed this interpretation, telling Zakaria that Singapore had an exam meritocracy, America a talent meritocracy. "We cannot use tests to measure creativity, ambition or the willingness of students to question conventional wisdom." Zakaria also quoted a Singaporean father who once lived in the United States. "In the American school, when my son would speak up, he was applauded and encouraged. In Singapore he's seen as pushy and weird." The father moved his son to an American-style private school.

No one should take the above facts and statements as an acceptance of the educational status quo. Some improvements should be made simply because they can be. It is more important to address the “achievement gap” between white and Asian students on the one hand and black and Hispanic students on the other. Indeed, the No Child Left Behind Act demands that schools eliminate this gap entirely.

I have never believed that this law is the idealistic, well-intentioned but poorly executed program that many claim it to be. NCLB aims to shrink the public sector, transfer large sums of public money to the private sector, weaken or destroy two Democratic power bases—the teachers unions—and provide vouchers to let students attend private schools at public expense. The original proposal, and each subsequent presidential budget, provided for vouchers, but Congress has thus far removed these provisions.

Even if every contention in the previous paragraph were wrong, NCLB is to education as Katrina was to New Orleans. The law mandates that 100 percent of students be proficient in math and reading by 2014. Projections of failure range from 99 percent of all schools in California down to 85 percent in high-scoring Minnesota. Of what use is a program that fails everyone?

NCLB depends on punishment. It does not reward schools for doing well, but sanctions them for doing “poorly.” NCLB requires schools to make arbitrarily determined “Adequate Yearly Progress” and to report that progress by various subgroups (perhaps its only beneficial requirement). Most schools have 37 subgroups—ethnic groups, special education students, English Language Learners, etc. If any subgroup fails to make AYP for two consecutive years, all students in the school must be offered the opportunity to transfer to a “successful school.” The school might be doing well by 36 of its 37 subgroups, but in federal eyes it is uniformly failing. If fewer than 95 percent of students show up to take the test, the school fails.

NCLB depends entirely on standardized tests to measure student progress. Spending classroom time preparing for a standardized test is the opposite of asking questions or being innovative. Robert Sternberg, PhD '75, dean of the school of arts and sciences at Tufts University, asserts that our “massive” use of standardized tests “is one of the most effective, if unintentional, vehicles this country has created for suppressing creativity.”

NCLB’s greatest absurdity derives from the demand that schools alone wipe out the achievement gap. As economist Richard Rothstein observes in *Class and Schools*: “We can make big strides in narrowing the student achievement gap, but only by directing greater attention to economic and social reforms that narrow the differences in background characteristics with which children come to school. . . . If the nation can’t close the gaps in income, health and housing, there is little prospect of equalizing achievement.”

It is no accident that Scandinavian countries, with their generous social safety nets, enjoy higher test scores—sometimes higher than Asian nations—and show smaller differences in scores among different socioeconomic levels. If we think NCLB will eradicate the achievement gap, then we are not yet taking the academic achievement of minority children seriously.

The great expansion that Cremin observed continues but slowly, although some reformers now express a hope to prepare all students for a college education. Between TIMSS 1995 and TIMSS 2003, only Hong Kong, Latvia and Lithuania



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showed larger gains than the United States. And in its *Global Competitiveness Report 2005-2006*, the World Economic Forum ranked the United States the most competitive among the 117 nations it rated.

Yet the sense of failure persists.

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