Question & Answer: The Truth About America's Schools

By Diane Ravitch From the July/August 2007 Issue
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Is K–12 education really lagging badly, or have we 'raised our sights'? DIANE RAVITCH answers the tough questions.

1. How big is America's school system?

Nearly 55 million children attend schools in the United States, taught by about 3.5 million teachers. About 89 percent of students from kindergarten through the 12th grade attend public schools, the rest private or religious ones.

2. How can we judge the quality of U.S. schools?

There are several important benchmark tests, administered to students in many countries.

In the United States, testing companies make assumptions about what students at different grade levels will learn, in part by examining textbooks that are widely used across the nation. Thanks to these tests and the similarity of textbooks, there is already something akin to a national curriculum in science, mathematics, reading, and history.

Some children will do poorly on tests simply because the curriculum in their classroom, their school, or even their country did not include the material that was tested. The tests send a signal to educators about what is usually taught, as well as what was taught poorly and therefore not learned. This is a backward process—we should be setting the tests based on the curriculum, not setting the curriculum based on the tests.

3. So how do American students compare to peers internationally?

In assessments of math and science, U.S. performance is mediocre. There are two major tests, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). On the math portion of the TIMSS, our eighth-grade students rank 16th among 46 nations. The 15 entities whose students outperformed ours include Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Estonia, Japan, and Hungary. On the PISA test, American scores in science and math literacy were below the average for the 30 nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The American Institutes for Research examined the scores of the 12 nations, including ours, that participated in TIMSS and PISA in 2003 and found that our students consistently ranked eighth or ninth of the 12. Only mathematics and science have been consistently tested, because other subjects are culture-bound. We spend a lot on education—only Sweden spends more—so these outcomes are disappointing.

4. Do we know how American schools today compare with those in the past?

We have had consistent measures of academic performance for national samples of students only since the 1970s, when the federal testing program called the National Assessment of Educational Progress was created. The SAT, previously known as the Scholastic Assessment Test and before that as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, is another measure that has been around since the 1940s, but it tests only students applying for college.

Median SAT scores peaked in 1964, then declined steadily until 1980. Median math scores rebounded almost to their earlier levels in the late 1980s, but median verbal scores hovered in the 420s (the mean score earlier was

500). The College Board ended the embarrassing annual discussion of low verbal scores by "recentering" them in 1994, so that median verbal SATs once again were about 500.

Test scores don't tell the whole story. American students, at least those in the top classes and schools, study far more demanding programs in mathematics and science than were offered half a century ago. However, students today are likelier to know less about history and literature than their counterparts of earlier generations.

5. Who is responsible for improving the system?

Education has long been the primary responsibility of state and local governments—now, there are about 15,000 local school districts. Until 1965, the federal role in education was very limited. Even today, Washington meets less than one-tenth of the costs of public education, but its importance in shaping education policy has grown steadily over the past 40 years.

6. How and why has the federal role expanded?

The Founders believed that education was necessary to create an enlightened public, but they did not envision a federal role in education. The U.S. Constitution does not even mention the words "education" or "school," so, by omission, the responsibility went to the states. In 1787, Congress adopted the Northwest Ordinance, setting out the ground rules for the formation and governing of new states. The document said, "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Still, the federal government itself had an insignificant role in education for most of our history.

In 1867, Washington began to collect statistics and report to the public about "the condition and progress" of education, but the federal government did not get directly involved in changing the way schools work until 1917, when Congress passed a national law to encourage vocational education. Other programs followed, notably the National Defense Education Act in 1958, which supported the teaching of science, mathematics, and engineering in response to the Soviet launch of *Sputnik*, an earth satellite.

But the biggest change in the federal role was the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program. That act provided federal aid to education, targeted especially at districts with large numbers of poor children. After the passage of ESEA, many more federal education programs were enacted. In 1980, in the closing days of the Carter administration, a federal Department of Education was created. And most recently, with the passage of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the federal government has assumed a significant role in determining what children are taught.

7. No Child Left Behind. What is it?

NCLB is a national law—passed in late 2001 by 381–41 in the House and 87–10 in the Senate—that aims to improve student achievement, increase accountability for results, and focus attention on the lowest-performing students. It requires every public school that receives federal funding (as nearly all of them do) to test every student from grades three through eight in reading and math. Starting this year, schools also test science.

The schools must break down these scores into subgroups by race, ethnicity, disability, low-income status, and English language proficiency. All schools are to make what the law calls "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for every one of these subgroups. All students must be 100 percent proficient by 2014.

If *any* of its subgroups fails to make AYP, then a school faces sanctions that grow more onerous with each passing year. In the second year, the school must offer all of its students the chance to go to another school

(even though the failure may involve only one subgroup—for example, students with disabilities); in the third year, the school must offer extra tutoring to the students who need it (this rule has created a bonanza for private tutoring companies); and in the following years, if the school continues to fail to meet AYP targets, it may be restructured, its staff removed, the school turned into a charter school, handed over to the state or private managers, or closed.

8. Does NCLB make things better?

There have been gains since 2000 for black, Hispanic, and Asian students in reading in fourth grade, as well as in mathematics for all groups in fourth and eighth grades. The gains from 2003 to 2005 are small or negligible, but it may be too soon to make a definitive judgment on the effects of NCLB because the law was signed by President Bush early in 2002, and schools took a while to understand what it meant.

9. Why doesn't everyone like the new law?

State officials are unhappy that control over their schools is shifting to Washington. Teachers complain that the unrelenting focus on reading and mathematics has narrowed the curriculum to the detriment of subjects like history, literature, geography, and the arts—none of which counts toward NCLB goals. Also, the law does nothing for top students and may even divert attention from them. More importantly, the goal of 100 percent proficiency by the year 2014 is impossible to meet—unless "proficiency" is diluted to mean only basic literacy (after all, no school district or state or nation has ever achieved 100 percent proficiency). As the date grows closer, more and more schools are bound to be labeled as "failing," even if the overwhelming majority of their students are performing well. At some point, Congress will have to revise the law to recognize this reality.

10. NCLB was supposed to give students from failing public schools the chance to move to better ones. Has that happened?

Not to the extent that Congress anticipated. Studies conducted by researchers around the nation, presented at a conference at the American Enterprise Institute last November, showed that minuscule numbers of students—fewer than 5 percent of those eligible—are switching to other schools. This is because some urban districts don't have enough empty seats in good schools for all the eligible students, or students don't want to leave their schools, or the districts are not providing good information about choices. In some cases, when top-rated schools have failed to meet AYP for a single group, the other students see no reason to transfer out of their school.

11. What would you recommend in the reauthorization of NCLB, now facing Congress?

I do not think that the federal government should tell states and districts how to "remedy" problems in their schools. Neither Congress nor the U.S. Department of Education has the capacity to prescribe appropriate remedies and sanctions. What the federal government does very well is gather information and distribute money to help educate needy students. So I suggest that NCLB be changed as follows: the federal government takes responsibility for establishing national curricular standards based on international benchmarks, and for creating national tests in those subjects. This information would be provided to the states, leaving to states and districts the responsibility to determine appropriate remedies, improvements, and, where necessary, sanctions.

12. What about voucher programs? Could they give students better options?

Voucher programs use public money to send students to private schools. They have been stymied by provisions in many state constitutions that prohibit public money from going to religious schools. Opponents of vouchers are quick to sue and have been generally successful in the courts. In Milwaukee and Cleveland, the two cities where programs have survived legal challenges, children are able to use vouchers to attend nonpublic schools of

their choice, including religious schools. These programs are often oversubscribed; parents are particularly attracted to the discipline and values of religious schools.

The educational research literature, however, abounds with heated debates about whether vouchers actually improve achievement. The evidence narrowly favors vouchers. But because of the constitutional constraints, the limited supply of religious and private schools, and the modest gains registered, vouchers do not seem to be a practical cure for the system as a whole.

13. What about charter schools?

Charter schools, which are part of public school systems but enjoy more autonomy, can be laboratories of school reform, demonstrating what can be done with changes in curriculum or governance or teaching methods. They are spreading: today, 16 years after the first ones were launched, there are 4,000 charters, with 1.2 million students, in 40 states and the District of Columbia. The schools' performance varies widely. There are some excellent charters but also many ineffective ones—no better than the weakest local public school.

The promise of charters was that the bad ones would be weeded out by public officials and the marketplace—since parents presumably would avoid sending their children to the poor performers. Unfortunately, there has not been enough weeding. Low-performing charter schools survive, and the students who attend them are getting cheated. For whatever reason, parents in the failing charter schools do not necessarily move out, either because they like the community or a teacher or something else (the same happens in low-performing regular public schools). The persistence of low-performing charter schools is a market failure.

For charter schools to be part of the solution, public officials must be far more vigilant in approving charter applications and much faster to shut down charter operators that cannot meet their performance goals. Meanwhile, regular public schools have shown little interest in replicating any of the successful models that have been piloted in charter schools. For example, while most people admire the KIPP schools, there are few if any public schools that are adopting the KIPP model; similarly, the Achievement First schools in Connecticut have been extraordinarily successful, but few public schools emulate them.

The experience with charters, at least as most of them are now structured, suggests that the U.S. public school system is not really comparable to a marketplace. It would be a disaster for public education if all the motivated children in a district went to charter schools and the unmotivated, underachieving students went to district schools.

14. Why does a country as rich as ours still struggle with student achievement?

Some observers blame the bureaucracy and the power of teachers' unions. Of course, other nations with achievement much higher than ours have bureaucracy and strong teachers' unions. Some say the problem is a lack of choice and competition. Others argue that students today are distracted by television, video games, and other visual media and are unwilling to spend the time required for serious reading and concentrating on lessons. Some say that the teaching profession has suffered because of the removal of gender barriers in the marketplace, with talented women entering more remunerative jobs when, in the past, they would have become teachers.

Some say the schools suffer from a general dumbing-down of the culture; for example, popular movies, once based on the classics, are now likely to feature gratuitous sex and violence without any reference to important works of literature. Still others theorize that Americans today care only about degrees and credentials, not about the intrinsic value of a good education. Some say that parents are not as involved with their children's education as they once were. Others point out that discipline problems cut into teachers' ability to teach and often make the job impossible; students know that the punishment for misbehavior will be minor.

These hunches all have truth to them, but there is one more important factor: we have raised our sights. For many years our country thrived because of the intellectual success of the top one-third of every graduating class. Now, we want to educate *all* children and leave none behind. This is an ambitious goal to which our sense of democracy and our belief in fairness impel us. But it won't be easy to achieve.

15. What should we do now?

No single approach can solve all our educational problems. But there is one important piece that is missing—a sequential, coherent curriculum. You might assume that a curriculum exists in every state and every district. Not true. Most states and most districts have none. This is why I think we must begin to think seriously about a national curriculum, national standards, and national tests, with states and local districts responsible for acting on the information gathered by the federal government.

When there is a knowledge-rich curriculum, all the parts of the educational system are coordinated to help teachers teach and students learn. Instead, most classrooms rely on textbooks to tell them what to teach.

For a remedy, E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s books, especially *The Knowledge Deficit* (Houghton Mifflin), are a good place to start. He developed the Core Knowledge curriculum, which lays out what children should learn from preschool through eighth grade. Students in Core Knowledge schools (there are about 800 that use the curriculum) achieve at very high levels, while getting a full education in history, literature, and the arts. It can be done.

The ingredients for success are the same everywhere: a coherent curriculum, highly qualified teachers, effective instruction, adequate resources, willing students, and a climate that respects education. It is good to have choices, especially for the lowest-performing students who have not benefited from their district schools. We do not need to dismantle public education. We need to do the hard and consistent work of improving it.

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