

Our Schools are Not Broken: The Problem is Poverty

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"Broken" schools?

We have been told repeatedly that our schools are "broken," that our teachers are inadequate, that our schools of education are not doing their job, and that teachers unions are spending all their time protecting bad teachers. The evidence is the fact that American students do not score at the top of the world on international test scores. One observer claimed that American students are "taking a shellacking" on these tests. ¹

The impact of poverty

Not so. Studies show that middle-class American students attending well-funded schools outscore students in nearly all other countries on these tests. ² Overall scores are unspectacular because over 20% of our students live in poverty, the highest percentage among all industrialized countries. High-scoring Finland, for example, first on the PISA science test in 2006, has less than 4% child poverty. ³

Reduce poverty to improve education, not vice-versa

The fact that American students who are not living in poverty do very well shows that there is no crisis in teacher quality. The problem is poverty. The US Department of Education insists that improving teaching comes first: With better teaching, we will have more learning (higher test scores, according to the feds), and this will improve the economy. We are always interested in improving teaching, but the best teaching in the world will have little effect when students are hungry, are in poor health because of inadequate diet and inadequate health care, and have low literacy development because of a lack of access to books. ⁴ Also, studies have failed to find a correlation between improved test scores and subsequent economic progress. ⁵

The relationship is the other way around: "We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished." (Martin Luther King, 1967, Final Words of Advice).

At least: Protect children from the effects of poverty

If poverty is the problem, the solution is full employment and a living wage for honest work. Until this happens, we need to do what we can to protect children from the effects of poverty. This means (1) continue to support and expand free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs ("No child left unfed," as Susan Ohanian puts it). It means (2) make sure

all schools have an adequate number of school nurses; there are fewer school nurses per student in high poverty schools than in low poverty schools.⁶ It means (3) make sure all children have access to books.

Access to books > more reading > literacy development

There is very clear evidence that children from high-poverty families have very little access to books at home, at school, and in their communities.⁷ Studies also show when children have access to interesting and comprehensible reading material, they read.⁸ And finally, when children read, they improve in all aspects of literacy, including vocabulary, grammar, spelling, reading and writing ability.⁹ In fact, I have concluded that reading for pleasure, self-selected reading, is the major cause of literacy development. Making sure that all children have access to books makes literacy development possible. Without it, literacy development is impossible.

The power of libraries

In support of this chain of logic, a number of studies show that school library quality and the presence of credential librarians are related to reading ability. The leader of this research in the United States is Keith Curry Lance, who, with his associates, has reported that school library quality is related to reading achievement in a number of different states.¹⁰ Related to the poverty issue, the results of some recent studies have suggested that access to books, either at home or at the school library, can mitigate or balance the effect of poverty: The positive impact of access to books on reading achievement is about as large as the negative impact of poverty.¹¹

Access can close the gap

A stunning example of the power of books to close the gap between different groups is Fryer and Levitt's (2004) analysis. They reported that white children did better than African-American children on tests administered on entrance to kindergarten. When socio-economic status was added to the analysis, about 2/3 of the gap was closed. When books in the home was added to the analysis in addition to socio-economic status, the entire gap was closed: There was no difference between the groups.¹²

Unfortunately, public and school libraries across the country are suffering tremendous budget cuts, and school librarians' hours are being reduced.¹³ As Isaac Asimov wrote, "When I read about the way in which library funds are being cut and cut, I can only think that American society has found one more way to destroy itself" (from his autobiography, *I, Asimov*).

How to pay for it: Reduce testing

We can easily afford to protect children from many of the effects of poverty. The obvious step is to halt the drive toward increased testing and reduce the amount of testing we are paying for now.

The astonishing increase in testing

It is widely acknowledged that NCLB (No Child Left Behind) required an excessive amount of testing. Not well known is the fact that the US Department of Education is planning to spend billions on a massive new testing program, with far more testing than ever before, all linked to national standards. The new plan will require, as before, tests in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school, but it also includes interim testing, and may include pre-testing in the fall to be able to measure growth during the year. In addition, the US Department of Education is encouraging testing in other subjects as well. The tests are to be administered online, which means a huge investment in getting all students connected.¹⁴

No evidence supporting the increase in testing

There is no evidence supporting the idea that tests to enforce national standards will have a positive impact on student learning. In fact, the evidence we have suggests that it will not: States that use more high-stakes tests do not do better on the national NAEP test than states with fewer,¹⁵ and the use of the standardized SAT does not predict college success over and above high school grades.¹⁶ Countries that use standardized tests for course examinations did only slightly better on the PISA, a test of reading given to 15 year olds, and the use of such tests to compare schools and to make curricular decisions has a near-zero correlation with PISA scores.¹⁷

Of course, the administration has argued that these will be new and better tests, more sensitive to growth in learning, able to chart student progress through the year, and able to probe real learning, not just memorization. Before unleashing these "improved" tests on the country, however, there should be rigorous investigation, rigorous studies to show that these measures are worth the investment. Right now, the corporations and politicians insist that we take on faith the claim that these tests are good for students. Such claims exhibit a profound lack of accountability.

In contrast, there is overwhelming evidence that dealing with poverty is an excellent investment, one that will not only improve school achievement but also affect quality of life and personal happiness.

To summarize:

1. American education is not broken. Our less than spectacular international test scores are not because of bad teaching, but are because of our high rate of child poverty.
2. Reducing poverty will improve educational attainment, not vice-versa.
3. A reasonable first step is to protect children from the effects of poverty: No child left unfed, more health care, improve access to books.
4. We can easily pay for much of this by reducing testing.

Notes

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- testing on the way: A 21st century boondoggle? http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2011/04/high_tech_testing_on_the_way_a.html. Apparently even the president of the United States has not been aware of the amount of testing the Department of Education was planning. On March 28, 2011, the President, in response to a question at a townhall meeting, commented that "we have piled on a lot of standardized tests on our kids" and suggested that we "figure out whether we have to do it every year or whether we can do it maybe every several years," as well as use other criteria. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-univision-town-hall>
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