How America Is Failing Its Schools

Originally published at: http://inequality.org/america-failing-schools/

Posted on July 23, 2015 by Salvatore Babones

America’s schools are not failing; America is failing its schools.

By Salvatore Babones

The 1983 blue-ribbon panel report A Nation At Risk exposed the dire state of America’s schools. The report was commissioned by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell to address “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system.”

The commission included 12 administrators, 1 businessperson, 1 chemist, 1 physicist, 1 politician, 1 conservative activist, 1 teacher — and not a single expert on America’s educational system.

The report concluded that “declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted.” It advocated an expansion of standardized testing to ensure better performance.

Testing is not the answer to the problems that plague America’s schools. But testing does explode one major myth embedded in A Nation at Risk and other reports on America’s schools. America’s schools are not failing.

According to standardized tests conducted every four years by the National Assessment of Educational Progress — the nation’s report card — American 9-year-olds now perform better than ever before in reading. They also perform better than ever before in math.

Long-term trend scores for 13-year-olds show the same pattern: better than ever before in both math and reading. For 17-year-olds scores are just a few points off the all-time highs achieved in the 1990s. Ironically, average scores have declined due to success in preventing at-risk students from dropping out of school — and out of the test pool.

The racial and ethnic gaps between white, black and Hispanic students have also declined in both reading and math for all age groups.

This story of success is repeated in international comparisons for all but a small proportion of American schools. A new documentary from veteran educator and first-time filmmaker Shannon Puckett delivers the numbers.

Defies Measurement highlights the fact that American schools that serve mainly middle-income students score exceptionally well on international assessments. Even schools where half of the students live in poverty do reasonably well. Serious problems only show up in schools where more than 75 percent of the students live in poverty.

To put this in perspective, the national poverty rate is 14.5 percent and the national child poverty rate is 19.9 percent. The fact that a school has more than 75 percent of its students living in poverty indicates an extreme concentration of poverty. Only these super-high-poverty schools lag international standards.

Unfortunately, the concentration of poverty in America is a common occurrence. According to statistics cited in Defies Measurement, roughly one-fifth of all US schools have student populations where more than 75 percent of students live in poverty.
As these figures show, the real crisis in American education is not the schools system. The real crisis is inequality. The inequalities separating America’s best-resourced school districts and its worst-resourced are staggering.

Even the inequality between 50 percent poverty schools and 75 percent poverty schools is enough to drag down the average educational performance of the entire country.

But Defies Measurement is not a documentary about testing. It is about education and how we do education in America. It is about the “public” in public education. The public interest in public education is what really defies measurement.

We the public are failing our public schools. It is not reasonable to condemn a school, its teachers, or even its students for performing poorly on standardized tests when that school is charged with educating a massive concentration of very poor students (and dealing with all the problems that come along with poverty).

It is similarly unreasonable to expect that more testing will solve the problems of these schools. Teaching to the test may improve test scores but it doesn’t improve education. There is very little evidence that it even improves student performance. It mainly improves test scores by encouraging administrators to manipulate test scores.

If public education “works” in low-poverty schools, in affluent suburban school districts, in middle-income small towns, and in mixed communities of all kinds, the reality is that public education works. What doesn’t “work” is a society characterized by extreme inequality in which the poorest students are concentrated in the poorest schools.

According to international test results the best-performing schools in the world are in China. Politicians routinely hold up the challenge from China when demanding more testing in America. They seem to want America to become more like China.

They might be surprised to learn that elite Chinese parents are desperate to get their kids into top-quality American public schools. They pay millions of dollars (cash) to purchase homes that will allow their children to attend our public schools.

It would be cheaper for those Chinese parents to send their children to private schools, and much cheaper for them to send their children to the supposedly excellent Chinese schools. But Chinese parents understand what American politicians do not. Most American public schools are excellent.

The small proportion of American public schools that are not excellent are victims of American inequality, not victims of bad teachers or evil administrators. Schools should not be dumping grounds for the failed policies of a failed politics. To fix American schools, fix American inequality.