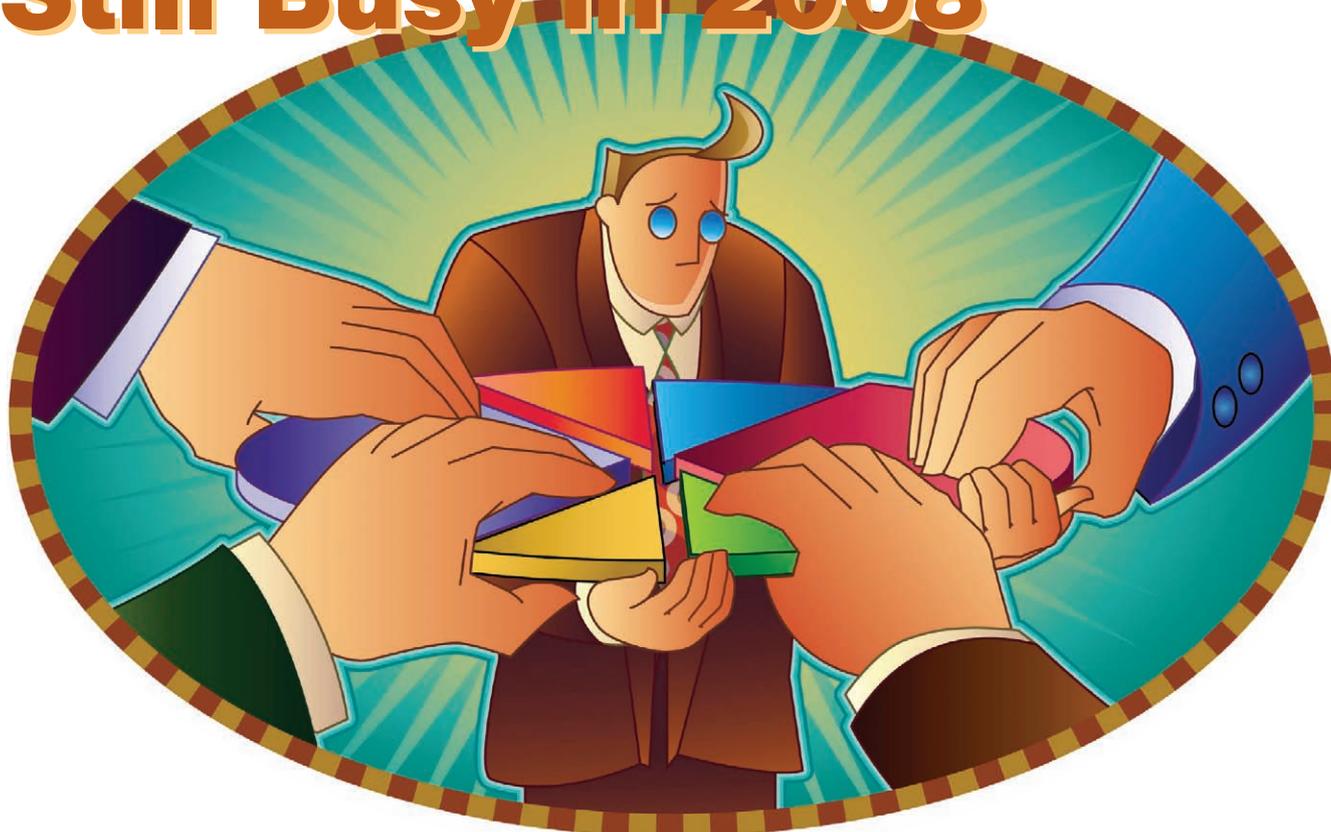


# Schools-Are-Awful Bloc Still Busy in 2008



*Mr. Bracey digs into the story behind various “facts” and uncovers explanations that shed a different light on the state of education in the U.S.*

**BY GERALD W. BRACEY**

**T**HE SCHOOLS-are-awful bloc has become so dominant that people don’t even think about challenging it. Even though the year isn’t over yet, there’s plenty of evidence that the fear mongers who reared their ugly heads in 2007 have been hard at work during 2008.

Misinformation, distorted information, deliberate attempts at obfuscation, sloppy thinking — all of those nasty habits have attracted the ire of the 18th Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education.

## **MAKING EDUCATION A PRIORITY**

Businessmen philanthropists Eli Broad and Bill Gates were the masterminds of EDin08, a \$60 million effort to inject education into the 2008 presidential campaign. But much of that effort is clouded by misinformation.

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In May 2008, EDin08 cited a Pew Research Center poll that showed education as the #2 priority for Americans and another poll from Rasmussen in which 90% of voters called education an “important issue.” Not quite.

The signal finding of the Pew survey of registered voters — a group probably quite different from the nation as a whole — was that only 18% of respondents are satisfied with the way the country is going, an all-time low in the 20 years of Pew polling. Whoever becomes president will inherit a mess.

## **EDin08 plays fast and loose with the truth.**

And, in the Pew poll, education was not a clear second — it tied with health care and jobs at 78% concerned, and behind the economy, which drew a full 88%.

Finally, EDin08 implies a vast change that hasn't happened: Education has long been considered important. In fact, concern about education increased a slight 3%, from 75% in 2004 to 78% this year. But much larger changes since 2004 occurred in energy as a concern (77%, up 23%); budget deficit (69%, up 12%); the economy (88%, up 10%); Social Security (75%, up 10%); the environment (62%, up 9%); taxes (68%, up 9%); and health care (78%, up 5%) ([www.people-press.org/reports/pdf/425.pdf](http://www.people-press.org/reports/pdf/425.pdf))

Of course, these surveys are remarkably sensitive to the way the questions are framed. In late July, when Pew asked, “What is the most important problem facing the nation,” education barely registered, being so designated by 5% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans. The economy (31%), energy/gas prices (19%), Iraq (17%), inflation/cost of living (6%), and unemployment (5%) all caused more anxiety than education ([www.people-press.org/reports/pdf/438.pdf](http://www.people-press.org/reports/pdf/438.pdf)).

The Rasmussen survey shows education rated “very important” or “somewhat important” by 85% of respondents (as in the Pew poll, voters), not the 90% that EDin08 claims. Without combining these categories, one doesn't come close to the 90% figure — 61% rate it very important. But, again, education is outranked by the economy (96%), government ethics and corruption (92%), taxes (89%), national securi-

ty (88%), social security (87%), and health care (86%) ([www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/issues2/trust\\_importance\\_on\\_issues](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/issues2/trust_importance_on_issues)).

Another example from EDin08's “Get the Facts About America's Schools” flyer: “70% of eighth graders are not proficient in reading — and most will never catch up.” The top-ranked nation in reading is Sweden (Finland did not participate in the study) but *two-thirds of Swedish students are not proficient*.<sup>1</sup> This should tell someone that something is wrong with their measure.

Also on the EDin08 site: “Compared to students in 30 industrialized nations, American 15-year-olds ranked 25th in math and 21st in science. Even America's top math students rank 25th out of 30 when compared with top students across the globe.”

These numbers are taken from the PISA ranks but ignore TIMSS or PIRLS. PISA has been widely criticized in Europe but, oddly enough, not in the U.S. (See page 108 to learn more about PISA's less than sterling reputation.) TIMSS 2003 results would reveal that American students were 9th out of 45 countries in science and 15th out of 45 in math. No one who reports in ranks ever acknowledges that ranks create large-looking differences out of insignificant differences. If American 8th graders had gotten 6% more of the items correct on TIMSS science, they'd have tied Korea for 4th place; 6% fewer and they'd have tied Italy for 22nd.

EDin08 even has material that is factually wrong. One of its so-called fact sheets on education and the economy says, “Two thirds of new jobs being created in today's economy require higher education or advanced training, but *only* about half of U.S. students who enroll in four-year colleges after high school manage to earn a bachelor's degree within six years.”

The “about half” figure is not accurate. A graph, “Bachelor's Degrees Awarded Per 100 HS Graduates Six Years Later,” on the site cited ([www.higheredinfo.org](http://www.higheredinfo.org)) shows that students are counted in this graph whether or not they ever enrolled in a four-year college. The figure for the U.S. is 52.1% for 2005, the most recent year available.

Second, in regard to jobs that will require higher education or advanced training, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 59.2% of jobs by 2016 will require no more than a high school diploma, if that. By 2016, only 17.3% will require a bachelor's or bachelor's and some experience; only 4.4% will require a master's or better.<sup>2</sup>

EDin08 plays fast and loose with the truth. When the campaign finally talks about TIMSS results,

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EDin08 is highly selective. One of its YouTube spots, “The State of America’s Schools,” says U.S. 4th-grade scores on TIMSS have remained the same while other countries improved and that only Switzerland outspends the U.S. A YouTube graphic shows a bar graph that depicts the U.S. remaining stationary while bars representing other nations rise and surpass America’s.<sup>3</sup>

Neither of these contentions is really true. Question: Why didn’t EDin08 use any TIMSS 8th-grade results? Answer: Because they don’t support the argument. But the 4th-grade results don’t support it either.

American 4th graders had the same scores in the 1995 and 2003 TIMSS math assessment and lost 5 points in science. But in math, three of the 15 nations — Japan, Scotland, and Norway — lost ground. Only seven of the 15 nations scored higher than the U.S. in 2003, and only two of them scored lower than the U.S. in 1995. The other seven scored lower than the U.S. in both 1995 and 2003. In science, five nations — Japan, Netherlands, Australia, Norway, and Scotland — that were tested in both 1995 and 2003 lost ground. Only four of the countries scored higher than the U.S. in 2003. Two of those — Scotland and Hong Kong — had scored lower in 1995. The other 10 were behind in 1995 and stayed behind in 2003. The YouTube graphic is wrong. Other nations are not uniformly improving and passing the U.S.

As for falling behind, TIMSS revealed that in between its first administration in 1995 and its third in 2003, American 8th graders gained 12 points in science and 15 in math. Of the 17 nations that participated in both administrations, only three — Latvia, Lithuania, and Hong Kong — had greater gains. Ten countries showed losses in math, nine in science. But, again, the U.S. clearly wasn’t one of the losers.

## 2 MILLION MINUTES

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EDin08 also hawks the video “2 Million Minutes.” Two million minutes is approximately the amount of time that elapses between the start of 9th grade and the end of the senior year. The video follows a boy and a girl around in the U.S., India, and China. The idea that four students could represent one nation that still has one-third of its people illiterate and another where only 40% of the students get past 9th grade is ludicrous ([www.2mminutes.com](http://www.2mminutes.com)).

The American kids attend a highly rated public high school and do well there. But the video starts off painting them as slackers. The kids in India and Chi-

na are hypergrinds. The Indian and Chinese students go to school many more hours and have much more homework. The Chinese boy, Ruizhan, says he sometimes does homework all night. There are some dents in this armor, though. “In India, you’re cooped up studying,” says Rohit, the Indian boy. But, with a smile, he adds, “At least, you’re *supposed* to be cooped up and studying.” We see him playing chess on the computer and wonder what else he plays, and Ruizhan admits to playing computer games a lot of the time he’s supposed to be studying.

But from the beginning, one sees that the American students have *options*. The Chinese and Indian students do not. Rohit says Indian students know what their work will be by the time they are 17. Neil, the American, says he can see himself doing lots of things over a lifetime, everything except working in a cubicle. The Indian and Chinese kids all want to be — or have been told to be — engineers.

The American students engage in many extracurricular activities; the Chinese and Indian students do not. Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute has recently voiced an opinion that the true genius of American education is precisely these extracurricular activities. It is in these, not in class, and certainly not on tests, that students develop the skills and attitudes that will stand them in good stead in later life.<sup>4</sup>

The video is interspersed with the usual fearful statistics about graduation rates, lack of homework, and other aspects of an easy life. We learn (again) that American students spend 900 hours a year in class and 1,500 watching TV. The video provides comments from “experts.” Some of the experts say good things,

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some of them also mouth the usual malarkey.

For my money, Vivek Paul, who came to the U.S. in 1980 and established a multi-billion dollar business, has the video's best take on what's going on. Paul notes that students in India and China have few options and that social mobility is limited. This gives them a different motivation. "What America is *really* about is creating opportunity. Economic mobility is greater in the U.S. It doesn't exist that much in other countries. This really is the land of opportunity," Paul said.

Aporva, the Indian girl, doesn't get into her university of choice and studies computer engineering at a school near her home. Rohit doesn't get into his chosen university either (it gets over 100,000 applications a year) and studies engineering at another school. Xiaoyuan, the Chinese girl, also misses the mark and studies music (she's quite good on the violin). Ruizhan gets his desired school, but not his desired advanced math program. Neil gets a full scholarship to study computer graphics at Purdue University. Brittany is carrying a double major in pre-med and Spanish at Indiana University. I sure hope venture capitalist Bob Compton, who funded the first video, is planning a follow-up video in 10 years.

## **NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND**

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*New York Times*' Neil Genzlinger's description of NCLB as a "well-intentioned irrelevance" appears to be wrong.<sup>5</sup> In *Time*, former assistant secretary of education Susan Neuman, one of the architects of NCLB, admitted that some in the Bush Administration wanted to use NCLB to destroy the public education system and replace it with a privatized system.<sup>6</sup> That was vindication for all us "paranoids."

In six years, NCLB has gone from being virtually everyone's darling (not mine: I attacked it in *Newsday* a full year before it became law<sup>7</sup>) to most people's whipping boy. President Bush, Secretary Margaret Spellings, and Sen. John McCain appear to be the only supporters left standing. But it's sure hard to feel sorry for the law. One of the most articulate and impassioned critiques came from a speech last year by Joanne Yatvin, then president of the National Council of Teachers of English:

In both its design and application, NCLB is deeply flawed and punitive, disrespectful toward students and teachers, dependent on unreliable evidence, underfunded, and beholden to ideologues and profiteers. But while many commentators have pointed out these flaws, too few have cut to the heart of the matter, making clear that the creators

and implementers of the law *do not understand learning, teaching, or human behavior*. Has any commentator dared to say that without these understandings, no one has the moral authority — nor should they have the legal authority — to make decisions for the education of America's children?<sup>8</sup>

The Center on Education Policy observed that what many earlier observers had predicted was now about to happen. For some states, the chickens were coming home to roost. Many states took a "balloon mortgage" approach to NCLB's 100% proficiency requirement (they should have, instead, pointed to the impossibility of such a requirement). While some states' plans showed a linear increase in test scores (not the same as achievement) until the witching year of 2014, many others demanded small gains in the early years and much larger ones later.<sup>9</sup>

Although NCLB reflects every piece of ignorance that Yatvin says it reflects, it is also something of a paper tiger other than for lowering teacher and kid morale. Few people chose to change schools, and those who did didn't do any better than those who remained behind in the "failing" schools, even though they chose higher achieving and more racially balanced schools. Few students get the tutoring they're entitled to (often from private firms at, of course, taxpayer expense).<sup>10</sup> And Robert Tomsho in the *Wall Street Journal* finds that in 2006-07, about 1,300 schools were in restructuring, the most severe NCLB punishment.<sup>11</sup> Then he asks, "So what is happening in schools that are restructuring?" Not much, he answers. According to the General Accounting Office, 40% of them have done nothing. Another 40% have

taken the “other” option, which is just a loophole to do very little.

Although the feds don’t require detailed reports from schools forced into restructuring, Tomsho finds that most continue to do poorly. Only 5% of California schools managed to escape the restructuring category in 2006-07. Firing people solves nothing — qualified educators are not going to flock to these schools without significant incentives, which are lacking.

## PERFORMANCE AT THE TOP AND BOTTOM

The September Research column in *Kappan* described three studies about high and low achievers, so I will not discuss that information here except to repeat what I consider the most important findings:

- Growth in NAEP scores slowed after NCLB became law.
- Schools are giving much more attention to struggling students than to advanced students.
- At the 4th grade, on NAEP, the difference between the 90th percentile and the 10th percentile is about 7½ years.
- Between kindergarten and 5th grade, the black-white test score gap grows twice as fast for high-achieving students (defined as upper quartile) as for low-achieving students (defined as bottom quartile).

I will add one study not reported in September, *Achievement Trap* from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which provides scholarships for talented, low-income students.<sup>12</sup>

The study defines high and low achievers as those scoring in the upper or lower quartiles on tests administered either in the ECLS-K study or in NELS or tracked in the National Center for Education Statistics’ study, *Baccalaureate and Beyond*. The upper and lower half of family income define high and low income.

Whites and Asians are overrepresented in terms of their proportions of the population as high-achieving, low-income students while blacks and Hispanics are underrepresented. Seventy-two percent of high achievers in the 1st grade come from upper-income families, while 28% come from lower-income families. Lower-income high achievers do not maintain that status as well as higher-income high achievers as they move through school. Nor are they as likely to move into the high-achieving category.

They are, however, almost as likely to complete high school (93%) as are high-income high achievers (97%). And they are almost as likely to enter college

as higher-income high achievers, 93% vs. 98%. Then the story turns downwards: Only 59% of lower-income high achievers graduate from college while 77% of higher income students do. As one low-income achiever says in the report, “College was like a slap in the face. I realized that all that preparation was to get me into college, not *for* college.”<sup>13</sup>

Lower-income, high-achieving students are more likely to attend community colleges and less likely to attend highly selective colleges. What is curious on the surface is that they are much less likely to graduate from *non-selective* colleges. Their graduation rate is 56% from such colleges, 70% from less selective institutions, 76% from selective, and 90% from the most selective. Of course, the missing information that might explain this is more precise data on their achievement. We know only that they attain the top

## **Any accountability program that doesn’t factor in family and community contexts is both unfair and doomed.**

quartile. Those who entered the highly selective colleges might have been mostly in the top decile.

Higher-income, high-achieving students show a more shallow gradient, dropping from 91% graduating at highly selective colleges to 83% at non-selective colleges (the earlier figure of 77% includes attendance at community college; these figures are only for those entering four-year institutions).

The attainment of advanced degrees shows similar differentials. Twenty-nine percent of high-income achievers get at least a master’s, 12% a professional degree, and 6% a Ph.D. For lower-income achievers, the figures are 19%, 7%, and 3%, respectively.

The report notes, “Because federal education policy largely ignores advanced learners, inadequate information exists at both the state and federal levels about what is happening educationally to high-achieving, lower-income students. To improve outcomes for lower-income high achievers, we will need better information about these students.”<sup>14</sup>

One presumes the inequalities would have been more severe with a definition of high and low income that separated students more than the upper- and lower-half of family income.

The report argues that “The time is ripe in the

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United States for a discussion about whether schools should be held accountable not only for meeting proficiency standards but also for the performance of students at advanced levels.” Coming on top of a disastrous school accountability, one is tempted to dismiss this idea out of hand. As the Sean Reardon research summarized in September suggested, high-achieving students are likely to be *more* dependent on out-of-school resources than low achievers. Any accountability program that doesn’t factor in family and community contexts is both unfair and doomed.

### **PISA LEANS, MAYBE FALLS**

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In the U.S., the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) has caused only momentary distress. Here, PISA, especially the 2006 administration, has been used as a general purpose cudgel — especially since neither TIMSS, on which we rank higher, nor PIRLS, on which we rank high, can be used for that purpose. School critics present the ranks, nothing else, and only for OECD countries, although another 27 countries take part. The ranks supposedly prove that America can’t cut it in the global economy.

British economist S.J. Prais has a slightly different view:

That the U.S., the world’s top economic performing country, was found to have schooling attainments that are only middling casts fundamental doubts on the value, and approach, of these surveys [e.g., PISA]. It could be that the hyper-involved statistical method of analysis used is, as many have suggested, wholly inappropriate. Or it could be, as two U.S. academics have suggested, that the level of schooling does not matter all that much for economic progress; rather it is ‘Adam Smithian’ factors such as economies of scale, and minimally regulated labor markets that allow U.S. ‘employers enormous agility in hiring, paying, and allocating workers.’<sup>15</sup>

The Swiss-based Institute for Management Development and the World Economic Forum back Prais’ contentions about the economic performance of the U.S.

Prais’ comment comes in a chapter he wrote for *PISA According to PISA*, edited by Stefan Thomas Hopmann, Gertrude Brinek, and Martin Retzl, all of the University of Vienna. The book holds PISA up to its claims of reliability, validity, importance, etc. It might be, according to the editors, the first independent look at PISA, the first examination not done by PISA officials themselves. The study does not fare well.

In their introduction, Hopmann and Brinek paint

a sad picture of how PISA operates. “What emerged [as we produced this book] was a picture not unlike that seen in the behavior of large companies when they encounter a potential scandal. . . . If some critique is voiced in public, the first response seems to be silence. Numerous PISA officials were invited to contribute to the book and all declined, one saying one doesn’t want to provide ‘a forum for unproven allegations.’”

“If that is not enough, the next step is often to raise doubts about the motives and the abilities of those who are critical of the enterprise,” write Hopmann and Brinek. “The next step is to acknowledge some problems, but to insist that they are very limited in nature and scope, not affecting the overall picture. . . . Finally, there is the statement that the criticism does not contain anything new, and nothing that has not been dealt with in the PISA research itself — and often this claim is accompanied by references to opaque technical reports that only insiders can understand, or to unpublished papers or reports.”<sup>16</sup>

In Europe, PISA has had far more impact on discussions of curriculum, structure, and instruction than here.

What is wrong with PISA? Lots.

Let’s start with the items, at least the ones we know about — PISA officials have exhibited extraordinary secrecy about the whole project. Peter Fensham, an Australian science educator and member of both PISA and TIMSS, deplored the secrecy: “By their decision to maintain most items in a test secret. . . TIMSS and PISA deny to curriculum authorities and to teachers the most immediate feedback the project could make, namely the release in detail of the items, that would indicate better than framework statements, what is meant by ‘science learning.’ The released items are tantalizing few and can easily be misinterpreted.”<sup>17</sup>

Svein Sjøberg of the University of Oslo raises some of the same issues. A released math item shows a man’s foot about twice its actual size, contains typos, and, in the end, is impossible to answer because the picture on which the item is based presents contradictory information. “Students who simply insert numbers in the formula without thinking will get it right. More critical students who start thinking will, however, be confused and get in trouble.”<sup>18</sup>

Sjøberg wonders about the translations. PISA starts with “authentic text,” meaning that it has to have been published in one of the 60 countries involved. Well, he says, it might be authentic in the country of origin, but he is highly suspicious of what happens

when it gets translated. He presents a science example about cloning from a newspaper article, “A Copying Machine for Living Beings?” about Dolly, the cloned sheep. In addition to containing errors of fact, Sjøberg says the Norwegian version translated the headline word for word, rendering it into complete nonsense.

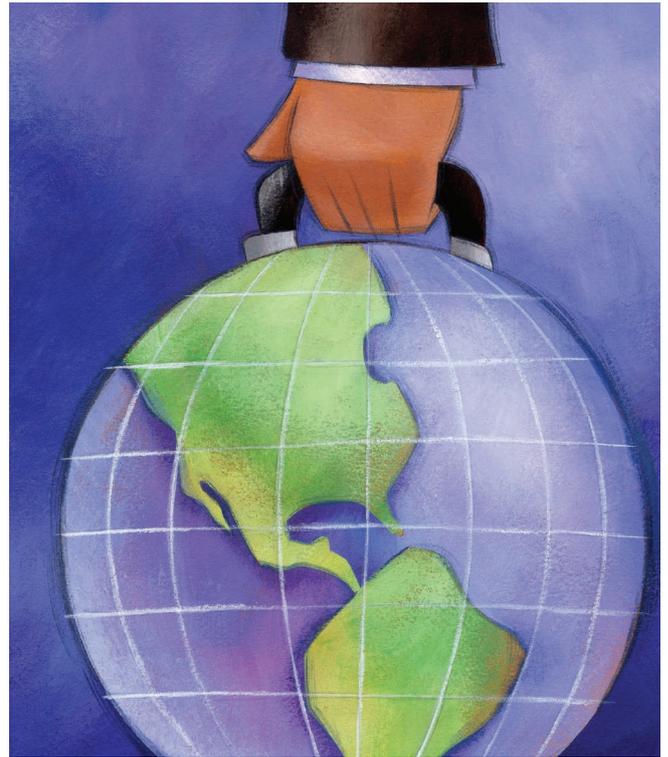
Not only do items begin with authentic text, Sjøberg quotes the PISA web site that the items must have no “cultural bias” and be “unanimously approved.” Sjøberg then lists alphabetically the first 13 countries taking part in PISA: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Denmark. “We can only imagine the deliberation towards unanimous acceptance of all items among 60 countries with the demands that there should be no cultural bias and that the context of no country should be favored.” Maybe you can imagine it, Svein, I can’t.

Marcus Puchhammer of the University of Applied Sciences in Vienna also has concerns about the language, but he expresses them quantitatively.<sup>19</sup> He shows that items in German are substantially longer than the same items in English (this would hold true in French, as well). That should make life more difficult for German kids. And not only longer, they contain less frequently used words. Puchhammer compares some of the words in items to where they appear in the 10,000 most frequent words in both languages. Fifteen of 17 comparisons favor English. Four of the words or phrases, such as “clips,” “bar graph,” and “communicate,” don’t even appear in the German most frequent 10,000. “Average” is ranked 388th in English, 3,259th in German. Puchhammer notes that German grammar is considered more complex than English and that the German habit of injecting subordinate clauses into the middle of sentences likely degrades their readability.

Joachim Wuttke of the Jülich Research Center in Munich takes on some of the technical problems.<sup>20</sup> PISA, says Wuttke, claims to measure the “outcomes of education systems in terms of student achievements.” But some of the participating countries have fewer than 60% of their 15-year-olds in school. Obviously, PISA can’t say anything about education outcomes in those countries. Although schools were supposed to exclude no more than 5% of the students from testing, the decision was left to “the professional opinion of the school principal, or by other qualified staff.” Wuttke contends this produces a “completely uncontrollable source of uncertainty.” Search-

ing the technical report, Wuttke finds inconsistent means of excluding students. Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Poland, and Spain excluded students with dyslexia, Denmark excluded students with dyscalculia, and Luxembourg excluded recent immigrants.

There were other technical problems. For example, students in special schools for those with learning dis-



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abilities were given a one-hour test (the regular test took two hours) that contained easy items. In Austria, students in vocational schools were underrepresented, something that was not discovered until a new government, suspicious of the results, ordered an investigation.

Also, Wuttke contends, some countries do not have

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consistent databases, which led to 102.5% of 15-year-old Swedes being tested and 107.7% of Tuscans. And, as Prais points out in his essay, making 15-year-olds the unit of testing is itself a problem. Countries differ in the percent of 15-year-olds in a given grade. Some will be in a class mostly with 14-year-olds and, if they've been held back twice, 13-year-olds. If they've been skipped ahead, most of their peers will be 16-year-olds.

Response rates of schools were supposed to be 85%. In the U.S., only 64.9% agreed to participate, most replacement schools declined, and the final rate was 68.1%. Wuttke observes that the U.S. contributes 25% of OECD's budget.

Wuttke finds that "Only one-third of the items that had reached the field trial [stage] were finally used in the main test. Items that did not fit into the idea that competence can be measured in a culturally neutral way on a one-dimensional scale were simply eliminated. Field test results remain unpublished, although one could imagine an open-ended analysis providing valuable insight into the diversity of education outcomes."<sup>21</sup>

PISA officials have often argued that students learn in school mostly in specific disciplines, yet the real world mixes science and mathematical problems with other considerations. Sjøberg observes that no paper-and-pencil test can mimic these kinds of interactions. Wuttke contends that the statistical analyses used in PISA are also a problem. In particular, Wuttke argues that the one-parameter Rasch model of Item Response Theory is wholly inappropriate. So why is it used? Wuttke thinks it is used because it's the only model that yields unambiguous rankings. A multidimensional model could result in one country being #1 on dimension one, another #1 on dimension two, and so on. If that happened, no nation could claim unambiguously that "We're #1!"

Fatigue and test-taking tactics also seem to play a role. Dutch students try to answer every item, but they often guess toward the end of the test. Austrian and German students skip many questions from the beginning on, leaving them enough time to finish without speeding up. Greek students either get tired or don't have an internal sense of time. They start off well in the first block of questions, but by the time they get to the fourth (final) block of items, their non-reached items and missing responses top 35%.

In some countries, students apparently don't understand that there can be only one right answer, and up to 10% of the items generate multiple responses from test takers. As Wuttke says, deciding if all five

choices are correct takes more time than finding one correct answer and moving on.

In his epilogue, Hopmann notes PISA's underlying assumptions:

The assumption that what PISA measures is somehow important knowledge for the future. There is no research available which proves this assertion. . . .

The assumption that the economic future is dependent on the knowledge base monitored by PISA: [it] relies on strong and unproven arguments, which have no basis when, for instance, comparing success in PISA's predecessors and later economic development.

The assumption that PISA measures what is learned in schools: this is not [even] PISA's own starting point, which is not to use national curricula as a point of reference.

The assumption that PISA measures competitiveness of schooling (most of the variance in PISA is attributable to background factors).

The assumption that PISA thus measures. . . school structures, teacher quality, the curriculum, etc.

In short: PISA relies on strong assumptions based on weak data.<sup>22</sup>

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## VOUCHERS

What is with the *Washington Post*? A June 17, 2008, *Post* article summarized a report finding that the Washington, D.C., voucher program doesn't work.<sup>23</sup> On June 24, a *Post* editorial begs Congress not to kill the program.<sup>24</sup>

Those wishing to eliminate the program did have the wrong reasoning: they claimed it drained money from public schools. Not so, says the *Post*. It comes with a "generous federal allocation." Well! As Jack Benny might say. That makes all the difference.

The money comes from all U.S. taxpayers via voucher-mad George W. Bush. Bush put vouchers into the original version of NCLB. When vouchers got excised and stayed out despite six separate efforts by Ohio's John Boehner, Bush rolled out a voucher proposal for six cities. Congress wasn't buying that either. So Bush proposed a program for D.C. only. Congress said no to that on three occasions. Even getting Sen. Dianne Feinstein to play both Benedict Arnold and hypocrite didn't work (she changed her vote and, speaking out of the other side of her mouth, said she would never vote for vouchers for Californians). Finally, Bush operatives attached the voucher proposal to an omnibus budget bill worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Dems realized that if they voted against *that*, the government would shut down, so they held their collective nose and voted for the D.C. Oppor-

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tunity Scholarship Program.

In the *Post* article, voucher advocates claimed that Democrats should not deny poor families the kinds of choices available “to the well-to-do.” The vouchers are worth \$7,500 and can be used in what are, at best, marginally better schools, a little over half of them church-affiliated. The “choices available to the well-to-do” in D.C. charge tuition of \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year. Of course, Washington’s poor could always just move to a well-to-do Northwest neighborhood or the counties of Fairfax, Va., or Montgomery, Md.

The *Post* article was based on a study published by the Institute of Education Sciences, part of the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>25</sup> After two years of the Opportunity Scholarship program, researchers found no differences between kids with vouchers and a matched group in the D.C. public schools. Nor did they find any significant impact for kids who were the top priority to get vouchers, those from schools that NCLB had already labeled as “in need of improvement.”

Parents of voucher kids were less likely to report serious “concerns” about school danger. There was no objective measure in the study of violent incidents. Voucher and control kids reported no differences in “dangerous activities” (the report’s term). In addition, parents of voucher kids were more satisfied with the schools than were parents of kids in public schools, but students did not differ in their levels of satisfac-

tion. Parents who are choosing to send their child to a school, of course, need to be satisfied to prevent or reduce cognitive dissonance. Not many parents could stand the stress of saying, “This is a lousy school and I choose to send my child to this school.”

The Washington Scholarship Fund that runs the voucher program predicts gains next year, claiming it took three years for gains to show up in Milwaukee ([www.washingtonscholarshipfund.org/PDF/iesreport08.pdf](http://www.washingtonscholarshipfund.org/PDF/iesreport08.pdf)). After five years, the official evaluation of Milwaukee schools by John Witte found no differences, and Paul Peterson found differences favoring vouchers, as always. Cecilia Rouse found a math difference favoring vouchers, but no difference in reading (these differing results on the same data are possible because different models of statistical analysis make different assumptions about data treatment). Rouse also felt, however, that the advantage had nothing to do with vouchers, but with small classes attended by the voucher kids.

An earlier study of the D.C. program found a positive effect for vouchers in year two of implementation, but by the allegedly needed third year, the effect washed out. We shall see.

Of course, the advocates’ arguments have changed over time. Vouchers, they said initially, would increase the achievement of kids using them and also increase the achievement of public schools because competition would end the state’s monopoly and spur them to do better work. New schools would pop up like gas stations and fast-food restaurants. None of these has happened, so now the argument is that choice, in and of itself, is sufficient justification.

In arguing for continuation of the program, the *Post* asked, “Which members of Congress would accept an argument that they should be forced to send their children to a failing school for the good of the school?” “Failing school,” of course, could be just a propaganda phrase of no merit beyond its rhetorical impact. If one subgroup of kids fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, the whole school fails. Or maybe the *Post* editors believe all D.C. public schools are failures. It’s not clear from the text. Secretary Spellings rushed in where wise men fear to tread with an op-ed claiming, “For many this was their first opportunity to receive a high-quality education.”<sup>26</sup>

But, Madam Secretary, if the voucher kids are getting a “high-quality” education, why can’t we see it in the test scores? Spellings has been a great fan of test scores when she thinks they support her position, as with the NAEP results cited earlier. If the voucher

kids don't do any better at their new schools and are no more satisfied than their public school peers, we are left with two potential explanations: either the school's quality isn't important, or the schools where the voucher kids use their vouchers are no better than the schools the kids left.

### READING FOIST, SPELLINGS SHAKES AND BAKES

Edward Kame'enui	\$752,068
Douglas Carnine	\$796,545
Sharon Vaughn	\$836,420

Nice work, if you can get it. Those are the sums paid to these three coordinators of Reading First by publishers of materials used by Reading First from 2003 through 2006.<sup>27</sup> McGraw-Hill, Pearson Scott Foresman, and Voyager Expanded Learning were the big players. The people involved authored some of those materials, and the money was paid even as the people in question acted as Reading First Technical Assistance Center directors. Somehow, Sen. Edward Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Subcommittee, viewed these payments to these people as conflicts of interest.

Kame'enui's contract states that he will "provide a minimum of six (6) sales-related workshops or presentations per year" and that "during the calendar years 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005, Author [Kame'enui] will make a minimum of six (6) personal presentations per year in support of Scott Foresman Early Reading Intervention." When Kame'enui joined the Department of Education as Commissioner of Special Education Research in 2005, the contract was amended to say that he would not "actively advance or promote Pearson Scott Foresman programs." In an e-mail, Kame'enui declared that he "misses" his "Scott Foresman family" and "look[s] forward to getting back to this work."<sup>28</sup>

According to Kennedy's report, Kame'enui sought, while a Reading First assessment team leader, to influence then-Assistant Secretary of Education Susan Neuman on behalf of Scott Foresman. When a Scott Foresman representative inquired about his meeting with Neuman, Kame'enui e-mailed that "my sense is that the meeting with Susan was fine and that Pearson and [Scott Foresman] got her attention. . . . Pearson is in a favorable position to exert influence [on Neuman]."

At the conclusion of the Kennedy report, the committee writes, "The Chairman's investigation reveals

that four Reading First Technical Assistance Center directors — subcontractors to the Department — had substantial financial ties to publishing companies while simultaneously being responsible for providing technical assistance to states and school districts seeking guidance in selecting reading programs that would help them secure federal grants. These findings are troubling because they diminish the integrity of the Reading First Program. Congress should act to ensure that future conflicts of interest are identified and addressed."<sup>29</sup>

Congress in 2007 voted to slash Reading First funding by 61%.

In May 2008, the department's Institute of Education Sciences released a report saying Reading First was ineffectual.<sup>30</sup> On reading comprehension, Reading First schools scored no better than a matched group of non-Reading First schools. IES director Russ Whitehurst said, "There are at least four possibilities for the results. One is that scientifically based reading instruction doesn't work. Another is that the instruction works, but was not sufficient enough to have an impact on reading comprehension."<sup>31</sup> Frankly, I don't think there is any such thing as "scientifically based reading instruction," but the first reason strikes me as closer to the truth. After all, teachers spent 45 minutes more a week on reading instruction at 1st grade and an hour more a week at 2nd grade. The third possibility is that some schools didn't do a great job at implementation. Finally, maybe the effect washed out because some non-Reading First schools used the materials (an explanation he rejects, see below).

The methodology could also have obliterated any results. Observers checked for various teacher behaviors in 10-minute intervals. Once the behavior occurred in a 10-minute interval, observers did not check it again no matter how often it happened. Thus, a teacher who stressed comprehension for two minutes in each of three 10-minute intervals would receive the same score as a teacher who worked on comprehension for the entire 30 minutes.

Die-hard believers claimed the programs were not faithfully implemented. Oddly, some of the same diehards claimed no effect was seen because, in some districts, schools not actually in the Reading First program used Reading First curricula. Reading researcher Reid Lyon took this position. Let me see if I got this straight: The teacher training that comes with Reading First wasn't sufficient to ensure an effect, but schools that adopted Reading First with no teacher training also gained, so it made the effect in Reading First schools invisible. IES director Whitehurst de-

nied that non-Reading First schools could have gained as much as Reading First, saying that IES vetted the schools in the study in advance.<sup>32</sup>

Spellings had no comment on this, an interim report, but said she would “look forward to the final report.”<sup>33</sup>

On June 23, Spellings issued a press release indicating, “New Reading First Data From States Shows Impressive Gains in Reading Proficiency.”<sup>34</sup> Only Spellings could see the data as “impressive.” The comprehension data is mostly in terms of proportion of students scoring higher than the 40th percentile. I have written repeatedly that percent passing, percent

### **With everyone trying to look good, one has to wonder about the integrity of the data.**

proficient, etc., are awful metrics to use in evaluating progress or achievement gains. Most of the rest of the data were measures of reading speed on that piece of lucrative silliness known as DIBELS (Kennedy’s report found that DIBELS inventor, Roland Good, had received \$1.5 million in royalties).<sup>35</sup>

Such a method can even obscure the fact that reading *scores* could be falling. Some allegations about concentrating on the bubble kids to the detriment of both low scorers and high scorers raise this possibility even though the Brookings study didn’t find any “Robin Hood” effect (see Research, September 2008). In any program, we should look at actual scores, not percent proficient. Percent proficient only tells you how many kids jumped over your barrier. It doesn’t provide any information about how high they jumped or by how much the others failed to clear the hurdle.

Of course, these data are self-reports from the states that are, in turn, dependent on reports from the districts. With everyone trying to look good, one has to wonder about the integrity of the data. And with the carping about the differences between NAEP reports and reports on state-constructed tests, one has to wonder about the integrity of the tests as well. In Massachusetts, for example, there were enormous jumps in the first year of the program and very little change for the next four years (or next three years for

those that started Reading First a year later). For schools that started in 2006, there were mostly declines in 2007. Looking at the Massachusetts assessment data in terms of percent proficient, one sees mostly declines not only for the whole group, but most subgroups as well.

By June 30, both the House and Senate appropriations committees had voted to reduce Reading First funds to zero.

### **THE RESISTANCE**

It is indicative of both the disgust people, especially teachers, feel for NCLB and of the explosive psychology of the Internet that when three people refused to give state tests this year, their acts received a lot of attention from the mainstream media and drove the blogosphere wild.

Terri Penney in St. Lucie County, Florida, resigned; Carl Chew in Seattle got suspended; and Doug Ward in western North Carolina got fired.

Pinney resigned as assistant principal of a middle school because she would not obey the principal’s orders to suspend some students.<sup>36</sup> The students had slept through the test or were making Christmas tree patterns on the answer sheets. They were good kids, she said, who couldn’t cope with English. The principal suspended them. She lifted the suspensions and resigned.

After feeling bad about it for years, Chew finally decided not to give the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) to his 6th graders. That decision cost him nine days without pay. He asked to be transferred to a job that had no WASL duties. His principal at Eckstein Middle School in Seattle said he’d have to give the WASL next year or be fired.

Seattle newspaper articles drew hundreds of comments. A long conversation ensued on the Teacher Leaders Network sponsored by Center for Teaching Quality. While a few people took the position that Chew was duty bound to do what his employer asked, most supported him.

Chew created an extensive list of reasons why WASL is bad for children, teachers, parents, schools, and just plain bad. Among them, he objected to presenting the test to children in a “secretive, cold, sterile, and inhumane fashion,” providing only a pass or fail option, testing only a narrow band of knowledge, damaging the professional relationships among educators, and shutting parents out of the process.

A comment on the *Seattle Times* article said the district had to do what it did: “The district must take the

action it did or just about every teacher out there would refuse to give this time-wasting test.”

Doug Ward in Cullowhee Valley Elementary School in Cullowhee, North Carolina, offered that Martin Luther King, Jr., along with Rosa Parks and other models of defiance almost forced him to do what he did. Ward worked with students with severe disabilities and had discussed King and Parks and other civil rights pioneers in class. He was told that they must take an alternative assessment designed for children with lesser disabilities. Ward said the test would drive his kids nuts and would not let them express the abilities and accomplishments they did have.

Ward said he was acting for the good of the school because his students' scores would be included in the school's AYP report. That would hurt the school and set up his students as scapegoats if the school didn't make AYP.

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0810bra.pdf**

**Gerald W. Bracey, The 18th Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education: Schools-Are-Awful Bloc Still Busy in 2008, Vol. 90, No. 02, October 2008, pp. 103-114.**

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