

# The 10th Bracey Report On the Condition of Public Education

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*Mr. Bracey provides a brief history to set the stage for his 10th-anniversary assessment of the condition of public education in the U.S.*

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BY GERALD W. BRACEY

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**I**N THIS 10th-anniversary Bracey Report, it seems appropriate to chronicle how the reports came to be in the first place. I believe that this history leads to an important conclusion, which I'll discuss below. The Bracey Reports happened virtually by accident, arising from an odd concatenation of almost unrelated events — unless, of course, you believe in fate.

## **It's All Richard Cohen's Fault**

Up to 4 November 1990, I was, in some ways, a typical public school parent. I had

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grown up in a college town, and that college (William and Mary) had produced a number of my teachers, who, in turn, were oriented toward making us successful at their alma mater should we go there, as I ultimately did. Still, I thought my own kids were getting a better, deeper, richer, and more challenging education than I had received. For instance, they learned biology in terms of DNA, genetics, ecology, and so on. I memorized phyla. On the other hand, though I could see the high quality of the education they were getting, I also *knew* that the schools were in crisis because the newspapers and sundry television specials kept telling me so. (One TV special, as I recall, carried the title "Is Anybody Out There Learning?") Then, too, the claims from *A Nation at Risk* were all around. So, had a pollster asked, I would probably have given the typical public school

parent's answer: the local schools are okay, but there's a crisis out there somewhere.

All that began to change on that morning in November. As I sipped my first cup of coffee, I read in the *Denver Post* a column by *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, titled "Johnny's Miserable SATs." Reading Cohen's column was a life-changing event, though I had no inkling of that at the time.

When evaluating SAT scores, most people's perspective starts at the average, 500. They look up from there to the perfect 800 or down to the lowest possible score, 200. Cohen started at 800 and looked down. He seemed to feel that anything less than an 800 was a step toward perdition.

His analysis led me to conduct my own SAT trend analysis. I knew that a College Board panel had concluded that as much as three-fourths of the widely reported decline had stemmed from changes in the population taking the test: more minorities, more women, more students with mediocre high school records. By 1990, though, 13 years had elapsed since that panel's report, and no one had taken a systematic look at SAT trends since. Trying to take demographic changes into account, I concluded that since 1963 there had been a small decline in the verbal score and a minuscule gain in the mathematics score.

I sent my analysis to *Education Week*, which published it on 21 November 1990 under the title "SAT Scores: Miserable or Miraculous?" Other data began to arrive. I looked into dropout rates and found them much lower than I had read in the popular press. And the results from the

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Second International Mathematics Study didn't seem as dire to me as the headlines had portrayed them. Iris Rotberg, then at the RAND Corporation, and Harold Hodgkinson of the Institute for Educational Leadership also supplied data that seemed to mute the alarms set off by *A Nation at Risk*.

Then I received a peculiar phone call from Lee Bray, at the time a vice president at the Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque. It was peculiar in that, if I thought of Sandia at all, I envisioned hydrogen bombs exploding because Sandia made the plutonium triggers for those devices. But Bray said that he and a group of engineers had assembled a lot of evidence about the condition of public education, that his evidence corroborated my analysis of SAT scores, and that, since he was coming to Denver anyway, we should meet for dinner and look at the stuff.

We did that. A couple of months later, Robert Huelskamp, one of the three engineers who actually wrote what came to be known as the Sandia Report, came to Denver, and we played show and tell with our data for most of a day. I then said, "Let's take all this information and publish it somewhere." He said, "We can't. We have internal political problems." Later he recounted a time when he and the rest of the team had gone to Washington and presented the analysis to staffers from Congress, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Education. When the presentation was over, David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox and then deputy secretary of education, said something along the lines of, "You bury this or I'll bury you." (Julie Miller's 9 October 1991 *Education Week* article, "Report Questioning 'Crisis' in Education Triggers an Up-roar," was not so specific. It said only, "Administration officials, particularly Mr. Kearns, reacted angrily at the meeting.") In a letter to the *Albuquerque Journal*, James Watkins, then secretary of energy and head of the federal agency that funds Sandia, called the report "dead wrong."

Having rejected the idea of joint publication, Huelskamp pointed out that the data in the report were not *their* data. Sandia had no proprietary claim on them. Most of the statistics came from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National Science Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Education — all in the public domain. He then

said, "We don't need to see our names on an essay." Message: take the data and run.

So I did. First to places like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. *Atlantic* editor Cullen Murphy liked what I sent him but said in the end, "I've got too much education stuff." So that's how decisions are made at American commercial periodicals.

I sent the article to the *Kappan*, which published it as "Why Can't They Be Like We Were?" in the October 1991 issue (about a quarter of the citations were to "Carson, Huelskamp, and Woodall" — the authors of the Sandia Report). The title was a snippet of a lyric from the 1960 musical *Bye Bye Birdie*: "Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way?/Oh, what's the matter with kids today?" (I mistakenly attributed the lyric to another 1960 musical, *The Fantasticks*. Many people pointed out my mistake.)

Soon other people began directing me to corroborative data. In February 1992 an international comparison in mathematics and science appeared. With enthusiastic help from Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander and Assistant Secretary Diane Ravitch, the media gave it a highly negative spin. "An 'F' in World Competition"

was the 17 February 1992 headline in *Newsweek*, and it was fairly typical.

By about April 1992, I had enough new material to go back to the *Kappan* editors and propose a follow-up. They said fine, and I sent in a piece with a title something like "The True Crisis in American Public Education" — with a post-it note affixed saying that I didn't like the title but couldn't think of anything better. Editor Pauline Gough suggested we call it "The Second Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education" and make it a regular, if not necessarily annual, event.

Now for the conclusion I alluded to above: I never set out to write these reports, and I never set out to defend the public schools (or to be an "apologist for the status quo," as some have erroneously characterized me). I was leading a nice peaceful existence as director of research, evaluation, and testing for the Cherry Creek (Colorado) Schools and restaurant critic for Denver's alternative newspaper, *Westword*. But I am a research psychologist by training and respectful of what data do and don't say. Over a few months, I had encountered a mountain of data. Taken together, the data I saw *compelled* the con-

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clusion — at least to anyone who hadn't already made up his or her mind — that the educational sky was not falling. Curiously, four years later, school critic Denis Doyle would, in fact, refer to me in *Issues '96: The Candidates' Briefing Book*, a Heritage Foundation Report, as "Chicken Little in Reverse."

I have always insisted in speeches that my defense of public education is not unconditional, like a mother's love. All during 1995, I warned that data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) were coming. If the data were credible and showed U.S. students to be performing terribly relative to students in other nations, I told my audiences that that's what they would read in the next report. U.S. students did not look awful at the fourth and eighth grades. And though the TIMSS Final Year data did seem abysmal at first glance, once anyone dug beneath the surface, the fatal methodological flaws became readily apparent.

### **Whatever Happened To the Sandia Report?**

The Sandia Report, officially known as *Perspectives on Education in America*, appeared in published form only after the Bush Administration had left town. For 12 years, the Reagan and Bush Administrations had pushed vouchers and tuition tax credits, with varying degrees of intensity. One of their strategies was never to say anything positive about public schools. For instance, five months after the math and science study that Alexander and Ravitch hyped, another international comparison appeared. This one, *How in the World Do Students Read?*, found American students second in the world in reading skills among 9-year-olds tested in 27 countries and eighth (though statistically tied with nine others for second) among 31 countries that tested 14-year-olds.<sup>1</sup>

No one called a press conference, and there was no media coverage. Even *Education Week* found out about the study only by accident some two months later. A Europe-dwelling friend of then reporter Robert Rothman sent him a copy from Germany. *Education Week* gave the report front-page coverage. *USA Today* played off the *Education Week* story with its own page-one article, complete with a quote from Francie Alexander, then deputy assistant secretary of education, *dismissing*

the study. In the Reagan/Bush years, bad news about schools got hyped; good news got suppressed when possible and ignored otherwise.

Asked why the Sandia Report was not yet published, Department of Education officials declared that it did not meet professional standards and was undergoing peer review. It was not being suppressed, they said. Peer review? Up to that point, it was unprecedented for one agency's reports to be "peer reviewed" by other agencies. But both the National Science Foundation and the Department of Education passed judgment on the Sandia Report. It is to their everlasting shame that NSF's Peter House and the Department of Education's Emerson Elliott allowed their good offices to be used for what were purely political and ideological purposes. They should never have put their names on the reviews.

The Sandia Report eventually appeared in the May/June 1993 *Journal of Educational Research*, filling the entire issue. In that venue, 5,000 people, few of whom have any burning interest in policy issues or in the fate of American public education, saw it. Recently, I phoned Lee Bray, who is now retired. Bray did not want to reopen old wounds, but he did say, "The report was suppressed. They will deny it, but it was definitely suppressed."<sup>2</sup>

### **Does Richard Cohen Still Think Things Are Miserable?**

Maybe. Cohen is a testament to the momentum of bad news about American schools, even when the "facts" are in error.

Cohen received a prepublication copy of my first article. He phoned, we talked about schools, and he suggested that I send a short version to the Sunday Outlook section of the *Washington Post*. I did. Under the headline "The Greatly Exaggerated Death of Our Schools," the *Post* ran it as the lead story on 5 May 1991.

Cohen also received a draft of the Second Bracey Report and, when we talked again, seemed to understand it. Some data in that report showed that standardized achievement tests were at record highs. Nevertheless, in his column of 4 August 1992, Cohen wrote that, during the Reagan and Bush years, "the country got . . . dumber on just about every achievement test the kids could take." Cohen hasn't writ-

ten about education in a long time. I take his silence as a small victory.

### **Whatever Happened To the Reading Study?**

It's still out there and still largely unknown. It illustrates the tendency not only of the media but even of educators to dismiss or ignore positive data. "Bells should have gone off all over the country," said Archie Lapointe, then executive director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and head of the above-mentioned math and science study that got so much publicity. Nary a tinkle.

The study received attention in the Third Bracey Report and had made up half of the February 1993 Research column in the *Kappan*. It was also discussed at length in *Educational Indicators: An International Perspective*, published in late 1996 by the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Also in 1996, Secretary of Education Richard Riley attempted to start the chimes ringing by re-releasing the data. I was in Houston on the day of the re-release, and I saw the coverage in the *Houston Chronicle*. The story was written, though, by Josh Greenberg of the Washington Bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*. When I returned to Washington, I called Greenberg and asked him why he and his editors had found such ancient data so interesting. He said, "You know, when Riley called us we were suspicious. But then we checked around and found that no one knew about this study. So it was still news." By that criterion, it still is.

*USA Today* dutifully carried the story on page one again. I discussed it again in the Sixth Bracey Report. Still, whenever I speak, I ask for a show of hands from those who know about the study. In a room with other researchers, perhaps two or three hands will rise. With audiences of teachers or administrators, I rarely see even a single arm aloft. Such is the struggle that good news faces on trying to enter the culture. Good stories about schools are like spawning salmon: few reach the goal — and then they die.

### **The Testing Madness**

The most bizarre moment to date in our national psychosis occurred on the night of 28 July 2000. On that evening, a state

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## The Golden Apples

For two reasons, the Rotten Apples have been separated from the rest of the barrel in this year's report. First, separating them from the Golden Apples will prevent them from contaminating the entire barrel. Second, I wish to protect unwary consumers from possibly swallowing one of them by mistake. Intrepid readers are invited to explore the darkest recesses of Bracey Orchards on the Web at [www.america-tomorrow.com/bracey](http://www.america-tomorrow.com/bracey). Meanwhile,

just two truly Golden Apples have turned up this year.

trooper and a Georgia school policeman knocked on the door of Susan Ohanian's house. They then proceeded to interrogate her about her possible role in the theft of a Gwinnett County, Georgia, fourth-grade test. Ohanian lives in Vermont.

Why a Georgia school policeman saw fit to go all the way to Vermont to query Ohanian about a misappropriated test remains unclear. So does the authority of both the Georgia lawman and the Vermont state trooper who assisted him. After a conversation of some length, Ohanian's husband ordered the men to leave and told them they would be arrested for trespassing if they returned. As this is written in late August, they have not done so, and the Vermont trooper is not returning Ohanian's calls.

The Georgia officer seems dedicated. He e-mailed me several times and later spent half an hour on the phone. Through the magic of plain brown envelopes, I had also received a copy of the not-very-good Gwinnett test. (Not only does the test have faults, but cut scores have also been set as low as the chance level.)

"High Stakes Are for Tomatoes" is a bumper sticker and T-shirt slogan created by Oakland, California, teacher Susan Harman, a member of the Assessment Reform Network listserv (<http://www.fairtest.org/arn>). Peter Schrag picked it up for the title of his August 2000 article in the *Atlantic*, in which he describes the growing opposition to high-stakes testing. The spirit of the times was captured by the opening line of an article by David Bacon in the 16 April 2000 *Oakland Tribune*: "This is the year that U.S. schools went test crazy."<sup>3</sup> Well, not quite. The schools didn't go test crazy; the schools went crazy trying to cope with the zillions of tests imposed on them by boards, governors, and legislatures.

Indeed, this entire report could easily be devoted to what happened in the wacky

### The Damn the Urban Legends, Let's See What the Facts Say Award

goes to W. Wayt Gibbs, senior writer for *Scientific American*, and Douglas Fox, a San Francisco-based freelance writer.

Skeptical about all the gnashing of teeth occasioned by the alleged results from the TIMSS final year study, writers Gibbs and Fox looked into the situation and presented their conclusions in the October 1999 issue of *Scientific American*.<sup>1</sup>

Even accepting the conclusion that American students fall behind, Gibbs and Fox observe that NAEP science scores are rising and that American adults do better than schoolchildren: "The fact that U.S. 12th-graders fall behind on international tests<sup>2</sup> does not mean that Americans know less about science than adults in other nations do. In fact, U.S. residents have consistently demonstrated a firmer grasp of basic science facts than have denizens of many countries that dramatically outperformed the U.S. on TIMSS" (p. 92).

The authors point out that, among college-level sciences, only physics enrollments have fallen, a decline occasioned mostly by a lack of jobs. (For details on this phenomenon, see the January 1999 *Kappan* Research column.) "In other fields, forecasters worry more about a flood of new scientists than about a shortage of them. Last year, a National Research Council report urged universities to freeze the size of their biology graduate programs for this very reason" (p. 89). Gibbs and Fox also show graphically that, while the number of technical degrees garnered by foreign students is rising faster than the comparable figure for U.S. citizens, the latter number is rising as well. In addition, 68% of the foreigners stay here, a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it constitutes a large brain gain; on the other, it increases the competition for jobs.

Missing no opportunity to slam schools, some critics have even blamed schools for the shortage of high-tech workers. Gibbs and Fox, though, point out that public school reform is a slow and uncertain method for addressing shortages in any area. They quote a Computing Research Association officer saying, "When the personnel department wants people who have three years of experience with a technology that's only 18 months old, they're not going to find them."

1. W. Wayt Gibbs and Douglas Fox, "The False Crisis in Science Education," *Scientific American*, October 1999, pp. 87-92.

2. I contend that there is indeed some decline between grades 4 and 8, but not between grades 8 and 12, even though the flaws in the study render any firm conclusion impossible. See my article in the May 2000 issue of *Educational Researcher*.

world of testing. Each year, I organize the Bracey Reports using an instrument of high technology known as a "drawer." As the year proceeds, potentially usable material gets tossed into the drawer and is withdrawn for consideration sometime in June. In most years, by June, the drawer is full. This year, all topics other than testing got

one drawer as usual. Testing had a drawer all its own. And it was full, too.

Even the American Educational Research Association felt compelled to issue a statement on high-stakes testing. I say "even" because, as Debra Viadero wrote in *Education Week*, "The Washington-based group rarely takes a stand on controversial issues." But the AERA statement is a good one and is available on the Web at [www.aera.net](http://www.aera.net). Its advice is not likely to be heeded.

With students being promoted and re-

tained in many states on the basis of commercial, standardized, norm-referenced tests, such as the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT 9), testing guru James Popham came out of retirement from his little grass shack in Hawaii to say, "No, no, no!" Basically, Popham said that such tests measure some things that teachers don't teach and don't measure

some things that teachers do teach. They test some things that youngsters have learned outside of school, giving an inherent advantage to those from well-off, well-educated families (the correlation between the Virginia Standards of Learning test scores for a school and its percentage of students eligible for federally subsidized lunches was  $-.76$  — the more students eligible, the lower the scores).

Finally, tests like the SAT 9 have to spread out the scores. To do this, they must use mostly items that 40% to 60% of the students get right. Items that all students get right or wrong don't "behave right" in the statistical sense. But, of course, most students *should* get most items right if the items tap what the teachers have emphasized, which, presumably, is what is important. Hence, commercial tests don't test at least some important content. "To evaluate teachers' instructional effectiveness by using assessment tools that deliberately avoid important content is fundamentally foolish," wrote Popham.<sup>4</sup>

According to Andrew Porter of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, the situation is worse than Popham imagined. Even tests purportedly designed to measure what teachers teach don't do so. For 10 states, Porter and his colleagues examined the relationship between what teachers taught and what tests designed around state standards tested. The overlap was not great, as little as 5% in one state. "Instruction in a state was, in general, no more aligned to that state's test than it was aligned to the tests of other states, suggesting that standards-based reform has not yet brought instruction into alignment with state tests. In mathematics, instruction was more aligned with the NAEP than with state tests. In science, the opposite was true."<sup>5</sup>

Without question, the year's most important article about testing was penned by Robert Linn of the University of Colorado, who is co-president with Eva Baker of the Center for Research on Evaluation, Student Standards, and Testing. Known for objectivity, fairness, and thoroughness, Linn looked back in frustration at a career that began in 1965. He wrapped up an unusually long article for *Educational Researcher* in this way:

As someone who has spent his entire career doing research, writing, and thinking about educational testing and assessment issues, I would like to conclude by summarizing a compelling case

showing that the major uses of tests for student and school accountability during the last 50 years have improved education and student learning in dramatic ways. Unfortunately, that is not my conclusion. Instead, I am led to conclude that in most cases the instruments and technology have not been up to the demands that have been placed on them by high-stakes accountability. Assessment systems that are useful monitors lose much of their dependability and credibility for that purpose when high stakes are attached to them. The unintended negative effects of the high-stakes accountability uses often outweigh the intended positive effects.<sup>6</sup>

Linn cites one of testing's elder statesmen, William Coffman, on the problem of standards: "Holding common standards for all pupils can only encourage a narrowing of educational experiences for most pupils, doom many to failure, and limit the development of many worthy talents."<sup>7</sup>

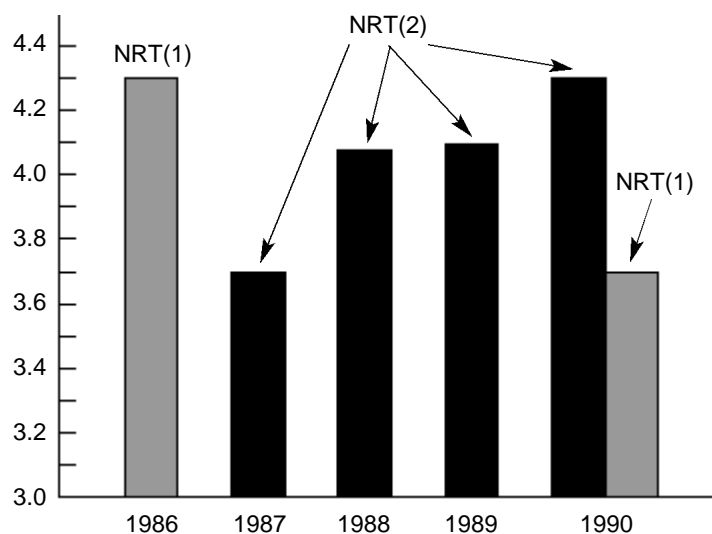
Linn illustrates his many concerns by citing a number of studies conducted over the past 50 years that have attempted, with little success, to use tests to measure and/or improve educational outcomes. One of the most important was a 1991 study by Daniel

Koretz, Linn, Steven Dunbar, and Lorrie Shepard. It describes a testing problem that could be added to Popham's list: test score results do not generalize to other indicators of achievement. The results of the study are presented in Figure 1.

As can be seen, when the school district shifted from NRT1 (norm-referenced test 1) to NRT2 (norm-referenced test 2), test scores declined. Over the next few years, the scores rose until they had reached the score previously attained on NRT1. At this point, the students were once again given NRT1. Although NRT1 had previously served as the district's "official" test, the students' scores on it fell to a level equivalent to the scores on NRT2 for the first year of its use.

Occasionally, one comes upon even more dramatic evidence of the failure of test scores to generalize or transfer. When John Murphy became superintendent of schools in Prince George's County, Maryland, in the mid-1980s, he promised to increase test scores and to close the black/white test score gap. On the walls of a conference room next to his office, he hung charts showing the test score trends for every school in the district. He dubbed it

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Comparison of Median Scores from Different Norm-Referenced Grade 3 Math Tests**



Adapted from Daniel Koretz et al., "The Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Achievement: Preliminary Findings About Generalization Across Tests," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1991.

**The All Things in Moderation Award** is divided: three-fourths goes

to Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, and one-fourth goes to Ethan Bronner of the *New York Times*. Rothstein

won a Golden Apple last year for his all-too-rational model of accountability. This year, the prize derives from his articles on education every other Wednesday in the *New York Times*. To date, these articles have provided balanced views of testing, accountability, job growth, and other hot issues, along with informative pieces on topics such as the achievement price paid by students who move around a lot.

Bronner's share of the award is simply for having the good sense to hire Rothstein. He might have gotten a larger share had he managed a better article placement. As it is, Rothstein's pieces appear deep in the "A section," usually on the page before the editorials. You can find the articles at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). They cost money unless you grab them on the day of publication, however.

his "applied anxiety" room. Test scores rose. The gap between the races did not disappear, but it did narrow, and black students scored comfortably above the national norm.

Rumors circulated that a lot of instruction in the district looked like test preparation. Murphy declined offers of external evaluations. The increase in test scores was abetted by Maryland's overlong use of a particular test. Eventually, though, the state changed tests, and, as occurred in the study mentioned above, scores declined all over the state. In Prince George's County, though, scores plummeted, some falling as low as the 18th percentile.

One of the nastiest stories of the testing mania surfaced in Birmingham, Alabama, where high schools were accused of removing over 500 students from the rolls just prior to testing. Schools in Alabama are graded solely according to their scores on the SAT 9. The test was never designed for such a purpose, of course, but Harcourt Educational Measurement doesn't appear to have protested, much less threatened to withhold the test if the

practice continues.

Another story held that low-scoring Birmingham students were told to stay home on test day. The school board split over the issue, and one teacher lost his job after insisting that the students did not drop out but were pushed out. According to one principal, the students were bad apples who were rowdy, fought, and set fires. The principal did not deny that they were removed but claimed he acted to improve the school's atmosphere.

As I noted above, testing stories could occupy this entire report. To save space but provide a sense of what is going on, I list a mere baker's dozen of the year's testing headlines from around the nation.

- "Practicing Without Learning" (*New York Times*, 18 March 2000);
- "Test Prep Moving into Primary Grades" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 2000);
- "State Test Boycott Expected" (*Boston Union News*, 12 April 2000);
- "Pressure to Boost Scores Leads Schools to Exclude Weaker Kids" (*USA Today*, 7 September 1999);
- "Top Schools Give Test an 'F'" (*Miami Herald*, 22 February 2000);
- "Test Scores Up, Test Takers Down: Link Between Participation and Improvement on School Exam Prompts Concern" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 July 2000);
- "Virginia Parents Don't Trust Exam, Poll Finds" (*Washington Post*, 27 June 2000);
- "Millions for Schools Tied to Stanford 9 Test Scores" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 2000);
- "Test Mania: Anxiety over Tests Can Lead to a Psychiatric Ward" (*Arizona Republic*, 2 April 2000);
- "School Testing Companies Score It Big" (*St. Petersburg Times*, 19 June 2000);
- "Give Kids Recess, Virginia Beach Parents Urge" (*Norfolk Virginia-Pilot*, 21 March 2000);
- "Is the Test Fair to Poor Students?" (*Denver Post*, 29 February 2000); and
- "Burnsville Family Sues Testing Company over Scoring Error" (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 8 August 2000. Some 8,000 students who "flunked" had actually passed; several hundred were seniors and had been denied diplomas).

Scoring errors were not restricted to Minneapolis, in a mistake made by NCS (formerly known as National Computer Systems). The two largest testing companies, Harcourt Educational Measurement and CTB/McGraw-Hill, also made them,

and they occurred in California, Texas, and New York — and maybe elsewhere.

Finally, as a bonus, I offer what surely turned out to be the most ironic testing headline of the year, "Rojas Links Job Security to Test Scores" (*Dallas Morning News*, 30 March 2000). In the story, Bill Rojas, the Dallas superintendent, was threatening principals and other school administrators. Four months later, the Dallas School Board sacked Rojas, who had been on the job only 11 months. He is appealing.

The Ohanian affair captured the prize for most outrageous test-related event of the year, but George Schmidt's experiences in Chicago come in a close second. Appalled by the quality of the tests the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had constructed, English and journalism teacher Schmidt published four of them in his monthly newspaper, *Substance*. CPS suspended him without pay and, after a series of hearings, seems on the verge of firing him. CPS also sued Schmidt for \$1.4 million, claiming that sum to be the cost of replacing the 120 now-public items. Yes, that works out to just under \$12,000 an item. My inquiries on item costs found something like \$300 to be the most frequently cited figure.

Schmidt was right to take action of some kind, although some might feel publication of the tests was extreme. The tests were overwhelmingly trivial. They presented history and culture in distasteful stereotypes, especially with regard to Africa (which they treated not as a continent made up of more than 40 distinctive nations but as an undifferentiated whole). Worse, at least from a technical perspective, too many questions had either no right answer or multiple right answers. If CPS actually did pay \$12,000 an item for these awful questions, those responsible for the costs should themselves be terminated. (As a matter of disclosure, I testified twice for Schmidt at the hearings and received payment for the testimony.)

All in all, it was a bizarre year in the testing biz, but no more bizarre take on the testing issue could be found than that which issued forth from William Bennett, former secretary of education. In a March 2000 speech on the condition and future of education, delivered at the Heritage Foundation's celebration of its 25th anniversary, Bennett turned to standards and testing. He said, "In this regard, I must

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say I am alarmed and worried about the reaction of many parents to the new standards movement; many are retreating. A recent survey showed that when parents are choosing a school for their child, high test scores are one of the *least* important factors in their decision. The most important in their decision: the child's happiness. . . . Armed with public opinion, we can wear down the unions. But if the parents go soft, we are done."

Parents valuing their kids' happiness over high test scores? How *dare* they!

### The 'Texas Miracle': Mirages, Smoke, and Mirrors

Texas got serious about education reform in 1984. Gov. Mark White asked Ross Perot to head a select committee. White's successor, Ann Richards, continued the crusade to persuade Texans that reading and mathematics were as important as high school football. Texans put such passion into the latter that author H. G. Bissinger wrote a whole book about it, called *Friday Night Lights*. The mania for Texas high school football was also featured on "60 Minutes."

Part of the Texas reform effort, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), was introduced in 1990, and the percentage of students passing it, low at first, began to soar. The dropout rate fell from 6.1% in 1989-90 to 1.6% in 1999. Looking at this last figure gave Peter Schrag the title for his *American Prospect* article, "Too Good to Be True."<sup>8</sup> Soon many others had joined a list of observers and researchers who argued that the Texas "miracle" was mostly mirage. Shortly after Schrag's piece appeared, along came Linda McNeil and Angela Valenzuela of Rice University with "Harmful Effects of the TAAS System of Testing in Texas: Beneath the Accountability Rhetoric."<sup>9</sup> Then, in June 2000, Boston College's Walter Haney delivered a 150-page opus, "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education."<sup>10</sup>

Most intriguing among the debunking reports was a long-rumored, but scarcely seen, analysis by "Flo Fisher." The first public reference to the existence of this paper appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* in an article by Jonathan Weisman. Weisman wrote, "Criticism of the movement has become such a politically delicate matter that an analysis of school achievement in Texas — drafted by a senior researcher at

the federal Education Department and obtained by the *Sun* — was written under a pseudonym and has not been made public."<sup>11</sup> A few days later, the *Washington Post* reported that the House Education and the Workforce Committee had demanded the report and "all e-mail, memos, and correspondence directly or indirectly related to this document." In response, the Department of Education said, "Officials are uncertain whether the document even exists."<sup>12</sup>

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by "Flo Fisher."

It exists, all right. Not only did the author use a pseudonym, he gave himself a sex change as well. In late July, the Flo Fisher paper, "Tall Tales? Texas Testing Moves from the Pecos to Wobegon," began to circulate.

The debunking papers used various data to conclude that the soaring TAAS scores are not corroborated by changes in other indicators of achievement. More damning still, the papers called the veracity of the TAAS results themselves into question. The results looked more like statistical sleight of hand than valid use of data.

In terms of the TAAS data themselves, the analyses reported the apparently remarkable increase in the proportion of fifth-graders who met the state's standards: from 60% in 1994 to 90% in 1999. The proportion of school districts identified as "exemplary" or "recognized" soared from 14% in 1995 to 48% in 1999, while the proportion of "not acceptable" districts fell to just 1%. "The trouble is," wrote the pseudonymous Fisher, "the numbers don't add up."

To begin with, TAAS set low standards

— some would say embarrassingly low. A passing TAAS grade equates to about the 25th percentile on a typical standardized commercial achievement test. Starting from this low point, increasing the pass rates was hardly a challenge. As if that weren't bad enough, an analysis of TAAS reading passages by Sandra Stotsky, then at Harvard University and now with the Massachusetts Department of Education, found that the passages had gotten easier over time. As a result, she said, "The decline in the overall level of reading difficulty of the selections on those tests . . . suggests that there may have been no real improvement in [students'] reading skills. There may even have been a decline."<sup>13</sup>

Although I will discuss Texas' NAEP scores in full below, I can note here that there was no increase in reading scores in Texas between 1992 and 1998 (according to the NAEP 1998 *Reading Report Card*). Texas fourth-graders scored 213 in 1992, 212 in 1994, and 217 in 1998. The increase from 1994 to 1998 is not statistically significant. Only eight states had a smaller proportion of fourth-graders reaching the "Advanced" level of proficiency: Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina. On the other hand, in 24 of the other 38 participating states, the proportion of students who scored at the "Below Basic" level was as large as or larger than the proportion of Texas students who scored at that level. These data support Stotsky's analysis. If there is any improvement at all in Texas, it is at the low end of the scale. TAAS might be raising the floor, but it is not elevating the average, and it certainly is not raising the ceiling.

That TAAS is zeroing in on minimal skills is further indicated by remediation statistics found in Fisher's paper. Texas mandates "intense remediation" for students who do not pass TAAS. In theory, if the early remediation is effective, it won't be needed later, and the proportion of students receiving remediation will decline with advancing grades. The proportion does indeed decline from grade 3 to grade 5, but then it increases again through grade 10, at which point it reaches its highest level, 28%.

Nor do scores on the SAT and the ACT (American College Testing) program test support claims for achievement gains. While the "national average" on the SAT (in quotes because it is not a true "aver-

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age” of anything meaningful) edged up, Fisher noted that in Texas, the “average” remained flat. If TAAS led to a higher proportion of seniors taking the SAT, one might expect scores to decline, but the proportion of SAT-takers dropped a bit.

Fisher also reported little change in the participation rates at institutions of higher education. Overall, from 1994 through 1996, the U.S. rate grew by 0.2%, while Texas showed a 0.1% increase. The numbers are even less favorable when Fisher compared Texas to other states with “young and diverse populations that include a substantial number of Hispanics.” Florida’s rate grew by 0.5%; California’s, by 2.6%; Arizona’s, by 0.8%; and New Mexico’s, by 0.8%. It is not clear why Fisher picked such a restricted time frame, but the numbers are no more favorable if one examines Table 194 of the *Digest of Education Statistics* for 1999, which shows changes from 1990 to 1997.<sup>14</sup>

Other data do not bear out the claims for the sharply falling dropout rates that Schrag said were “too good to be true.” Haney found that, when TAAS became a high-stakes test, there were declines in the ratio of graduates to ninth-grade students three years earlier, indicating more dropouts. White students recovered from the initial decline, but blacks and Hispanics did not. This indicates a dropout increase for blacks and Hispanics, from which they have not recovered.

In addition, there are other ways of making dropouts disappear. This could be happening in Texas.

In Texas, as elsewhere, dropouts can be eliminated by steering students toward a General Education Development (GED) certificate. Students in GED programs are not dropouts, but neither are they truly high school graduates. And they don’t have to take the TAAS. Fisher reported that the number of younger people taking the GED in Texas — those who might otherwise be in school — rose by 24% from 1990 to 1995. In the nation, there was only a 1% increase. “In 1996,” Fisher wrote, “Texas became the first state in the nation whose residents had received over a million GEDs.”

Like Fisher, Haney also observed that GED enrollers were not considered dropouts. Nor, he found, were those that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) referred to as “leavers.” Leavers are students who have completed all coursework but have failed the TAAS and have left. As for the

GED students, Haney points out that Texas could be encouraging students to pursue a program that is financially detrimental to them. Although it is better to have a GED than to be a dropout, it is better still, in terms of future earnings, to have a regular diploma.

Also not counted in the TAAS results are those labeled “in special education.” The proportion of such students rose from 3.9% in 1994 to 6.3% in 1998, with the highest proportion for any ethnic group being for whites, 7.1%. Says Haney, “It is clear that the TEA has been playing a Texas-sized shell game on the matter of dropouts in the Lone Star state.”<sup>15</sup>

Some miracle.

A recent article by Jay Greene purportedly debunks the debunkers, but, frankly, this essay appears to be no more than a plea for a position in the U.S. Department of Education for Greene in the event that George W. Bush is elected President. It appears in the summer 2000 issue of *City Journal*, the house organ of the Manhattan Institute, where Greene is employed.

### Education and the Economy

I hope by now that everyone has abandoned the daffy theory of economic competitiveness put forth by *A Nation at Risk*. After whining about incursions by the Japanese in automobiles, by the South Koreans in steel, and by Germans in machine tools, the authors of *Risk* drew this conclusion: “If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our education system.”<sup>16</sup>

Although it seems counterintuitive to many of us, Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, contends that the main problem with the economy is that it’s *too* good. He and many other economists argue that the rate of growth can’t be sustained. Sooner or later, a shortage of labor will push up wages and cause inflation. Hence, Greenspan’s series of interest rate increases. This mainstream theory is being espoused in spite of the fact that the unemployment rate is substantially lower than was considered theoretically possible and that no one has spotted any sign of inflation. In the years after World War II, productivity rose by more than 2% per year. In the last 12 months for which we currently have data, April

1999 to April 2000, productivity soared 5.1%.

The position of the Fed, I should note, is an anti-labor, pro-capital position. Wages are to be kept low to protect and increase profits. But, since Wall Street is now Main Street — more than half of the U.S. population is invested in stocks in one way or another — one hears few people protesting.

Meanwhile, the projections of job growth from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1998 to 2008 indicate that the fastest-growing jobs will be a mixture of highly skilled occupations, mostly in information technology, and not so highly skilled jobs, such as home health-care aides and human service assistants.<sup>17</sup>

Recall, though, that rates and numbers often paint entirely different pictures. When speaking of fastest-growing occupations, we are speaking of rates. Looking at the projections for those occupations with the largest numbers of jobs, one sees mostly unskilled and semiskilled positions: retail sales, cashiers, and office clerks. The occupation of retail sales includes almost as many jobs as the top 10 fastest-growing jobs combined. Only two occupations make both lists: systems analysts and personal care/home health-care aides.

*U.S. News & World Report* for 21 February 2000 offered a slightly different take on the situation, listing categories of winners and losers in terms of income, between 1993 and 1998. In order, auto mechanics, physicians, dental assistants, plasterers, and dieticians were the big winners. People in the traditional jobs of a manufacturing economy, plus farmers and those in the large-numbers occupations (retail sales, office clerks, garbage collectors, janitors, and kitchen workers) all lost.

The *U.S. News* article also observed that, between 1980 and 2000, the ratio of CEO pay to the pay of nonmanagement workers grew from 42 to 1 to 691 to 1. Over the same period, the share of wealth controlled by the 1% of wealthiest households grew from 24.8% to 40.1%.

People seem more knowledgeable these days about the weak relationship between education and jobs.<sup>18</sup> The specter of Japan, with its students near the top in test scores, mired in recession for a decade should certainly give pause to those who wrote *A Nation at Risk*. One wonders if, when the next recession appears or when some country shoots past us in some category of perform-



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ance, schools will again be the scapegoats of choice. Given the precedents, there is cause to worry. Schools were blamed for letting the Russians get into space first, but they received almost no credit when an American walked on the moon 12 years later.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, schools allegedly caused the recession of the late 1980s — but not the recovery of the early 1990s. Indeed, critics kept up the drumbeat of failure. On 27 February 1994, the Business Section of the Sunday *New York Times* carried the headline “The American Economy, Back on Top.” Other papers and magazines ran similar headlines. Three months later, IBM CEO Louis Gerstner, Jr., penned an op-ed in the *Times* with the headline “Our Schools Are Failing.”<sup>20</sup>

Richard Rothstein used one of his *New York Times* columns not only to remind us that the theory propounded in *A Nation at Risk* was full of holes, but also to ask some questions: If we had recognized sooner the limited role schools play in determining economic success, would we have embarked on the same reforms? Or would education policy have been less politicized, with more tolerance for experimentation? Rothstein pointed out that Alan Greenspan and other economic theorists once held that “full employment” occurred when the unemployment rate fell to 6%. By this reasoning, it was pointless to create new jobs because there was no one sufficiently educated to fill them — except for people already working. The resulting competition would only drive salaries up. But then the unemployment rate fell to under 4%. Says Rothstein, “Some three million Americans suffered prolonged joblessness because policy makers wrongly assumed they were too poorly schooled to work.”<sup>21</sup>

### The National Goals for Education

In 1989, President George Bush and the nation’s governors set six national goals for education in the year 2000. These were amended by President Clinton and Congress in 1994, when two new ones were added. It’s now 2000, and we didn’t get there. Surprise.

As Rothstein put it, “Some ‘Goals 2000’ were ridiculous in the first place. Others required substantial resources to accomplish, and these were not provided. Still others required far more than 11 years to achieve.”<sup>22</sup>

When you put it that way, Bush, Clinton, the governors, and Congress look pretty dumb. Do you suppose their inability to set realistic goals or to provide the resources to attain the ones that might have been attainable is another example of the failure of American public education? Did public schooling leave our Presidents, governors, and members of Congress too feeble-minded to put forth a logical, reasonable, useful set of goals?

### Korea Goes Fuzzy

Korea had the second-highest math scores among the 41 nations in TIMSS and finished ninth in the 1998 International Mathematics Olympiad (IMO). For what it’s worth, the U.S. always finishes higher than Korea in the IMO and remains the only nation ever to finish first with all members of the team attaining perfect scores.

Despite the high rankings in TIMSS, Korean educators have fretted over the nation’s math program. Professor Hee-chan Lew of the Korean National University of Education outlined the problem (and, though not in colloquial English, his concern comes through clearly enough): “At the outward appearance, mathematics education of Korea seems to make a success. Very recently, Korea was ranked 2nd in TIMSS and 9th in the IMO. Although this result needs to be analyzed closely, too many problems are being raised from the so called skill- and fact-oriented inflexible curriculum. Most students believe that mathematics is meaningless and only some specific students’ possessions.”<sup>23</sup>

Among the problems, on the 10th-grade Korean national mathematics test, average scores hovered in the 35% correct range. On the multiple-choice college entrance examination, average scores were only 25% correct, which, as Lew points out, is no better than chance (the equivalent of random guessing or filling in an answer sheet without even looking at the questions).

What apparently worried Korean educators even more was that students could not connect their math knowledge to the real world. Most *Kappan* readers are probably aware of the infamous NAEP problem that goes something like this: 1,190 soldiers need transportation by bus; each bus holds 38 soldiers. How many buses are needed? Many American students give an answer like 31, remainder 12. Korean

students outdid Americans in failing to see the practical constraints on mathematical questions. Given a mathematical operation and the task of creating a word problem that used it, Korean students created arithmetically correct problems unrelated to reality. They created problems in which the father of a 6-year-old girl was himself only 2 years old or in which a zoo purchased 3/4 of a gorilla.

According to Lew, the mathematics curriculum of Korea relies on lectures “to transfer fragmentary pieces of knowledge. The designers of the new curriculum think that Korean mathematics education is in total crisis and that the main culprit is this curriculum which forces students to learn mathematics meaninglessly” (here and later, I have rendered Lew’s comments in more traditional English). The curriculum designers based their efforts on the standards from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and on the National Curriculum of the United Kingdom. They also consider that mathematics instruction should further social goals to help “construct the advanced civilized society with rapid circulation of information, highly developed technology, and openness to other cultures.” Consequently, the new curriculum

should focus on cultivating manpower with the following abilities:

- creativity in problem solving,
- rational communication with other people,
- openness to the ideas of other people,
- self-control or metacognition in the problem-solving process,
- autonomy in learning,
- mathematical power to synthesize aspects of mathematics in the problem-solving process,
- appreciation of mathematics as a tool for solving problems.

The curriculum that Lew describes should be in place by now. Of course, it is one thing to say what a curriculum should focus on but quite another to actually develop a curriculum that embodies that intention — and it is yet another to get people to use it properly.

### The No Excuses Report

In the spring of 2000, the Heritage Foundation published *No Excuses*, a study that deserved neglect but received substantial

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publicity, including two articles and a column in the *Washington Post*. Written by Samuel Casey Carter, a theology student studying the phenomenology of Jacob Klein for his doctorate, this study purported to find 21 schools that had high poverty and high achievement. These schools had 75% or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and standardized test scores at the 65th percentile or higher. No doubt the report garnered so much media attention (but not nearly enough skepticism) because these findings run counter to the conventional wisdom.

Press releases and the introduction to the report contended that, now that we have found 21 such schools, there is no reason why all low-income schools can't achieve high scores. The report claimed to refute the "liberal view" that demography is destiny. I have never heard a liberal espouse such a simplistic doctrine, but it has become a new attack phrase for the Right. For some, the fact that the study was able to locate *only* 21 such schools among thousands and thousands says a great deal.

Chief among the report's findings was that all these schools had "strong" principals who exercised their wills on the schools' curricula and teachers. Indeed, so prominent was this message that Geneva Overholser's glowing (and naive) column in the *Washington Post* was titled simply, "Free the Principal."<sup>24</sup>

But even the highly unsystematic study itself provided evidence that it takes more than a strong principal to get test scores up in high-poverty schools. For one thing, a quarter of the schools were private, and one wonders what public schools could take away from the experience of such different institutions. These schools charged \$4,500 to \$6,000 annual tuition, leaving one to wonder about the accuracy of classifying them as low-income schools.

Some schools had 11-month years, and many had test-oriented after-school programs. Some even had Saturday programs. Some of the schools had more money than public schools in the same geographical area. All of them seemed to test their students to death. Most were small. For example, one had 152 children in seven grades, and another had 285 in 14 grades (pre-K-12).

Some schools reported implausible test scores — averages for a grade as high as the 98th percentile in one Detroit school. When I pointed out to Kenneth Cooper, a

*Washington Post* reporter, and Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki, a *Detroit Free Press* reporter, that not even the most affluent schools score this high *on average*, their reactions were astonishing. Walsh-Sarnecki said simply, "We must celebrate our victories," while Cooper virtually called me a racist for, in his eyes, denying that black students could score as high as whites. Such naiveté about test scores in education reporters is very disturbing.

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The principals described in the report hardly appear "free." "Obsessed" might be a better description. They put in workweeks that most people would not and demand similar commitment from their teachers. One school gives its students cell phones and the teachers' phone numbers. It expects teachers to be accessible at any time.

Indeed, the report itself includes admissions that any attempt to reproduce these schools on a larger scale would face immense difficulties. Two principals told Carter that to replicate their schools on a national scale "would require a pool of educators that does not exist today." In a foreword, Adam Meyerson, vice president for educational affairs at Heritage, declares, "Most of the principals of high-poverty schools do not come close to the standard set by *No Excuses* principals. They should be replaced." In exasperated response, one can only ask, "By whom?"

It might actually turn out that much of the *No Excuses* report unravels. At Earhart Elementary School in Chicago, for instance, the highest-scoring students are usually first-graders. This would mean that the schools are selecting high-scoring students, not creating them (Earhart is part of a Chicago program in which selection is per-

mitted). In one extreme example, students who averaged at the 98th percentile as first-graders had fallen to the 47th as third-graders. At Chicago's George Washington Elementary, ethnic trends look like those in Serbian villages. The proportion of black students there fell every year from 15.2% in 1990 to 1.3% in 1999.

Most important, neither school is testing anywhere near all its students. Earhart has about 33 students per grade, but often tests only 21 or 22. Washington has 74 pupils per grade, but only in sixth grade did it test anywhere near that number (66), while in third grade it tested only 48. Limited English might exclude some at Washington, but not at Earhart, which reports zero cases. These considerations are not desperate attempts to make the results disappear. They describe factors that any competent researcher would have examined.

The schools described in *No Excuses* do appear to have some good qualities, although the report does not extract them as general properties. Reading the vignettes about the schools, though, one senses that they build a sense of community in both the children and their parents and that they instill the idea of "a possible future" in the students. The notion that one has a future and that it has a chance of being good does not come automatically to children. Indeed, according to a number of books, it appears to be completely absent or wholly distorted in children coping with mean streets. (My complete analysis of the report is available from the Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, at <http://uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI>.)

### **The RAND Study, NAEP Trends, And the Presidential Election**

In her August speech to the Republican National Convention, Laura Bush said, "The highly respected nonpartisan RAND study released just last week found that education reforms in Texas have resulted in some of the highest achievement gains in the country among all racial, socioeconomic, and family backgrounds." It happened, she said, "because George led the way." Just a few weeks earlier, scientists had reported a phenomenon moving faster than the speed of light and thus leaving the experimental apparatus before it had entered it. Perhaps something similar is happening here, as Laura Bush has her

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husband's agenda working backward in time. The RAND study examines NAEP trends between 1990 and 1996. George W. Bush became governor only in 1995.<sup>25</sup>

As I noted above, if anything has happened in Texas, it has more to do with Ross Perot, Mark White, and Ann Richards than with anyone else. And the RAND study emphasizes that results take time — that is, years — to show up. In addition, the reforms RAND implicated in the improvements are not those proposed by Gov. Bush.

The RAND study found that, nationally, NAEP math scores had been rising during the 1990-96 period. If NAEP were a standardized achievement test, scores would have been heading up about one percentile rank per year. Some states showed no gains. Others, including Texas, North Carolina, Michigan, Indiana, and Maryland, gained about two percentile ranks per year. When the study compared students from families with similar demographic characteristics, Texas topped the nation, and California was last. Although senior author David Grissmer indicated that the study could not provide causal inferences, the gains seemed to be linked to smaller class sizes, increased preschool education, and increased instructional resources for teachers.

The media reaction to this story can be taken either as a projective test or as weak evidence for a constructivist theory of cognition: different media saw very different things in the results. The *Washington Post* didn't see anything at all and carried no story. Jodi Wilgoren of the *New York Times* saw a national study and addressed the impact of education reforms, such as increased funding and smaller class size. Gail Chaddock of the *Christian Science Monitor* also emphasized the national results, but she brought in the usual conservative commentators (Chester E. Finn, Jr., Eric Hanushek, Douglas Carnine) to spin the data in a given way. Chaddock also used the word "dismal" to characterize California's performance. I thought that she and I had agreed on the phone that "dismal" was not an appropriate description.

The *Los Angeles Times* headlined its story "California Near Bottom in Education, Says RAND Report." *Times* reporter Richard Colvin emphasized the differences between California and Texas but pointed out that California had made above-average gains. He also observed that the

reforms that appeared to make the difference were those emphasized by Gore, not the "tough accountability measures" championed by Bush.

Anjetta McQueen of the Associated Press gave lots of attention to comparisons between Texas and California, but she did manage in the opening paragraph to summarize the major national findings: "States that reduce class sizes, enroll more kids in public preschool, give teachers more classroom materials, and target additional money to poor children are improving the lot of all students."<sup>26</sup> Tamara Henry emphasized another outcome in *USA Today*: "Minority Students Making Strides in Math." *Education Week* relegated Debra Viadero's excellent story to its "Research" section on page 8. On the same page, Viadero summarized the AERA statement on high-stakes testing.

Heather May, in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, observed that, while students in Utah do well on tests, they are not improving. Not surprisingly, the Texas media came down on the side of Lone Star superiority: "Texas Ranked at Top in U.S. Education Study," claimed the *Houston Chronicle*. At least the opening paragraph mentioned Perot and White.

While Colvin and the *LA Times* sulked over California's low estate, an unbylined story in the *San Jose Mercury News* took the "glass-is-half-full" tack. It took solace in the fact that the reforms that produced the gains in test scores in other states were the same reforms that California had recently put into place.

### Vouchers and Charters

I expected to have large sections on these two areas in this year's report, but neither has seen much action in the past 12 months. The Ohio voucher program has been declared unconstitutional by a state judge whose decision, naturally, is under appeal. Meanwhile, the students already in the program are being allowed to continue to attend private schools.

Similarly, Florida's statewide voucher program was declared unconstitutional and appealed. At the moment, though, the program has ground to a halt. In Florida, vouchers come into play only if a school receives a grade of F two years in a row. Then its students become eligible for state-sponsored vouchers that they can use to attend private schools. Last year, only two schools

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earned an F for the second time, and 53 of their students left. This year, 78 schools brought an F rating into the testing from the previous year. But all managed to do better, leaving only four new schools with an F grade for the first time.

Both sides claimed victory. Florida teachers, though, as in other states, said that improved test scores had been bought by eliminating breadth of instruction. "They're walking talking test scores," said one. A bit of cognitive dissonance was introduced about the rating system when one school garnered best-in-the-nation in ratings by *Newsweek* but received only a C from the state.

The Florida program contains an interesting asymmetry: once students leave a public school, the school has no direct way of getting them back. Even if an F school moves up to A, it can do no more than try to cajole students to return.

Once again, California voters will vote on a voucher referendum. Sponsored by Timothy Draper, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, the measure would provide \$4,000 of taxpayer money to anyone who attends a private school, including the 600,000 students already in private schools. Draper expects to spend at least \$20 million of his own money to push the measure. While supporters claim that a win will give parents "total freedom of choice," they have yet to explain how the existing private school system — or even a rapidly expanding one — can accommodate the 6,000,000 students California currently enrolls in public schools.

In the online Znet Commentaries of *Z* magazine, Noam Chomsky produced an argument against vouchers that I had not heard before: they will destroy a sense of

community. Chomsky saw vouchers as reflecting the spirit of the time: gain wealth, forgetting all but self. "A public education system," Chomsky wrote, "is based on the principle that you care whether the kid down the street gets an education."<sup>27</sup>

In the absence of new data about vouchers, I would like to cite an important older comment from Terry Moe's *Private Vouchers*. Advocates of vouchers usually present them in terms of an unfettered market and in an either/or situation: either vouchers or the monopoly of "government" schools. Such a naive approach ignores complexities on both sides of the issue. Certainly, the presence of many magnet schools gives the lie to the charge of monopoly. On the voucher side, Moe has this to say:

Ideology aside, perhaps the most vexing problem [of voucher research] is that few researchers who carry out studies of school choice are sensitive to issues of institutional design or context. They proceed as though their case studies reveal something general about choice or markets when, in fact — as the Milwaukee case graphically testifies — much of what they observe is due to the specific rules, restrictions, and control mechanisms that shape how choice and markets happen to operate in a particular setting.

As any economist would be quick to point out, the effects of choice and markets vary, sometimes enormously, depending on the institutional context. The empirical literature on school choice does little to shed light on these contingencies and, indeed, by portraying choice and markets as generic reforms with general effects, often breeds more confusion than understanding.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, one cannot immediately generalize from the research findings in one setting to other settings without examining the comparability of the two settings. Pro- or anti-voucher findings from one study may have nothing to say in a larger or different context.

The state of charter schools has changed little since last year's report, which discussed a number of evaluations in California, Michigan, and Arizona. The idea remains popular with many Americans, notably Bill Clinton.

## A 'Lighter' Matter

Robert Marzano and his colleagues at

the Mid-Century Regional Education Laboratory estimate that the standards put forth by professional organizations could possibly be learned by the brightest students by the age of 27. Perhaps as a result of seeing this figure, some newspapers have been asking what the standards were doing for the weight of student backpacks. In a nonscientific sample, the *Florida Times Union* in Jacksonville found that some elementary schoolers were toting as much as 16 pounds on their shoulders, while high schoolers stooped under weights as high as 29 pounds.<sup>29</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* obtained similar results. After finding that more than half of parents surveyed said that they had to help their children get the packs on their backs, the *Inquirer* decided to check into the medical ramifications of textbook toting. "The pediatric part of our practice is exploding," said one chiropractor.<sup>30</sup> The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons reported that the heavy backpacks can cause medical problems such as muscle fatigue, scoliosis, and spondylitis (an inflammation of the spine). "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," said another chiropractor. "If these kids are hunched over like peasants now, imagine what they will look like in a few years."

1. In international studies it is usually the case that many countries have scores that are not statistically different. In this study, after first-place Finland, the next highest scores were France, 549; Sweden, 546; New Zealand, 545; Hungary, 536; Iceland, 536; Switzerland, 536; Hong Kong, 535; United States, 535; Singapore, 534; and Slovenia, 532.

2. Those who have been reading the *Kappan* for a few years will recall that the story of the suppression of the Sandia Report was the centerpiece of Daniel Tanner's article "A Nation 'Truly' at Risk," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1993, pp. 288-97.

3. David Bacon, "Value of School Testing Open to Question," *Oakland Tribune*, 16 April 2000.

4. W. James Popham, "Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality," *Educational Leadership*, March 1999, p. 12.

5. Andrew C. Porter and John L. Smithson, "Alignment of State Testing Programs, NAEP, and Reports of Teacher Practice in Mathematics and Science in Grades 4 and 8," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 2000.

6. Robert L. Linn, "Assessments and Accountability," *Educational Researcher*, March 2000, p. 14.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

8. Peter Schrag, "Too Good to Be True," *American Prospect*, 3 January 2000, pp. 46-49.

9. Linda McNeil and Angela Valenzuela, "Harmful Effects of the TAAS System of Testing in Texas: Beneath the Accountability Rhetoric," in Mindy Kornhaber, Gary Orfield, and Michal Kurlaendar, eds.,

*Raising Standards or Raising Barriers? Inequality and High-Stakes Testing in Public Education* (New York: Century Foundation, forthcoming).

10. Walter Haney, "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education," available from Education Policy Analysis Archives, <http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>.

11. Jonathan Weisman, "Validity of Texas Tests Questioned," *Baltimore Sun*, 28 March 2000, p. A-1.

12. Kenneth Cooper, "House Panel Upset at U.S. Study on Texas," *Washington Post*, 4 April 2000, p. A-27.

13. Sandra Stotsky's analysis was conducted for the Tax Research Association in Houston, but that website is no longer available. The analysis can be found at [http://www.educationnews.org/analysis\\_of\\_the\\_texas\\_reading\\_te.htm](http://www.educationnews.org/analysis_of_the_texas_reading_te.htm).

14. Readers can find the *Digest of Education Statistics* on the U.S. Department of Education website at <http://www.ed.gov>. The list of frequently requested items on the Education Department's home page includes the *Digest*.

15. Haney, p. 132.

16. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 7.

17. "Employment Projections," available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at <http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t06 and t07.htm>.

18. The relationship is weak within developed countries only. Within underdeveloped nations, increasing the levels of education remains essential to economic development.

19. Only Stanley Elam, then editor of the *Kappan*, gave schools credit for their role in the moon landing in the September 1969 issue. For a summary, see the *Kappan* Research column for June 2000.

20. See Sylvia Nasar, "The American Economy, Back on Top," *New York Times*, 27 February 1994, Sect. 3, p. 1; and Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., "Our Schools Are Failing: Do We Care?," *New York Times*, 27 May 1994, p. A-27.

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