

EDITORIAL

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Schools Need to Be More Productive

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If your blood test comes back with bad results, do you address the problems it reveals—or do you blame the doctor who interprets the test?

The U.S. Department of Education just released the latest long-term results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP, an important diagnostic tool for measuring the performance of America's schools, did have some good news. For example, the reading and mathematics scores for 9 and 13-year olds were higher in 2008 than they were in the early 1970s.

But there was also bad news. The average scores for 17-year olds, students near graduation, were no better. And even with the improvements, many students aren't doing well: fewer than one in three students reads at grade level in fourth and eighth grades, and the record isn't that much different in mathematics. (Kansas scores are somewhat better but still unacceptably low, with roughly half of all students at grade level in mathematics but only one in three reading at grade level.)

When Education Week, the newspaper of record for people working in public schools, printed a story on the results, it quoted several analysts and experts, including Andrew J. Coulson, an education analyst with the Washington, DC-based Cato Institute. Coulson said that the results "reveal a productivity collapse unparalleled in any other sector of the economy."

That article provoked a sharp rebuke from one subscriber, who described herself as "extremely irritated." Oddly enough, she was irritated not by the opportunities lost by high school students who graduate with an incomplete education, but by Coulson's reaction.

"That word 'productivity,' she wrote, "is a perfect indication of the fact that many conservatives look at education as if it were a manufacturing plant producing a 'product,' i.e. students." The reader, who is a professor of education, called the comparison "terribly dehumanizing" to students.

Dehumanizing? "If you don't like the word "productive," substitute the word "effective," as in "Are schools effective in doing what we ask them to do, which is to educate students?"

The answer, unfortunately, is "not especially." Coulson, in a remark not included in the Education Week article, said that "at the end of high school, students perform no better today

than they did nearly 40 years ago, and yet we spend more than twice as much per pupil in real, inflation-adjusted terms.”

Can schools rise above mediocrity? Some do. The American Indian Public Charter School, in Oakland, California, is the fifth-highest scoring school in California. It's also among the top 200 public schools in the country, despite the fact that nearly all of its students are both poor and minority, two groups that usually do poorly in school. And when John Deasy became the superintendent of schools in Prince Georges County, outside Washington, DC, he brought in changes that sent test scores up, even though half of the students are poor and many are immigrants.

So making school budgets bigger isn't the answer, but how leaders use the money available to them is very important. Do they reward teachers for good performance and back them up when disciplinary problems arise? Do they set high expectations and cultivate a culture of “no excuses?”

Some public school leaders do these things, but many are unable or unwilling to cut through the red tape, and public bureaucracies are prone to protect their employees rather than serve the public. Leaders in public charter schools and private schools often have more room to maneuver, to the benefit of students.

No change in education will quickly, easily or painlessly lead to graduating classes of students who are equipped to face the challenges that universities and the work force present. Clearly, money alone isn't sufficient. Getting rid of ineffective teachers and rewarding excellent ones is a good place to start.

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