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Public school leaders have lots to learn, test results indicate

By JOHN R. LAPLANTE

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

The U.S. Department of Education recently released the latest long-term results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The report had 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 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.

Education Week, the newspaper of record for people working in public schools, reported the results and quoted analysts and experts, including Andrew J. Coulson of the Cato Institute. Coulson said the results "reveal a productivity collapse unparalleled in any other sector of the economy."

That article provoked a sharp rebuke from one subscriber, who was irritated not by the opportunities lost by 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.

If you don't like "productive," substitute "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 has also 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."

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

Making school budgets bigger isn't the answer, but how leaders use the money available to them is crucial. Do they reward teachers for performance and back them up on disciplinary problems? 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. Charter schools and private schools often have more room to maneuver to the benefit of students.

No change in education will quickly or painlessly lead to graduating students who are equipped to face the challenges of work and college. 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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