



What Works in Schools

Translating Research into Action

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INTRODUCING THE BEST OF TIMES

Perhaps now more than ever the quotation from Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* describes the position of public education: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Actually, given the criticisms of public education, some of those directly involved in K through 12 education might argue that the only relevant part is "it was the worst of times." This book, however, is about *possibility*, specifically the possibility that K–12 education is on the brink of the best of times if we so choose. My premise is that if we follow the guidance offered from 35 years of research, we can enter an era of unprecedented effectiveness for the public practice of education—one in which the vast majority of schools can be highly effective in promoting student learning. As subsequent chapters detail, any school in the United States can operate at advanced levels of effectiveness—if it is willing to implement what is known about effective schooling. Before examining this possibility, let us consider the

criticisms of U.S. education—the argument for the worst of times.

The Case for the Worst of Times

The history of public education, particularly during the 20th century, is rife with criticisms (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Indeed, the century began with a massive effort to improve K–12 schooling, which was spearheaded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. One significant aspect of that reform effort was the establishment of the "Carnegie unit" as the uniform standard for defining academic achievement.

Criticisms of public education and their accompanying reform efforts flourished for the first five decades of the century. However, it is the criticisms and reform efforts of the second half of the century that most profoundly affect us today. The first of these was spawned by the launching of

Sputnik in 1957. Shocked by this event, the U.S. public began to question the rigor and viability of our schools. Indeed, influential figures such as Admiral Hyman Rickover (1959) forwarded the position that public education was weakening the intellectual capacity of our students. Rickover's book, *Education and Freedom*, made direct links between the security of the nation and the quality of education.

In the 1960s there was no hiatus from the harsh criticisms of public education. In fact, the study that arguably produced the most concrete evidence of the failures or inadequacies of public education was conducted in that decade. It was in the context of President Johnson's "war on poverty" that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a cornerstone of Johnson's initiative, specified that the Commissioner of Education should conduct a nationwide survey of the availability of educational opportunity. The effort mounted was impressive even by today's standards. More than 640,000 students in grades 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 took achievement and aptitude tests and were categorized into six ethnic and cultural groups. Sixty thousand teachers in 4,000 schools completed questionnaires about their background and training. The resulting report, *Equality in Educational Opportunity*, was published in July 1966. Although the work of a team of researchers (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfield, & York, 1966), it has become known as the "Coleman report" in deference to its senior author, James Coleman. To say the least, the findings did not paint a flattering picture of public education:

Taking all of these results together, one implication stands above all: that schools bring lit-

tle to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront life at the end of school. (p. 325)

The report had a profound impact on public perceptions of schooling in the United States (Madaus, Airasian, & Kellaghan, 1980; Madaus, Kellaghan, Rakow, & King, 1979). Specifically, it dealt a veritable deathblow to the belief that schools could overcome students' backgrounds. Perhaps the most publicized finding from the report was that schools account for only about 10 percent of the variance in student achievement—the other 90 percent is accounted for by student background characteristics.

The findings in the Coleman report were corroborated when Christopher Jencks and his colleagues published *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America*, which was based on a reanalysis of Coleman's data (Jencks et al., 1972). Among the findings articulated in the Jencks study were the following:

- Schools do little to lessen the gap between rich students and poor students.
- Schools do little to lessen the gap between more and less able students.
- Student achievement is primarily a function of one factor—the background of the student.
- Little evidence exists that education reform can improve a school's influence on student achievement.

The conclusions stated and implied in the Coleman and Jencks studies painted a sobering picture of U.S. education. If schools have little chance of overcoming the influence of students' background characteristics, why put any energy into school reform?

Although the nation viewed public education poorly in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s were even darker times. As Peter Dow (1991) explains in his book *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era*:

In 1983 educators and the general public were treated to the largest outpouring of criticism of the nation's schools in history, eclipsing even the complaints of the early 1950s. Nearly fifty reports totaling more than six thousand pages voiced a new wave of national concern about the troubled state of American education. They spoke of the fragmented state of the school curriculum, the failure to define any coherent, accepted body of learning, the excessive emphasis on teaching isolated facts, and the lack of attention to higher order skills and concepts. They called for more individualism of instruction, the development of a closer relationship between teachers and students, and methods that encourage the active participation of the student in the learning process. (p. 243)

Again, a single report laid the foundation for the outpouring of criticism. Without a doubt, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was considered by some as proof that K–12 education had indeed devolved to a state of irreversible disrepair. The report noted that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a

nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). To punctuate the importance of the message about public education, the report claimed that “we have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral disarmament” (p. 5).

The effects of the report were profound, due in no small part to the fact that it was perceived as the sanctioned opinion of the White House. As David Berliner and Bruce Biddle note in their book *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Frauds, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995):

... in 1983, amid much fanfare, the White House released an incendiary document highly critical of American education. Entitled *A Nation at Risk*, this work was prepared by a prestigious committee under the direction of then Secretary of Education Terrell Bell and was endorsed in a speech by President Ronald Reagan. (p. 3)

The effects of *A Nation at Risk* persisted through the 1990s. Indeed, some authors (Bennett, 1992; Finn, 1991) cite the report as one of the primary sources of evidence for public education's decline.

Although *A Nation at Risk* was sufficient to cast a negative shadow on education throughout the 1990s, a newer study, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), was interpreted as evidence of the ineffectiveness of U.S. education. It involved a large-scale, cross-national comparison of the education systems in 41 countries. TIMSS researchers examined mathematics and science curricula, instructional practices, and school and social factors. In general, U.S. 4th grade students performed moderately well

when compared to students of similar ages in other countries; 8th grade students less so; and 12th grade students performed quite poorly. Both technical reports of TIMSS (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998) and commentaries on TIMSS (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) interpret the results as evidence of a dire need for public education reform. Perhaps at the extreme, Chester Finn (1998), in a provocative article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Why America Has the World's Dimmest Bright Kids," described the findings in the following way:

Today the U.S. Department of Education officially releases the damning data, which come from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, a set of tests administered to half a million youngsters in 41 countries in 1995. But the results have trickled out. We learned that our fourth-graders do pretty well compared with the rest of the world, and our eighth-graders' performance is middling to poor. Today we learn that our 12th-graders occupy the international cellar. And that's not even counting Asian lands like Singapore, Korea and Japan that trounced our kids in younger grades. They chose not to participate in this study. (p. A22)

Given the criticisms of public education that have flourished over the last half of the last century, it is clear that those who believe that it is the worst of times for public education have plenty of evidence for their position. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an argument for the position that it can be the best of times for public education.

The Case for the Best of Times

My case for the position that public education is at the dawn of the best of times is not necessarily based on refuting the reports mentioned. Such arguments have been made for *A Nation at Risk* and, to some degree, TIMSS. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these arguments are found in David Berliner and Bruce Biddle's (1995) *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Frauds, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* and Gerald Bracey's (1997) *Setting the Record Straight: Responses to Misconceptions about Public Education in the United States*. These works take a rather aggressive stance that past research has been either misleading or misinterpreted to paint an unwarranted negative perspective of U.S. education. Although I do not share this view entirely, both works present compelling arguments and provide perspectives with which all educators should be familiar.

My basic position is quite simple: Schools can have a tremendous impact on student achievement if they follow the direction provided by the research. As evidence for this position, I will not use examples of specific schools mainly because other writers have already done so (see Darling-Hammond, 1997a; Reeves, 2002; Schmoker, 1999, 2001). Indeed, perhaps the most compelling evidence for this conclusion is the impressive list of schools that have "beat the odds" compiled by Education Trust (Barth et al., 1999). These high-poverty schools are referred to as "beat the odds" schools because they sport impressive academic achievement from students whose background characteristics would