
50 MYTHS and LIES

That Threaten America's Public Schools

The Real Crisis in Education

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Preface

In 1996, one of us (DCB) published a book with Bruce Biddle entitled *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*. Whether Berliner and Biddle were first to use the phrase “manufactured crisis” is unclear, but what is less debatable is that the phrase has entered popular parlance as a woeful commentary on our over-politicized times. The 1996 text focused on the false narrative being constructed by certain political interests of that day. By the 1990s, public education was feeling the full impact of the Reagan commissioned *A Nation at Risk* (1983). That narrative spoke of a rising tide of mediocrity and held that America's public schools were failing to teach our children; that student achievement in America was inferior to that in other countries; that Japan was about to bury our economy. At the time, Japan was beginning to dominate the automobile market, but that had to do with short-sighted industry executives who failed to take seriously America's desire for fuel efficient cars. Reagan had received *A Nation at Risk* from his blue-ribbon commission at a press conference in the White House rose garden, and he thanked the commission for their strong stand in favor of vouchers and abstinence education—neither of which is mentioned in the report. But that is a story for another book.

In 1996, we only vaguely sensed the beginnings of an organized movement to destroy public education. What appeared to be an uncoordinated attack by many on the public schools has been revealed, 18 years later, to be an all-out attack on public schools that is both well coordinated and very well funded. We hope the public will heed our current message, namely, that something nasty, unlovely, and undemocratic, this way comes.

A war is raging for the hearts and minds of Americans. At stake is the nearly 200-year-old institution of the nation's public school system—the institution that, more than any other, is responsible for the evolution and preservation of the oldest, most successful constitutional democracy in the world. Opposed in this war are two formidable combatants. On one side are the forces of corporate America seeking to gain a share of the billions of dollars expended annually in support of K–12 education. Enlisted in their cause are the American Legislative

Exchange Council, hundreds of conservative politicians, and a network of Right-wing think tanks. On the opposing side stand thousands of academic scholars, scholars-in-training in our universities, and practicing teachers. We stand unapologetically with the latter groups.

We, the authors of this text, span three generations. The Associates are young enough to be the grandchildren of the first two authors. In total, hundreds of years of experience with the nation's public schools, as researchers, teachers, trainers of teachers, parents of students, and students ourselves, are brought to bear here. One of us—Berliner—is an Emeritus Regents' professor at Arizona State University. Another—Glass—is currently a research professor at the School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder. The Associates were recruited from among the best and brightest PhD students at both institutions. The opinions expressed here are the result of close collaboration among the 21 individuals who share authorship of this book. Although there are thousands of scholars and scholars-in-training in America's graduate schools, these Associates are distinguished by their experience and their ability to put down in writing convincing reasons for their opinions.

We limited ourselves to 50 myths this time because this book is already thicker than the publisher likes books to be. But the next time, if we can, we will do quite a few more. Education will be helped if we can dispel at least some of the nonsense now being broadcast about public schools and the American education system. We expect to update this book with new arguments and new data in a few years. To help us, please contribute to the next edition. Send us your pet myths, hoaxes, and lies about education and we will investigate them. They could find their way into the next edition of this book.

Myths, Hoaxes, and Outright Lies

Myths are beliefs in things that may or may not be true but that fill the void left by ignorance. We focus here on the pernicious myths, that is, the myths that are untrue and which, if believed, may have unhappy consequences for the believer or others.

They arise in at least two ways: personal experience and observation, which are incapable of unraveling the complex influences that typify causal relationships in an area as broad and encompassing as education. Does a good self-concept cause increased achievement or does increased achievement cause a better self-concept, or do they influence each other, and which is the stronger direction? It is no wonder that weakly justified beliefs based on anecdotes and hearsay—let’s call them myths—come to fill the emptiness left by decades of investigation.

One of the hallmarks of myths is that they are greatly influenced by the believer’s self-interest. Consider the father of a 5-year-old boy who feels that his own athletic career in high school left something to be desired. This father believes ardently that holding his son back a year so that he begins kindergarten at age 6, or having his son spend 2 years in kindergarten, will be of enormous academic benefit to the child. But in his heart—and even unbeknownst to himself perhaps—he wants his son to be bigger and more mature when he takes to the athletic fields in grade 10.

Hoaxes are of a different stripe. A belief that the believer knows to be dubious still might be pushed because it stands to greatly benefit the believer. Perpetrators of hoaxes evidence a willful blindness to contradictory evidence and choose to remain ignorant of more reliable standards for evaluating empirical claims. A hoax has more than one belief wrapped up in it, and in fact some of the beliefs might even be true. Rather than a myth, which can be summarized in a sentence or two, a hoax tends to be a complete false narrative often supported with theories, stories, and case histories. Examples of hoaxes in education would include things like neurolinguistic programming, the Doman-Delacato Theory of Patterning, or the Orton-Gillingham Approach to reading.

The perpetrators of a hoax typically do not know that in large part the hoax is false, misleading, or even detrimental to others. They are

the true believers, and they usually stand to gain in many ways by convincing others to believe.

Believers in myths are merely deluding themselves. But liars are different. And fortunately there are not many of them around who hold credible positions in our education system. But they do exist. The liars don't even believe in what they are saying, but they say it to advance their own self-interest. Individuals who claim vigorously that dressing up all the students in school uniforms will cause them to drop all bad behaviors and soar academically may truly believe it to be true, particularly if they own a uniform company. But that doesn't mean they are liars. Take the example of Michelle Rhee. While she was acting as chancellor of the Washington, DC, schools, the rising test scores of the schools under her management frequently were cited as evidence for the effectiveness of her tough-minded administration. Schools with low test scores could expect changes in principals and teachers. During her no-nonsense, business-oriented tenure, Rhee closed 2 dozen schools and fired 600 teachers and 90 principals for underperformance. When a chorus of whistle-blowers could no longer be ignored, Rhee appointed a commission to look into irregularities in the administration of the achievement tests on which she relied and which determined the fate of numerous teachers and administrators. Years later, after Rhee herself had been replaced, she was asked why she did not heed the findings of the commission that in fact cheating on the tests was widespread. Rhee maintained that she never read the commission's report or if she did she only skimmed it and couldn't recall what was in it. It seems highly unlikely that Rhee ignored or forgot about a report that was so central to her entire management philosophy.

Evidence and claims like this seem to suggest that rather than a myth or a hoax, in this instance we are dealing with a liar.

Tony Bennett served as the very controversial superintendent of schools for the state of Indiana. Bennett was narrowly elected Indiana state superintendent in 2008. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute named Bennett the nation's "reformist reformer" in 2011. The hallmark of Bennett's reform strategies was a school-grading system, based largely on achievement test scores, that aimed to discover and hold accountable "failing schools." "Accountable" in Bennett's system meant potential takeovers by the state. Bennett was defeated for re-election in an upset in his bid for a second term. In 2012, the state of Florida hired Bennett as its state commissioner of education. On August 1, 2013, Bennett resigned his position as commissioner of education for the state of Florida after journalists acquired emails showing that while in his position in Indiana he directed his staff to manipulate Indiana's A-F school-grading system so that the grade of a charter school run by

a major Republican donor would be raised from a C to an A. Bennett's behavior has been so universally condemned that even ultra-conservative columnists like Michelle Malkin, writing in the *National Review*, opined:

[Bennett's] disgraceful grade-fixing scandal is the perfect symbol of all that's wrong with the federal education schemes peddled by Bennett and his mentor, former GOP governor Jeb Bush: phony academic standards, crony contracts, and big-government and big-business collusion masquerading as "reform." . . . As a conservative parent of children educated at public charter schools, I am especially appalled by these pocket-lining GOP elites who are giving grassroots education reformers a bad name and cashing in on their betrayal of limited-government principles.

If people know what they are saying is false and do so to further or protect their self-interest—be it money, a job, reputation, or a beloved ideology—then some are quick to call such persons liars.

Did Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City lie when, campaigning for an unprecedented third term as mayor, he ran on his education record? He had been told the data he was using were suspect because the huge gains in achievement that he was citing were highly unusual. He ignored the warnings and soon after the election the New York City data were found to be highly misleading. The tests had been made too easy so that large gains in achievement could appear to be the result of his takeover of the city schools. The *New York Times* believes that both the mayor and his school chancellor, Joel Klein, knew the scores were not believable as the mayoral race heated up. What was a lie and what was delusion? What was a lie and what were really blinders put on to protect self-interest? We will never know. We do know the scores were phony and used to help the mayor keep control of the city and its schools.

Why we wrote this book and how we wrote it.

Why we have written this book should be obvious. The education of America's children is one of its most important priorities. That message has been lost on many Americans. We cannot count the number of even our close acquaintances who recite warped opinions about our nation's public schools: They are inferior to private schools; they are among the worst in the world in math and science; teachers should be fired if their students don't score at the national average, and on and on. Many citizens' conception of K–12 public education in the United States is more myth than reality. It is essential that the truth replace the fiction.