
From Checker's Desk

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Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Facing facts

"Facts are stubborn things," John Adams famously wrote, "and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." Nowhere is that truer than in education, where passions and wishes often take the place of hard information.

In recent years, an unexpectedly rich source of factual information about U.S. education has turned out to be the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Paris-based "club" of the world's more prosperous lands. When I attended OECD education meetings back in the 1980s, they were sleepy, formalistic affairs that only an education minister (or ed school professor) could love. But of late the organization has evolved into a valuable font of comparative data on education in what we once called the "industrial world." Its annual *Education at a Glance* is especially helpful in placing U.S. education facts in international perspective, though

some of its "indicators" are hard to interpret as a result of OECD's need to massage the data in arcane ways to make them comparable from country to country. (The post-secondary numbers are especially gnarly.)

You may want to get the 2003 edition for yourself, but it now runs a whopping 450 pages so allow me to note some facts contained therein that seem especially illuminating for American education reformers.

- The U.S. high school graduation rate—72 percent of the age cohort, using OECD calculations—is now well below average. Not only do we lag behind countries that you might expect to do well (Denmark at 96 percent, Japan at 93 percent) but we're also behind Poland (92 percent) and Italy (79 percent). The U.S. position improves when later graduates and GED recipients are factored in, but many analysts have come to doubt both their intellectual equivalence and their career- and income-boosting power.

- Though American fourth graders have reading skills in the upper end of the OECD distribution, our fifteen-year-olds are just average on this scale—and in both cohorts the “standard error” of the U.S. score is greater than for any other land, meaning we have greater disparities in the test-taking sample.
- When it comes to the performance of fifteen-year-olds in math and science (on the PISA math and science “literacy scales”), the U.S. score is again average in both subjects and again has the largest standard error.
- Our outcomes may be average, but our inputs are way above average. From pre-school through university, American education institutions spent an average of \$10,240 per student in 2000, the most of any country and about twice the OECD mean (\$5,736). To be sure, this is skewed by the high spending of our colleges, but it is also a fact that U.S. pre-school, primary, and secondary school per-pupil expenditures are second in the OECD world (after Norway, Denmark, and Switzerland, respectively).
- Relative to GDP, our overall per-pupil expenditures are tied for first place (with Austria), though several countries outstrip us on this measure when preschool, primary, and secondary school are separated out from higher ed. More interesting, while the U.S. leads in overall per-pupil expenditures, it lags in public investment in private schools. According to the report “in a number of OECD countries, governments pay most of the costs of primary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education but leave the management of educational institutions to the private sector to provide a wider range of learning opportunities without creating barriers to the participation of students from low-income families.”
- U.S. private expenditures on education are second highest at about 32 percent of total institutional expenditures, trailing only Korea (40 percent) and almost triple the OECD average. But that’s mainly due to higher education. And when you flip it around, you find that U.S. public expenditures in support of private K-12 education are among the world’s lowest: just 0.3 percent of total public education outlays, vastly below such countries as Australia, France, Germany, Spain, and Britain.
- America channels less of its GDP into government than do most OECD countries—not surprising, considering the heavy tax burdens of most European nations—but within our total public expenditure the share going to education (15.5 percent) surpasses the OECD mean (13 percent) and is bested only by Korea, Mexico, and Norway.
- Once upon a time, Americans didn’t necessarily go to better schools but they got more schooling. That’s no longer true. The

average number of years of full-time schooling expected for today's young American is 15.5, compared with an OECD average of 15.7. Adding part-time schooling brings our average to 17.1, versus an OECD mean of 16.9, but we're way outstripped by Australia (20.6), all of Scandinavia, Germany, New Zealand, even Spain.

- Not surprisingly, our college-going rate no longer leads the world, nor do our persistence rates within college. (Even when full- and part-time tertiary education are combined, our expected average of 3.5 years is outdone by Finland and Korea.) And we've developed a wider-than-average female-male discrepancy in college matriculation and completion rates.
- Though the U.S. is surpassed by just a few countries (Hungary, Iceland, Italy) in the number of school employees per 1000 K-12 students—we're at 116.2 vs. the OECD average of 99.5—we have relatively fewer teachers (and other academic personnel) within that workforce (62.1 per 1000 students vs. an OECD mean of 71.4). That's because we have more administrators and "maintenance and operations" personnel.
- U.S. teachers get better-than-average pay at every level—beginners, after fifteen years, and at the top of the salary scale—but compared with the nation's wealth (measured as GDP per capita) they earn less than their peers in a

number of countries. The average U.S. teacher salary after fifteen years of experience equals 1.19 GDP per capita, compared to OECD averages of 1.31 to 1.43. American teachers also work more student "contact" hours each year. Our high-school teachers, however, are no better paid than primary teachers—strikingly different from the pattern in most other lands.

What to make of such stubborn facts? America looks strikingly AVERAGE on most measures of education performance and efficiency, including some where we once beat "the competition." Where we now do best is on gauges of education spending. Where we fare worst is on measures of educational attainment, both quantitative and qualitative. If average returns to large investments are good enough for the world's only superpower, we can quit trying to reform our education system. To those who see the present situation as the path to national decline, however, these data should serve as an alarm bell.

—October 2, 2003

Are unions accountable, too?

"If men were angels," Madison wrote in *The Federalist*-Number 51, "no government would be necessary."

Thus, too, with schools and other education institutions. If children were angels, nobody would need to check on whether they did their homework or test them to see whether they learned

the week's spelling words. If educators were angels, they would spontaneously leave no child behind and we wouldn't need elaborate mechanisms to hold them and their schools "accountable" for performance.

"Accountability" means the arrangements by which others can determine whether we're doing what angels would do unbidden—and the means by which those others can influence us to become more angel-like. Its two vital ingredients are not angelic wings, however, but, transparency and intervention (or its equivalent: incentives, sanctions, and rewards whose influence is similar to intervention).

Transparency and intervention (and its avoidance) occur throughout our lives. Cars have speedometers and police have radar—and the ability to write tickets—to keep us accountable to speed limits. The physician has a scale. A device beeps if you take an item from the store that you didn't pay for. The monthly bank statement asks to be reconciled with one's checkbook. Dinner guests smile or frown after taking a bite of the meal you've cooked. The remote lets you "punish" a bad television show by opting for another. (If every program were produced by angels, who would need options?) The auditor checks the company treasurer's books and reports his findings to shareholders and the public. And on and on.

In education, we've grown accustomed to accountability at the individual and institutional levels. Has Mathilda passed the fourth grade proficiency test or must she attend summer school? Is the Lincoln School making

"adequate yearly progress" or must the district intervene? Do enough children want to attend the Einstein Charter School to enable it to meet its budget? Is Montana making headway on its NAEP math results or should voters replace the governor?

But what of organizations that seek to influence education? To whom is Fair Test accountable? The American Educational Research Association? The Harvard Educational Review? The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation? The American Association of School Administrators? The teachers' unions? Are they transparent? Does anyone have authority to intervene to make them more angelic? Such questions rarely get asked, yet some of these outfits, particularly the unions, are immensely powerful.

This grew vivid indeed in recent days as Barbara A. Bullock, former head of the Washington Teachers Union, was charged with (as the Washington Post put it) "plundering more than \$2.5 million from union coffers so she and two fellow union leaders could finance lavish lifestyles complete with fur coats, catered meals, and luxury cars." Bullock has since pleaded guilty and agreed to serve up to ten years in prison and pay a \$500,000 fine for her shopping spree.

Besides law enforcers, to whom is a union's leader accountable? To the members, one assumes, who pay its dues and elect its officers. But what happens when someone messes up badly—and seeks to conceal the evidence? How transparent are teacher unions? Who has the authority to

intervene? How effective are the internal controls? Does membership accountability work?

The eight-page “charging papers” in the Bullock case describe what the Post termed “a long unchecked conspiracy” in which she and two henchmen sought “to enrich themselves and others by stealing millions of dollars from [the union] and its individual members.”

A similar case is under investigation in Miami, Florida, where the longtime head of that teachers’ union siphoned large sums out of its coffers and into his own.

How does a membership organization hold its officers and staff to account in the event they turn out not to be angels? Supposedly in the way that voters and taxpayers hold government accountable: democratic politics, the capacity to elect leaders to run the place, to observe their performance, and then to retain or replace them as needed. (Consider what just happened in California.) Government by consent of the governed is supposed to work in membership organizations, too. (This is different from publicly traded corporations, which are accountable to their shareholders, and nonprofits such as think tanks, which are accountable to their trustees and, sometimes, their funders.)

Nearly half a century ago, famed sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman wrote *Union Democracy*, based on a case study of the International Typographical Union. They concluded that lively internal politics—the existence of factions, rivals for office, and the

equivalent of political parties—had kept democracy vibrant in the ITU. But they didn’t find it in most unions and attributed its absence to the potent forces of bureaucracy and incumbency:

[A]n incumbent administrator [has] great power and advantage over the rank and file. . . . This advantage takes such forms as control over financial resources and internal communications. . . . The normal position of the trade-union member in modern urban society makes it likely that few individuals will ordinarily be actively interested in the affairs of the union. . . . The absence of membership participation facilitates the existence of one-party oligarchy. . . . [U]nion leaders possess great power to do things which would never be approved if a democratic choice were available.

In other words, non-angelic union leaders can get away with misdeeds due to the absence of viable choices for their members. And that’s exactly what happened in the nation’s capital. Barbara Bullock “ruled by fear,” says the Post, “and proved so effective at stifling dissent that during her last two years in office, membership meetings rarely drew the 100 people needed for a quorum. . . . When [a longtime union activist] would ask a question about union finances, most of Bullock’s supporters would leave the meeting. Then someone would call for a quorum and, seeing none, Bullock would declare the meeting over. Bullock ran the union as a political patronage system. . . .”

One might say she ran it precisely the way the unions say schools would be run if it weren’t for teacher unions!

The absence of choice is bad for democracy. It causes institutions to go wrong. It saps their accountability. It invites petty (and not so petty) despotism and disregard for performance. How is the plight of members of the Washington Teachers Union different from that of children in failing schools to which they have no alternative? Surely the uncle-knows-best-so-pipe-down-and-trust-us mindset that leads unions to block education choice for families must also habituate their members to expect no alternatives among union leaders, either.

When internal controls fail, outside oversight is called for. That's the theory of NCLB. That's what happened to Ms. Bullock and her confreres when the FBI swept in. And that's what is proposed for large unions by Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, who has proposed major changes in form LM-2, which unions file annually with the Labor Department to say how they've spent their money. Today, it's a nebulous document with big categories and little detail. Ms. Chao would have unions explain each outlay of \$5,000 or more. That's like disaggregating the NCLB test scores so that everyone can see how the kids in a school are doing. But guess who's opposed? The Washington Teachers' Union's parent AFT and its grandparent, the AFL-CIO. The latter's chief, John Sweeney, insists that the revised LM-2 is "craftily designed to weaken unions." But how, then, and to whom, would unions be accountable? Or aren't they?

—October 9, 2003

Why not religious charter schools?

The tragedy of urban education is the dearth of effective schools for poor kids. That acute shortage belies the right nominally conferred by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, namely that parents can move their children from failing public schools to better ones. Many communities have nowhere near enough capacity in well-functioning schools to provide an education haven for those thousands of youngsters. (In cities like New York and Chicago, we're talking hundreds of thousands.)

Federal law also says such kids may go to charter schools, but there aren't enough of them, either, at least not the highly effective kind.

How to get more? Take advantage of the charter option and become more creative and open-minded. Many cities with weak public schools have strong churches and faith-based organizations. And one thing that many parents crave for their children is a school that not only teaches the Three Rs, not only keeps Tony and Tanika safe, not only gives them a teacher who knows their names and cares if they're learning—but that also supplies them with values, morals, a code of behavior, and a sturdy faith in God.

Yet the No Child Left Behind legislation doesn't include the right to go to private schools, where such things are routine. Paul G. Vallas, the chief executive officer of the Philadelphia school system, is seeking a way around that restriction, hoping to send disadvan-

tagged youngsters from troubled public schools into archdiocesan classrooms that have space and are willing. But, like vouchers, this is an uphill political battle. And even with voucher aid, many children who would benefit from the curricular and moral offerings of private schools cannot afford to matriculate. But faith-based organizations seeking to operate zero-tuition charter schools have, until now, been compelled to exclude all forms of religiosity—thus quashing one of their major incentives to serve children and barring one of the things they do best.

Solution: Let religious schools become part of the charter system so long as they're willing to abide by the results-based accountability arrangements that other charter schools must accept, namely state academic standards and tests. And allow churches to found new charter schools without shedding their sectarianism.

In most countries, this wouldn't qualify as an innovation, for they assume that government has an obligation to support church-affiliated as well as secular schools. In the United States, however, a daft reading of the First Amendment's "establishment" clause was long held to bar public aid to religious schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2002 *Zelman* decision changed this. It said there's no federal prohibition on state dollars going to such schools so long as this results from free and open choices by parents. It thus legalized voucher programs in several states and others struggling to be born, including the

new one in Colorado and the District of Columbia plan now pending in Congress.

But vouchers aren't the only education innovation that *Zelman* makes possible. Charter schools, too, get public dollars only when parents freely choose them. No child is compelled to attend a charter school. If parents don't select it, it has neither pupils nor revenue.

Yes, charter schools must be "sponsored" by state-approved agencies, and some will see excessive "entanglement." But private schools also need state licenses and, under the pending District of Columbia voucher program, must accept other constraints devised by Congress. Doing so will not, however, erase their religious character.

True, other differences remain between private and charter schools. Wholly private schools can restrict attendance to members of their faith and expel youngsters who refuse to behave. They can operate separate programs for girls and boys and need not comply with Uncle Sam's myriad rules for educating children with disabilities.

Because they value such freedoms, many private schools will shun greater involvement with government. So be it. But some would welcome the opportunity to serve more children. In most places, per-pupil funding for charters, meager as it is, exceeds current tuition levels—and is more than vouchers would bring. In any case, the entanglements that accompany charter school status are not much worse—as is becoming clear in Florida, where new

rules are raining down upon private schools that take part in that state's several voucher programs. It's a calculation each school can make for itself.

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A few private schools have converted to charter status, but they did so by severing all religious ties. A few others have created sister schools that operate as charters. I visited an interesting pair of schools in Houston, one private (and religious), the other charter (and secular), sharing facilities but functioning as separate organizations.

Creating a secular sister school is one viable model for a parochial school or church that wants to serve more kids. It may be the only option in states with "Blaine amendments" that prohibit public dollars from flowing into religious institutions no matter what the Supreme Court says about the U.S. Constitution. But in the dozen or so states without such impediments, why not try religious charter schools?

Watchdog groups will rush back to court at the first sign of a new breach in their cherished "wall of separation," and in time this education innovation would also wind up in the Supreme Court. But that's no reason to forgo it. Cash-strapped states may fear the budgetary impact of private school pupils suddenly qualifying for public subsidies. Yet that cost can also be contained. Since many state charter laws bar private school conversions, most religious charters would be new schools, serving kids not already in the private school orbit—and adding to the supply of seats in decent schools for youngsters who need them.

Overriding all objections is America's woeful lack of such seats. Every possible asset should be brought to bear on the creation of more. Religious charter schools deserve consideration.

—*December 11, 2003* ■