

## What's Good About Public Schools

Criticism of public schools has deteriorated from helpful prodding into such broad and harsh condemnation that many citizens are left wondering if *anything* is being done right in American schools. It's time for all of us to slow down and take a clearheaded look at the facts about our educational system.

The United States today is the number-one power in the world. No other country comes close in terms of economic strength and military prowess. Who made the U.S. into such a powerful and prosperous country? The answer is the American people. To state the obvious, a nation consists of its people – and nearly 90 percent of Americans attended public schools. In other words, nine out of 10 Americans who created this wonderful country were educated in public schools. Common sense tells us that our schools must be doing *something* right. A brief review of key education statistics shows what has gone right with U.S. public schools.

### **Academic achievement**

American students know more than students in earlier years, and their test scores are showing it. Between 1990 and 2000 (or 1998, depending on the subject and grade level), the math and reading scores of students in grades 4 and 8 went up across the board and for all major racial and ethnic groups, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the best source of national data on U.S. student achievement over time. Gains in math were more impressive than in reading, but students made progress in both areas.

Since 2000, NAEP scores have continued to rise for students in grades 4 and 8. The 2003 scores for these grades show impressive gains in math and encouraging gains in reading compared with the 2000 or 1998 levels. In math, for example, 77 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders reached at least the basic level in 2003, meaning that they have partially mastered the skills needed to do solid academic work. African American and Hispanic students have registered some of the most sizeable improvements in both subjects in recent year. In recent year, NAEP scores in grades 4 and 8 have also risen in writing. (The 2003 scores should not be compared with the 1990 scores because NAEP has changed its procedures in recent years to allow special accommodations, such as extra testing time or different methods of administering the test, for students with disabilities and limited English-language skills. In the past, these students were often excluded from testing.)

At grade 12, however, average NAEP scores in key subjects have gone down in recent years. Some researchers have questioned the accuracy of the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade NAEP scores because the test doesn't really "count" for these students, who are about to graduate and in many cases have already "checked out" after the first semester of their senior year when their grade point averages have been submitted to the prospective colleges and their class ranks have been finalized for college admission purposes. Even so, the nation clearly had more work to do to improve education at the high-school level.

### **College admissions tests**

High school students are doing better on the SAT college admissions tests and are holding steady on the ACT, the other major college entrance exam. In 2003, the average SAT math score reached 519 – an 18-point gain over 1990 and the highest level in three decades. The average SAT verbal score of 507 in 2003 represented a seven-point gain over 1990. These gains have occurred even as more students -- including more students with lower academic achievement -- are taking the test. ACT scores have been fairly stable in recent years, again with more students taking the test that ordinarily would have the effect of driving the scores down.

### **Harder courses**

One reason why scores on college admissions tests are rising is that high school students are taking more demanding course work than they have in the past. Greater percentages of students are taking higher-level math and science courses, such as calculus, physics, and chemistry. More students are also taking honors-level English courses and advanced foreign language courses. The ACT has also reported that test-takers who are enrolled in demanding core curriculum courses score higher than test-takers who are not enrolled in a minimum core curriculum or higher.

As further evidence that more students are taking a rigorous high school curriculum, the number of high school students taking Advanced Placement tests – tests that determine whether high school students will receive college credit for completing challenging, advanced-level courses – has increased from an average of 36 students per school in 1989 to 55 students per school in 1999.

### **College admissions**

More high school students are going on to postsecondary education, a trend that holds for all major racial and ethnic groups. Although the rate for Hispanic students shows an increase in a period of 12 years, that rate has fluctuated over the years, partially influenced by immigration.

### **School safety**

Several highly publicized school shootings may have led parents to feel that schools are not safe, yet incidences of school crime have actually decreased over the past decade, according to the annual school safety reports from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. Between 1992 and 2001, the rate of serious non-fatal violent crimes and assault against students has dropped by more than 40 percent, from 48 violent crimes per 1,000 students in 1992 to 29 such crimes in 2001. Homicides on school premises, fortunately, are very rare and are becoming rare – 14 in 2001 compared to 34 in 1992.

### **Public support**

Although new reports tend to highlight the problems in public schools, especially inner-city schools, citizens are still generally satisfied with their public schools. For example, according to a Phi Delta Kappa Poll, a large majority of parents said they felt the nation should focus on improving the existing system of public education, rather than on finding an alternative system.

### **Private schools**

Although private schools are an important component of elementary and secondary schooling in the United States, their reach is very limited. Americans overwhelmingly send their children to public schools, and have done so consistently for decades. Sometimes, people become confused about this because they hear that private schools are growing in their communities. To give some perspective, between 1987 and 1998, private school enrollments grew by 7 percent, while public school enrollments increased by almost 16 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. So, although private school enrollments grew, public school enrollment rose more than twice as fast.

In conclusion, American public schools are generally doing better in most key respects than they were in the early 1990's, even though they often face difficult social and economic circumstances. We should be proud of our accomplishments.

This does not mean, of course, that all public schools are doing fine. The schools in some communities, often the most economically ravaged communities, are not doing a good job of educating young people. Much work remains to be done to eradicate inequities in American schools and eliminate achievement gaps between students from different economic, racial, and ethnic groups. We must also do more to raise student achievement to higher levels of proficiency, so that all students will leave school ready to become good citizens and productive workers. Public schools across the country are working on these tasks right now.

Public schools are a valuable asset to our country. Constructive and civil criticism can help identify ways to improve public schools, but broad-based attacks that ignore the good being done each day by educators and others are irresponsible. Children learn by example. If we are reasonable and objective in our discussions about national issues, then children will be too.

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