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Five Things Most People Believe About American Education that are Wrong

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By David Drew

Will Rogers said, “People’s ignorance isn’t the problem; it’s what they know for sure that isn’t true.” One reason that reform of our educational system often fails is that every politician and voter holds strong opinions about American schools. After all, they all went through the school system. Some of those opinions are simply wrong. Here are some examples:

1. American students perform dismally on international assessments of education achievement. This shows us that American schools have deteriorated in the past 30 or 40 years. This is because of the destructive influence of the 1960s: drugs, rock and roll, and the replacement of rigorous standards by a “feel good” grading system.

Fact: Yes, our students, particularly our high school students, do score at or close to the bottom of the list, depending on the subject being tested, well below such countries as Slovenia. The fact that we score poorly now does not mean that our educational system has deteriorated. In fact, it was always bad. Our high school students have always scored at or near the bottom. (Ironically, our college and university system is the best in the world.) In my book *Aptitude Revisited: Rethinking Math and Science Education for America’s Next Century*, I reviewed and presented international educational achievement data from the 90s, 80s, 70s, 60s, and even the 50s. In a 1965 mathematics assessment, for example, the U.S. placed last among all nations tested. The other nations achieved mean scores from 36.4 to 21.6. The U.S. score was 13.8.

2. We look bad on international comparisons because we strive to educate everyone, including many students who just aren’t very smart. Other countries only educate a small elite.

Fact: Universal education doesn’t explain why our students perform below those from other countries. When data about only the top 1 percent from each country are examined, the ranking of U.S. students increases a little, but essentially they only move from “the worst” to “dismal.”

Furthermore, the concept of aptitude has been used as an excuse for the failure to deliver effective instruction. Perhaps the most important research finding to emerge from international comparisons of educational achievement is this: when American students do poorly, teachers and parents attribute this failure to low aptitude. When Japanese students do poorly, teachers and parents conclude that the student has not worked hard enough.

American educators base many decisions, such as those about tracking, on their perceptions of how intelligent a student is—perceptions that are often wrong. Furthermore, aptitude has been overrated as a factor in achievement. Some of the most successful people in every walk of life were not considered very bright when they were in school.

3. Students of color lack the aptitude to master mathematics and science.

Fact: Students of color can easily master and excel in mathematics and science. Uri Treisman at the University of California, Berkeley created workshops for African American students who were doing poorly in calculus, many of them failing. Instead of remedial education, he designed workshops to encourage students to excel and required them to do additional, difficult homework problems. They succeeded. Treisman reported that at any given SAT performance level, the African American workshop participants earned better grades than did the white stu-

dents and the Asian students.

4. English is the language of the U.S. Despite the growth in the Latino population, we have never supported bilingual education in the past and we shouldn’t do it now.

Fact: In the early days of this country many schools, particularly in Pennsylvania, carried out instruction entirely in German. One expert estimated that 1 million pupils attended public bilingual schools during the early 1800s, when the U.S. population was much smaller. In the third Congress, two Congressional committees debated whether to print all federal laws in German as well as in English.

5. As one politician put it, professors and researchers are “pointy-headed intellectuals who can’t even park their bicycles straight.” They have no idea how to solve the problems in our schools.

Fact: Educational researchers have indeed figured out most of the solutions to the problems. But professors and politicians each use jargon and cannot communicate with each other.

Researchers write statements such as this: “In the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the beta for the treatment effect approached significance. If we had access to a larger sample, or had measures of additional covariates, the beta might have been statistically significant.” Translation: “The program didn’t work. Maybe we did the evaluation study wrong.”

Politicians say things like this: “The problems in our schools really aren’t that complicated. All we need to do is return to the basics.” Translation: “I’ve got a good job, and I went to a small town public school during the Eisenhower administration. If we would just return to the 1950s, everything would be fine.”

If we are to engage in a serious national dialogue about education reform, we should base that dialogue on facts, not on what “everybody knows.”

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