

50 MYTHS & LIES THAT THREATEN AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The REAL CRISIS in EDUCATION

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Teachers College Press, New York, NY 10027

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Myth #8: Want to find the best high schools in America? Ask *Newsweek* or *U.S. News*.

“Although a typical BASIS school starts off with hundreds of students in elementary grades, the number who survive the gauntlet of tests and requirements for promotion, and make it to middle school and high school, is hugely reduced. Here are the enrollments by grade at the BASIS Tucson charter school for 2011-2012.”

Grade 5 - 121

Grade 6 - 125

Grade 7 - 125

Grade 8 - 102

Grade 9 - 58

Grade 10 - 57

Grade 11 - 34

Grade 12 - 21

MYTH #11: Merit pay is a good way to increase the performance of teachers. Teachers should be evaluated on the basis of the performance of the students. Rewarding and punishing schools for the performance of the students will improve our nation's schools.

“Furthermore, we live in a 21st-century world and expect our students to have 21st-century skills, but we keep assessing our students and their teachers with methods best suited for a 19th-century model of education, one based on the simple transmission of knowledge. Texts, and what teachers say, are what students memorize, and memory of the knowledge and skills transmitted in these ways is tested. Modern companies, including modern factories, have begun to realize the potential of collaboration and have incorporated this method of work in to their daily routines. “

MYTH #14: Subject matter knowledge is the most important asset a teacher can possess.

“Old notions of teachers as the “sage on the stage” thankfully are being replaced by a vision of our best teachers acting more like a “guide on the side.” That is, we are witnessing an end to the dominance of a simple transmission model of teaching. In this traditional model the teachers have the content knowledge and transfer it from their heads to their students' heads, and then the quality of the transfer is measured by the students' ability to give back on tests a close approximation of the content

obtained from teachers and textbooks. But educators are asked by many in the business community to develop in our students the skills deemed important for the 21st century: independent thinking, debate, working in groups, participating in projects of depth and duration, developing creative solutions to common problems, and so forth. So the best teacher of the coming age will need to know their content, of course, as they always needed to. But if that is their only asset, they will fail as teachers and fail the country.”

MYTH #17: Class size does not matter; reducing class sizes will not result in more learning.

“The apparent paradox that exists in the arguments from some quarters that class size doesn’t matter, seems not to matter. The paradox is this: Fiscal conservatives contend, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that students learn as well in large classes as in small. And yet, the very constituency whose taxes they are trying to reduce, namely, the affluent families, consistently opt for public and private schools that have small classes, often paying handsomely for them. Furthermore, they report that class size is often the reason they make a choice to enroll their child in private, charter, or other schools that are not their neighborhood public school (Walford, 2011). So for which students are large classes okay? Only the children of the poor?”

MYTH #18: Retaining children in grade—“flunking” them—helps struggling students catch up and promotes better classroom instruction for all.

“If we want to end “social promotion,” that is, promotion of students who do not meet the standards for achievement at a particular grade, we might more wisely invest in tutoring or summer school. In communities that have high rates of disadvantaged children, we might want to invest in early childhood programs of high quality, programs known to have long-range benefits to individuals and communities alike.”

“Even though retention ultimately may work out well for some students, it doesn’t work out well for most students. We simply do not know how to identify in advance which students, and under what conditions, this policy might benefit. But we do know that retention in grade usually affects students and their families adversely. To uphold this policy in the face of research that has documented its numerous failures, along with this policy’s clear bias against poor and minority students, seems meanspirited. Retention policies in the United States appear to be just another barrier that the least advantaged among us must clear to obtain the benefits our society frequently offers to its more advantaged citizens.”

MYTH #23: Homework boosts achievement.

In fact, there is more credible scholarship on the negative effects of homework than on its merits. A popular innovation comes from the idea that schoolwork should be project-based and not task-based. Students design and execute a large project that incorporates core skills like computation and literacy and that requires critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. If they choose to work after hours on the project, so be it.

MYTH #24: Group projects waste children’s time and punish the most talented.

John Dewey promoted the group project method as part of his belief that the best preparation for social life was to actually engage in social life. Dewey was also less interested in what a child learned, the official school outcomes, than that the child learned how to learn what it is he or she wanted to learn, particularly in partnership with others. So, in preparation for a changing society, and for living in a democratic society, progressive educators promoted group projects. These reasons for recommending group projects have not changed.

The group project also allows for peer teaching and learning, promoting far more participation than is true of large-group classroom learning. Learning how to do collective problem solving toward shared goals, as required by group projects, is different from life in ordinary classrooms, where individualism is nurtured and a hierarchical authority structure is ever present.

MYTH #31: Bullying is inevitable; it’s just kids. It’s a rite of passage. The national effort to eliminate bullying is effectively addressing the problem in our schools.

It is aggressive behavior that is intentional, hurtful, threatening, persistent, and always wrong. More important, it is detrimental to the academic, physical, social, and emotional development of all parties involved—bullies, targets, and the bystanders who witness it (Olweus, 2001; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996).

School climate studies have indicated consistently that the perception of a safe school climate is directly related to the availability of school-based resources and support, including student organizations, inclusive curricula, supportive school staff, and comprehensive anti-bullying policies (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmere, 2012).

MYTH #32: American K-12 education is being dumbed down.

Briefly, let’s consider two commonly invoked bellwethers of academic decline: college entrance exams and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). A drop in average college entrance exam scores—scores on the SAT and ACT, in particular—has been cited as evidence of general academic decline. On closer investigation, however, it turns out that declines in average scores, based on the entire pool of all students taking these tests, were not due to any particular group of students performing worse than those like them who had taken the test before. Rather, the decline in the average score was due to the fact that many people who previously would not have attempted to enter college were, in the late 1960s and beyond, finding their way to postsecondary education, in part because of the programs of financial support initiated under the Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson. The most recent drop in SAT scores was likely for similar reasons, plus a job market that favors college graduates even if the jobs

themselves do not require those degrees. Many students who previously did not take these tests, now were doing so.

The NAEP scores actually show an increase in all subjects for all students across the decades of the alleged decline that is supposed to now be of crisis proportions!

MYTH #50: The schools are wasting their time trying to teach problem solving, creativity, and general thinking skills; they would be better off teaching the facts students need to succeed in school and later in life.

They probably were never emphasized much, but given the current education system with its ever-increasingly test-based accountability systems, classrooms are becoming more controlled. Thus environments in which problem solving and creativity and problem solving, assessing such higher order thinking remains a difficult enterprise, particularly with our current forms of standardized tests.

It should come as no surprise that when teachers focus on multiple ways of knowing and celebrate the wealth of knowledge their students bring to the classroom, collaborative environments spring up. In these environments, students and teachers participate in meaningful conversation and dialogue that remain a necessary component in teaching creativity and problem solving. It is through conversation, not didactic instruction, that students are able to articulate what they know and how they know it, while incorporating the knowledge of their peers and their teacher to further their own understanding.

Schools too often assume that learning must be incentivized, and issue rewards and punishments to this end. Rather than being motivated by curiosity or the need to address a real problem, students are motivated to perform, either by avoiding sanctions or garnering positive reinforcement from their teachers. School then becomes not a place where creativity can flourish, but a place where creativity is extinguished.

When the focus of teaching is on transmitting facts and on students' performance on standardized tests, conversation and dialogue too often are replaced with rote learning, recitation, and regurgitation. Teachers sacrifice lessons that address issues of genuine concern to the children in their classrooms in favor of preparation for high-stakes tests—tests that can determine the child's future in public education, the future of their school, and, more recently, the teacher's tenure in the profession.