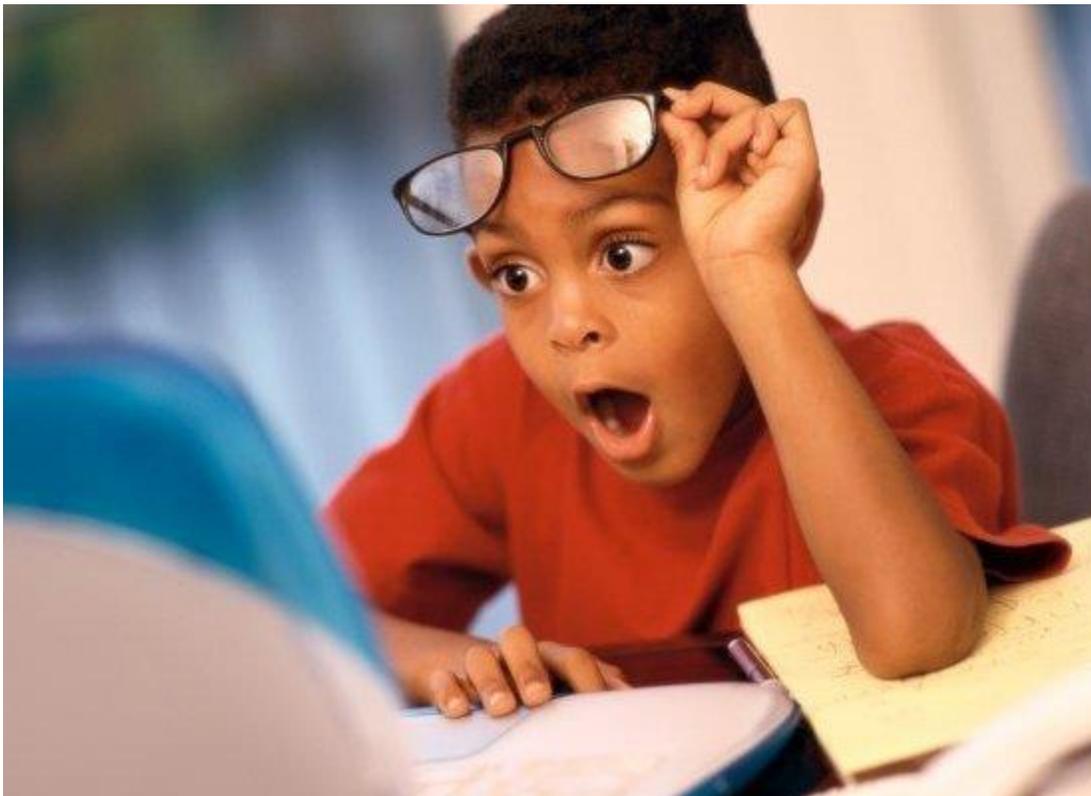


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U.S. Public Schools Are Not Failing. They're Among The Best In The World

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Everyone knows U.S. public schools are failing.

Just like everyone knows you should never wake sleepwalkers, bulls hate red and Napoleon was short.

Wrong on all counts. Waking sleepwalkers will cause them no harm – in fact, they're more likely to harm themselves while sleepwalking. Bulls are colorblind; they're attracted to movement. And Napoleon was 5'7", which was above average height for Frenchman during his lifetime.

So why do we believe that American public schools are doing such a terrible job?

Because far-right policymakers have convinced us all that it's true.

It's not.

Let me repeat that in no uncertain terms – America's public schools are **NOT** failing. They are among the best in the world. Really!

Here's why: the United States educates everyone. Most other countries do not.

We have made a commitment to every single child regardless of what their parents can afford to pay, regardless of their access to transportation, regardless of whether they can afford uniforms, lunch or even if they have a home. Heck! We even provide education to children who are here illegally.

That can't be said of many countries with which we're often compared – especially countries comparable to the U.S. in size or diversity. So from the get-go, we have an advantage over most of the world.

We define education differently. Though our laws are woefully backward, in practice we look at it as a right, not a privilege. And for a full 13 years (counting kindergarten) it's a right for every child, not just some.

But that's not all! We also provide some of the highest quality education you can get in the world! We teach more, help more, achieve more and yet we are criticized more than any system in any country in the world.

TEST SCORES

Critics argue that our scores on international tests don't justify such a claim. But they're wrong before you even look at the numbers. They're comparing apples to pears. You simply can't compare the United States to countries that leave hundreds of thousands of rural and poor children without any education whatsoever. The Bates Motel may have the softest pillows in town, but it's immediately disqualified because of the high chance of being murdered in the shower.

No school system of this size anywhere in the world exceeds the United States in providing free access to education for everyone. And that, alone, makes us one of the best.

It doesn't mean our system is problem free. There are plenty of ways we could improve. We're still incredibly segregated by race and class. Our funding formulas are often regressive and inadequate. Schools serving mostly poor students don't have nearly the resources of those serving rich students. But at least at the very outset what we're trying to do is better than what most of the world takes on. You can't achieve equity if it isn't even on the menu.

However, for some people, this will not be enough. They'll say that despite our high ideals, the quality of what we actually provide our students is low. After all, those international test scores are so low.

First point: it depends on the scores you're looking at. American elementary and middle school students have improved on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study every four years since the tests began in 1995. They are above the international average in all categories and within a few percentage points of the global leaders (something rarely mentioned on the nightly news).

Even on the PISA test administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to 15-year-olds in about 60 countries, US children are far from the bottom of the scale. We're somewhere in the middle. We've always been in the middle for all the decades since they've been making these comparisons. Our schools have not gotten worse. They have stayed the same.

IDEALS AND POVERTY

To some this just demonstrates that our schools have always been mediocre. But again you're overlooking the consequences of our ideals.

The broader the spectrum of children who take a test, the lower the average score will be. In other words, if only your top students take the test, your average score will be very high. If only your top and middle students take the test, your average score will still be quite high. But if **ALL** of your students take the test, your average score will be lower.

Now add in poverty. Living in poverty reduces your access to health care, books, early childhood education and many other factors that increase learning throughout your life. Children from poor

families are already more than a year behind those of rich parents on the first day of kindergarten. If you only test the wealthiest students, the average test score will probably be quite high. The average score will drop dramatically if you test all of your students.

That's why many of these countries where the poorest children do not have access to education have higher test scores than the United States. You're not comparing equals. The United States has the highest child poverty rate in the Western World. And we don't hide them away. We include them on our tests. That has a major impact on our scores. But talking heads on TV almost always ignore it. They pretend it doesn't exist. It's the only way they can use these test scores to "prove" to a gullible audience that America's schools are failing.

But if you fairly compare education systems and factor in the equal access we provide for all children to an education, our system comes out way on top. We have one of the best systems in the world.

But wait! There's more!

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Not only does the United States serve all children regardless of academic achievement or poverty. We also serve far more students with disabilities.

Why are there so many special education children in the USA? Because we have a higher standard of living.

A standard pregnancy lasts about 280 days or 40 weeks. However, some mothers give birth to children after only 28 weeks. Two decades ago, these babies would not have survived. Today, they often do. Five years later that child will enter kindergarten and our school system will be responsible for teaching that student to read, write and learn math. In other countries, premature babies have a much lower chance of survival. They don't survive to become the special education population. So things as diverse as the live-birth rate actually affect average test scores.

Another counterintuitive factor is the suicide rate. In many countries where pressure to perform at the highest levels on standardized tests is extreme, many children are actually driven to suicide. This is especially true in numerous Asian countries with a record of high scores on these international tests. So a higher suicide rate actually increases test scores.

Would you say this makes other countries superior to the United States? Heck no! In fact, just the opposite. I certainly wouldn't wish more underperforming U.S. students were ending their lives so we could do better on international tests. Nor would I wish that more premature babies died to improve our international standing.

We have developed a special education system to help children at the edges that many other countries just can't touch. In some countries these students are simply excluded. In others they are institutionalized. In some countries it's up to parents to find ways to pay for special services. The United States is one of the only countries where these children are not only included and offered full and free access, but the schools go above and beyond to teach these children well beyond their 12th academic year.

In every public school in the United States these students are included. In math, reading, science and social studies, they are there benefiting from instruction with the rest of the class. And this, in turn, benefits even our non-special education students who gain lessons in empathy and experience the full range of human abilities.

Of course, most of our special education students are also included in our test scores. Yes, other countries that ignore these children and exclude them from testing get higher scores. But so what? Do you mean to tell me this makes them better? No, it makes them worse.

In many ways, we are the gold standard, not them. They should be emulating us, not the other way around. They should be jealous of the way we prize each other's humanity. We shouldn't be salivating at test scores achieved through shunning certain students in favor of others.

CURRICULUM AND STRATIFICATION

But it's not just who we teach, it's also what we teach.

Compared to many other countries, U.S. school curriculum is often much wider and varied. Countries that focus only on testing often leave out sciences, arts, literature and humanities.

Unfortunately, the push from policymakers even in the U.S. has been to narrow curriculum to imitate some of the worst practices of our competitors. But in many districts we still strive to create well-rounded graduates and not just good test-takers.

The bottom line: the curriculum at most American schools is more inclusive than that found internationally. We even include societal issues like alcohol and drug abuse prevention, stress reduction and relaxation, and physical fitness programs.

In addition we don't stratify our children based on academic ability to nearly the same degree as many international schools. We don't weed out our worst students through middle and high school until only our most capable are left in 12th grade. Nor is college only open to our best and brightest. We make a much greater effort than many other countries to keep this option open to as many students as possible regardless of whether they can afford it or not. The number of Americans with at least some college education has soared over the past 70 years, from 10 percent in 1940 to 56 percent today, even as the population has tripled and the nation has grown vastly more diverse. Meanwhile, Graduation rates are at an all-time high of 83.2 percent, and for the first time minority students are catching up with their white counterparts.

It's not easy. But it's something we're committed to as a nation. And that's not true around the world.

SIZE MATTERS

Finally, there's the issue of size. The United States is a big country – the third most populous in the world. We have 324,450,000 people and growing. That's about 50 million students in public schools.

It's much easier to educate fewer children. Even excellent education systems would struggle with our sheer numbers. Small systems often outshine bigger ones. For instance, I might be able to make dinner for my immediate family, but I'd find it much more challenging to prepare a meal for a banquet hall of hundreds. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether smaller nations could handle educating a population as big and diverse as ours without collapsing.

By any fair measure, America's public education system is simply stunning. But the media perpetuates the myth that we're failing.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE MEDIA

After decades of hearing these falsehoods, the American public is strikingly divided. On a 2011 Gallup poll, parents were asked their opinion of their local school and the public was asked its opinion of schools in general. The results are enlightening. Parents who gave their local school an A grade were at the highest percentage ever (37%) whereas only 1% of respondents rated the nations schools that way. Why the difference? Respondents said it was mostly because people knew about their local schools through direct experience. They only learned about the state of education nationally through the news media.

Why is education reporting so biased? Part of it is monetary. Huge corporations make hundreds of millions of dollars off of the failing schools narrative. They sell new standardized tests, new test prep materials, new Common Core books, trainings for teachers, materials, etc. If they can't demonstrate that our schools are failing, their market shrinks. And who do you think owns the shrinking media conglomerates? That's right, many of these same corporations.

But even when journalists want to be fair, it's difficult for them to get the inside story of how our public schools work. They are rarely permitted inside our schools to see the day-to-day classroom experience. Legal issues about which students may be photographed, filmed or interviewed, the difficulty of getting parental permissions and the possibility of embarrassment to principals and administrators often keeps the doors closed. In many districts, teachers aren't even allowed to speak on the record to the media or doing so can make them a political target. So reporters are often in the position of being unable to directly experience the very thing they're reporting on. Imagine if sportswriters never got to see athletes play or political reporters never attended a campaign rally. Of course there would be a disconnect!

So we're left with a public education system that should be the envy of the world being portrayed as a loser.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As ever, far-right politicians on both sides of the aisle, whether they be Democratic Neoliberals or Republican Tea Partiers, are using falsehoods about our public schools to sell an alternative. They say our public schools are beyond saving and that we need to privatize. They call it school choice but it's really just an attempt to destroy the system that has so much going for it.

We should strengthen public education not undermine it. We should roll up our sleeves and fix the real problems we have, not invent fake ones.

People act as if “alternative facts” were invented by the Trump administration. Our policymakers have been using them for decades in a libelous and dishonest campaign against our public schools.

They are some of the best in the world – if only people knew it.

This article originally appeared on my Website, Gadfly on the Wall Blog.