



Uninformed Attacks on Public Education Have Increased

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For the last five decades many politicians have disparaged public education, and public school teachers, for stagnant or slow achievement test score growth. These recently increasing attacks are, in many cases, misguided due to lack of knowledge of readily available research, data, and reports. The truth is that educators are performing herculean feats daily in classrooms throughout our country. Achievement test scores have improved over time, graduation rates are at an all-time high, and more students than ever are ready for college. These accomplishments—particularly in light of our nation’s history of excluding and underserving many populations (e.g., students of color, low-income students, English Language Learners) and the rising numbers of these demographics—deserve to be recognized and appreciated, not discredited and dismissed.

The motivation for disparaging statements about our public schools may be to promote political ideologies and/or to divert attention from failed policies affecting families living in poverty. Apparently, those who believe in the superiority of market-driven public schools through for-profit charter schools are attempting to convince the public that the same public schools that made America the intellectual and financial powerhouse that it is in the world today are now failing. This article confronts common negative political speech about education and sheds light on the facts from readily available sources.

The Success of Public Schools

The truth, as supported by data and research, is that public schools are successful and continue to accomplish excellent outcomes even with changing demographics of students. Today’s students have changed over-time to be more impoverished and increasingly minority and English Language Learners. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics website displays the longitudinal study of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). This assessment of student learning has been administered to representative samples of 9, 13, and 17 year olds in schools in each of our 50 States for four decades. The results over the last 30 years show that even though more students who took the NAEP test are living in poverty (eligible for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch) and more are from minority populations than in 1973, NAEP reading and math scores have improved or remained the same from 1973 to 2008 [see Appendix Tables 1-5] (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

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In addition, the 4-year high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, more students are challenging themselves with Advanced Placement (AP) courses that accrue college credit, and more students than ever are ready for college by completing rigorous college preparatory courses. The College Boards, who administer AP exams, report that significantly more students are taking these exams nationwide with roughly the same percent passing as in the past (a score of 3 or better). They report that in 1955-56, 1,229 students took 2,199 exams and in 2015-16, 2,611,172 students took 4,704,980 exams with 2,729,043 tests passed, giving credit for this number of college courses (College Boards, 2017). The California Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson, reported that the California class of 2016 graduation rate of 83.2% was an increase “for the seventh year in a row and is now at a record high, with the biggest increases... taking place among English Learners and African American and Latino students” (California Department of Education, 2017, para. 1).

It should also be noted that American public schools, over the past century, have produced adults who created the most patents, technology, the strongest economy, and the leading country in the free world.

Disparaging Comments about Teachers and Public Schools

Even with the results shown above, many politicians continue to disparage public schools. The uptick in attacks on public schools may have been inspired by rhetoric in the recent Presidential campaign. One of the loudest voices was that of Presidential candidate Donald Trump, whose opinion of public school teachers has been less than favorable for many years (Kranish & Miller, 2016).

Even before he began campaigning for the Presidency, in a 1997 legal deposition, Mr. Trump declared that educators lack intelligence, saying that, “I assumed that the people essentially teaching the kids were not stupid. They turned out to be very stupid” (Boser, 2016, para. 4). In Mr. Trump’s 2000 book, *The America We Deserve*, he wrote among other things that graduation diplomas “have been devalued into ‘certificates of attendance’ by a dumbed-down curriculum that asks little of teachers and less of students” (p. 67). In Mr. Trump’s 2015 book, *Crippled America*, he writes, “I am totally against these programs and the Department of Education. It’s a disaster. We cannot continue to fail our children—the very future of this nation” (pp. 50-51). On the presidential campaign trail, Mr. Trump rolled these criticisms into a call for “urgent change” for “our government-run education monopoly” (Sullivan & Brown, 2016).

Economic Policy Failures

Attacking public schools is a clever diversion to prevent the electorate from discussing poverty in America. In general, politicians are reluctant to acknowledge that their governmental policies have not adequately met the needs of families living in poverty while simultaneously creating more families living in poverty. In fact, the number and percentage of families living in poverty has continued to grow over the last two decades from 11% to 13.5% of Americans living in poverty (43.1 million in 2015) according to the U.S. Census Bureau, a division of the U.S. Department of Commerce. In fact, the greatest rise in people living in poverty in the United States is school aged youth under age 18. In 2015, 19.7% of this group, nearly one in every five children, lived in poverty – up from 16% on 2000. It has been known for fifty years that family poverty is one of the strongest predictors of low achievement test scores. It is clear from these statistics that governmental economic policies have failed families living in poverty and, therefore, stunted their children’s educational growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Education Policy Failures

Misinformation about education's success and failures has resulted in the creation of harmful education policy. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, renamed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), significantly increased standardized testing in Reading and Math (to annually) in order to rank schools while calling for 100% of students to be proficient by the 2014 school year (a logically unattainable goal). Lower ranked schools were required to offer afterschool tutoring by non-teachers and parents were offered a choice to attend a different school (that resulted in white flight and greater school segregation). In addition, these schools were subjected to "turn around" efforts such as firing the staff, closure, restructuring, or conversion to a charter school. At the time that this law was written, little or no high-quality research supported these "turn around" efforts to improve student learning; however, recent research has documented the impotence of these policies. Though NCLB had the positive effect of spotlighting achievement gaps, it systematically narrowed the curriculum to Reading and Math instruction only, to the detriment of all other subjects (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Spring, 1997; Ravitch, 2010).

Charter schools have been the subject of federal and state laws for many decades and have been touted as the panacea for improving student learning by instituting free-market competition. As a result, charter schools have blossomed and investing in them has become the latest investment hot ticket. Charters have become a multi-million dollar income generating business venture, even though numerous financial failures of for-profit charter schools have been documented in popular media over the past several years. Many stories have highlighted schemes concocted by charter operators who embezzled millions in public funds meant for the education of children. Charter schools in New York, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Detroit, Pinellas, Florida, Chicago, Memphis, and Mesa Arizona have been closed due to financial improprieties and/or poor student performance. For example, 143 charter schools in Texas have closed since the program began in 1998 and 122 have closed in Michigan. According to a National Center for Education Statistics report, 2,378 charter schools were closed in the United States between 2000 and 2014, displacing 253,454 students (Singer, 2016). By contrast, non-charter public schools are closed at a much lower rate primarily due to declining enrollment.

The most comprehensive study of charter schools, prepared by The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) in 2009, concluded that:

The group portrait shows wide variation in performance. The study reveals that a decent fraction of charter schools, 17 percent, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools (p. 1).

The follow-up study by the same research group in 2013 (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013) reported that charter schools had improved in reading performance and mathematics, where they attained scores comparable to non-charter public schools. The report also documented that charters had longer school years by eight days than non-charter public schools. However, they found results similar to the 2009 study in that "charter school quality is uneven across the states and across schools" (p. 3). Other studies of charter schools show higher dropout rates, consistent under-enrollment of

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students with special needs, and highly segregated student populations. These findings strongly suggest that charter schools have supported segregation and that they are not the academic achievement panacea that they were believed to be.

The Impact of Public School Disparagement

Concerted effort over many decades to disparage public schools has resulted in more negative attitudes. Annually, Phi Delta Kappa surveys the American public on their attitudes toward public schools, consistently finding that those with greater connections to public schools rate them higher—and the reverse is also true—those with fewer interactions rate them lower. The highest ratings of public schools come from parents of children attending those schools.

Langer Research Associates (2016), who analyze survey results, confirm these findings, reporting that parents of children in public schools are more likely to give schools higher marks (A or B grades) than the general public, with 67 percent giving their own child's school an A or B compared to just 24 percent for all adults. This suggests that public official's disparagement of public schools have created an image of failing schools that does not reflect the experiences of the majority of those who have regular contact with local public schools.

Why Does this Matter?

As more and more Americans wrongly believe that public schools are failing, the pressure to support them financially through taxes is lessened, which could lead to dismantling the successful public school system in America. The very foundation of our American way of life is based on the free education of our citizens. It has long been believed that in a democracy, an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people. Thomas Jefferson wrote the following to James Adams in 1787: "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them" (Family Guardian, 2017, Section 39.3, para. 1). He also wrote to Richard Price in 1789, "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government" (Section 39.2, para. 4). Free American public schools must be preserved.

In addition, the disparagement of public schools can lead to discouragement of students in their own potential. It also discourages young college graduates from pursuing education as a career, which has resulted in a teacher shortage. This may be the most important topic of our time. Abraham Lincoln said "Upon the subject of education...I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people may be engaged in" (Abraham Lincoln, 1832, p. 8). His words are more important today than ever before.

What is the Remedy?

Just as the purpose of this journal suggests, all people, but especially our leaders, should review educational research, reports, and data before making policy or speaking on the subject to the public. Discussions on these important educational issues should take place regularly. The education of our nation is too important to be left to uninformed politicians.

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About the Author

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APPENDIX: TABLES 1-5

Table 1 (reproduced from *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*)

Changes in NAEP reading average scores and score gaps for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students, by selected characteristics: various years							
Characteristics	Subgroups	Score changes from 1973			Score changes from 2008		
		Age 9	Age 13	Age 17	Age 9	Age 13	Age 17
All students	All students	↑ 13	↑ 8	↔	↔	↑ 3	↔
Race/ethnicity	White	↑ 15	↑ 9	↑ 4	↔	↔	↔
	Black	↑ 36	↑ 24	↑ 30	↔	↔	↔
	Hispanic	↑ 25	↑ 17	↑ 21	↔	↑ 7	↔
Gender	Male	↑ 17	↑ 9	↑ 4	↔	↔	↔
	Female	↑ 10	↑ 6	↔	↔	↑ 3	↔
Score gaps	White – Black	Narrowed	Narrowed	Narrowed	↔	↔	↔
	White – Hispanic	Narrowed	Narrowed	Narrowed	↔	Narrowed	↔
	Male – Female	Narrowed	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔

↑ Indicates score was higher in 2012
 ↔ Indicates no significant change in 2012.

Table 2 (reproduced from *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*)

Changes in NAEP mathematics average scores and score gaps for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students, by selected characteristics: various years							
Characteristics	Subgroups	Score changes from 1973			Score changes from 2008		
		Age 9	Age 13	Age 17	Age 9	Age 13	Age 17
All students	All students	↑ 25	↑ 19	↔	↔	↑ 4	↔
Race/ethnicity	White	↑ 27	↑ 19	↑ 4	↔	↔	↔
	Black	↑ 36	↑ 36	↑ 18	↔	↔	↔
	Hispanic	↑ 32	↑ 32	↑ 17	↔	↔	↔
Gender	Male	↑ 26	↑ 21	↔	↔	↔	↔
	Female	↑ 24	↑ 17	↑ 3	↔	↑ 5	↔
Score gaps	White – Black	Narrowed	Narrowed	Narrowed	↔	↔	↔
	White – Hispanic	↔	Narrowed	Narrowed	↔	↔	↔
	Male – Female	↔	↔	Narrowed	↔	↔	↔

↑ Indicates score was higher in 2012
 ↔ Indicates no significant change in 2012.

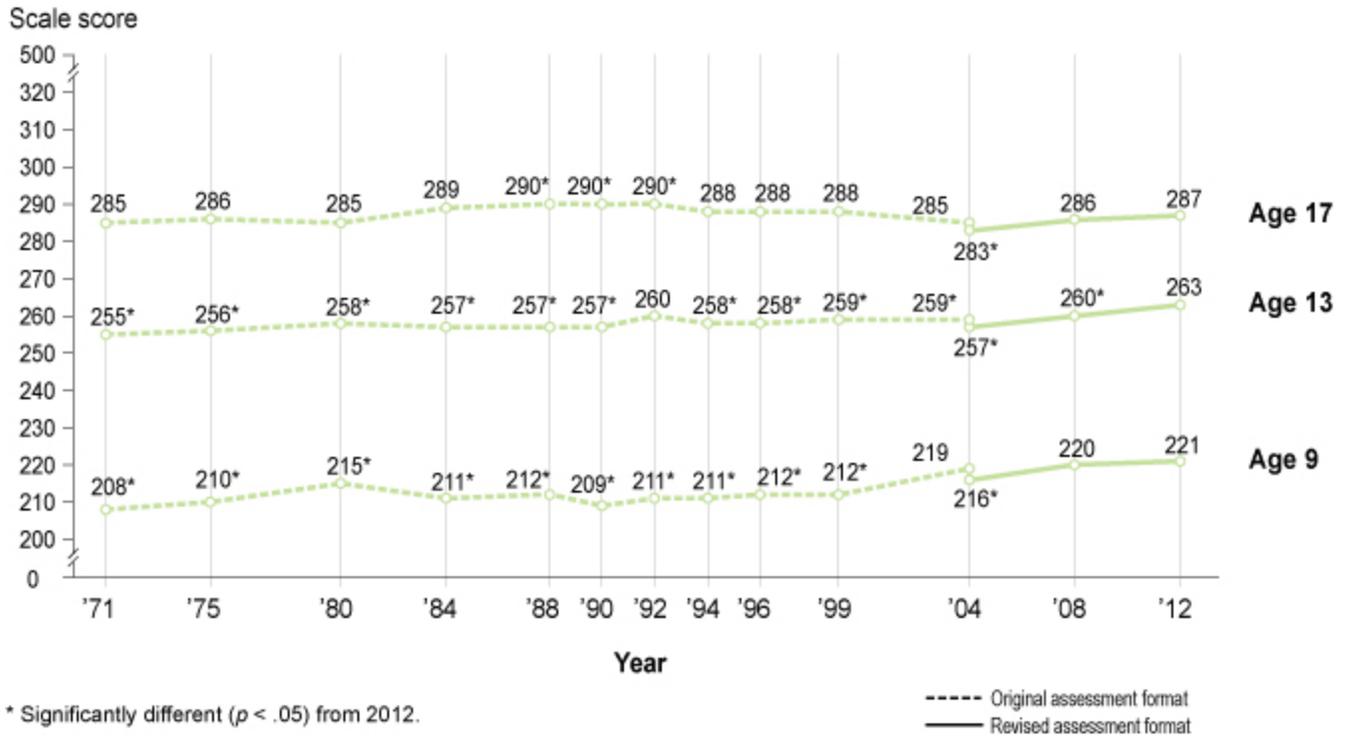
¹ Reading results for Hispanic students were first available in 1975. Therefore, the results shown in the 1971 section for Hispanic students are from the 1975 assessment.

² Score differences between male and female students in mathematics were not found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$) at age 9 in 1973, 2008, or 2012, and at age 13 in 1973 and 2012.

NOTE: Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

Table 3 (reproduced from *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*)

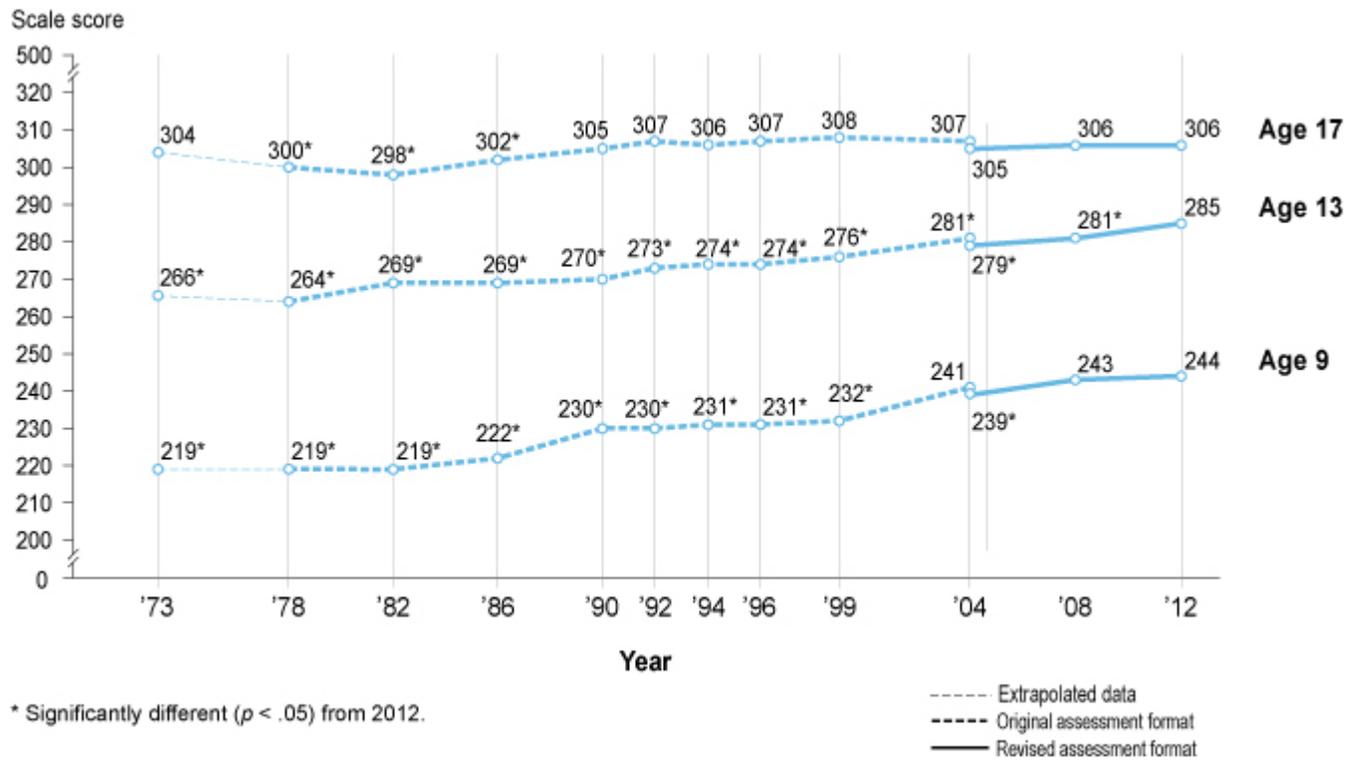
Trend in NAEP reading average scores for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students



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Table 4 (reproduced from *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*)

Trend in NAEP mathematics average scores for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students



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Table 5 (reproduced from *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012*)

Trend in percentage distribution of students assessed in eighth-grade NAEP mathematics, by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

Years	Eligible for National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	Not eligible for National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	Information not available
2015	49	44	7
2013	46*	48*	6*
2011	44*	50*	6*
2009	39*	54*	7
2007	37*	55*	7
2005	36*	56*	8
2003	33*	55*	11*

* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2015.

NOTE: Although the percentage results are shown as rounded numbers in the chart, unrounded numbers were used for the statistical test when the results for one assessment year were compared to the other.