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Nine Myths About Public Schools

None of this will likely strike you as particularly new, but it might be good to have a bunch of myths lined up and debunked all in one place.

1. The schools were to blame for letting the Russians get into space first. Granddaddy of all slanders and a great illustration of the absolute nuttiness with which people talk about education.

Sputnik, the first man-made satellite to orbit the earth, launched on October 4, 1957. On September 20, 1956, Werner von Braun's Army Ballistic Missile Agency launched a 4-stage Jupiter C rocket from Cape Canaveral. After the first 3 stages fired, the rocket was 832 miles in the air and traveling at 13,000 miles an hour. The 4th stage could have easily bumped something into orbit. The 4th stage was filled with sand. There were a number of reasons for this including the fact that the Eisenhower administration was determined to keep its weapons rocket program and its space exploration project separate and von Braun's rocket was clearly a weapon. Its primary intent was to incinerate Russian cities with nuclear warheads. Ike worried how the Russians might react. His Assistant Defense Secretary Donald Quarles actually said "the Russians did us a favor" because they established the precedent that deep space was free and international.

Most US engineers in the space program in 1957 would have graduated high school in the 1930s, but in the media, the schools of the 1950s took the hit for Sputnik. Ike was quite puzzled by this.

2. Schools alone can close the achievement gap. This is codified in the disaster known as No Child Left Behind. Most of the differences come from family and community variables and many out-of-school factors, especially summer loss. Some studies have found that poor children enter school behind their middle class peers, learn as much during the year and then lose it over the summer. They fall farther and farther behind and schools are blamed. Middle class and affluent kids do not show summer loss.

3. **Money doesn't matter.** Tell this to wealthy districts. Money clearly affects changes in achievement although levels of achievement are more influenced by the variables just mentioned. Most studies are short term and look only at test scores, a very foolish mistake. Economists David Card and Alan Krueger also found investments in school show a payoff in terms of long-term earnings of graduates.

4. **The United States is losing its competitive edge.** China and India ARE Rising. As economies collapsed all around it, China's economy grew a remarkable 7% last year. On just humanitarian grounds, we should not wish China and India to remain poor forever, but the more they grow the more money they have to buy stuff from us. As China and India prosper, we prosper. The World Economic Forum and the Institute for Management Development have consistently ranked the U. S. economy as the most competitive in the world. Education is only one part of multi-factor systems in rankings. WEF is especially keen on innovation. Our obsession with testing makes testing a great instrument for destroying creativity.

5. **The U. S. has a shortage of scientists, mathematicians and engineers.** This was a myth started oddly enough by the National Science Foundation in the 1980s in a study with assumptions so absurd the study was never published, but the myth lingers on. In fact, Hal Salzman of the Urban Institute and Lindsay Lowell of Georgetown University found that we have three newly minted scientists and engineers who are permanent residents or native citizens for every newly minted job. Within 2 years, 65% of them were no longer in scientific or engineering fields. That proportion might have fallen during the current debacle when people are more likely to hang on to a job even if they hate it. An article in the September 18 *Wall Street Journal* reported that before the economy collapsed, 30% of the graduates of MIT--MIT--headed directly into finance.

6. **Merit pay for teachers will improve performance.** Bebachuk & Fried Pay Without Performance. Adams, Heywood & Rothstein, Teachers, Performance Pay, and Accountability. Bonus pay is concentrated in finance, insurance, and real estate. In most of private sector hard to determine and often leads to corruption and gaming the system. Campbell's Law: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort the social processes it is intended to monitor."

7. **The fastest growing jobs are all high-tech and require postsecondary education.** "Postsecondary education" is a weasel word. A majority of the fastest growing jobs do, in fact, require some kind of postsecondary training. But, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they account for very few jobs. It's the Walmarts and Macdonald's of America that generate the jobs. According to the BLS, the job of retail sales accounts for more jobs than the top ten fastest growing jobs combined.

8. **Test scores are related to economic competitiveness.** We do well on international comparisons of reading, pretty good on one international comparison of math and science, and not so good on another math/science comparison. But these comparisons are based on the countries' average scores and average scores don't mean much. The Organization for Economic Cooperating and Development, the producer of the math science comparison in which we do worst has pointed out that in science the U. S. has 25% of all the highest scoring students in the entire world, at least the world as defined by the 60 countries that participate in the tests. Finland might have the highest scores, but that only gives them 2,000 warm bodies compared to the U. S. figure of 67,000. It's the high scorers who are most likely to become leaders and innovators. Only four nations have a higher proportion of researchers per 1000 fulltime employees, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand and Japan. Only Finland is much above the U. S.

Consider Japan, the economic juggernaut of the 1980's. It kids score well on tests and people made a causal link between scores and Japan's economy. But Japan's economy has been in the doldrums for almost a whole generation. Its kids still ace tests.

9. **Education itself produces jobs.** President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan have both linked any economic recovery to school improvement. This is nonsense. There are parts of India where thousands of educated people compete for a single relatively low-level white-collar job. Some of you might recall that in the 1970's many sociologists and commentators worried that America was becoming TOO educated, that they would be bored by the work available.

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