UNDERSTANDING FEARS ABOUT FAILING SCHOOLS

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"Education in our country, at the present time, is neither in character nor extent what our free political institutions demand to ensure their continuance." This may be my favorite quotation from a critic of American education. It taps into our contemporary concerns, not just with "failing schools," or with the reports that foreign students outperform their American counterparts on standardized tests, but with the threats that inadequate schooling poses for democracy itself. It would be possible to fill a book with similar quotations. We are bombarded by calls for educational reform, reports from blue-ribbon commissions deploring the shortcomings of American schools, and books worrying that today's students constitute the "dumbest generation." So–what's the source for my favorite quote? It's Frederick Adolphus Packard's book, The Daily Public School in the United States. And when was that volume published? 1866 (Packard 1969 [1866]: 13).

In other words, barely one generation after some states began mandating universal public education, critics were already worrying that American schools were slipping, and nothing much has changed in the intervening years. There has been a more-or-less constant litany of doom about the shortcomings of American schools for the past 150 years. Today's critics–like generations of their predecessors–harken back to a now lost Golden Age, a time when teachers demanded the best from their students, while their students strove to meet those expectations; in contrast, the critics warn, today's schools, teachers, and students fall short.

Taken together, these critiques tell a remarkable tale of social decay. They describe what must have been a prolonged epidemic of rising stupidity, of schools getting steadily worse, generation after generation. How remarkable–during the decades that America came to lead the world in scientific discoveries and technological innovations, its people must have been getting dumber and dumber. What's going on?

To answer that question, we need to begin by asking whether the critics are right: Are we actually getting dumber? In making their case,

the critics tend to rely on anecdotes–rosy recollections of their own school days, tales about cashiers (presumably products of failing high schools) who can't make change, and so on. But surely there must be data that speak to the issue. What do those data show?

I want to summarize four sets of data that seem to address whether, over the long haul, education has been getting worse. The first of these concerns educational attainment–how many students get how much schooling. The findings are pretty straightforward: levels of education have been increasing. One hundred years ago, less than 10 percent of young people graduated from high school; today, about 75 percent get high school diplomas, and another 15 percent receive GEDs or equivalent certification–that's 90 percent in all (Goldin 2006: Table Bc480-491; National Center for Education Statistics [hereafter NCES] 2010a: Table 109) . Completing high school went from being unusual to becoming nearly universal. Similarly, 100 years ago, about two percent of Americans graduated from college; today more than a quarter complete a bachelor's degree. Moreover, while higher proportions of whites continue to complete all levels of schooling, the gaps between whites and nonwhites have been shrinking.

But, the critics say, those increased levels of education are meaningless if schools have been watering down their standards. This brings us to our second measure–standardized test scores. Although commentators like to talk about test scores as though they show unambiguous decline, test score results generally show improvement. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP–what the Department of Education likes to call "our nation's report card") have been rising since the tests began in the 1970s, in both reading and math, for 4th, 8th, and 12th graders, and for all major ethnic groups. Morever, the scores of black and Hispanic students have been rising at a faster clip than those of whites (NCES 2010b). Critics might wish that the differences among ethnic groups had vanished, or that all of the students were getting higher scores, but the NAEP results hardly support claims that students are actually getting worse. Scores on other standardized tests–SAT, TIMSS, etc.–pose interpretive issues too involved to address here, but the bottom line is that, so long as you make appropriate comparisons–apples to apples, so to speak--none of them offers unambiguous evidence of educational decay.

The third set of data involves those polls designed to measure popular "literacy" of one sort or another–civic literacy, economic literacy, and

so on. Reporters love to write stories about the surprisingly low percentages of Americans who can give correct answers to questions about basic knowledge. For instance, a 1997 poll asked people what we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution, and only 66 percent answered "the Bill of Rights" (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (2009): National Constitution Center survey, 1997). That might seem appalling, surely every schoolchild learns this fact. But what's interesting is that pollsters have asked this question before; in 1954, only 31 percent knew the right answer (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991). Such comparisons across time–and they also can be found in polls of scientific literacy and geographic literacy--suggest that the population is getting more, not less knowledgeable.

Finally, I want to draw attention to a fourth trend–the so-called Flynn Effect. Believe it or not, IQs–as measured by intelligence tests–have been rising. For decades, the average IQ has been rising .3 points per year . That doesn't sound like much, but it adds up–a 3 point increase over ten years, a noticeable 15 points over half a century (Flynn 2009). The Flynn Effect has been documented in more than 30 countries–the United States and many European nations, but also in some developing nations. Today's youth aren't the dumbest generation–they're the smartest.

In sum, the data give a reasonably positive picture: educational attainment has grown a lot; standardized test scores have improved somewhat; the general public seems to be more knowledgeable than in the past; and IQ scores have been growing at a modest but steady pace. Obviously, things aren't perfect; it will always be true that students could learn more. However, the critics' warnings that teachers, students, and schools are worse than they used to be seem misplaced.

In that case, it seems reasonable to ask one more question: Why, if the data seem to show progress, do so many critics perceive decay in American education? There are several answers to this question, but I want to focus on three of these.

First, while we don't seem to be getting dumber, we are absolutely becoming more ignorant. Some analysts have described what they call the knowledge-ignorance paradox. This paradox derives from the tremendous increase in human knowledge: think of the millions of scientists, researchers, scholars, and so on whose jobs are to create new knowledge. Every day, the total stock of what is known grows, at an impossibly rapid rate. Now matter how hard an individual studies, at

the end of each day, he or she commands a smaller share of the world's knowledge than at the day's beginning. All of us get more ignorant, day after day. Thus, it is always possible to point to the vast amount students don't know, and complain about education's failure.

Second, note that what we consider relevant knowledge is perpetually evolving. Today's students lack the sliderule skills I learned in high school; just as my grandfathers knew how to harness horses–knowledge I never acquired. On the other hand, many of today's elementary-school students are comfortable programming cell phones that are far more complicated than the VCRs that bewildered adults a generation ago. Critics like to point to lost knowledge as evidence that today's students don't measure up to past standards, but they consistently forget to consider the new skills that have been acquired.

Third, it is important to acknowledge that our societal expectations for schooling continue to rise. It was once possible for a boy who didn't care for algebra to leave school, and get a job that would support a family. Those days are gone. More and more jobs demand higher levels of literacy and numeracy than in the past, and we depend upon schools to give young people the skills they're going to need. However, it is not clear that criticizing schools, teachers, and students for some imaginary decline is the best way to achieve those ends. Instead, it might be more useful to acknowledge a long record of educational progress, and draw upon it as evidence that education can continue to improve to meet tomorrow's challenges.

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