

Education Myths

Don Closson offers 5 myths about education commonly held by the American public, from a Christian perspective. These myths include neutrality, more money is the solution, teachers are underpaid and school choice harms public education.

The Myth of Neutrality

Most of us assume that those involved with our public schools have at least one thing in common: the belief that the kids come first. This assumption allows us to believe that a kind of neutrality exists among the various participating parties. Since they all have the best interests of our children in mind, we can trust their motives and their actions. It also leads some to believe that there is no place for politics in schools; again, thanks to the myth of neutrality.

The problem with this kind of thinking is that no such neutrality exists. Our schools are highly political and are a battle ground for the various groups hoping to cash in on the huge amount of money Americans spend on public schools every year. Politics is all about deciding how our tax monies will be distributed, who gets what resources, when, and how. In the 2003-04 school year, America spent over \$500 billion on public schools with about 60 percent of that amount going to actual classroom expenses. But even though we spend more on public education than any other industrialized nation, our schools continue to fail to adequately educate those who are most in need of a good education: our inner city students.

Despite being in an almost constant state of reform, the school districts in our largest cities perform poorly. In New York schools, only 18 percent of children receive a Regents Diploma after four years of high school. Those numbers fall to 10 percent for black and Hispanic students. Yet year after year, regardless of their performance teachers, principals,

and central office staff cash their paychecks. Teachers unions, textbook publishers, and even colleges and universities that earn millions training and retraining teachers, thrive on their connection to the annual education budgets of our nation's cities. As New York Post columnist Bob McManus once put it: "This is the New York City public school system, after all, where power comes first and kids come last—but where money matters most of all."[\[1\]](#)

The entrenched bureaucracy that has grown up around the education industry knows how to protect itself and its link to the billions of dollars being spent. The lobbying efforts of teachers unions, national organizations representing school board members and superintendents, as well as the textbook companies all fight for influence in Washington and state capitols.

It must be said that there are many teachers, principals, school board members and countless others involved with our schools who are diligently and conscientiously working to educate our nation's children. However, the way that our school systems are organized virtually guarantees that politics will reign supreme when important decisions are made on behalf of our most needy students.

In this article, we take a look at five myths about public education held by the American public.

The “If Only We Had More Money” Myth

Rarely do representatives of our nation's teachers unions, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers write about deficiencies in our public schools without blaming them on a lack of adequate funding. The “we need more money” mantra has been heard so often that it is ingrained in the minds of most Americans and goes unquestioned by most. But is this always the best explanation for the

failure of our schools to educate well? In fact, inadequate funding is only one of many possible reasons for poor performance.

The U.S. has been increasing per pupil spending consistently for the last fifty years. From 1945 to 2001, inflation adjusted spending has grown from \$1,214 per student to \$8,745. Measuring increases in performance over that period is more difficult. We do have good data from the early 1970s when the National Assessment of Educational Progress began. Unfortunately, scores for twelfth grade students have remained essentially flat in reading, math, and science over that time period, and graduation rates have changed little. Many studies have concluded that although we have increased our educational spending significantly there has been little or no significant improvement in our schools.

Various explanations have been given for why more money hasn't resulted in improved student performance. One of the most popular is that much of the increase in funding has gone to services for disabled students and special education programs. The special ed complaint is answered by the fact that we don't have a higher percentage of disabled students; rather, we are choosing to label students disabled who in the past would have been called slow or under-average learners. The percentage of students with severe disabilities has actually remained level between 1976 and 2001, and the number of students classified as mentally retarded has actually declined.[\[2\]](#) Regardless of what label we give these students, increased dollars spent should result in improved performance, but it hasn't.

Some argue that a smaller fraction of every budget dollar actually goes to classroom instruction, but whose fault is that? Others complain that students are harder to teach today due to the effects of poverty, greater healthcare needs, and the fact that they are more likely to speak a foreign language than in the past. However, childhood poverty rates have held fairly steady since the late 70s and has been declining since

1992.^{3} One of the best indicators of health care for children, the child mortality rate, has improved 66 percent in the last thirty years, so it is hard to argue that today's children have poorer health care. The only argument that holds up is that more students have a native language other than English. But this factor alone does not explain why the huge increases in spending have not resulted in better performance.

Teachers Are Badly Underpaid

Another myth is that students perform poorly because teachers are severely underpaid.

Every few years we are warned about a looming shortage of teachers or that teachers cannot afford to live in the cities in which they teach, resulting in either inferior teachers or large classes. For instance, during the internet boom of the 90s, it was feared that teachers could not afford to live in Silicon Valley due to the high cost of real estate. But a number of years later, the San Jose Mercury analyzed housing data from that period and discovered that there was no crisis. In fact, 95 percent of the teachers who taught there lived there, and about two thirds owned their own homes.^{4} In fact, teachers fared better than software engineers, network administrators, and accountants when it came to home ownership.^{5}

Others argue that the best and the brightest stay away from teaching because salary rates compare poorly to similar professions. But most researchers compare teachers' annual salary with the annual salary of other professions without taking into account the one hundred eighty day work year for the typical teacher. Adjusting the average teacher's annual salary of \$44,600 to a full-time equivalent brings it to \$65,440. This amount represents a respectable middle class salary by anyone's calculation.

Another way to look at the issue is on an hourly basis. In 2002, high school teachers made an average of \$31.01 per hour. This compares to \$30 per hour for chemists, \$29.76 per hour for mechanical engineers, \$28.07 per hour for biologists, and \$24.57 per hour for nurses.[\[6\]](#) Doctors, lawyers, dentists, and others do make more per hour than teachers, but their education is far more rigorous, and they often require long internships or residency obligations.

Even when one compares benefits other than income teachers fare well. One researcher discovered that half of all teachers pay nothing for single-person health care coverage, while the same is true for less than one-quarter of private-sector professionals and technical employees.[\[7\]](#) Another type of employment benefit that teachers enjoy is job security. It becomes remarkably difficult to fire a teacher who has been employed by a school district for three or more years. Tenure protection for public school teachers give them almost unparalleled job security compared to professionals in the private sector.

The reason that teaching does not attract the best and the brightest is more likely tied to the way that individual teachers salaries are determined than the average amount paid. A recent study found that the inability of teachers to make more money by performing better than their peers is the main cause for the declining academic abilities of those entering the field.[\[8\]](#) Talented people want to know that they can earn more if they work harder than others around them.

School Choice Harms Public Education

Another controversy that has generated myths of its own is the debate over educational choice or voucher programs. There are two popular misconceptions: first, that research has been inconclusive regarding the benefits of voucher programs, and second, that educational choice damages public education.

Whenever the topic of school vouchers comes up in major media outlets the consistent message is that research on their benefit to students is mixed at best. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine have all sounded the same warning. *Time* wrote, "Do vouchers help boost the test scores of children who use them? Researchers are trying to find out, but the evidence so far is inconclusive."[{9}](#) Why would publications and even researchers equivocate on the benefits of vouchers? There are a number of possible reasons. Ideology can play a role. If one has come out against vouchers it's difficult to affirm them regardless what the research says. Financial interests might also play a role if supporting vouchers might result in the loss of funding or readership.

The most accurate way to research the impact of voucher programs is to perform random-assignment studies.[{10}](#) There have been eight such studies, and all of them found a positive effect or advantage in academic progress for students who received a voucher to attend a private school. Seven of the eight findings were statistically significant. The question left to researchers is to determine the magnitude and scope of the positive effect and to establish the conditions that result in the greatest amount of progress.

The second myth; that voucher programs damage nearby public schools, is also contrary to the evidence. Although not all voucher programs are large enough to impact the public schools nearby, those programs that have the potential to do so have been studied. The consistent finding is that the competition caused by vouchers always results in an increase in public school performance. For instance, as a result of Florida's A-Plus voucher program, "public schools whose students were offered vouchers produced significantly greater year-to-year test score gains than other Florida public schools."[{11}](#) Schools that faced competition experienced a 5.9 percentile point advantage on the Stanford-9 math test over schools not facing competition.[{12}](#) Other studies showed that even the

threat of future competition produced public school improvement.

Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby studied the impact that the oldest voucher program in the country has had on student performance in Milwaukee's public schools. Again, she discovered that "schools exposed to greater voucher competition made significantly larger test score gains than schools less exposed to voucher competition."[\[13\]](#)

Studies in other states have supported the benefit of competition as well. Vouchers offered in Maine, Vermont's "tuitioning" programs, and charter schools in Arizona and Michigan have all prompted better performance in nearby public schools.

Public Education Doesn't Matter

Our final American education myth is often held by conservative Christians. It is the belief that public education doesn't matter. The argument goes something like this: the public educational establishment has adopted a completely naturalistic worldview. And, as a result, it is hostile towards anything Christian, rendering it morally bankrupt.

While it is true that our public education system is primarily built upon the assumptions of naturalism, and that it is often hostile to both individual Christians and Christian thought. It does not follow that Christians, even those who chose to home school or place their children in a private Christian school, should be indifferent to the fate of children in our public schools.

Perhaps we can compare our situation to that of the Israelites while in captivity in Babylon. Although the culture was alien and often hostile, as ours can be today, and it would have been tempting to undermine its institutions and seek its

destruction, God communicated via the prophet Jeremiah that the Jews were to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”[\[14\]](#)

Out of love for our neighbors and their children, we should desire to see them receive the best education possible. One of the earliest justifications for public education was that children needed to become literate in order to understand the Bible and apply it to their lives. In 1647, Massachusetts passed the Old Deluder Act which argued that public education was necessary because Satan attempted to keep men in ignorance of the Scriptures by keeping them from the true sense and meaning of the text. If they could read it for themselves they would be less susceptible to deception. The same need is present today. A literate society is not necessarily more open to the Bible and its message, but illiteracy places a large gulf between an interested individual and God’s revelation.

Another reason to not lose interest in the funding and functioning of our public schools is because we continue to pay for them. If we are to be good stewards of the monies granted us by God, we cannot ignore perhaps the largest single government expense. The amount of money spent on public education in America is massive by any standard, and the potential for abuse and misuse is equally large.

Into the near future, most American children, Christian and otherwise, will be educated in our public schools. Misinformation or political spin should not be allowed to shape our opinions or our decisions about education in the voting booth. The parties involved are not neutral. Although many have the best interests of the children at heart, power and money also play a major role in educational policy making.

Notes

1. Joe Williams, *Cheating Our Kids* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005),

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2. Jay P. Green, *Education Myths* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 24.
3. Ibid., 26.
4. Ibid., 72.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 79.
7. Ibid., 82.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 147.
10. See chapter 13 of *Education Myths* for an explanation.
11. *Education Myths*, 170.
12. Ibid., 172.
13. Ibid., 173.
14. Jeremiah 29:7