

INFORMATION CAPSULE

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THE CONDITION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Dr. Gerald W. Bracey, author, researcher, and policy analyst, has released “The 13th Bracey Report on The Condition of Public Education,” published to inform the public about the current state of education in the United States. This year’s report, released in the October 2003 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, discusses the following issues that are on the education news front:

- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
- NCLB and Highly Qualified Teachers
- Vouchers
- Charter Schools
- Testing
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
- Edison Schools

NCLB and AYP

NCLB requires that schools test students in grades 3-8 annually in reading and mathematics (science will be added in 2006-07) and demonstrate AYP. NCLB states that all ethnic groups, major socioeconomic groups, English language learners, and special education students must make AYP until, by 2014, 100 percent of schools’ students attain a proficient score. If a school does not reach 100 percent proficiency by 2014, they will be classified as “needs improvement.”

Dr. Bracey expresses concern about our educational system’s ability to bring 100 percent of students up to the proficiency level. He cites a study that examined how long it will take our schools to achieve 100 percent proficiency if they continue to improve at the same rate they have improved over the last 10 years. The study found that, in mathematics for example, our schools can attain 100 percent proficiency as follows: grade 4 by 2056, grade 8 by 2060, and grade 12 by 2166. Consequently, after 2014, an alarmingly large number of this country’s schools will be classified, under NCLB, as “needs improvement.”

NCLB and Highly Qualified Teachers

NCLB requires states to hire “highly qualified teachers.” All teachers (not only new hires) must meet the highly qualified standards by 2005-06. Highly qualified teachers are defined as those who hold a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution, demonstrate competence in the subject areas taught, and hold full state certification. The U.S. Department of Education, however, reports that the percent of teachers currently meeting

the criteria for certification is as follows:

- 50% in English;
- 47% in mathematics;
- 55% in science; and
- 55% in social studies.

In order to meet the NCLB requirement and bring the percent of highly qualified teachers to 100 percent, the U.S. Department of Education is, according to Dr. Bracey, de-emphasizing certification and providing “promising” alternatives to full state certification. The Department of Education states that there is little evidence that certification requirements are related to teacher effectiveness and, in fact, reports that cognitive ability, focused training, experience, and content knowledge are teacher characteristics that have a greater effect on student achievement. Dr. Bracey, however, cites studies that conclude that certification is related to student achievement and that, in order for our schools to reach the 100 percent highly qualified teachers requirement, the U.S. Department of Education is minimizing the importance of teacher certification.

Vouchers

An increase in the number of voucher programs across the country was anticipated after the Supreme Court ruled the Cleveland voucher program constitutional. Large state budget deficits, however, derailed many of the proposed voucher programs. To date, evaluations of voucher programs have focused on their effect on student achievement in language arts and mathematics. The available research indicates that voucher programs do not appear to affect student achievement and, in some cases, public school students are outperforming voucher recipients. Most studies have followed students for only one year. Longitudinal evaluations should be conducted before any definitive conclusions regarding the effect of voucher programs on student achievement are drawn.

Charter Schools

Studies examining test scores of charter school versus public school students have found that charter school students are keeping pace with public school students.

- At the elementary level, public school students post greater test score gains at some grade levels, while charter school students post greater gains at other grade levels. Overall, combining grades 2-6, charter and public school students' test scores are improving by similar amounts over time.
- In grades 6-8, public school students post greater test score gains than charter school students.
- In grades 9-11, public school students post greater test score gains than charter school students. (Note: A separate study, characterized by Dr. Bracey as methodologically flawed, reported greater gains for charter school students.)

Dr. Bracey makes the following additional observations regarding charter schools:

- Charter schools tend to receive less money for categorical programs, such as transportation and nutrition, but receive more money from private sources.
- Some charter schools save money by hiring teachers with less experience. The average number of years of teacher experience is: 13.6 years at public schools, 8.7 years at start-up charter schools, and 11.4 years at conversion charter schools.

- Charter school principals are less likely to have a teaching or administrator's credential or masters or doctoral degree.
- Charter school students are twice as likely to drop out of school as public school students (8 percent versus 4 percent).

Testing

Dr. Bracey reviews the debates that are occurring throughout the country regarding the value of testing. Some of the questions that have yet to be fully researched and answered are:

- Do high stakes tests improve learning?
- Do high stakes tests generalize to anything else?
- Do high-stakes tests increase the number of dropouts?

One question that has been studied is whether state tests are aligned with state standards, as required by NCLB. Dr. Bracey reviews a study that found that items are generally aligned with state standards; however, the sets of items that comprise tests often don't do a good job of assessing the full range of standards. The most challenging standards are often undersampled or omitted entirely. The study concluded that, as more and more importance is placed upon test scores, schools' curricula will more closely match the content of the test, instead of measuring all of the standards students should master.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

NAEP assessments continue to bring attention to the achievement gap between White and minority students throughout the country. Nationwide, Black and Hispanic students' reading scores, for example, are 26 to 29 points lower than White students' reading scores.

Edison Schools

Despite the company's promises, the Edison education model was never fully realized. Edison's stock value is down and its investors are suing the company. Edison was unable to provide a better education for the same price as a public school education.

Conclusion

Dr. Bracey believes that the past year was "not a good one" for education. Although Dr. Bracey holds some opinions that may not represent the views of mainstream educators, he encourages full discussion of the challenges facing our educational system as we work to improve the educational experience for all students.