



Myths and Realities in Public Education

All too often, public schools have been defined by a few narrow measures, cherry-picked data that neither puts public schools in the most positive light nor provides the full picture.

The Center for Public Education's [Data First Data Cycle](#) presents a set of 28 indicators that when used correctly provides a more complete depiction of the public education system. Test scores and graduation rates are among the benchmarks. But the Data First site also shows how all targets, when used in the proper context,

supply an accurate assessment of schools performance.

Unfortunately, critics of public education do not always take this balanced approach. Too often they take indicators out of context to show how public schools are failing and ignore signs where public education is succeeding. With so many reports masquerading as evidence-based research, it's difficult to discern fact from fiction. To help you make sense of it all, we've highlighted areas where perception differs from reality.

How Schools Really Stack Up

International Assessments	
Myth: U.S. students are outperformed by most industrialized countries on international assessments.	Reality: U.S. students fare quite well against their international peers on most assessments, especially eighth-grade math and fourth-grade science. We lead the world in civics education.
Facts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some states perform as well as the highest performing countries.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ In fourth-grade math, Massachusetts and Minnesota ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, on TIMSS, an international assessment of math and science. Both states performed just below Hong Kong and Singapore but outperformed Japan.○ In science, only Singapore outperformed fourth-graders in Massachusetts.• U.S. students rank among the top countries in fourth and eighth-grade science.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Outperformed all but four of 35 countries in fourth-grade science.○ Outperformed all but nine of 47 countries in eighth-grade science.• Nationwide, U.S. fourth-graders and high schoolers fare well against their international	

counterparts in reading.

- U.S. fourth-graders outperformed all but 10 of 44 countries.
- At the high school level just nine of 64 countries performed higher than U.S. 15 year-olds.

National Assessments

Myth: Student achievement has remained stagnant even as funding has increased.

Reality: Student achievement has actually increased significantly.

Facts

- Data shows fourth- and eighth-grade students have made tremendous progress over the past two decades despite the fact that a growing portion of the student population is comprised of traditionally disadvantaged students.
- Math
 - At the fourth-grade level, the proportion of students reaching proficiency has more than tripled since 1990, climbing from 13 to 40 percent.
 - More than twice as many eighth-graders scored proficient on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in 2011 (35 percent) than in 1990 (15 percent).
 - Progress is being made at many large urban districts as well. Between 2003 and 2011, Boston and Atlanta made gains that were the equivalent to nearly two more years worth of learning.
- Reading
 - Since 1992, the percentage of eighth-graders reaching the proficiency benchmark increased by six percentage points for both black and Hispanic students .

High School Graduation Rates

Myth: High school graduation rates have remained relatively flat for several decades.

Reality: Graduation rates have been increasing for nearly a decade.

Facts

- The national graduation rate rose from 66 to 73 percent between 1999 and 2009, increasing nearly five percentage points since 2007 alone.
- The actual high school graduation rate is closer to 80 percent when students who take longer than four years to graduate are included.
- According to *Education Week*, the number of states with an estimated on-time graduation rate of at least 70 percent, increased from 26 states in 1999 to 40 states in 2009.
- Graduation rates are likely to continue to increase as states and districts implement early warning systems to identify struggling students and provide them with early interventions

to keep them on-track to graduate.

- The number of so-called “Dropout Factories”—schools that graduate less than 60 percent of their students on time—have declined by 23 percent between 2002 and 2010.

College Preparation

Myth: According to college entrance exam scores from the ACT and SAT, public schools are not improving.

Reality: SAT scores have declined slightly while ACT scores have remained relatively flat as a greater number of lower achieving students consider post-secondary education.

Facts

- Higher rates of traditionally under-represented students are taking college entrance exams, suggesting they see college in their future.
 - In 2012, nearly 27 percent of ACT test takers were black or Hispanic compared to just 16 percent in 2002.
 - In 2012, 30 percent of SAT test takers were black or Hispanic compared to 17 percent in 2001.
- Even though a greater number of students, including more lower-achievers, are taking college entrance exams, this has not depressed scores overall.
 - ACT scores have increased between 2002 (20.8) and 2012 (21.1).
 - SAT math scores remain steady over the same time period.
- More students are completing the rigorous courses they need to be successful in college.
 - The number of students taking Advanced Placement more than doubled, climbing from 430,000 to about 900,000 between 2001 and 2011.
 - More than three times as many black and Hispanic students took an AP exam during that same time period.
 - At the same time, the percentage of graduates scoring a three or higher on the AP exam increased from 10.8 to 18.1 in that decade.
 - The percentage of high school seniors who completed a curriculum that included advanced math and science lab courses nearly doubled, rising from just 31 percent in 1990 to 59 percent in 2009.

Postsecondary Participation and Outcomes

Myth: Fewer students are graduating from college.

Reality: More students are attending and completing college than ever before.

Facts

- The U.S. (32 percent) is second only to Norway (35 percent) in the percentage of adults who possess the equivalent of a four-year degree or higher.
- Enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 38 percent between 1999 and 2009; in the decade earlier the increase was just nine percent.
- The number of students earning a Bachelor's degree increased 33 percent between 1999 and 2009, while the number of students earning a Master's degree increased by 49 percent during that same period.

Student Safety

Myth: Public schools are gang and drug infested institutions where students are afraid to go.

Reality: Students are extremely safe in school and are safer than ever before.

Facts

- In 2010, less than half of one percent of students aged 12 to 18, claimed a crime had been committed against them while at school. In 1995, that figure was 15 percent.
- In 2012, just four percent of the public thought violence was the biggest problem facing our public schools down from nine percent a decade earlier.

Public Attitudes Toward Public Education

Myth: The public has lost confidence in public schools.

Reality: While the general public has a dim view of public education, those who see it first-hand, parents, consistently rate the schools their children attend highly.

Facts

- According to a 2012 Gallup poll, 77 percent of parents gave high marks--- an A or a B--- to the public school their eldest child attends.
- In that same survey, 35 percent of respondents cited lack of financial support as the biggest challenge facing public education. Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds said they were willing to pay more in taxes to improve the quality of public schools.

Why it is More Efficient to Invest in Our Public Schools?

While public schools are not failing, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Public schools still aren't meeting the needs of all students and are far from the leading the world on a number of academic measures. Yet, the solution is not to abandon traditional public schools for alternatives like vouchers, digital schools, and charter schools that put more public money in private hands. Rather, public education should be strengthened by investing in

proven strategies like boosting the number of effective teachers and principals, providing quality early education programs, and implementing dropout prevention initiatives, to name a few. With nine in ten school-aged students attending public schools, taxpayers will get more bang for their buck by investing in public education instead of expanding into unproven and unknown territory. Here are some reasons why:

Myths and Realities about alternatives to traditional public schools

Vouchers

Myth: Greater choice will not only improve the performance of the students who use the voucher but also students in local public schools due to competition.

Reality: Some research shows that vouchers only have a positive impact on some students some of the time in some types of private schools.

Facts

- Some studies have found that low-income black students who use vouchers to attend urban Catholic schools make greater gains than if they remained in their neighborhood public schools. Yet, research has not found similar benefits for low-income Hispanic students.
- There is no clear evidence that competition created by vouchers has improved the quality of the local public schools.
- Such limited and inconsistent findings do not provide strong evidence that vouchers are worth their price of admission.

Charter Schools

Myth: Students are better off attending charter schools than attending their traditional public school.

Reality: Students are not better off attending the vast majority of charter schools.

Facts

- Research shows that only 17 percent of charter schools are more effective than the traditional public school the students would have attended.
- Looked at another way, 83 percent of charter schools are no more effective than the neighborhood traditional public school; 37 percent of charters are actually less effective than their traditional counterpart.
- Although excellent charter schools exist, excellent traditional public schools also exist in abundance.
- Research provides scant evidence that charter schools are a better alternative than traditional public schools.

Digital Schools

Myth: Digital schools or online schools are revolutionizing education and improving student achievement.

Reality: While research on digital schools is limited, few studies have found a link between online schools and improved student achievement.

Facts

- A 2011 study of Pennsylvania digital schools by Stanford University found students were no better off attending any of the state's online schools than if they had attended their neighborhood school.
- In most cases, students made fewer gains while attending digital schools than if they had gone to their regular school.

Data compiled by the Center for Public Education, 2012.

More data questions? Go to www.data-first.org or contact Jim Hull, jhull@nsba.org.