

## Closing the Gap

In “Demography as Destiny?” (*features*, Summer 2009), Matthew Ladner and Dan Lips argue that Florida’s reforms—school accountability, literacy enhancement, student accountability, teacher quality, and school choice—have helped students there achieve record academic success. Florida’s results support school-focused reform strategies, such as those we’ve implemented in New York City. New York City’s progress in narrowing the achievement gap confirms that policymakers and advocates can no longer use demographic factors like race, ethnicity, income, or zip code to excuse differences in educational achievement between high- and low-needs students.

Like Florida’s schools, New York City’s serve a high-needs population. But we are not allowing demographics to define our outcomes. Since 2002, our students have made steady progress. Today, far more students are meeting and exceeding standards in math and reading. We’ve substantially narrowed the racial and ethnic achievement gap, our students are catching up to students in the rest of the state, and our graduation rate is the highest it has been in decades.

How have we done this? We have set high standards and created a school accountability system that holds schools responsible for outcomes and gives schools, parents, and educators the information they need to address students’ strengths and weaknesses. We have raised pay for educators and created incentive programs for teachers and principals that help us attract the best talent to our schools. Since 2002, we have replaced hundreds of failing schools with new small schools that provide New York City families with good options.

We still have a long way to go, but it’s clear that even the most disadvantaged students can achieve at high levels when provided with a strong education.



It’s time for leaders across America to stop making excuses for low student performance. As Florida and New York City demonstrate, we can offer all students, regardless of their backgrounds, the educational opportunity they need and deserve.

JOEL I. KLEIN

*New York City Schools Chancellor*

## Education Reform Work Is Not Complete

Regarding “Accountability Overboard” (*features*, Spring 2009), the heated rhetoric that the Massachusetts Readiness Project with its goal to move public education into the 21st century somehow represents a “waving” on standards is off the mark.

As the article correctly points out, Achieve, Inc., has reviewed the Massachusetts standards and found them to be top-notch; they combine rigorous content with clear expectations that students develop problem-solving and reasoning skills as they learn the content. In fact, Achieve regularly uses the Massachusetts standards as a model when working with other states that seek to raise their expectations. As the article rightly notes, Massachusetts students

not only perform at the top of U.S. measures such as NAEP, but are globally competitive, as recent TIMSS results have shown.

Every state needs to review and update its standards periodically. That Governor Deval Patrick wants Massachusetts to build on its tradition of excellence by ensuring that standards enable students to access and attain rigorous content, as well as meet assessment goals requiring that they demonstrate their ability to apply their knowledge, does not represent a “waving” on content, but rather a way to enhance the state’s current world-class standards. High-performing countries, such as Singapore, are doing the same. Rather than getting distracted by false choices or creating controversies where none need exist, it would be far more helpful for the debate in Massachusetts to focus on the best strategies for ensuring that classroom instruction effectively delivers the standards to all students throughout Massachusetts.

MICHAEL COHEN

*President, Achieve, Inc.*

The achievement of students in Massachusetts is well documented. The state’s commitment to high standards, rigorous curricula, and accountability for student achievement is widely regarded to be among the best in the nation. Results on NAEP, SAT, and TIMSS confirm that the hard work is paying off, and MCAS scores continue to improve in the great majority of subjects and grades tested.

Massachusetts is clearly doing well. But Governor Deval Patrick has repeatedly said that doing well is not good enough. I could not agree more.

Too many students, particularly black and Latino students and those with limited English proficiency and special needs, are not reaching higher levels of academic proficiency, are falling behind, and are dropping out. It was

with those students in mind, with their future at stake, and in the interest of the Commonwealth's economic vitality, that the governor engaged more than 200 citizens to develop an action plan, a series of recommendations spanning 10 years with an immediate focus on turning around low-performing schools and ensuring that students are receiving the support they need outside of school to take full advantage of improved teaching and learning inside of school.

Governor Patrick and his education secretary Paul Reville should be praised for their efforts to transform the public education system into one that works for and promotes high achievement for all students. Instead, he is vilified on the pages of this publication with such wanton disregard for the integrity of the facts that the presentation bears absolutely no relationship to what is actually occurring in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts has a great base on which to build, but in order for students to truly achieve, to succeed, and to develop into the future leaders of this state, this country, and this world, they need additional time for learning, additional time on the core subjects, and additional time to build out their knowledge and ability to apply what they learn in class to a college classroom or their chosen field of work. Governor Patrick has begun that work in Massachusetts and I believe the students will be better served by acknowledging where the state needs to improve its education reform efforts than by simply declaring victory based on past success.

THOMAS W. PAYZANT  
*Former Superintendent  
Boston Public Schools*

### Measuring Benefits

Marguerite Roza's excellent article ("Breaking Down School Budgets," *features*, Summer 2009) provides only half of the story. Traditional cost-

benefit analyses explore the benefits as well as the costs of programs. By providing only the cost side of a cost-benefit analysis, Roza, in effect, assumes the benefits of all high school classes are equal.

While providing curricular electives may cost more per pupil than basic courses in the core subject areas, electives often keep students interested and attending school. Electives also develop talents missed with traditional core subject classes. The future financial benefits to students and their employers of knowing a second language certainly balance a slightly higher cost ratio for providing foreign language classes, for example.

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Over time, Advanced Placement classes save students money. Each year, thousands of high school graduates arrive on university campuses already having earned college credit through their AP classes. Not only do these credits save parents and students tuition dollars, they decrease the time, and thereby the cost, of earning a college degree.

Additionally, the potential costs of not addressing the needs of high-achieving high school students through honors and AP courses are great. Ignoring the educational needs of students with the greatest potential effectively restricts the level of achievement

in our schools. Many gifted elementary school students know much of the material to be covered in their current grade prior to the start of school. Nearly half of the low-income students who are classified as high-achieving when they enter 1st grade can no longer be classified as such by the time they reach 5th grade. These students clearly need educational opportunities that their parents often cannot provide. We can do better than to ignore almost half of our nation's talent.

Failing to adequately educate our nation's youth by reducing the cost per class is not a blueprint for informed local resource decisionmaking. Instead, it is a formula for sacrificing our nation's intellectual capital.

DEL SIEGLE  
*President  
National Association for  
Gifted Children*

### Educating the Public

Charter schools are public schools. The movement has been repeating that mantra for 17 years, but the point hasn't completely sunk in. In surveys conducted for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the portion of registered voters recognizing charters as public schools has hovered around 40 percent for the past four years. The diversity within charter schooling may work against any common definition. Chartering empowers thousands of African American families to create a vibrant new public-school sector in Harlem; it liberates a group of Minnesota teachers to start and run their own schools; and it provides a Teach for America alum the freedom to start a network of college-prep charters serving Mexican immigrants in Texas.

How charter schools are defined matters greatly. The information William Howell and Martin West provided to survey respondents ("Educating the Public," *features*, Summer 2009)—that



feature

# Educating the Public

By WILLIAM G. HOWELL and MARTIN R. WEST

**Most people express strong opinions about public education.** But only a few know the basic facts about the public schools: how much they spend, how well teachers are paid, and what schools can and cannot do.

What happens when the public learns the facts about schools and deliberates responsibly about public education? Do citizens update their views on policies designed to improve public schooling? Or do they hold steadfast to their opinions, suggesting that whatever animates debate about education is not an abiding concern about what is actually happening in our nation's schools? A series of experiments embedded within a national survey that we conducted in 2008 shed new light on what happens to public opinion on education when it is informed about some key facts. We divided respondents into randomly chosen groups: some were simply asked their opinions about school spending, teacher salaries, and charter schools, while others were first provided with accurate information about each of these issues. Because all that distinguished the more-informed respondents from the others is chance, we can be confident that any differences between the views of the two groups are attributable to the information provided.

## How information affects Americans' support for school spending and charter schools

The results are striking. Accurate information about what is currently being spent on public schools reduces both support for increased spending and confidence that more spending would improve student learning. Knowing how much the average teacher earns lowers support for salary increases. We observe only a modest effect of information on the views of current teachers who

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charters are tuition free and do not teach religion—is only one slice of what defines charters and what distinguishes them from other public schools. When people are given a fuller definition, including the public nature of charters, the freedom charters have to be more innovative while being held accountable for improved student achievement, and the greater partnerships among parents, teachers, and students often found at charters, we see support grow across partisan and ideological lines.

In states where there are more charter schools, we see a significant increase in knowledge and understanding reflected in surveys. While charter schools still serve less than 5 percent of the public school population, in a dozen population centers charters now enroll more than 20 percent of public school students. In the District of Columbia, for example, where nearly 100 charter campuses are educating more than one-third of the public school students, charters are increasingly accepted as an integral part of the public education delivery system: Sixty-three percent of D.C. residents know they are public

schools. And in California, a state with close to 800 charters, 52 percent of voters in a 2007 poll knew they were public schools.

Howell and West's commendable work was done in 2008, which predates what we've been calling the Obama Effect. The president has made his commitment to charter schools known, and this has not gone unnoticed. In our latest survey, conducted in late March 2009, we saw a sharp increase in the number of people who identified charter schools as an educational option in their community (from 18 percent in 2008 to 29 percent in 2009). In state after state, legislators who previously opposed charters are reconsidering their positions because of the president's strong support for these schools. If we in the charter community respond with robust growth of high-quality schools, we will surely see greater public understanding from all quarters.

NELSON SMITH  
President and CEO  
National Alliance for  
Public Charter Schools

## Class Size

In Paul E. Peterson's recent editorial ("What Is Good for General Motors... Is Good for Education," *from the editors*, Spring 2009), he optimistically suggests that the economic crisis could spur some much-needed fiscal reform within the education sector.

While I absolutely agree that too much of our taxpayers' money is spent on stuff that isn't making our schools better, I couldn't disagree more with what Peterson identifies as fat. His analysis of class-size data is particularly baffling to me. Eight pupils per teacher? My own state of California limits class size to 32 at the secondary level and 20 at the primary level. In other words, as a high school teacher in California, I can be pretty sure that I will have 32 names on each of my class rosters each semester. And in some cases, I'll have more.

Peterson arrives at his number by lumping all instructional employees into the teacher category. But isn't that a little misleading? Not once has an administrator directly helped teach my class. And guidance counselors? Their caseload is impossibly large as it is; they certainly don't have time to help me grade essays.

Peterson misrepresents class-size data and draws the flawed conclusion that class-size reduction is not working. This seems a disservice to the hard-working teachers of this nation who struggle every day to leave no child behind in shamefully overcrowded classrooms. Class-size reduction isn't working because it doesn't exist.

Peterson is right to propose that the fiscal crisis affords us the opportunity to reassess where our money is going. I just hope—if and when that conversation occurs—that teachers are a part of it. Too much of what passes as reform these days is anti-teacher, or at the very least, out of sync with what teachers are facing on the ground.

As teachers, we must find ways to interject our voice into the conversation.

Otherwise, we give permission to academics and bureaucrats to dictate next year's policies (and budgets). All that will be left is for us to ask, "How high?"

ALISTAIR BOMPHRAY  
*Teacher*  
Hayward, CA

**Paul Peterson responds:**

According to the official *Digest of Education Statistics*, released by the National Center for Education Statistics, the ratio of pupils to instructional employees in the United States declined from 14:1 in 1970 to 8:1 in 2005. Instructional employees include teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, librarians, and other professional educators. About half are teachers, which explains why the pupil-teacher ratio is 15:1, a decline from 23:1 since 1970. If class-size reduction hasn't happened, the reason can only be the result of inefficient utilization of instructional talent by school districts. In other industries, that is called "fat."

**Book Review**

The review by Chester E. Finn Jr. ("More Money for Less Accountability?" *book review*, Spring 2009) of Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder's book *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* simply misses the mark.

The book at issue does not undermine school accountability and it is not about NAEP. What Rothstein and colleagues do is to document very well the ways in which accountability systems can and do corrupt the delivery of services as people manipulate the system. This was done in the case of hospitals with high heart-patient mortality rates that "fixed" the problem by simply no longer taking such cases. The authors look at how current education accountability systems have become similarly skewed and suggest some very useful alternatives.

Education accountability takes place at the school, district, and state levels. The levers available to the federal government are indirect; states are where the action and authority reside. Let the feds set expectations and parameters and hold systems accountable. Let us not pretend that the feds can deal directly with 100,000 schools and 13,000 school districts. We must think very carefully about whatever system is put in place. The potential for harm is great, the needs of children even greater. The importance of the right accountability system is too great to keep getting it wrong.

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**Genuine alternative certification programs may prove to be our best hope for putting in our schools trained professionals who can truly make a difference.**

**Genuine Alternatives**

As Paul Peterson and Daniel Nadler ("What Happens When States Have Genuine Alternative Certification?" *check the facts*, Winter 2009) correctly assert, there is considerable resistance to genuine alternative certification in a number of states. The motive for this resistance is simply to preserve the power and influence of a traditional system that is becoming increasingly irrelevant with each passing year.

The traditional route to teacher certification, a college degree that requires

30-plus credit hours of education-related coursework, has created a kind of cult within the teaching profession. Those who acquire their teaching credentials through alternate means tend to be viewed as second-class citizens in the schools where they work.

I have two sons, so I have had considerable interaction with teachers at several different schools over a fairly long period of time. Most teachers have gone through the traditional certification process at one of our states' public universities. In my experience, it is not unusual for teachers to 1) not really know that much about the test scores they are attempting to explain, and 2) be civil toward me yet completely discount most of the questions I ask and the concerns I raise. I am seen as an "outsider" and therefore my views can be taken with a proverbial grain of salt.

I have also taught a graduate course on testing and assessment for several years, and teachers typically constitute the largest segment of the class. It is obvious that many teachers have been indoctrinated with an exclusive attitude that suggests "unless you have been in the trenches, you can't possibly know what it's like, and therefore what could I possibly learn from you?" They believe that the traditional route to teacher certification has provided them with insights into reality to which the rest of us are not privy. This mindset signifies a false sense of competence and confidence that contributes to the gradual decline of the effectiveness of our entire education system.

Far from being the cause of many of the problems associated with our schools, genuine alternative certification programs may prove to be our best hope for putting in our schools trained professionals who can truly make a difference.

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