

Education Myths

Without reliable information, it is difficult to make good policy decisions.

By Jay P. Greene

Myths aren't lies. They're beliefs that people adopt because they have an air of plausibility, people want to believe they're true, and they are consistent with at least some pieces of evidence. But of course, myths aren't true — or at least they're not the whole truth.

Unfortunately, much of what people believe today about education is as mythological as anything from Homer or Aesop, even if it isn't nearly as poetic. Education is dominated by myths.

The people promoting these myths may not be fools or liars, but the myths themselves do real harm to children. They cause us to misunderstand the nature of the problems in our schools, to continue engaging in practices that shortchange students, and to resist the adoption of effective reforms that would improve education.

For example, if not for education myths, we wouldn't think that schools fail because they lack adequate resources. We wouldn't continue paying ineffective teachers the same as effective ones, and we would support proven reforms like accountability and school choice.

Before we can bring about real improvement in schools, we have to start by dispelling the education myths that facilitate mediocrity and block progress.

People believe these education myths for a variety of reasons. Because it involves children, education is a highly-emotional issue, which tends to cloud people's thinking. And it doesn't help that people tend to assume they already know about education policy just because they went to school themselves or they have a child going through school.

Public perceptions of education policy tend to be distorted by people's subjective experiences in the classroom, from which they may draw the wrong lessons if they don't step back and look at the facts objectively.

But by far the most important reason myths dominate education policy is that they are promoted by organized interests. These interest groups fundamentally shape education policy, just as similar groups fundamentally shape every other kind of policy.

To gain an advantage in debates over policy, some interest groups promote myths that support their positions. Of course, if systematic evidence supports their positions, interest groups will use that as well.



Their goal is simply to advance their agendas; they are relatively indifferent to whether their claims are based on myths or facts. This is the way democratic governance works, and education policymaking is not immune to its normal practices and problems.

Though it can be ugly, this democratic process usually works pretty well. But it is malfunctioning in education because most people fail to appreciate the role interest groups play in shaping education policy.

Education policymaking is no different from other policymaking in a democratic system, but people prefer to think that it is different because it involves our children.

Rather than face this uncomfortable reality, most people are inclined to view the actors in education policy debates as wise, disinterested experts even when they are obviously-interested parties. This allows people to believe that education policymaking is a discussion among professional experts rather than a political struggle among organized interest groups.

Education practitioners, such as teachers, school administrators, and professors at education schools, are not necessarily reliable judges of an education policy's merits. Just as doctors are not neutral parties in health policy discussions, education practitioners are not neutral parties in education policy discussions, since education policy affects their interests.

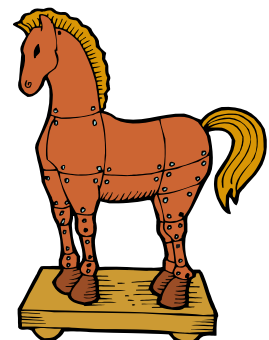
While reporters regularly consult education practitioners for their opinions about education policy, they should be careful not to treat educators' claims as though they were comprehensive assessments made by neutral experts.

And if the practitioners themselves aren't necessarily objective, their professional associations certainly won't be. These organizations exist to promote the collective interests of their members.

We should expect the policy positions of organizations like teachers' unions, school board associations, and education bureaucracies to reflect their members' interests, just as the policy positions of the American Medical Association reflect the interests of doctors.

No one should treat these organizations as anything other than what they really are — interest groups that seek to advance their agendas regardless of the evidence.

(Dr. Greene is head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas.)



Education Facts

Many people believe some or all of these statements, but they are all false.

MYTH Schools perform poorly because they need more money.

FACT Eric Hanushek of Stanford University examined every available study on the relationship between spending and educational outcomes that conformed to basic social science methods — a total of 163 studies — and found that only 27 had identified a statistically-significant relationship.

Other researchers analyzing the same set of studies with somewhat different methods have argued that the studies justify concluding that more school spending does affect student performance, but the size of the effect they identify is so small that it is dwarfed in comparison to the large increases in school spending over the past 30 years.

Such a tiny effect from such a large increase in spending does not justify the Money Myth.

<http://edpro.stanford.edu/hanushek>

MYTH Special education programs burden public schools, hindering their academic performance.

FACT If a school decides to devote more resources to helping students who are falling behind in reading, the school must bear the cost of this program itself. But if the same school redefines those students as “learning-disabled”, the government will help pay for their remediation.

The number of disabled children is not really getting bigger. Instead, special education programs have grown for the simple reason that this growth, far from bleeding money from school budgets, is profitable for schools because it brings in additional funding for programs schools would otherwise have to pay for themselves.

Thus, not only is the Special Education Myth false, it is the reverse of the truth: special education is not draining school budgets, it’s inflating them.

MYTH Social problems like poverty cause students to fail; schools are helpless to prevent it.

FACT If the influence of disadvantages on student achievement were as overwhelming as the Myth of Helplessness implies, we would expect to see little variation in levels of achievement at schools serving similar student populations. Yet a recent study by Dr. David Johnson of Wilfrid Laurier University found substantial variation in achievement among similarly-disadvantaged student populations in Ontario. www.cdhowe.org

MYTH Schools should reduce class sizes; small classes would produce big improvements.

FACT The Class Size Myth is not totally baseless. Research does give us reason to believe that there might be some benefits to smaller classes. But if the research supporting smaller classes is correct, the benefits of class size reduction are only moderate. And whether this research is in fact correct is still very much open to debate.

Even if the research is correct, other evidence suggests that reducing class sizes does not produce similar gains when implemented on a wider scale. When California introduced a state-wide reduction in elementary school class sizes, the students who were in larger and smaller classes improved at about the same rate.

Given that there are other reform strategies that are more promising and less costly, the modest benefits of class size reduction simply can’t justify the very large financial sacrifices that would have to be made.

MYTH Certified or more experienced teachers are substantially more effective.

FACT The Abell Foundation’s review of studies conforming to basic social science methods found that teachers holding master’s degrees did not produce higher student performance (except for high school teachers with master’s degrees in the subjects they taught, as opposed to degrees in education) and among new teachers traditional certification makes no difference in student performance.

When it comes to years of experience, the evidence seems to indicate that teachers get a little more effective in their first few years as they get up to speed in the classroom, but after this initial period teachers do not tend to get more effective with more years of experience.

<http://www.abell.org/publications/detail.asp?ID=59>

MYTH The evidence on the effectiveness of vouchers is mixed and inconclusive.

FACT Every random-assignment study of the effect of vouchers except one finds statistically-significant benefits on test scores for at least some groups of students. Even the one other study still found positive effects from vouchers; it failed only to achieve statistical significance, and only after resorting to highly-selective and questionable methods.

<http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/greene.htm>

MYTH Independent schools are less effective at promoting tolerance and civic participation.

FACT Studies consistently show that independent schools are better at conveying the democratic values of tolerance, participation, and volunteerism than public schools. Rather than undermining students’ adherence to democratic values, independent schools actually enhance it.

www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2003-08-22-SFSC-Wolfe-testimony.pdf

MYTH School choice harms public schools.

FACT Rather than draining public schools of resources and talent, school choice improves public schools’ performance. The evidence from existing voucher programs consistently shows public schools improving in response to the challenge of vouchers. Studies of charter school competition suggest that increased choice and competition lead to better public schools.

http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/688_OP35V2.pdf

Education Meta-Myth

The belief that incentives don't matter in education is toxic to the whole system.

By Jay Greene

Myths dominate education policy. Over the past 30 years, our education system came to be based more and more heavily on beliefs about education that the evidence shows to be false. These myths have distorted virtually every area of education policy.

These myths fall into four major clusters. The first and most prominent cluster of myths claim that the performance of the education system is hindered by a lack of **resources**, and that policies seeking to improve education by redirecting more resources to the classroom (through class size reduction and personnel policies) are effective.

The second cluster is a set of myths about the **outcomes** produced by the current system — about whether those outcomes have changed in the past 30 years, about how many students successfully complete K-12 education, and about how qualified those who graduate are.

The third cluster of myths claims that **policies** seeking to hold schools and students accountable for their performance will be undermined by test manipulation and lack of resources, and to the extent that they aren't thus undermined will end up pushing too many kids out of school altogether.

The fourth cluster claims that **choice** does not improve education. Independent schools appear to do better only because they have tons of money and they “cream” in admissions; allowing students to leave public schools for independent ones would only cripple the public schools; independent schools are racially-segregated and produce closed-mindedness and hate.

Surveying these myths, we can see a pattern emerging across most of them. One might call it a “meta-myth”. It is the belief that education is different from other policy areas in that the types of incentives that normally shape human behaviour do not shape educational behaviour.

In most areas of life, people respond to the presence of economic incentives and other similar kinds of incentives. Businesses know that they will lose business if they treat customers badly; so they strive to treat customers well. Parents reward their children for good behaviour and punish them for bad behaviour, with the expectation that these rewards and punishments will create incentives for better behaviour.

But when it comes to education, people seem to believe that incentives just don't apply. For example, in any other area of life, if someone is never rewarded for doing a job well and never punished for doing it badly, we would naturally expect him or her to do it badly.

Yet, this is exactly the way we run our education system — schools, teachers, and administrators get almost no reward for good performance and no penalty for bad performance — and we still believe that any failures must be the result of inadequate resources.

It would never occur to most people that schools will not make better use of the money they get until they have some incentive to do so. Reform policies that promise to harness incentives, such as accountability and school choice, are rejected as counterproductive.

It is not hard to see why people believe in this meta-myth. Because education involves the well-being of children, it naturally engages strong emotions. We want to believe that the classroom doesn't work the same way other human activities work. We want to believe that the people to whom we entrust the education of our children are not affected by incentives.

We do know that teachers are generally good people who go into teaching because they want to help children, and from this fact we think it necessarily follows that teachers will teach just as well without having to be given incentives to do so.

We want to believe that it would be wrong for incentives to affect the education system, that no one would stand for it if a teacher or a school acted in ways that were shaped by incentives. We think that it would be odd if we treated the education of children the same way we treated all the other departments of social activity.

People also believe in the meta-myth because powerful interest groups promote it. For example, teachers' unions promote the idea that teachers will teach just as well even if we don't hold them responsible for their job performance.

They promote this myth because they have an incentive to do so — it serves the interests of their membership if teachers are not held accountable for the quality of their teaching.

Ironically, people believe the meta-myth that incentives don't work in education largely because interest groups are driven by powerful incentives to promote the idea that incentives don't work in education!

The meta-myth that incentives don't matter to education is so widespread and has corrupted so much of education policy, that tracing the things that could be done to correct it would be a whole other book in itself.

But the first step is obvious — we cannot overcome the meta-myth until we first show it to be false. Rigorously testing our educational beliefs against a full reading of the systematic evidence is the only hope for dethroning the meta-myth. The work is difficult, and will be opposed by powerful groups that have interests in protecting the prevailing methodology.

But science has triumphed over mythology against all hope in many other fields, and there is no reason it can't do so here as well.

(Adapted with permission from Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About our Schools — And Why It Isn't So. See our review on page 3.)