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Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe - And Why It Isn't So

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Fall 2005

Myth Buster

Schools perform poorly because they need more money; teachers are underpaid; schools are performing much worse; accountability systems impose large burdens on schools. The evidence on the effectiveness of vouchers is inconclusive. To all these popular assertions, Jay P. Greene, Ph.D. offers readers evidence to the contrary in his first book, *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe—and Why It Isn't So*.¹

Greene has a strong history of approaching special interest assertions with a skeptical eye, thoroughly conducting his own research, and drawing conclusions firmly based in economic theory. His research on education policy was cited four times before the U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* case, which ultimately found school vouchers constitutional. His articles on education spending and student achievement have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Public Interest*, *Education Next*, the *Washington Post*, and many other publications. Greene takes his considerable experience and research and creates a useful, easy to read book that challenges the traditional education establishment.

Education Myths is a handbook for education policymakers who are interested in research and evidence when debating legislation. Greene highlights 18 commonly used myths and offers research and evidence as to why special interest assertions should not be automatically considered fact, organized into four main topics: education resources—including teacher pay, education spending, and class sizes; outcomes—including graduation rates and student achievement; accountability; and school choice. Greene is quick to point out that myths are not lies, as these claims oftentimes have some tie to truth, but he thoroughly illustrates why the public should be skeptical of special interest assertions by sharing scientifically sound data and research of his own and from other published studies.

Education Spending

Any talk about the cost of education policy causes some people great distress; they think schools should be immune from having to worry about costs... There is only a certain amount of money available for schools. That amount can be raised if taxpayers can be convinced to direct more money away from other priorities and into education, but the amount available will always be limited.²

Greene begins his book by recognizing that there is a relationship between spending and student performance, noting that “if we reduced school spending to zero, that would definitely have an impact on student outcomes,”³ but he warns that “poor [student] performance alone tells us nothing about whether spending levels are contributing to the problem.”⁴ According to the US Department of Education, per pupil expenditures increased from \$1,214 at the end of World War II to \$8,745 in 2001 in inflation-adjusted 2001 dollars,⁵ and while no consistently reliable achievement data exists until the introduction of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in the early 1970s, NAEP scores have remained mostly unchanged in the past 30 years. With gains of only three to five points on the math, reading and science NAEP assessments between 1971 and 1999, student achievement gains certainly did not match the dramatic increase in education spending during the same time period.⁶

Teacher compensation is a separate but closely related issue to education spending. People are apt to gree when they hear the American Federation of Teachers claim, “It’s no secret that teachers are significantly underpaid”⁷ because it is easy to believe that a national teachers’ union speaks on behalf of teachers. Greene has the courage to report write what unions do not like to admit: “One reason for the prominence of the Teacher Pay Myth is that people often fail to account for the relatively low number of hours teachers work.”⁸

Keeping in mind that teachers only work nine months of the year, and after closely researching U.S. Department of Labor reports, Greene concludes that, “when we compare hourly earnings instead of annual salaries, we find that teachers are actually better paid than accountants.” While the unions retort that teachers work many hours offsite, Greene reminds the reader that people in many professions also work offsite.⁹ He also notes that teachers enjoy medical benefits and retirement packages.¹⁰

Special Education

Some contend that spending has risen dramatically because of the rising number of special education students and the associated costs of educating this student population. Greene disputes this claim by examining the numbers of students with severe disabilities and finding that “the total number of students classified as mentally retarded has undergone a dramatic drop—from about 961,000 in 1976-1977 to about 599,000 in 2000-2001,” which is an absolute reduction of mentally retarded students that becomes even greater when calculated as a percentage of all students. During the same timeframe, public school students classified as learning disabled has tripled, from 1.8 percent to 6.0 percent.¹¹ While factors such as better diagnosis of autism and “other health disorders” most likely plays a role in this increase, “only about one-tenth of the growth in special education enrollment between 1976-1977 and 2000-2001 occurred in those two categories.”¹²

Greene also sheds light on states’ different funding systems for special needs students. The two ways states traditionally fund schools for special needs populations is either by the “bounty” system or the “lump sum” system. The bounty system provides schools with increased funds on a per-pupil basis, calculated by how many special needs students the school claims, while the lump sum system funds each school one lump sum for a percentage of the school’s students. Studies of the two systems show that “the special education enrollment rate grew significantly faster in the 1990s in states with bounty funding systems. While states that adopted lump-sum funding saw their average special education enrollments grow from 11.1 to 12.4 percent of all students, states with bounty funding saw average special education enrollment grow from 10.5 to 12.8 percent.”¹³

Class Size

An experiment conducted in Tennessee in the 1980s, known as the STAR project (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio), has the National Education Association sup-

porting classes limited to 15 students or smaller if the students have exceptional needs.¹⁴ For the STAR project, students from kindergarten to the third grade were randomly assigned to one of three types of classes: regular sized with around 24 students and one teacher; regular sized with one teacher and one teacher’s aide; and a small class with around 15 students and one teacher. The study found that students in the small classes showed a one-time benefit in test scores, but the increase was only “equal to fewer than 0.2 standard deviations.”¹⁵ Also, 40 percent of the regular-sized class students took the SAT or ACT, 43.7 percent of the small class students took these exams.¹⁶

After analyzing the implementation of the STAR program, Greene notes that the program’s most important flaw is that participating students were not tested at the beginning of the program. He also stresses that the test score improvement is a one-time benefit, which is to say that “students who had been in smaller classes for four years were no further ahead of their peers in regular-sized classes than they had been after only one year of smaller classes.”¹⁷

Using 2001-2002 enrollment and spending figures, Caroline Hoxby of Harvard University calculated that the cost of a 10 percent class size reduction would cost around \$615 per student,¹⁸ but to reduce class size to 15 students, classes would have to shrink 37.5 percent—or \$2,306 per pupil. On class sizes, Greene concludes that “even if all the claims made to promote the Class Size Myth were right, improving student performance by reducing class sizes is a little bit like driving from Los Angeles to San Francisco by way of Pittsburgh.”¹⁹

Graduation Rates

Because the general public recognizes the importance of a traditional high school diploma, as graduating from high school is a significant indicator to students’ adult lives, Greene purports that government agencies might have self-interest to claim that nearly all students attending public high schools graduate. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports the official U.S. graduation completion rate at 86.5 percent, but independent graduation measures indicate that about 30 percent of students who enter high school leave without earning a diploma.²⁰

To understand the differences in these two assertions, Greene first assesses the method NCES uses to compile high school completion rate data. Because NCES uses the Current Population Survey, which the U.S. Census administers, NCES finds the high school

completion rate by calculating the proportion of survey respondents who identify themselves as high school graduates, which leaves the door open to lies. Also, the survey is not administered to people in institutional settings or who are incarcerated. Also, GED recipients are counted as high school graduates in the survey, which Greene points out is concerning because there is a large body of evidence that a GED is not equivalent to a high school diploma. Even more concerning is that GED recipients do not account for public school successes.²¹

Greene developed a method to calculate graduation rates by using the “enrollment figures reported by each state to the U.S. Department of Education,” which he deems highly reliable. He then “calculates the graduation rate by estimating the number of students who should have graduated in a given year if no student had dropped out.”²² Using this method, the 2000 national graduation rate calculates to 69 percent, not the 86.5 percent as reported by NCES. More alarming still, when using this calculation method, only 51 percent of black students and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduated with a regular diploma in 2001.²³

Accountability

State and federal education reforms of the past two decades have not only focused on increasing public expenditures but also on accountability. Overwhelmingly, parents and taxpayers want to be assured that students are learning basic skills needed to enter the workforce, including math, science and reading. Unfortunately, nationally recognized and respected accountability measures, such as the NAEP, SAT and ACT exams, show that students have made negligible gains if any over the past 30 years. While education policymakers have begun to demand that schools make progress, the National Education Association ignores these dismal results by demanding that “...test scores alone should never be used to punish students, teachers or schools by cutting funding, closing schools or firing teachers.”²⁴

Education Myths examines unions’ claims that teachers only teach to the test, which are too costly and cause students undue stress, leading to higher drop-out rates. Stanford University’s Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond closely examined a study by Arizona State University’s Audrey Amrein and David Berliner that the unions oftentimes cite to support such claims. Not surprisingly, Hanushek and Raymond found that these studies did not follow some basic principles of social science, including having no controls to the data set

and arbitrarily excluding some states from their sample, among other examples. Contrarily, Hanushek and Raymond examined the same evidence using sound research methods to find that “states with high-stakes testing made greater gains on NAEP than states without high-stakes testing.”²⁵

Accountability standards and the associated costs have gained public interest, especially with the passage of No Child Left Behind, which requires state-created standards for student testing. Harvard’s Hoxby calculated states’ different costs of administering these tests and found costs that varied from least expensive in South Carolina (\$1.79 per pupil) to most expensive in Delaware (\$34.02 per pupil).²⁶ These costs are paying off. Hanushek and Raymond found that between the fourth and eighth grades “students in states that had no accountability measures made a 0.7 percentage point increase in their proficiency scores,” while “students with states with tests that had explicit consequences for school, however, made gains of 1.6 percentage points.”²⁷

School Choice

Florida’s A-Plus program uses the gains of a rigorous accountability program to develop a competitive and successful voucher program. If a public school receives two failing grades in a four-year period, the state offers vouchers to its students, allowing them to attend another public school or a private school of the parent’s choice. Greene’s research shows that schools whose students had the voucher option made year-to-year gains on the Stanford-9 that were 5.9 percentile points larger than schools not threatened by vouchers. Even schools only facing the prospect of vouchers experienced a 3.5 percentile point gain in math and a 1.7 percentile point gain in reading on the Stanford-9.²⁸

The mainstream media continuously reports that the effects of school choice on participating students and the resident school district are inconclusive; opponents claim that the best students are drained from the public schools, that vouchers increase racial tensions and do not adequately serve disabled students. Greene writes six chapters shredding these myths with scientific-based research, concluding that the “highest quality research consistently shows that vouchers have positive effects for students who receive them. The results are only mixed with regard to the scope and magnitude of vouchers’ benefits.”²⁹

Each of the eight random assignment studies of five school choice programs finds that “at least some positive academic effects for students using a voucher to

attend a private school. In seven of the eight studies the benefits for voucher recipients are statistically significant.”³⁰ Greene finds that school choice students score at least as well, if not better, than their public school counterparts for about half the cost. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the average private school tuition cost \$4,689 per student for the 1999-2000 school year,³¹ while that same year the nation’s average per pupil expenditure was \$8,032.³²

Conclusion

Greene’s book, *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe—and Why It Isn’t So*, is one that education policymakers, taxpayers, and school officials alike should read carefully. The book also has chapters on several other popular myths in education, including several topics on accountability and school choice. Because Greene is committed to exemplary research, he does not shy away from taking bold stances, no matter how unpopular they might be. His brief but well-documented chapters each offer high quality research that dispel common myths in education policy and offer constructive insight into innovative education reforms.

Endnotes

- ¹ Greene, Jay P. *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe—and Why It Isn’t So*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.
- ² Greene, p. 56.
- ³ Greene, p. 8.
- ⁴ Greene, p. 9.
- ⁵ Digest of Education Statistics 2002, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2003, Table 166, as cited by Greene, p. 9.
- ⁶ Digest of Education Statistics 2002, Table 103, as cited by Greene, p. 11.
- ⁷ Feldman, Sandra. “Ranking Teacher Compensation,” AFT Website, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_teacher/mar04/AT_wws.html, found October 19, 2005.
- ⁸ Greene, p. 73.
- ⁹ Greene, p. 74-75.
- ¹⁰ Greene, p. 82.
- ¹¹ Greene, p. 24-25
- ¹² Digest of Education Statistics 2002, Table 103, as cited by Greene, p. 28.
- ¹³ Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, “Effects of Funding Incentives on Special Education Enrollment, Manhattan Institute,” December 2002, as cited by Greene, p. 33.

- ¹⁴ Class Size, National Education Association website www.nea.org/classsize/index.html, accessed October 19, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Hanushek, Eric A. “Some Findings from an Independent Investigation of the Tennessee STAR Experiment and from Other Investigations of Class Size Effects,” *Educational Evolution and Policy Analysis*, Summer 1999, as cited by Greene, p. 52.
- ¹⁶ Alan B. Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, “The Effect of Attending a Small Class in the Early Grades on College Attendance Plans,” distributed at a Project STAR press conference, April 10, 1999, as cited by Greene, p. 52.
- ¹⁷ Greene, p. 53.
- ¹⁸ Hoxby, Caroline M. “The Cost of Accountability,” in *School Accountability*, William M. Evers and Herbert J. Walberg, eds., Hoover Institution, 2002, as cited by Greene, p. 56-57.
- ¹⁹ Greene, p. 57.
- ²⁰ Greene, p. 95-96.
- ²¹ Greene, p. 96-98.
- ²² Greene, p. 98-99.
- ²³ Greene, p. 101-102
- ²⁴ “Accountability and Testing,” National Education Association Website, <http://www.nea.org/accountability/index.html>, found October 21, 2005.
- ²⁵ Raymond, Margaret E. and Eric Hanushek, “High Stakes Research,” *Education Next*, Summer 2003, as cited by Greene, p. 122.
- ²⁶ Hoxby, as cited by Greene, p. 141.
- ²⁷ Raymond and Hanushek, as cited by Greene, p. 142.
- ²⁸ Greene, Jay P. and Marcus Winters, “Competition Passes the Test,” *Education Next*, Summer 2004, as cited by Greene, p. 170.
- ²⁹ Greene, p. 149.
- ³⁰ Greene, p. 151.
- ³¹ Digest of Education Statistics 2002, Table 61, as cited by Greene, p. 160.
- ³² Digest of Education Statistics 2002, Table 166, as cited by Greene, p. 160.

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*Published by
American Legislative Exchange Council
1129 20th Street, N.W., Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036*

Publications Code: 0528 \$5.00 for nonmembers

