

Don White

From: Don White [dwhite@pekin.net]
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To: 'message@pekin.net'
Subject: Is Public Education Working? How Do We Know?

If you listen to the mainstream media, it seems that public schools are failing. While I realize that public education has room for improvement (much like all systems), I believe public educators are doing great work. Below is an excerpt from an article written by Robert Freeman titled, "Is Public Education Working? How Do We Know?" This article does an excellent job of demonstrating that the glass is half full in public school systems.

Is Public Education Working? How Do We Know?

- Last year's SAT scores were the highest in 30 years. English scores were the highest in 28 years. Math scores were the highest in 36 years. The scores were at record levels for all ethnic groups: whites; Asian-Americans; African-Americans; Native Americans; and Latinos. And they were achieved by the broadest test-taking pool in testing history. Forty-eight per cent of the nation's 2.9 million high school seniors took the test – a record. Thirty-six percent of the test takers were minorities, another record.
- Thirty years ago, only the most elite 15 percent of students took the test. And remember, elites usually test better than averages. So the fact that scores have gone up while the test-taking pool has gotten both larger and more diverse may be the most powerful performance indicator of all. These scores are a huge victory for those who have believed in and fought so hard for public education.
- Even more impressive, public schools have accomplished these new highs while confronting some of the greatest obstacles they have ever faced. Consider just a few of these almost Herculean challenges:
 - Most mothers left home in the past 30 years to join the workforce. No more Mrs. Cleaver at the door with warm cookies, milk, and help with the homework when Beaver comes home.
 - Over the past decade, American schools have absorbed the largest wave of immigrants in history. Most of these immigrants spoke no English when they came to this country. Many had little if any comparable educational preparation in the countries they left.
 - Schools have been saddled with vastly expanded responsibilities in recent years, much of it wholly unrelated to general academic performance. This includes broadened mandates for everything from sex and drug education to increased demands for help with learning and physical disabilities.
 - As a nation, we have almost completely surrendered students' socialization to television. By the time they are 18 years old, children have watched 450,000 commercials! Meanwhile they spend only 9 percent of their time in the classroom.
 - Millions of the best teachers have left teaching for other fields. This is especially true with women who used to have few career options (nursing, teaching, etc.) but who can now go into law, medicine, engineering, business, etc.
- Despite all of these challenges, and throughout one of the most vitriolic, unremitting campaigns of character assassination in American history, public education has delivered the highest performing group of graduates in over a generation.
- Against this record, those who would "privatize" public education have virtually nothing to show for their decades of hucksterish claims. In trial after trial, experiments with educational vouchers (the most popular form of school privatization) have proven a bust. Voucher programs in Milwaukee, New York, Washington D.C., and in Dayton and Cleveland, Ohio have shown no long-term gains in student achievement. And this, despite in some cases skimming the cream off the top of local student populations-recruiting only the best students while keeping problem or special-needs children out.
- For example, the longest-running evaluation of a publicly funded voucher program ever conducted, by Indiana University of the Cleveland, Ohio program, found that "student academic achievement presents no clear or consistent pattern that can be attributed to program participation." In other words, the results are no different than those for public schools. This is especially surprising because the program

participants were more white, more wealthy, and more stable than students in the local population. If privatized education can't make it with this kind of free pass, it's not going to make it.

- Besides educational failure, the economic failure of the privatization model is reflected in the dismal fate of the country's largest company providing such services. Edison Public Schools lost over \$350 million dollars trying to perfect the McStudent formula. Yet, after repeatedly failing to deliver on its promises and continually losing contracts, it was finally forced to be de-listed by NASDAQ. It has converted itself back to a private company and no longer publishes its financial information.
- Nor do "charter schools" fare any better than voucher schools. Charter schools are self-governing public schools frequently run by private corporations. They were conceived as a way to "liberate" public schools from conventional constraints in hiring, curriculum, and administration. But in August, after the most extensive examination in the history of the country, the Department of Education published data showing charter school students lag public schools students in almost every category of performance. In math, fourth graders were a full half year behind public school students.
- Given this record, it comes as no surprise that voucher and charter advocates have started changing their story. No longer do they claim superior results (not that they ever actually delivered them). Instead, they begrudgingly claim that improved public school performance is due to the threat of competition from privatization. This, of course, is conveniently unprovable but sounds a lot like the rooster taking credit for the sunrise. Meanwhile, support for public funding of private schooling has plummeted. In the past year, the number of Americans favoring such programs dropped from 46 percent to 38 percent according to a recent Gallup Organization poll.

Don

*You can choose to dream or you can dream
and do something about it. I prefer the latter.*

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