

# In Support of American Schools

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Reading the newspaper or news magazines, you would think schools are mismanaged, chaotic, violent, ineffective and ultimately a waste of taxpayers' money. Negative reports abound. A student expelled for bizarre behavior in Mississippi makes the news in Oregon where student successes are only reported locally. News reports accentuate the negative and remain largely silent on the positive. The net result is the public believes American schools are failing. Contrary to this belief schools are safer and more inclusive, and students achieving at improving levels.

## Historical Perspective

Our grammar schools were designed to give Americans a common basis for understanding Western Civilization, preparing American citizens and preparing young people for the world of work. Historically we only prepared the top students or the wealthiest students for university education. However, in the past 40 years, American schools have new expectations. We are expected to teach all students and prepare them all for post high school education. We now are responsible for teaching all students who come through our doors, including students with medical difficulties, students with cognitive impairments, students of all socio-economic classes, students who speak languages from around the world, students who are homeless and students from all ethnic affiliations. The number of students with severe disabilities in public schools has increased significantly since federal special education laws were passed in the 1970s.

## High School Completion Rate

Even with this increase in access for all students, our high school completion rate has steadily improved over the past 60 years.

### **High School Completion Rates**

Decade	H.S. Completion (% of students)
1940's	50.8
1950's	59
1960's	69.5
1970's	76.9
1980's	71.4
1990's	72
2000's	85

Source: US Dept of Ed, National Center for Ed Statistics

These increases show slow and steady progress, especially considering that we are now educating all of America's young people. However, some populations' numbers are troubling: Black and Hispanic youth are twice and four times as likely to drop out of high school as white and Asian students.

## School Safety

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2007) report *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2007* school violence is half the rate in 2005 as it was in 1995. Schools are one of the safest locations for young people to be.

## Reading and Math Performance

The National Center for Education Statistics has been measuring student achievement in core content areas since the early 1970s.

### **Reading Scores**

Age of students	1971	1980	1990	1999	2004
9 year-olds					
Males	201	210	204	209	216
Females	214	220	215	215	221
13 year-olds					
Males	250	254	251	254	254
Females	261	263	263	265	264
17 year-olds					
Males	279	282	284	281	278
Females	291	289	296	295	292

### **Math Scores**

Age of students	1973	1982	1990	1999	2004
9 year-olds					
Males	218	217	229	233	243
Females	220	221	230	231	240
13 year-olds					
Males	265	269	271	277	283
Females	267	268	270	274	279
17 year-olds					
Males	309	301	306	310	308
Females	301	296	303	307	305

Source: US Department of Ed, Digest of Education Statistics 2007

Student achievement has been increasing or stable over the past 40 years. These statistics indicate that education achievement is steadily increasing in the elementary and middle school grades but is relatively static in high school. We are holding our own, but the rest of the world is increasing at faster rates. Education is open to all students, but we must now improve the performance of all these students.

## Financial Commitment

We know a great deal about teaching. We can help students learn—given the proper resources. Given more resources, we can reach more students. Athletes in division I colleges have a wealth

of academic support services and have responded with remarkable academic success. College athletic teams have academic staffers that line up tutoring, help identify faculty to work with student athletes, monitor study halls and check attendance. Many universities spend more than \$1 million annually on academic support for athletes. Not surprisingly, the success rate is very high. Because athletic programs generate a great deal of income for these universities and the NCAA punishes schools for poor academic performance, the academic success of athletes is important. Even athletes from poor academic preparation and disadvantaged homes can achieve college success when given sufficient support. It is a priority for universities to keep their athletes eligible. If we had this same financial commitment to all students, we could assure that more students would achieve.

David Berliner has outlined six out-of-school factors (OSFs) that limit what schools can accomplish on their own:

1. Low birth weight and non-genetic prenatal influence on children
2. Inadequate medical, dental and vision care, often resulting from inadequate or nonexistent medical insurance
3. Food insecurity
4. Environmental pollutants
5. Family relations and family stress
6. Neighborhood characteristics

These OSFs are “related to a host of poverty-induced physical, sociological, and psychological problems that children often bring to school, ranging from neurological damage and attention disorders to excessive absenteeism, linguistic underdevelopment and oppositional behavior”. Also discussed in the study is a seventh OSF—extended learning opportunities—such as before-school, after-school, and summer-school programs that can help correct some of the harm caused by the above six OSF factors. (<http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>)

Schools and school partners, given financial support, could design programs that would largely overcome the factors outside of school control.

### Is the American School System Failing?

In response to the above question, my answer is “No!” American schools are performing better than any point in history. However, we aren’t successful with enough students. The world is a different now than 50 years ago. We now must educate US students to be competitive with students from other nations. Other countries are putting remarkable resources into their educational systems and they are developing very competent high school and college graduates. We must get more students to invest more energy in education and training.

Schools and teachers are succeeding every day to improve the lives and futures of young people. To achieve more success with more students, schools need the commitment and resources to serve the most disadvantaged and underperforming students. We have some success in closing the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups, but not enough. The missing elements are commitment and support to serve today’s students and policies that encourage and support schools in their mission to improve student success.