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The Same Old Miracle School in Chicago, with a High Attrition Rate

By dianeravitch

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A few years ago, [I wrote an article](#) in The New YorkTimes about “miracle schools” that weren’t. I called out Mayor Bloomberg, as well as Arne Duncan and President Obama for making grandiose claims about schools that allegedly graduated 100% of their students or saw dramatic test score gains. On closer inspection, none of the miracles was true. In the schools where the scores jumped by 50 points, they mysteriously fell in a year or two by fifty points. In the schools with amazing graduation rates, what was not disclosed was their high attrition rates, that is, the large number of kids who left before senior year. In my research, I was aided by the detective work of Gary Rubinstein in New York City and Noel Hammatt in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Gary subsequently created [a wiki site](#) to keep track of miracle schools. So far, he has not found one that holds up to close scrutiny.

But NPR just ran a [story](#) about one of the schools that I debunked in 2011. Noel Hammatt again tracked down the data and showed how many students drop out before graduation.

After NPR described Urban Academy as a charter school where 100% graduate and 100% are accepted into four-year colleges, Noel Hammatt wrote this comment:

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Noel Hammatt •

I wrote about Urban Prep years ago (see <http://bit.ly/Noel9> for my article that appeared at Harvard's Nieman Center.) and Dr. Diane Ravitch used some of my research in an Op-Ed in the New York Times (<http://bit.ly/Noel91>) to point out that the story of Urban Prep is a marketing story, not a balanced story or a "miracle school" by any means. In the year that I wrote about Urban Prep their graduation rate was nothing to brag about. It is not unusual for UP to start with 155 students in the 9th grade, and four years later graduates around 55 Seniors. What is so startling in the story line in this story was the set up... where the story line says "and barely half [of African-American males] will graduate from high school." Then the story immediately goes into data about Urban Prep, where suddenly the focus is NOT on graduation rate at all, but on the % of graduating seniors who are accepted into a four year college. No other high school looks at these numbers, and Urban Prep does it because it is the easiest to focus on while ignoring more damaging data.

What of this less stellar data? Here is what I wrote about Urban Prep in the Harvard piece. "The use of anecdotal data to promote a certain ideological version of "school reform" is only effective when the media are too lazy to dig behind a "press release" version of the news. In fact, it reminds me of the hype over a Chicago charter school highlighted for achieving 100 percent acceptance of its graduates in colleges. In spite of news outlets across the country reporting that this all-male, all African-American charter high school had beaten the odds (I in no way minimize the importance of the students being accepted into college), not one noted that only 17.2 percent of the students had passed the Reading and Mathematics portion of the Prairie State Achievement Examination, a key high school test in Illinois. Out of 1139 schools in the state taking this exam, Urban Prep Charter High School ranked 1067."

"A year after I reported the data above, ALL of the scores for Urban Prep had gone even lower. Their average passage rate on the Prairie State Achievement Examination went from 17.2% to 14.7%, making it again one of the lowest performing schools in the state. The average composite score on the ACT was a paltry 16.5, which is lower than the average score for ALL African American students in the country.

"To look at the achievement another way, not one student in the 2011 PSAE scored at a level 4 (the highest level) in either Mathematics or in Science in the entire school.

“In my article at the Nieman Center for Journalism I was basically asking journalists to dig a bit deeper into the data before creating a story based on self-reported “hype.” Apparently no one at NPR read or appreciated my work. It would be nice to think that NPR is capable of digging deeper than a headline or a schools marketing report.

“(The statement about barely half graduating from high school is misleading as well. According to the Schott Foundation the number of African American males graduating IN FOUR YEARS is 52%. This is quite different from suggesting they NEVER graduate high school. See <http://thegrio.com/2012/09/20/…> for more.”

Why does the media fall for these stories? Well, they are dramatic even if untrue. Then, to the simpleminded listener, they show that privately managed schools are better than public schools. And they satisfy a basic human longing to believe in miracles. Reading or hearing this story on NPR leads to the conclusion that there are simple solutions to difficult problems. There are not.