

FRIDAY, NOV 18, 2011 4:43 PM UTC2011-11-18T16:43:00ZL, M J, Y G:I A T

# Don't believe the education "reformers"

**Public schools are better than we think and efforts to quantify teacher performance are typically destructive**

BY GENE LYONS



(Credit: iStockphoto/RonTech2000)

Three mildly heretical thoughts about American education: First, given the impossible assignment we've given them—an egalitarian mission in a nation rapidly growing more stratified by income and class—American public schools are probably doing a better job than they ought to be. One big reason is greater professionalism among teachers. A lot has changed since I wrote a Texas Monthly article documenting the awful state of teacher education back in 1979, mostly for the better.

Despite melodramatic pronouncements to the contrary

by sundry politicians, tycoons, tycoon/politicians and media-enhanced "reformers" like former Washington, DC schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, the available evidence shows American students performing steadily better on standardized assessments of educational progress over the past 30 years.

"The only longitudinal measure of student achievement that is available to Bill Gates or anyone else," writes Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, "is the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#)." Scores on the NAEP have trended steadily upward to where the most underprivileged African-American children do better in 8th grade reading and math today than white students did back when the measurements began in 1978. But no, they haven't caught up because white kids' scores have improved too.

This doesn't mean the U.S. is turning into Finland or South Korea, to mention two small, ethnically homogeneous nations education reformers like to cite as (quite contrary) examples of how to proceed, but it does indicate that much doomsday rhetoric we hear from the likes of Rhee and Education Secretary Arne Duncan is predicated upon false assumptions.

Yes, we could be doing better; no, the sky's not falling.

Second heretical thought: Very little good can come from treating teachers like part-time cashiers at an underperforming Wal-Mart outlet. I was moved to this observation by [a sad, mordantly funny account](#) by New York Times education columnist Michael Winerip about Tennessee's brilliant new, Obama-approved scheme for teacher evaluation.

Dubbed "First to the Top" by Tennessee's Republican Gov. Bill Haslam, the plan reads like something from Joseph Heller's satirical novel "Catch-22"—a bureaucratic morass so confounding as to invite disbelief.

Surely Winerup's exaggerating. Anybody who thinks about it for 30 seconds can readily see problems in evaluating teachers according to their own students' test scores. But basing tenure decisions and pay raises on how **other people's** students perform? Yet that's exactly what Tennessee's doing.

In deference to the bureaucratic god of false objectivity, Tennessee demands hard numbers where none exist. Little kids have no standardized test scores. So kindergarten through third grade teachers there are evaluated by fifth graders' results. Seriously.

Similarly, as quantifiable measurements aren't possible for subjects like music, art, P.E., vocational and special education—that is, for fully half the public school teachers in Tennessee—those teachers must guess which of their school's standardized test results might show them in the best light.

"The P. E. teacher got information that the writing score was the best to pick," a Murfreesboro art teacher said. "He informed the home ec teacher, who passed it on to me, and I told the career development teacher."

"It's a bit like Vegas," Winerup writes "and if you pick the wrong academic subject, you lose and get a bad evaluation. While this may have nothing to do with academic performance, it does measure a teacher's ability to play the odds."

Elsewhere, the school's principal complained of wasting so much time making mandated repeat evaluations of veteran teachers that he has no clue what's going on in his building. The school's basically on auto-pilot while its leader fills out paperwork.

"One of my teachers came to me six weeks ago and said, 'Will, morale is in the toilet,'" he said. "This destroys any possibility of building a family atmosphere. It causes so much distrust."

No brief summary can do justice to Winerup's fine reporting, which you're encouraged to read. That would put you far ahead of the Times editorial board, which soon published a stern editorial praising Tennessee's "rigorous teacher evaluation system." The newspaper urged the state's leaders not to go all wobbly now simply because the Tennessee Education Association "wants it postponed until it is essentially perfect."

Actually, I suspect most Tennessee teachers would settle for marginally sane.

Third heretical thought: All educational Miracle Cures and panaceas are wrong, and many who push them are charlatans—starting with the ubiquitous Michelle Rhee. Schools get better when communities get richer, rarely the other way around. Remember when charter schools and vouchers were going to save the world? There's no evidence they've out-performed public schools.

For all the attacks on public school teachers as indolent dolts who are also somehow cunning and effective political operatives, in my experience most work harder and take their responsibilities more seriously than their presumed betters in the editorial suites and CNN talk shows.

Oh, brave new world that has such noble reformers in it.

*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* columnist Gene Lyons is a National Magazine Award winner and co-author of "The Hunting of the President" (St. Martin's Press, 2000). You can e-mail Lyons at [eugenelyons2@yahoo.com](mailto:eugenelyons2@yahoo.com).

Copyright © 2011 Salon.com. All rights reserved.