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AJR Features

From AJR, **February/March 2012** issue

Flunking the Test

The American education system has never been better, several important measures show. But you'd never know that from reading overheated media reports about "failing" schools and enthusiastic pieces on unproven "reform" efforts. Fri., March 30, 2012.

By **Paul Farhi**

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Fareed Zakaria is worried about the state of American education. To hear the [CNN host and commentator](#) tell it, the nation's schools are broken and must be "fixed" to "restore the American dream." In fact, that was the title of Zakaria's primetime special in January, "[Restoring the American Dream: Fixing Education](#)." Zakaria spent an hour thumbing through a catalog of perceived educational woes: high dropout rates, mediocre scores by American students on international tests, inadequate time spent in classrooms, unmotivated teachers and their obstructionist labor unions. "Part of the reason we're in this crisis is that we have slacked off and allowed our education system to get rigid and sclerotic," he declared.

This is odd. By many important measures – high school completion rates, college graduation, overall performance on standardized tests – America's educational attainment has never been higher. Moreover, when it comes to education, sweeping generalizations ("rigid and sclerotic") are more dangerous than usual. How could they not be? With nearly 100,000 public schools, 55 million elementary and secondary students and 2.5 million public school teachers currently at work in large, small, urban, suburban and rural districts, education may be the single most complex endeavor in America.

Zakaria's take, however, may be a perfect distillation of much of what's wrong with mainstream media coverage of education. The prevailing narrative – and let's be wary of our own sweeping generalizations here – is that the nation's educational system is in crisis, that schools are "failing," that teachers aren't up to the job and that America's economic competitiveness is threatened as a result. Just plug the phrase "failing schools" into Nexis and you'll get 544 hits in newspapers and wire stories for just one month, January 2012. Some of this reflects the institutionalization of the phrase under the No Child Left Behind Act, the landmark 2001 law that ties federal education funds to school performance on standardized tests (schools are deemed "failing" under various criteria of the law). But much of it reflects the general notion that American education, per Zakaria, is in steep decline. Only 20 years ago, the phrase was hardly uttered: "Failing schools" appeared just 13 times in mainstream news accounts in January of 1992, according to Nexis. (Neither Zakaria nor CNN would comment for this story.)

Have the nation's schools gotten noticeably lousier? Or has the coverage of them just made it seem that way?

Some schools are having a difficult time educating children – particularly children who are impoverished, speak a language other than English, move frequently or arrive at the school door neglected, abused or chronically ill. But many pieces of this complex mosaic are quite positive. First data point: American elementary and middle school students have improved their performance on the [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study](#) every four years since the tests began in 1995; they are above the international average in all categories and within a few percentage points of the global leaders (something that few news reports mention). Second data point: The number of Americans with at least some college education [has soared over the past 70 years](#), from 10 percent in 1940 to 56 percent today, even as the population has tripled and the nation has grown vastly more diverse. All told, America's long-term achievements in education are nothing short of stunning.

As the son and husband of schoolteachers, I can't say I'm unbiased on this subject. But as a journalist, I can't help but see the evident flaws in some of the reporting about education – namely, a lack of balance and historical context, and a willingness to accept the most generic and even inflammatory characterizations at face value. Journalists can't be faulted for reporting the oftentimes overheated rhetoric about educational "failure" from elected officials and prominent "reformers" (that's what reporters are supposed to do, after all). But some can certainly be faulted for not offering readers and viewers a broader frame to assess the extent of the alleged problems, and the likelihood that the proposed responses will succeed.

Check out some of the 544 articles that mentioned "failing schools" in January; they constitute an encyclopedia of loaded rhetoric, vapid reporting and unchallenged assumptions. In dozens and dozens of articles, the phrase isn't defined; it is simply accepted as commonly understood. "Several speakers said charter schools should only be allowed in areas now served by failing schools," [the Associated Press wrote](#) of a Mississippi charter school proposal. The passive construction of the phrase is telling: The schools are failing, not administrators, superintendents, curriculum writers, elected officials, students or their parents.

The running mate of "failing schools" in education stories is "reform." The word suggests a good thing – change for the sake of improvement. But in news accounts, the label often is implicitly one-sided, suggesting that "reformers" (such as proponents of vouchers or "school choice") are more virtuous than their hidebound opponents. Journalists rarely question the motives or credentials of "reformers." The Hartford Courant hit the "reformer-failing schools" jackpot [when it reported](#), "Like most people seeking education reform this year..the council wants policies that assure excellent teaching, preschool for children whose families can't afford it, and help for failing schools."

One reason schools seem to be "failing" so often in news accounts is that we simply know more than we once did about student performance. Before NCLB, schools were measured by averaging all of their students' scores, a single number that mixed high and low performers. The law required states to "disaggregate" this data – that is, to break it down by race, poverty and other sub-groups. One beneficial effect of the law is that it showed how some of these groups – poor children and non-English speakers, for example – lag children from more privileged backgrounds. But rather than evidence of a "crisis," this new data may simply have laid bare what was always true but never reported in detail.

What or who was responsible for the poorest performing schools? Quite often, news media accounts have pointed the finger at a single culprit – teachers. In late 2008, Time magazine [featured the District of Columbia's then-School Chancellor Michelle Rhee on its cover](#) wielding a broom to symbolize her desire to sweep out underperforming instructors. The magazine endorsed her approach not just as prudent but as scientific: "The biggest problem with U.S. public schools is ineffective teaching," wrote reporter Amanda Ripley, citing "decades of research." This view – a favorite of wealthy education "reformers" such as Bill Gates and real estate developer Eli Broad – was also a theme in the critically adored documentary "Waiting for 'Superman,'" which featured Rhee.

But like "failing schools" and "crisis," the phrase "ineffective teachers" has become media shorthand (it appeared 136 times in news accounts during January alone, Nexis says). And given the many factors that affect learning, it also looks like scapegoating. NPR's Tovia Smith, for example, [concluded her story](#) in early March about a program that holds back third graders who are having trouble reading this way: "As another academic put it: This policy flunks kids for failing to learn, but given how widespread the problem is, maybe it's the school that should flunk for failing to teach."

The notion that education is in "crisis" – that is, in a moment of special danger – is another journalistic favorite. While few reporters ever mention it, anxiety over the nation's educational achievement is probably older than the nation. Zakaria's concern that American students aren't being prepared for the modern workforce echoes the comments of business leaders at the turn of the century – the 19th century. Then as now, they worried that schools weren't producing enough educated workers for an economy undergoing rapid technological change.

Nor are the fears that international competitors are bypassing us without precedent. Five months after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in October 1957, Life magazine contrasted the rigorous academic workload and extracurricular activities of a Moscow teenager (physics and chemistry courses, chess club) with the carefree lifestyle of a Chicago schoolboy (sock hops and soda shop dates with his girlfriend). The cover line: "Crisis in Education." Cold War worries gave way to fears that Japan was gaining on us in the 1980s; the Reagan-era education reform manifesto "A Nation at Risk" warned that "a rising tide of mediocrity" was threatening "our very future as a nation and a people."

"The idea that we have a crisis in American education, that there is pervasive failure, starts with policy makers," says Pedro Noguera, the eminent education researcher and New York University professor. "This is the line we hear in D.C. and in state capitals. There are certainly areas in which we're lacking, but when you report it that way, it doesn't at all acknowledge the complexity of the situation [and] where we're doing quite well. The discussion is quite simplistic. I'm not sure why exactly. My suspicion is that the media has trouble with complexity."

Noguera praises some of the journalism about education, such as work by the New York Times and NPR, two outlets that have full-time, veteran reporters covering the subject. He also noted a "Dan Rather Reports" program on the little-seen HDNet channel last year that explored the link between school performance and poverty, a subject often ignored or noted only in passing in many stories about academic achievement.

The news media's general portrayal may help explain a striking disconnect in public attitudes about public education. Since 1984, a year after the publication of "A Nation at Risk," the [Gallup Organization has asked parents](#) to assess their local schools, and the public to rate schools generally. In 2011, the percentage of parents who gave their children's school an A grade was at its highest ever (37 percent), whereas only 1 percent of respondents rated the nation's schools that way. Why the disparity in perceived quality? Gallup asked people about that, too. Mostly, it was because people knew about their local schools through direct experience. They only learned about the state of education nationally through the news media.

The leading, or at least most widely viewed, source of education reporting is NBC News, which covers the topic on multiple programs and platforms – "NBC Nightly News," the "Today" show, MSNBC and Telemundo, among others. It is the only commercial broadcast network to employ a full-time education reporter, Rehema Ellis. NBC is so devoted to education reporting that in 2010 it began branding its coverage under its own banner, "[Education Nation](#)." It has also gone beyond mere reporting by hosting an annual education "summit" that last fall brought together 10 governors, former President Bill Clinton, former First Lady Laura Bush, educators and other dignitaries at its Rockefeller Center headquarters to discuss ways to improve education.

"We've really tried to put a very bright spotlight" on this topic, NBC News President Steve Capus said in an interview. "We felt the subject matter was important, and it wasn't getting as much attention as it deserved." Result? Capus, who used to cover school board meetings in the Philadelphia area as a young stringer, proudly points to an Aspen Institute study showing that one in five Americans has heard of "Education Nation" and almost one in 10 has seen some of its reporting.

But while "Education Nation" occasionally escapes the "crisis-in-education" paradigm, its gaze is squarely on perceived flaws and, yes, failing schools. "America's public school students are struggling," said Ellis, beginning a "Nightly News" story during the NBC-sponsored summit in September. The segment included an NBC-commissioned poll showing widespread public dissatisfaction with public schools. Gallup's multiyear findings on the same topic weren't mentioned.

In the past six months, NBC has done "Education Nation" stories on online public schools; on the success of Shanghai's students on an international exams; on "unschooling" (a less structured version of home-schooling); and on a "wave" of new "parent trigger" laws that allow parents to petition for dramatic changes in "troubled" local schools, including firing teachers (in fact, only three states have enacted such laws).

Yet NBC and "Education Nation" have rarely looked closely at the effect of poverty and class, the single greatest variable in educational achievement. Academic research has shown for many years that poor children, or those born to parents who are poorly educated themselves, don't do as well in school as better-off students. More recent work by, among others, Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University, suggests that the achievement gap between rich and poor children has grown wider since the 1960s, reflecting in part the nation's growing economic disparity. The problem is vast – some 22 percent of American children live in poverty, the highest among Western democracies.

Instead, NBC has concentrated on initiatives favored by self-styled education reformers. The network has been particularly generous to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into promoting teacher merit pay proposals and privately run charter schools – an agenda strongly opposed by many public school teachers, labor unions and educators. (Zakaria also featured Bill Gates on his CNN special.)

During its first "Education Nation" summit in 2010, for example, "NBC Nightly News" aired a profile of a Gates Foundation initiative, "Measures of Effective Teaching," which seeks to create a database of effective teaching methods. The reporter was former NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw. During the second summit last fall, [Brokaw showed up on "Today"](#) with Melinda Gates to discuss the same Gates initiative. Turning from reporter to advocate, Brokaw told host Natalie Morales, "So what Bill and Melinda have done, and it's a great credit to them, and it's a great gift to this country, is that they have taken the kind of episodic values that we know about teaching and they've put them together in a way that everyone can learn from them. So that's a big, big step."

Brokaw also put his gravitas behind Gates and other billionaire education reformers in a syndicated column that appeared in newspapers during the NBC summit in 2011, writing that "Entrepreneurs and captains of industry such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, home building tycoon Eli Broad, hedge fund billionaires in New York's Robin Hood Foundation, have put education reform and excellence at the top of their personal and financial agenda." Brokaw didn't mention the objections to these "reforms" from teachers, nor ask why billionaires should be accorded expert status on education policy in the first place.

(An NBC spokeswoman declined to make Brokaw and Ellis available for comment, saying that the story sounded "negative.")

NBC News does more than just report on the "reform" movement; it's also in business with those who are

promoting it. Among the corporate sponsors of its "Education Nation" summits are the for-profit education company University of Phoenix, the book publisher Scholastic Inc. and...the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Remember that Aspen Institute study showing broad public awareness of NBC's "Education Nation" efforts? It was funded by the Gates Foundation.

Capus says such a relationship doesn't pose a conflict of interest for the network's journalists because an editorial "firewall" prohibits sponsors from influencing coverage. Nevertheless, representatives of each of these sponsors, including Melinda Gates and Scholastic Senior Vice President Francie Alexander, have appeared repeatedly on "Today" and "NBC Nightly News" to discuss various education proposals and ideas (their financial connection to NBC News has never been disclosed on the air, according to a Nexis search). Meghan Pianta, an NBC spokeswoman, defended using the billionaire couple as a news source because of their "prominence and importance in the education debate."

Some teachers, on the other hand, can't help feeling that the network has stacked the deck in favor of the "reform" agenda. NBC's approach "is beneficial to those who promote privatizing schools, those who peddle tests and tests to prepare for tests, and curriculum based on tests to prepare for tests," wrote Randy Turner, an English teacher in Joplin, Missouri, on The Huffington Post last fall, as he watched the network cover its own summit. "It is also beneficial to those whose chief goal is to eliminate unions of all kinds, including those representing teachers."

On a more prosaic level, veteran education reporters say they face a simple yet profound barrier to doing their job: It's hard to get inside a classroom these days. They say administrators are wary about putting potential problems on display, particularly in the wake of No Child Left Behind and the Obama Administration's initiative, Race to the Top.

"School systems are crazed about controlling the message," says Linda Perlstein, author of two books about schools and, until recently, public editor of the Education Writers Association. "Access is so constricted." As a result, she says, "There's great underreporting of what happens in classroom, and it's just getting worse."

Perlstein spent three school years in classrooms to report a series about middle school for the Washington Post in 2000, and for her books, "Not Much Just Chillin'" (about middle schoolers in Columbia, Maryland) and "Tested" (about high-stakes tests). But Perlstein says other reporters were never able to gain similar access to other schools, including those in Washington, D.C., where the reform efforts of former Schools Chancellor Rhee attracted national attention.

Even with a cooperative principal or school superintendent, few reporters could make the lengthy commitment that Perlstein did in her reporting. That means journalists don't get to see the very thing they're reporting about. Imagine if sportswriters never got to see athletes play or political reporters never attended a campaign rally. Some districts even forbid teachers from speaking to the media on the record outside the classroom.

What to do? "You rely more and more on talking heads and less on what a school looks like," Perlstein says. She adds, "That matters." Ironically, superintendents and administrators "always tell me that the media gets it wrong. Well, how can we get it right when they won't talk to us?"

This compels education journalists to talk to secondary sources: administrators and bureaucrats, labor leaders, politicians and the occasional billionaire. Not necessarily a bad thing, since at the moment, there are perhaps a dozen ideas (tenure reform, vouchers, charter schools, teacher accountability, etc.) floating around and plenty of disagreement about how or whether to implement them.

But pronouncements and policy nostrums often don't get the checking they deserve. "Some reporters don't do enough to synthesize and explain the wealth of peer-reviewed research available on the proposals being batted around," says Jessica Calefati, an up-and-coming education reporter at the Star-Ledger in Newark. For example, if a school district or a state is pushing for teacher merit pay, it behooves a reporter to point out that few studies link merit pay with increased student achievement, she says. Some reporters, says Calefati, "gloss over the nuance."

Washington Post education blogger Valerie Strauss goes much further, giving her media colleagues an F for legwork. "The mainstream media has failed to do due diligence [on the school reform agenda] for over a decade," she says. "They bought into the rhetoric of school reform and testing" mandated by No Child Left Behind. As for President Barack Obama's proposed Race to the Top initiatives, Strauss faults the news media for failing to ask whether "the rhetoric matches the practice. There's nothing new under the sun. Some of the things that didn't work 30, 40 or 50 years ago still don't work....We've taken as truth whatever Bill Gates says."

Strauss points out that leading Democrats, such as Obama, and Republicans have both embraced school choice and charter schools to some degree. This unusual political comity has led some mainstream outlets to position "reform" as a centrist, bipartisan idea, she says. There are a few consistently skeptical voices – she mentions New York Times education columnist Michael Winerip, and I'd mention Strauss – but for the most part, she says, the media have romanticized reform figures like Gates and Rhee, and the KIPP Schools, the darlings of the private charter movement.

"The mainstream media hasn't been digging," Strauss asserts. "Generally, reporters have gone along with the reform of the day. Well, I've got news for you: It's much more complicated than that."