



Ask This

Miracle schools, vouchers and all that educational flim-flam

ASK THIS |
April 13, 2011



An Oakland charter school kindergarten class in December 2010. Diane Ravitch says reporters should check out the groups promoting charters and high-stakes testing and policies that link teacher evaluations to test scores. (AP photo)

Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch tells reporters to

dig deep when states or school districts or even individual schools claim big educational gains; chances are someone is gaming the system. She shows how such gaming works – and when it comes to asking the right questions, Ravitch could be anyone’s assignment editor.

By Diane Ravitch
gardendr@gmail.com

Be skeptical of miracle schools. Sometimes their dramatic gains disappear in a year or two or three. Most such claims rely on cheating or gaming the system or on intensive test prep that involves teaching children how to answer test questions. These same children, having learned to take tests, may actually be very poorly educated, even in the subjects where their scores were rising.

Whenever a school has a dramatic increase in test scores in only one or two years, ask questions about the participation rate: How many kids started the school? How many were tested? Were low-performing students held back in a previous grade to inflate the scores? Reporters should also check to see if there has been any verification to make sure that there was no cheating (e.g., a high

 Share

 Email to a Friend

 Printer Friendly

 Read/Submit comments to this article

erasure rate, changing scores from wrong to right). Who graded the papers? Did teachers have access to the test questions before the test was given? If so, they might have taught the test questions during practice sessions.

Ask questions of charter schools about skimming, excluding, winnowing out low-scoring students. Ask about the proportion of special ed students, and watch for numbers of spec-ed that do not include the most severely disabled. Many charters take children with the mildest disabilities while leaving the most challenging spec-ed to the regular public schools. Ask about the proportion of Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners (LEP/ELL) students. Most charters have exceptionally small proportions of LEP/ELL as compared to local public schools.

Whenever a district has a dramatic increase in test scores, look for cheating, gaming the system, intensive investment in test prep. Testing is NOT instruction. It is meant to assess instruction, not to substitute for it.

When a charter school reports miraculous results, be sure to ask about the attrition rate. Some highly successful charters push out low-performing kids and their enrollment falls over the years (and the departing students are not replaced). Recently Arne Duncan hailed a "miracle" school in Chicago—[Urban Prep](#)—where all the students who graduated were accepted into college. But 150 students started and only 107 graduated. The 107 graduates had much lower test scores than the average for Chicago public school students. The school did a good job of getting the students into college (perhaps that was a miracle) but they were not better educated than students in the regular public schools.

In another instance, one of the "amazing" schools singled out by the 2010 documentary "[Waiting for Superman](#)" admits 140 students, but only 34 graduated. That's a 75 per cent attrition rate. Some miracle.

One of the central claims made in "Waiting for Superman" is that 70 per cent of eighth grade students in the USA read "below grade level." That statistic is wrong. Someone misread the federal testing program data. The relevant figure was "below basic." Twenty five per cent of eighth grade students are "below basic," not 70 per cent.

What is the state's passing mark on its tests? In some states, a student may be considered proficient by answering correctly only a minority of the questions on the test. There have been instances of states lowering the passing mark (New York and Illinois, for example), to raise the proportion of students marked proficient. New York dropped its passing mark in some subjects and some grades over a four-year period, leading to ecstatic press coverage about rising numbers of students who were proficient. When the game was revealed by an independent audit (a rarity), the state had to admit that almost all the previous gains were phony.

Be aware of the source of research about school choice. Many advocacy organizations release “studies” that have not been peer-reviewed, with the intent to proving that choice is successful.

Look at what has happened in Milwaukee, where researchers used to argue about whether vouchers were working. The argument is over. After 20 years of vouchers, even voucher advocates admit that students in voucher schools are doing no better than students in regular public schools and students in charters. And all three sectors are doing poorly. The theory of vouchers and charters is that competition will cause achievement to go up in public schools, and a rising tide will lift all boats. But according to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress, black students in Milwaukee public schools score below black students in Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. And voucher students do no better! So voucher advocates now say that the goal of vouchers is not to improve test scores but to increase parental involvement or to provide choice for its own sake. That is called moving the goal posts.

Have you looked at the broad range of charter studies? With only one exception, they show that charters on average do not produce better academic results than regular public schools. The one exception was Caroline Hoxby’s study of NYC charters. In that study, which was not peer-reviewed, she claimed that students who attended charters for nine years would close the Scarsdale-Harlem gap. The press gave that study huge attention and credibility, but no one noticed that there were very few students who had attended a charter in NYC for nine years or that Hoxby did not provide a number for the students who had closed the gap. It appears that her study was an extrapolation, and it was an extrapolation based on NYC and NY state’s inflated and unreliable test scores (see above). When NYC’s charter scores are reported, they range widely from very abysmal (a six per cent pass rate) to exceptional (100 per cent pass rate).

Follow the money: One of the funders of “Waiting for Superman” was [Philip Anschutz](#), a billionaire who gives generously to free-market, pro-voucher think tanks. Another funder was previously CEO of a string of for-profit postsecondary institutions.

Follow the money: Check out the groups promoting charters and high-stakes testing and policies that link teacher evaluations to test scores. In particular, who is on the board of Democrats for Education Reform? Why the huge interest of Wall St. hedge fund managers and big real estate moguls in charters? What are the connections among DFER, Education Reform Now, Stand for Children, the state CAN organizations (e.g., ConnCAN), and a host of other groups promoting privatization and de-professionalization? Also NewSchools Venture Fund? And the big foundations: Gates, Walton, Broad.

Since no high-performing nations are pursuing such policies, why are these well-funded groups promoting policies that have so little evidence behind them?

Why has the Obama administration embraced the accountability policies of the Bush administration? Why does the president publicly say he is against standardized testing at the same time that his administration is demanding more emphasis on standardized testing?

Why has the Obama administration embraced choice, which was a staple of the GOP agenda?

Why do the corporate reformers promote merit pay, even though study after study has shown that it has no effect on test scores?

Principles for reporters: Be skeptical; don't believe in miracles; follow the money.



(Photo by Jack Miller)

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a distinguished historian of American education. [MORE ►](#)
E-mail: gardendr@gmail.com