

Bad Rap On the Schools

Bad schools are not going to sink the American economy. Despite what the headlines say, U.S. students fare well in international comparisons. It's the schools serving the poor that demand our attention.

BY JAY MATHEWS

OH, LOOK. THERE'S A NEW FILM THAT PORTRAYS American teenagers as distracted slackers who don't stand a chance against the zealous young strivers in China and India. It must be an election year, when American politicians, egged on by corporate leaders, suddenly become indignant about the state of America's public schools. If we don't do something, they thunder, our children will wind up working as bellhops in resorts owned by those Asian go-getters.

The one-hour documentary, conceived and financed by Robert A. Compton, a high-tech entrepreneur, follows two teenagers in Carmel, Indiana, as they sporadically apply themselves to their studies in their spare time between afterschool jobs and sports. The film, called *Two Million Minutes*, cuts to similar pairs of high schoolers in India and China who do little but attend classes, labor over homework, and work with their tutors. *Two Million Minutes* has

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become a key part of the ED in '08 campaign, a \$60 million effort by Bill Gates and other wealthy worriers to convince the presidential candidates to get serious about fixing our schools.

Most of the time, I cheer such well-intentioned and powerful promoters of academic achievement. I have been writing about the lack of challenge in American high schools for 25 years. It astonishes me that we treat many high schoolers as if they were intellectual infants, actively discouraging them from taking the college-level Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses that would prepare them for higher education and add some challenge to their bland high school curricula. I share what I imagine is Bill Gates's distress at seeing Carmel High's Brittany Brechbuhl watching *Grey's Anatomy* on television with her friends while they make half-hearted stabs at their math homework.

Yet it is one thing to say that teenagers don't devote enough time to their studies and another to claim that American schools have fallen behind those in the rest of the world, crippling U.S. economic com-

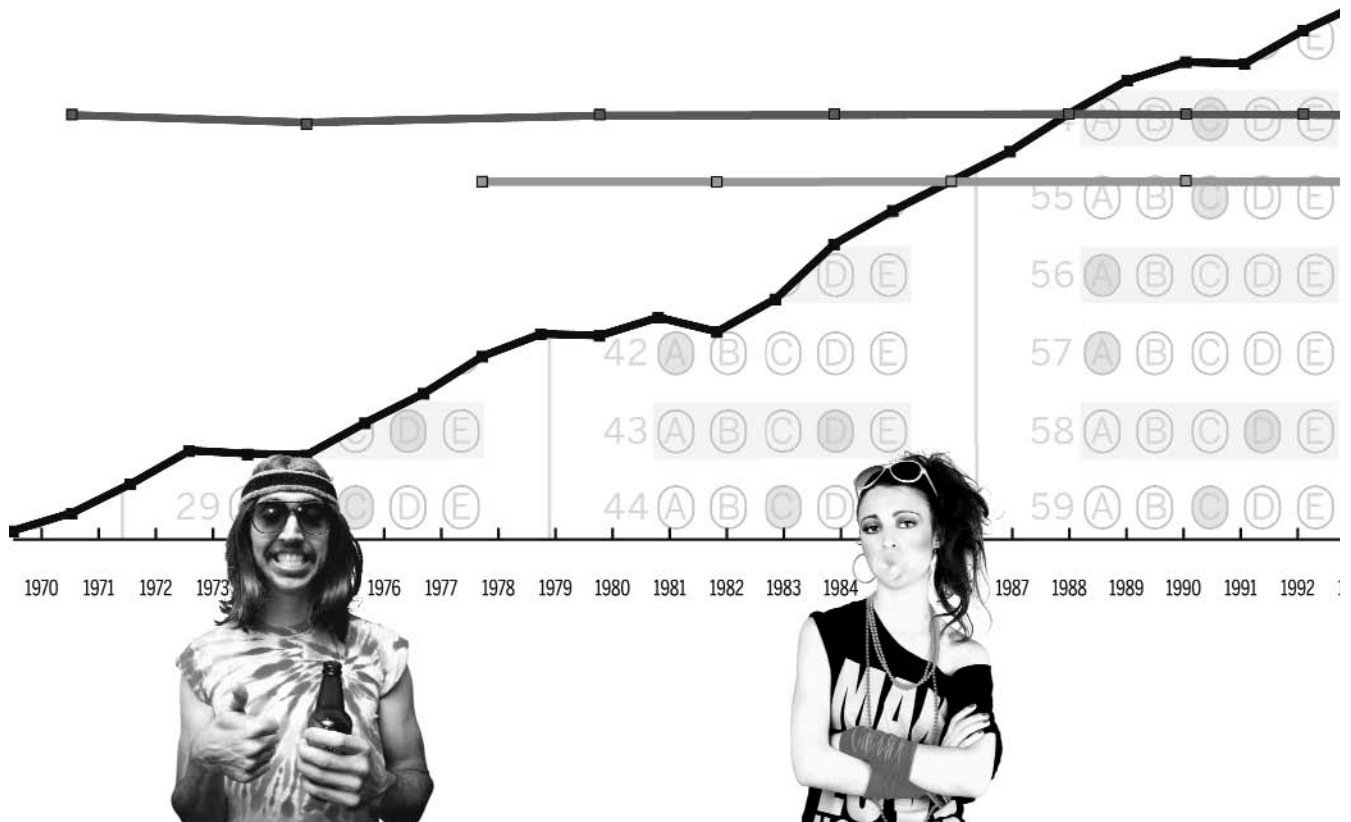
petitiveness. That is the argument of *Two Million Minutes* and a good number of very intelligent people, such as former IBM chief Louis V. Gerstner Jr., *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman, and former Colorado governor and Los Angeles school superintendent Roy Romer. Their misunderstanding is based on some truths: U.S. businesses are having trouble hiring skilled people and must often go abroad to find more. American high schools have, on average, shown no significant improvement in math and reading in the last 30 years. But the larger truth is that American education is vastly superior to the stunted, impoverished school systems of China and India, which, despite impressive surges of economic growth, are still relatively poor, developing countries.

Making voters angry about education by citing foreign threats is certainly one way to focus attention on the schools, but the flimsy argument is sure to collapse as intelligent people discover the holes in it. It would be better if those of us who want to improve the

schools went into this debate armed with the most potent argument: More than 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), we still have separate and unequal education.

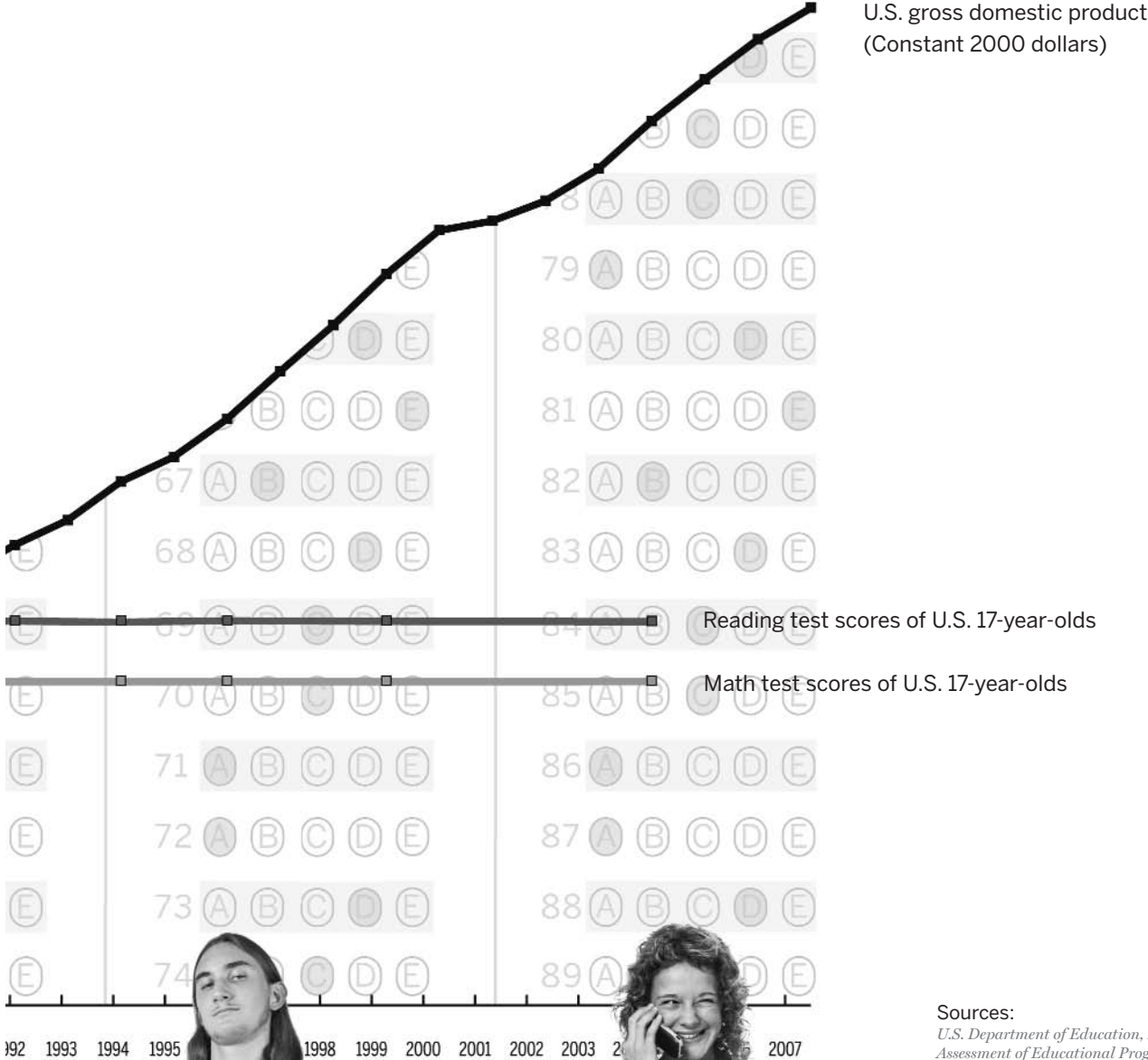
Our best public schools are first-rate, producing more intense, involved, and creative A-plus students than our most prestigious colleges have room for. That is why less-known institutions such as Claremont McKenna, Rhodes, and Hampshire are drawing many freshmen just as smart as the ones at Princeton. The top 70 percent of U.S. public high schools are pretty good, certainly better than they have ever been, thanks to a growing movement to offer Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Our real problem is the bottom 30 percent of U.S. schools, those in urban and rural communities full of low-income children. We



A Correlation That Flunks

While student test scores, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, have gone nowhere since the 1970s, the U.S. economy has soared.



Sources:
U.S. Department of Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress
U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis

have seen enough successful schools in such areas to know that many of those children are just as capable of being great scientists, doctors, and executives as suburban children are. But most low-income schools in the United States are simply bad. Not only are we denying the children who attend them the equal education that is their right, but we are squandering almost a third of our intellectual capital. We are beat-

600,000 engineers in the previous year, India graduated 350,000, and poor, declining America could manage only 70,000. The cover of *Fortune* showed a buff Chinese beach bully looming over a skinny Uncle Sam. The headline said, "Is the U.S. a 97-Pound Weakling?"

This argument became a favorite target for collectors of bad data, including Carl Bialik, *The Wall*

Street Journal's "Numbers Guy," educational psychologist and author Gerald W. Bracey, and a Duke University research team led by Vivek Wadhwa. The source of the China numbers seemed to be the *China Statistical Yearbook*, a Chinese government publication, which said that the country

**THOSE WHO RAISE HYSTERICAL
alarms about American schools usually
overlook the complexities involved in inter-
national comparisons.**

ing the world economically, but with one hand tied behind our back.

As even some of the experts who appear in *Two Million Minutes* note, the notion that the United States is losing the international economic race is implausible. China and India may be growing quickly, but they remain far behind and are weighed down by huge, impoverished rural populations. Both countries are going to continue to send many of their brightest young people to study at U.S. universities. Stupidly conceived and administered immigration laws give many of these foreign students little choice but to leave once they receive their degrees. Given the chance, many more are likely to stay in the United States, where the jobs pay better; creativity in all fields, including politics, is encouraged; and—another blow to education critics—the colleges their children would attend are far better and more accessible.

Most commentary on the subject leaves the impression that China and India are going to bury the United States in an avalanche of new technology. Consider, for example, a much-cited 2005 *Fortune* article that included the claim that China turned out

produced 644,000 engineering graduates in 2004. But a subsequent McKinsey Global Institute report said that about half of those "engineers" would be no more than technicians in the United States. Bialik could not find a source for the 350,000 Indian engineers, but National Science Foundation officials told him that the real number was unlikely to be anywhere near that.

In a 2005 report, the Duke researchers concluded that the United States produced 137,437 engineers with at least a bachelor's degree in the most recent year, while India produced 112,000 and China 351,537. "That's more U.S. degrees per million residents than in either other nation," Bracey said in *The Washington Post*. Yet he found the discredited numbers still presented as fact by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez, and Senator John W. Warner (R.-Va.).

The *Fortune* article belongs to an emerging genre of news stories that raise hysterical alarms about the deficiencies of American education in international comparisons while completely overlooking the complexities involved in such studies.

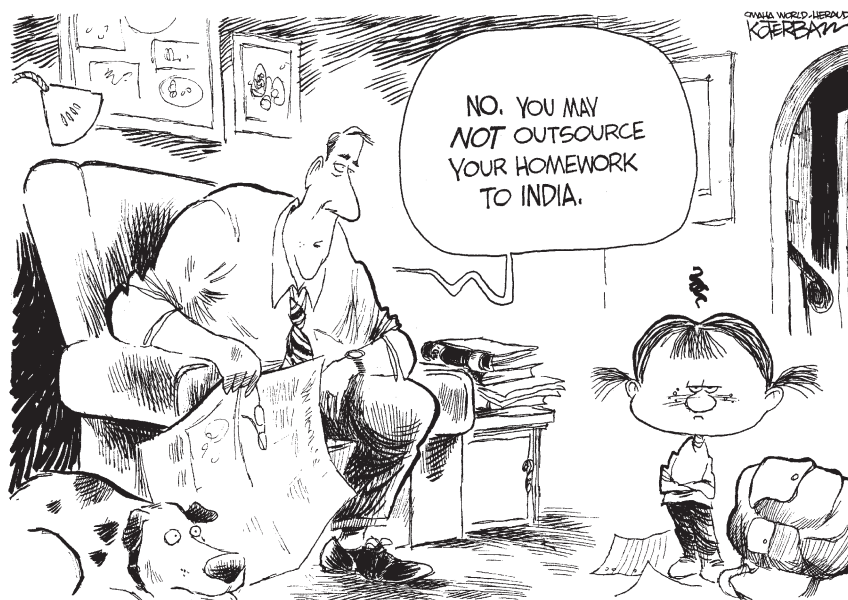
In "More Than a Horse Race" (2007), Jim Hull, a policy analyst at the Center for Public Education, which is affiliated with the National School Boards

Association, analyzed four major studies of school achievement around the world. When Hull looked carefully at the numbers, he found that the United States did much better than the headlines suggest. In reading, only three nations' students did significantly better than their U.S. elementary and high school counterparts. "The reading performance of U.S. fourth graders was particularly strong," Hull said. "They scored above the international level . . . while our 15-year-olds scored slightly above the average." In science, fourth and eighth graders were above the international average, and only three countries did significantly better than the United States at the elementary school level. (It is worth noting that the studies Hull examined did not include India and China, in part because schooling is so minimal for so many children in these two countries that their performance isn't comparable.)

Hull also examined the frequent charge that American students fare well in international comparisons at earlier ages but fade as they enter their teen years. Some studies did show U.S. fourth graders doing relatively well, eighth graders about average, and high school students below average. But when the American Institutes of Research, a Washington-based think tank, did a more careful, apples-to-apples comparison, making sure the students were actually at the same grade level, those differences disappeared.

Bracey has detected the precise flaws that warp international comparisons. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) of 1999, for instance, seemed to show that American high school students were far behind in advanced

math. But the alarming news accounts that followed the study's release—and the politicians who echoed them—failed to note an important caveat. A significant portion of the U.S. test takers, unlike the overseas students, had not yet gotten beyond precalculus. The U.S. TIMMS administrators included those students in their sample because, one told Bracey, "we just wanted to see how they'd do." They had not concerned themselves with how the results might look in the newspapers. When the TIMMS experts later re-analyzed the data, comparing overseas students only to American high schoolers who had taken Advanced



Placement calculus, the United States did much better. That news, however, wasn't widely reported.

Bracey found other differences that distorted international comparisons. In Europe, many teenagers who hold jobs are tracked into nonacademic schools, but American youngsters commonly combine traditional school and work. Bracey noticed that 55 percent of the Americans tested in the TIMMS study reported working more than 20 hours a week, the point at which, research shows, after-school jobs begin to hurt academic performance. Few European students seem to devote as much time to after-school jobs. In Sweden, the only country for

which Bracey found hard data, only 16 percent of students worked more than 20 hours per week.

There is, in any event, scant evidence that test scores have much to do with national economic performance. In the late 1980s, when Japan still seemed on its way to becoming the world's economic superpower, U.S. newspapers published glowing stories about the lofty test scores achieved by Japanese students and suggested that failures of American public education had helped bring on bad times in the United States. By 1998, despite the lack of any significant change in math and reading scores, the U.S. economy was back on top. The Japanese still had good schools, but the bottom had dropped out of their economy (which still hasn't fully recovered). No story.

Robert J. Samuelson, a columnist for *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post*, analyzed the disconnect between test scores and economic growth in a column reprinted in his 2001 book, *Untruth: Why the Conventional Wisdom Is (Almost Always) Wrong*. Samuelson told of the computer guru at *Newsweek's* Washington bureau who had an English degree but found, through a series of jobs that taught him new skills, that he had become a technological expert indispensable to Samuelson and his colleagues. "People don't learn only at school," Samuelson concluded. "If they did, we'd be doomed. In isolation, test scores hardly count. What counts—for the economy, at least—is what people do at work. . . . On the job, people learn from supervisors, mentors, coworkers, customers and—most important—experience. One Labor Department study estimates that about 70 percent of training in the workplace is informal. Culturally, this is America's strong suit." What keeps the American economy so productive, Samuelson said, is its flexibility. American companies "have more freedom to set pay rates, hire and fire, and alter work practices."

Other countries have job training too. The Germans are praised for bringing teenagers to a technical level that makes them valuable in the workplace right after high school. But the U.S. system excels all others in allowing enough freedom for people to flounder and fail and change jobs until they find the niche where their talents are put to best use. It's dis-

orderly and unbusinesslike, but it works.

American schools have the same ability to innovate on the run, even if not as freely as one might wish, and foreign educators have begun to realize that they may have something to learn from them. Some U.S. schools now regularly host visiting educators from China, Singapore, and Japan, who want to know how American teachers are able to produce such creative students. They have noticed that American schools produce Nobel Prize winners, and theirs don't. The Chinese have been particularly impressed by the fact that every Nobel laureate of Chinese descent was educated outside China.

None of this is to say that American schools don't have many flaws. But their worst failure is that they betray so many of America's talented young people. The few inner-city schools that are successfully raising the achievement levels of low-income children don't worry about beating the Chinese and the Indians. Their foes are the apathy and hopelessness that lead many young Americans, and their parents, to think they have no chance of getting to college or finding a good job. Yet the success stories show that we can provide these children the education they deserve. It takes, among other things, longer school days and more careful selection and training of teachers and principals. And it takes a commitment to deliver on the American promise of justice and equality.

The politicians and business executives who rail about foreign competition are aware of the needs of America's educationally dispossessed children, but they don't talk about them much. That wouldn't win them as much attention from the news media, and it wouldn't sell as many books. We need a *Two Million Minutes* that tells a different story, about students who are striving against the odds to make their way to academic success at charter schools in places such as Harlem, Anacostia, and Oakland. That would turn the debate in a more realistic direction and illuminate our real education challenge—not beating economic threats from abroad, but beating our doubts about our ability to help the American children who need it most. ■