

K-12 Education Reality Check

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With politicians lauding education improvement and promises to do better through additional tinkering with our public school system, this is an especially opportune time for a 'Nation at Risk' reality check. K-12 education is still the national emergency announced by the 1983 Nation at Risk report produced by a bipartisan, blue ribbon national commission, and reinforced by a 2001 national commission report on national security, and by published pronouncements by President Bush's former education secretary, Rod Paige, and assistant secretary Hickok. Federal, state, and local tinkering with the 'system' hasn't accomplished much. With the passage of 23 years since 'Nation at Risk', we've let down most of another two cohorts of schoolchildren; most of the 100 million children that are now severely under-educated (for what we spent and what they need) young adults. This is not just an inner city problem. For the roughly \$11,000 per year (2005 \$\$) we spend on the average public school user, even the top performers could/should have done even better; most of them a lot better. We 'mainstream' the top students (= bore and dumb down) to avoid lowering the self-esteem of the less talented.

According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress ("The Nation's Report Card") the average Texas eighth grade science and reading scores are below the national average of a nation at risk!!! The 8th grade Texas math scores are just barely above the national average. For most subjects and most states, the NAEP trends are a flat line. Typically easier state tests sometimes show improvement when the NAEP scores do not. NAEP does not yet regularly publish a wide array of results for 12th graders, but in virtually all instances where older children are tested, the results are worse than for younger children. The longer children are in the system, the smaller the share that performs up to an objective standard for what a child of that age ought to know.

So, with that in mind, exactly how are Texas eighth graders doing? In reading, 24 percent are proficient!!! 31 percent are below basic!!! In math, 25 percent are proficient!!! 28 percent are below basic!!! In science, 21 percent are proficient!!! 47 percent are below basic!!! This is the situation after years of promises and much frenzied effort to make the current K-12 system work better. How can anyone imagining themselves to be a public servant or a leader respond to such numbers with more policy tinkering? The fundamental tenets of the current system are in complete denial of what we know about how children learn and how people generally respond to the incentives inherent in our current education funding and governance methods. We need a complete overhaul of the system. Is there anyone out there ready and willing to carry this message to the general public; to risk their political career to lead a misinformed, under-educated public to support the needed policy changes, namely to exploit freedom and free enterprise to create the relentlessly improving diverse menu of schooling choices we need to serve a diverse student population? The Entrepreneurial Conservatism Institute aims to support such leaders with the information they need to sell effective policies, and then enact and implement them.