

[no dumbing down]

# What Education Crisis?

Johnny still can't read—but that's nothing new.

By Gregory Cochran

MANY ARE UNDER the impression that American education is in decline. But they're wrong. Average educational achievement has been fairly stable for 60 years or more.

Why, you may ask, do they think that there has been decline? People have lots of reasons for thinking this. Not good reasons, but reasons. Many rely on personal observations—anecdotes, really. Some recall how all middle-school kids read “Evangeline” and “Hiawatha” and the *Congressional Record* back in their day. Of course, you can't rely on that kind of anecdotal evidence any more than you can predict election results by polling your three best friends. For every anecdote that supports a point, there is another that undermines it. Back in my day, my fourth-grade teacher said that you couldn't see the moon in the daytime and that anteaters ate dead people. Experience has proven her wrong.

Sometimes people assume that their obviously unusual experience is typical. They attended More Science High School and casually assume that everyone else did too. I am reminded of the little old lady of my acquaintance who informed me that being a young mother was much easier in her day since back then everyone had servants.

In a typical example, the comparison is between the performances of a high-school graduate in 1900 and today. Back in 1900, 6.4 percent of kids graduated

from high school, while today around 70 percent do. The top 6 percent are going to score higher than the top 70 percent, all else equal, just as the tallest men of 1900 were taller than the average man today. But that hardly proves that the average man has gotten shorter or that the average 18-year-old today knows less than the average 18-year-old did in 1900. A high-school degree doesn't mean what it used to—but that doesn't indicate that education has declined. If I misused my mystic powers and conferred a Ph.D. on every man, woman, and child in the United States, a Ph.D. wouldn't mean what it used to, but no one would know any less than he did the day before.

Making essentially the same error, declinists often cite tests given to unrepresentative samples. People love to talk about average changes in SAT results, but that's a terrible source of data for comparisons, mainly because there are vast differences in the fraction of kids who take the SAT in different states and substantial differences between different years. There's nothing wrong with the SAT in terms of predicting college performance, but it isn't given to a representative picture of the student population. In New Jersey, about 40 percent of seniors take the SAT, while roughly 10 percent take it in Iowa, where people are more likely to take the ACT. That 10 percent in Iowa that is hoping to go to Stanford or Yale scores higher, on aver-

age, than the 40 percent taking it in New Jersey, but any state's top 10 percent will beat another state's top 40.

People are also confused by ethnic change. The classic example would be a school in the Bronx, where 50 years ago the students were Jewish but now most are Puerto Rican. Test scores have declined dramatically. Doesn't this mean that education has gone to the dogs? No. Jewish kids do well (on average) in every kind of school, while blacks and Hispanics do poorly in every kind of school—rich or poor, slum or suburb. This “changing neighborhoods” pattern can be very confusing because in fact black and Hispanic students are doing noticeably better than they once did, although they still lag behind white students. Particular schools can go downhill when one group replaces another while at the same time the average score of every ethnic group is stable or increasing. These improvements definitely suggest that going from very bad conditions (as in the case of black schools in South some decades ago) to more typical conditions does increase academic performance. The problem is that we don't how to increase it further. The black-white academic gap did narrow in the 1960s and 1970s, but over the last 20 years it has been stable.

George Will once wrote a column that is a classic example of this kind of confusion—Pulitzer-level confusion. He noted that North Dakota had some of

the highest test scores in the nation and suggested that the reason was a low divorce and illegitimacy rate. Will looked at SAT scores. That's a snare and a delusion: since few kids in North Dakota take that test, they're a highly unrepresentative group. But if you look at NAEP scores, which are representative, kids from North Dakota do indeed score high—in some years the highest in the country. In 1996, North Dakota was first in 8th-grade math scores, 45th in spending.

What was their secret? Well, it helps if you notice that the average math score of white students in North Dakota was 286, while the national white average was 285. The secret is having few blacks and Hispanics, combined with an educational system that is otherwise average (although cheap).

## MOVING?

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Some get it almost right: they run large, nationally representative surveys of academic performance. Those surveys show that the average American doesn't know all that much, then they cite the results as evidence of educational decline. But if I whip out my tape measure and find that Danny Devito is short, it hardly means that he's shrunk. If memory serves, he's always been short. To show decline, you need before and after data.

We have some. There are three representative, technically sound surveys that go back many years: Iowa Test of Basic Skills (1940s to early 1990s), the SAT's national norm studies (covers the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1970-present). The average NAEP reading score was 285 in 1971, 288 in 1999. The average math score was 304 in 1973, 308 in 1999, while the science score dropped from 305 in 1970 to 295 in 1999. Averaged over the three subjects, test scores dropped from 298 to 297—a one-point change.

When you think about it, this stability—or should we call it stagnation?—is just what you would expect. It is notoriously difficult to improve test scores materially. The Coleman Report, back in the '60s, found that the amount of money spent didn't have much effect on educational results: "Schools are remarkably similar in the effect they have on the achievement of their pupils when the socioeconomic background of the students is taken into account."

More depends on the student than the school—a lot more. This has been thoroughly demonstrated, most dramatically when Federal District Judge Russell Clark seized control of the Kansas City schools back in 1985. The judge ordered the school district and the state to spend nearly \$2 billion on educational improvements. As Paul Ciotti of the Cato Institute says,

For more than a decade, the Kansas City district got more money per pupil than any other of the 280 major school districts in the country. Yet in spite of having perhaps the finest facilities of any school district its size in the country, nothing changed. Test scores stayed put, the three-grade-level achievement gap between blacks and whites did not change, and the dropout rate went up, not down.

To be fair, this only means that spending money in the currently fashionable ways doesn't have much effect on student performance. There may well be some way of turning dollars into scholars. We just don't know how. I have plenty of ideas that might work, such as bringing back caning or somehow persuading cheerleaders to forsake the football team for the chess club. Perhaps we should call in the attorney general: if Gonzales has ways of making them talk, maybe he can make them learn too.

Supposed decay has been going on for a long time. The *New York Times* once administered a U.S. history test to a sample of Ivy League freshmen. The results were horrifying and led to a Pulitzer. "College freshmen throughout the nation reveal a striking ignorance of even the most elementary aspects of United States history, and know almost nothing about many important phases of this country's growth and development, a survey just completed by The New York Times has shown." Hot news from April 4, 1943. The *New York Times* administered a very similar history test in 1976, which included some of the same questions. College freshmen again did poorly—just about as poorly as in 1943.

Adolescent test scores, which are what we measure with the SAT or NAEP, do not tell us what we really want to know. That's kid stuff. What information

do people retain and (hopefully) use in their lives? Adult knowledge is the real test of the educational system. The test scores we usually talk about are really measures of intermediate output: we don't want to end up like the Soviets, always increasing steel production while somehow forgetting to manufacture a corresponding amount of steel products.

We probably need a broader definition of the educational system: not just school daze but all the other channels that might educate the public—books, newspapers, magazines, job experience, yes, even dreaded TV. A lot of information must be transmitted by formal schooling, but if people are now learning certain facts by other channels (learning about Ockham's razor from watching old episodes of "The Rockford Files," or about zero-point energy by watching "The Incredibles," say) that's fine. The question is how much people end up knowing.

Jon Miller has run surveys of general science knowledge for about a quarter of a century. The tests are aimed pretty

interviewed a random sample at Harvard graduation, asking them what caused the seasons. Twenty-one out of 23 interviewed were wrong, and worse yet, they all had the same wrong idea: they thought that the Earth's orbit is egg-shaped and that winter comes when we're farthest from the Sun. In other words, average Americans understand nothing about science and technology and never have: about 5 percent could get a decent grade on an 8th-grade science exam.

But this isn't evidence of decline: scores have in fact gone up slightly over the past 25 years. Miller's test didn't exist 50 years ago, but we have the results of similar questions in other surveys of that era, and the greatest generation knew even less than people today. Nor is it evidence of relative failure. Miller has administered the same test to representative samples of citizens of the European Union. They're just as ignorant as we are, while China is far worse.

There have been surveys touching upon civic and political knowledge over the years, and many political scientists have analyzed the hilarious results. John

innocence and that the president has the power to suspend the Constitution. Only one in seven Americans between 18 and 24 could even find Iraq on the map in 2002. When it comes to political and civic knowledge, Americans are profoundly ignorant and always have been.

This state of affairs is more than a bit alarming. Obviously the typical citizen votes by intuition—or possibly by sense of smell. What can and should be done? Education hasn't declined, but people don't seem to know much about history or biology, and surely that's bad. Even highly educated people usually don't know much outside of their own fields, and it's not just the two-culture problem, where science and literature never seem to meet. The typical young Ph.D. in physics can't pass a high-school exam in biology.

Perhaps people don't want to know. Most only remember information acquired in school when they need to use it routinely in work or when it happens to be a subject that fascinates them. It's like the classic book review the 10-year-old girl gave: "This book gives me more information about penguins than I care to have."

Systematic pilot studies of innovative educational methods are worthwhile. We've not had much success along those lines, but then we've seldom tried. Of course we'd have to treat them like experiments rather than religions, acknowledge failure when it occurs, and above all keep education majors from having anything to do with the process.

As for the professional declinists like William Bennett, he can talk, he can exhort, he can pick up \$50,000 speaking fees for a talk that doesn't include one bit of serious thought, but if he wants actually to change anything, I have to say the odds are against him. ■

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## WHEN IT COMES TO POLITICAL AND CIVIC KNOWLEDGE, AMERICANS ARE PROFOUNDLY IGNORANT AND ALWAYS HAVE BEEN.

low—roughly middle school. A typical question asks whether the Sun goes around the Earth or the Earth around the Sun. Those who got that right were asked whether the Earth took a day, a week, a month, or a year to orbit the Sun. About 50 percent of American adults know that the Earth orbits the Sun in a year. Less than 10 percent know what a molecule is, while only 20 percent have some vague idea what DNA is.

It's not easy to find surveys of elite knowledge, but what we know isn't encouraging. Some years ago researchers

Ferejohn summarizes the typical reaction: "Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics." In the '50s, only 19 percent of the public could name three branches of the federal government, while 35 percent could define the Electoral College. In recent years, 45 percent thought the phrase "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" was in the Constitution. Half thought that an accused person must prove his

[tyranny of the majority]

# Baghdad Isn't Berlin

Free elections and popular power entail grave risks for the Middle East.

By Tom Switzer

WHEN NEOCONSERVATIVES rose to intellectual prominence in the 1970s, they were invariably described—not least by themselves—as “liberals mugged by reality.” Three decades later, that definition will acquire even more resonance if the neoconservative effort to remake Iraq as a viable and peaceful democratic state ends in failure.

Recently, of course, the consensus about the Bush administration's record in Iraq and the broader Middle East has been far from negative. Even opponents of the U.S.-led invasion have good things to say about President Bush's foreign policy agenda. “The most difficult sentence in the English language,” concedes the *Toronto Star's* Richard Gwyn, “is short and simple. It is this: Bush was right.” A *Le Monde* editorial titled “Arab Spring” concedes “the merit of George W. Bush.” The *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland says, “the dark cloud of the Iraq war may have carried a silver lining.” *Der Spiegel's* Claus Christian Malzahn compares President Bush's belligerence towards Arab dictators to President Reagan's rollback of the Soviet Empire. And left-wing politicians from Teddy Kennedy in the U.S. to Piero Fassino in Italy admit Saddam Hussein's downfall has intensified pressure for democracy in the Middle East.

No wonder neoconservatives are giddy about the prospects for democratizing the Middle East—and not just the Kristol-Kagan-Krauthammer cabal either.

According to Lebanese socialist leader Walid Jumblatt, “It's strange for me to say it, but this process of change has started because of the American invasion of Iraq.” Jumblatt—who had earlier said, “We are all happy when an American soldier is killed” in Iraq and who had complained it was “too bad” that Paul Wolfowitz escaped a rocket blast at his Baghdad hotel in October 2003—now says, “The Syrian people, the Egyptian people, all say that something is changing. The Berlin Wall has fallen.”

Is this really true? Are we witnessing the dawn of a global democratic revolution? And will we, as leading neocon Richard Perle has predicted, “look back on the liberation of Iraq and the subsequent establishment of a decent, humane government there as a turning point in history”?

Certainly such hopes will be boosted in the wake of last month's belated appointments of Iraq's president, Kurdish rebel leader Jalal Talabani, and his two (Shi'ite and Sunni) vice presidents. And indeed it would be wrong and churlish to dismiss the significance of what has happened across the region in recent months. The Palestinian elections, the Iraqi elections, Saudi Arabia's first municipal elections, Hosni Mubarak's call for political pluralism in Egypt, and the massive anti-Syrian mobilization in Lebanon—all of this appears to confirm everything that the president says about the universal

yearning for freedom. Give individuals a right to choose their own leaders, and they will seize the moment. Who could forget the images of brave Iraqis dodging bullets at the ballot box?

Yes, yes, yes, all true. But that being acknowledged, it is well to remember that these are early days and although Iraq's long political stalemate is apparently drawing to a close, there is still treacherous ground to cover. There are serious reasons to be tentative in one's judgment of the changes taking place not only in Iraq but in the broader Middle East today. Indeed, far from ushering in a new era of democratic prosperity, the “Arab Spring” could lead to a period of virulent anti-Americanism and Islamic extremism.

After all, one election does not a democracy make. To work, democracy requires, among other things, a consensus among the major religious and regional groups that they are one people. And it requires that the losers respect the rights of the winners to rule and the electoral majority respect the rights of the minority to the untrammelled benefits of civil society—including freedom of speech, organization, religion, and an impartial judicial system. That is, a democracy has to embrace the idea of a loyal opposition.

One only has to look at the results of the Jan. 30 elections—how the south voted overwhelmingly for the Shi'ite bloc, how the north voted likewise for