

10 Good Things About Public Education

The naysayers are wrong—public schools are not failing. Here’s a list of the many things we are doing right, with suggestions for ways to improve even more

Policymakers and pundits have decried “our failing schools” so often it’s become an accepted truth. But the naysayers are wrong. To be sure, our schools need to do better. But we have much to be proud of, too, and it’s on this foundation that we can build a 21st century system that will work for all kids.

It’s time that we recognize our accomplishments and give our public schools a collective pat on the back. Here is my personal Top 10 list of things we’re doing right and where we should go next.

10. A tradition of universal education

Beginning in 1642 when Massachusetts enacted the country’s first education law, Americans have placed a high premium on producing an educated populace. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.” Indeed, the history of American education is one of expanding educational opportunity. From the push for compulsory schooling in the last half of the 19th century through *Brown v. Board of Education* in the mid-20th, it’s a story that continues to this day.

What’s next? The Common Core State Standards define expectations for all students that will prepare them for their next steps, whether they lead to a four-year college, two-year credentials, or training for 21st century jobs. At this writing, 46 states

and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards.

9. Beginning reading

Over the last decade, our fourth-graders have improved their reading skills by six points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). If that doesn’t sound like much, consider that 10 points on the NAEP scale is approximately one year’s worth of learning. More significantly, the gains have largely been from the bottom up, and the achievement gap is narrowing between children of color and their white classmates. As a bonus, American fourth-graders rank among students from the top-scoring nations in reading literature.

What’s next? Middle- and high-schoolers aren’t making the same gains. We need to do more than just teach kids how to read, but also focus on developing critical readers, especially of informational texts.

8. Civics

On the 1999 international assessment in civics, U.S. ninth-graders were No. 1 in civics skills. By a lot. But what about now? There hasn’t been an international look at this topic since then, but NAEP offers a clue. Over the last decade, American fourth-graders have improved their civics performance by seven points. Hispanic students improved the most—by a whopping 17 points.

What’s next? As with reading, middle and high school students are not showing the same progress as their younger siblings. This deserves our attention, considering that high school seniors are able to cast their first votes or will be voting soon.

7. English Language Learners

An original study for NSBA’s Center for Public Education (CPE) compared the reading achievement and characteristics of limited-English-speaking students in the U.S. to other industrial nations with high proportions of immigrant children (“PIRLS of Wisdom,” 2009). While English Language Learner (ELL) students in American public schools tend to come from poorer families compared to those in other countries, their schools nonetheless provide resources not available to their international counterparts and their performance is as good or better as a result. The big advantage? The U.S. has more teachers trained to teach ELL students.

What’s next? The number of ELL teachers, though larger than other countries, is still too small to meet the need. Another big issue: Evidence-based instruction for ELL students too often takes a backseat to politics. Yet the research is clear in this regard: Dual-immersion programs produce the best long-range results for ELL students, followed by language support in elementary school. Despite its appeal to some, English-only submersion has been proven to have the least effect (CPE, 2007).

6. ESEA and IDEA: Monumental laws

In 1965, the country passed the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of President Johnson’s war on poverty. Its intent was to provide poor children equal access to a solid public edu-

cation. As such, ESEA did nothing less than establish education as a civil right, and every president since then has supported the provision of Title I funds to schools serving poor children. These goals were further extended to children with disabilities in 1975's Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees a "free and appropriate" education to all special-needs children.

What's next? Under President George W. Bush, ESEA became the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It added a sharp focus—and school accountability—on narrowing achievement gaps among groups of students based on race, ethnicity, family income, and special needs. While the idea of accountability no doubt will continue, both NCLB proponents and critics recognize that adjustments need to be made.

5. High-level high school courses

One of public education's biggest successes is the increase in high school academic rigor. In 1990, less than a third of high school seniors (31 percent) had a core curriculum that included math through at least Algebra II and three lab sciences. By 2009, that number was 59 percent. Moreover, the course-taking gap between white and black students has disappeared.

What's next? The Office of Civil Rights recently reported that there are still 3,000 high schools in the country lacking the capacity to offer Algebra II, meaning their graduates will not be college-ready or qualified to enter training programs for many 21st century jobs. Making sure all students have access to high-level courses and support to succeed must be among our highest public priorities.

4. High-quality prekindergarten

No educational investment pays off more than making sure children are ready for school when they enter the kindergarten door. Recognizing the potential return on investment, states have been expanding access to and increasing the quality of pre-k programs. Over the last decade, the number of 4-year-olds enrolled in state-sup-

ported programs has doubled to the current 27 percent. When including Head Start, we now have 39 percent of 4-year-olds in publicly funded programs. And it's not just access that's improving. States have been more active in ensuring the programs attend to children's educational preparation as well as to their social and emotional development.

What's next? Despite the recession, states have attempted to preserve their pre-k funding. However, last year witnessed the first decline in state funding for pre-k since 2002. These are painful setbacks, as the nation still has a long way to go to ensure universal access for families who wish to participate in pre-k.

3. High school graduation rates

Researchers have uncovered student characteristics—such as poor attendance, failing grades, and disciplinary actions—that are highly predictive of students who may be in danger of dropping out. In response, states and districts have implemented data systems to flag these "early warning signs" and provide effective interventions, often in collaboration with community-based organizations. The result is that graduation rates are beginning to improve. Since 2002, on-time graduation rates have increased from 72.6 percent to the current 75.5 percent. According to an analysis by CPE's Jim Hull, including late graduates in the calculation would raise that rate by another 5 to 8 percentage points.

What's next? Even an 80 percent to 83 percent graduation rate leaves too many young people out of jobs paying a decent wage. President Obama has set a goal for the nation to reach a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020. Reaching this mark will require the combined efforts of schools and their communities to keep kids in school and on track to graduate.

2. Mathematics

Yes, really! We may not be No. 1 in mathematics internationally, but math progress is still the great untold story in American education. Since 1990, American fourth-graders have gained a phenomenal 28 points on

NAEP math. Eighth-graders weren't far behind, posting a 21-point boost over the same period. And progress was evident in every student group. Still not convinced? Scores on the mathematics portion of the SAT are significantly higher than in 1972, while the number of test-takers has more than doubled so that the scores no longer represent the academic elite alone.

What's next? Education technology may be the engine that propels the math achievement of all students, and can be especially helpful in remote or hard-to-staff schools. Innovators like Sal Khan are developing new ways to make even the most sophisticated concepts understandable to students using online platforms. Moreover, access is not determined by geography.

And my No. 1 good thing about public education is ...

1. Community support

Approximately nine out of 10 school-aged children attend public schools in this country—a figure that has remained fairly stable for 40 years. Communities maintain their support of their local schools even as their opinion of public education in general declines. In 2011, only 17 percent of Americans told Gallup pollsters that they would grade American public education as an A or B. In contrast, 51 percent would give an A or B to their local schools. Parents were the most satisfied, 79 percent of whom gave their child's public school these high grades. When asked to explain the discrepancy, respondents cited familiarity and local pride.

What's next? Public schools have their work cut out for them, especially as they tackle the job of preparing all of their students for success after high school in this increasingly complex 21st century world. Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels all have a role to play. But the supportive involvement of the community—from one district to the next—is our strongest guarantee that the challenge will be met. ■

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