

What Makes A "Bad" School Bad?

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The roots of school underachievement are a complicated network of poverty, language barriers, unstable student homes and imbalanced public policies.

"Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance-wheel of the social machinery." --Horace Mann, "Father of the common school," report no.12 of the Massachusetts School Board, 1848. This fall, nearly 50 million elementary and high school students across America geared up for a school year which, collectively, will cost state and local governments \$489 billion, or roughly \$10,000 per pupil. The federal government has taken an interest in the inflating price tag with the pending reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. But even federal legislators are hard-pressed to agree upon just why the "great equalizer" is foundering even as dollars pour into the system. The question on everyone's lips? "Why does the achievement gap persist, and what can be done about it?" The reasons why U.S. public schools cannot seem to close the achievement gap, or pass NCLB standardized tests, are varied and often conflicting. Researchers claiming larger schools are more beneficial to the pupil, for example, have criticized small school movements. And while NCLB's mixed track record has emboldened legions of educators and state officials to call for its swift demise, others have praised it as groundbreaking legislation. Although a direct correlation has been made between low-income students and poor achievement scores, the reasons for this connection are often difficult for policymakers to address holistically. Poverty, language barriers, unstable home environments, poor parental support and a lack of quality teachers are only a few of the issues that can contribute to poor school performance. Nevertheless, conflicting studies muddy the water when the time comes to make broad decisions. Some analysts even question whether or not there are problems in America's public schools. Historians point to the 50-year anniversary of Sputnik, when, for the first time in American history, the country's public school system was called into question. For many analysts who do not believe our schools are in jeopardy, the debate on education reform seems based largely upon an insecurity regarding national competitiveness, and not about the history and progress of the schools themselves. What's the objective? Rick Ayers is a former Berkeley High School teacher, as well as author and editor of several teaching guides. His innovative small schools program, Communications Arts and Sciences, brought together students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds to work on project-based assignments through internships and various real-world experiences. Ayers believes that federal policymakers are too focused on global competition, to the detriment of the students. "High schools are public institutions to turn out citizens; we should be turning out kids who really care about a broad range of topics and subjects," he says. "Instead, it's like bureaucrats are focusing on this life or death struggle to keep up with the Chinese. We need to ask ourselves, 'What is an educated person?' Is it a Darwinian system, or is it about getting students to appreciate their education and want to continue learning?" Another instructor, who would only speak on the condition of anonymity, teaches U.S. history and government economics just outside of San Jose, CA. She claims that her curriculum has suffered as a result of NCLB's single-minded focus on math and reading. She fears that as a result, her students will not gain enough civic knowledge. "The kids know that the biggest subjects they need to worry about are reading and math," she says. "They know they don't have to pass social studies classes. To them, the question is, 'Well, why do I need this information? Why do I need to take these classes?'" Beyond concerns over a narrowed curriculum, the San Jose instructor claims that legislators making key structural decisions are too far removed from the actual classroom experience to know where the real problems are. "Some of our administrators on the district level have never been in a classroom, they've had some student teaching, but got hired based on administrative experience and don't know what it's like down in the trenches." She says that teachers need to get more involved with government committees and associations, but that there is little spare time for them to do so. Hilary Mclean, representative for California State Superintendent of Schools Jack O'Connell, says she understands the concerns of educators wary of state and federal administrators who may seem out of step with classroom experiences.

"It's true that, at the state level, we don't have the day-to-day interaction; that's why we try to work so closely with representatives from the education field like the California Teachers Association, the California School Boards Association, the Association of State Administrators," she says. "Supervisor O'Connell visits several schools per week, and we try to listen to professionals in the field — it's a balance we have to strike." The language of education Twenty percent of school-age children spoke another language other than English in 2005, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). An elementary school teacher from the Parajo Valley School District, also wishing to remain anonymous, says that she spends nearly

two and a half hours per day after school tutoring ESL students. Often, these after-school programs run longer than scheduled. But she still maintains that teaching is a profession worth the added responsibilities. "It's not the kind of job where you can just walk out the door—teachers are doing 12 to 14-hour days. It's a really high-stress, high-pressure job. But they do it because they're challenged by it; it's not boring. And you never have it mastered—there's always one kid that challenges you. And it's amusing—you can't have a bunch of people together and not have fun, amusing moments. But it is a lot more stressful than it used to be." For many educators, the challenges of addressing student needs individually is made more difficult through mandates on standardized testing measures which, they believe, only allows them to "teach to the test." "The curriculum we teach [under NCLB] seems to have tunnel vision," says the San Jose teacher. "It's probably not intentional, but other critical subjects, like political science, fall by the wayside." Ayers maintains that the federal emphasis on achieving higher national test scores does not make for a quality education that will prepare students for postsecondary education. "We need people to have the tools to do what they want with their lives, not simply test well," he says. "Go to any private school in Marin—they aren't doing test prep. They're doing projects. The idea that we're doing this for equity is just rhetoric." Mclean disagrees with this assessment. "From the Superintendent's perspective, we shouldn't blame the test, it's just a tool," she says. "People that claim we are only teaching to the test; are using this as an excuse or cop out when they just don't want to adhere to testing standards." Mclean says that setting a "high bar" for students has been nationally celebrated, and serves California students well. But when schools score well at the state level yet fail at the national level, state administrators and legislators can become daunted. For better or worse, national testing standards are sometimes difficult to attain in a state as diverse as California, with a growing population of ESL students. Distinguished schools, or laggards? Napa High School is a case in point. Although the public school scores high on statewide achievement scores, making it a top California Distinguished School, it has been deemed, through NCLB, a "Program Improvement" school. The Northern California school failed to pass 43 of the school's 195 English learners, a requirement under federal law. They missed the mark by 10 students. Although it could be argued that these testing standards could prove a "great equalizer" for ESL students, some see it as a hindrance to the school, one which could ultimately bankrupt it. If Napa High does not get the required percentage of students scoring at grade level within five years, the principal and teachers could be fired, or the school could be taken over by an outside agency. Sometimes the policies used to address perceived problems in public schools can become problems in and of themselves. Regardless of where the real problems can be found, legislators are pushing the discussion towards closing the achievement gap, Mclean says. "At the end of the day, we take everyone. We owe it to our collective society to provide a quality education to every student in California. We want all students to meet our levels of achievement. A good first step would be to decide what we want before legislators set those goals."