Inquire: How Do We Measure and Impact Student Success?

Overview

The studies are everywhere. The U.S. ranks, at best, in the middle of the pack in student performance world-wide. The studies say we lag behind Singapore, Finland, South Korea, Macao, Australia, the United Kingdom, Poland, and many, many others when it comes to education. Parents, politicians, sociologists, educators, and most of America seems to be concerned and wants to make changes.

But, why does the U.S. rank so low? Is it bad teaching? Is it our schools in general? Does America need a major overhaul of the school system? Could every student perform better if they could just go to a better school? If it is the schools’ fault or the teachers’ fault, then the answers are clear and easy.

What if those answers are too simplistic and there are other factors involved? How can we tell, and what should be done?

Big Question: What are the factors that impact student success in school?

Watch: Schools and the Establishment Clause

In 1962, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) handed down what has turned out to be one of their most controversial opinions. *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) struck down required and/or administration-led prayers in schools. This decision has led to significant conservative push back.

However, SCOTUS was absolutely right in *Engle*. The First Amendment prohibits the government (national, state, or local) from establishing a religion. If a teacher, staff employee, or administrator leads a prayer, or if there is a required prayer, some sort of religion is being authorized or validated above others or those who believe in no religion. The public schools must be a completely religiously neutral and safe place for all people.

In 1971, in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), SCOTUS clarified these issues and established the Lemon Test for deciding whether a law or other government action that might promote a particular religious practice should be allowed to stand.

The Lemon Test has three criteria that must be satisfied for such a law or action to be found constitutional and remain in effect:

1. The action or law must not lead to excessive government entanglement with religion.
2. The action or law cannot either inhibit or advance religious practice; it should be neutral in its effects on religion.
3. The action or law must have some secular purpose; there must be some non-religious justification for the law.

The next big issue involving public schools and religion is the voucher issue. Can a parent take taxpayer funded vouchers and enroll their students in private parochial schools?

Using the Lemon Test, start with the secular-purpose prong of the test. Assuming no religious classes are required, educating children is a clear, non-religious purpose, so the law has a secular purpose. Next, the law would neither inhibit nor advance religious practice, so that prong would be satisfied. The remaining question is whether the law leads to excessive government entanglement with religious practice. The decision becomes more difficult if the funding is unrestricted in use or helping to pay for facilities or teacher salaries, or if there are required religious classes or activities. While these could be addressed and solved, it would require audits and investigations to ensure the voucher money is not spent on these items, and that could lead to too much government entanglement with religion.

As the push for vouchers continues to gain support, all of these issues must be resolved.

Read: Who Pays for Public Education, and How Do We Improve It?

Democracy depends on an educated citizenry.

If individuals are to participate in government, they need to be able to read and write, and they should also know something about their country, its people, its history, and its geography. Public education is the single largest expenditure for state and local governments across the nation. Yet, it is arguably the most criticized. Many people charge that public schools are faltering and that American academic achievements are far behind those in other countries. In recent years, many states and localities have experimented with improving public schools.

Unlike the practice in most other countries, state and local governments in the United States provide most of the funding for education. Part of the reason is the traditional belief that communities need to take care of their own children. Others assume that the federal government cannot understand the educational needs of a community's children as well as local officials. States vary a great deal in the extent to which education is funded by local governments or state governments. For example, in Hawaii the state pays about 90% of educational expenses, as compared to New Hampshire, where 90% is paid by the local school district.

One result of state and local funding is a great deal of inequality in the amount of money that school districts have to spend on public education. Because most schools are funded by property taxes, many prosperous communities are able to collect more taxes than are poor communities, where property values are much lower. Critics maintain that this situation creates inequities in the quality of schools, resulting in inadequate education for poor children. A number of programs currently are attempting to improve the quality of public education, particularly in poor school districts:

- **Vouchers.** Some people believe that poor quality public education results from a lack of competition. In effect, they argue that school districts have monopolies in educating children in their area. Vouchers attempt to remedy the situation by providing parents with a set amount of money to pay for their child's education in a public or private school of their choice. The plan assumes that parents will choose the best available schools for their children. Failing schools will
either improve their quality of education or find themselves without students. In either case, supporters of vouchers believe that competition will improve education. Opponents criticize vouchers for draining additional funds from communities that most need them and for allowing parents to use public money to send their children to religious schools.

- **Charter schools.** This reform does not go as far as vouchers, but it still provides publicly funded alternatives to standard public schools. Individuals or groups in communities may start charter schools that they believe will provide a better education. They must work with the local school board to provide funding. No money is given to parents as with vouchers, but parents may choose which school — standard or charter — their children attend.

- **National student testing.** This reform advocates that students be given national exams in various subjects to measure their accomplishments by an objective standard. Supporters believe that weak school districts will be exposed and that the tests will give them the incentive to improve their delivery of education. Critics say that standardized testing causes teachers to "teach to the test," and that creativity in the classroom is inhibited. Others believe that the tests are unfair to minorities because they are culturally biased toward the majority.

The problem is that these answers do not necessarily speak to the issues that impact student success. Whether it is vouchers to give the parents choices, or charter schools, or even standardized testing, the focus continues to be on the "education of the child." Low performing students are low performing because of the school, or the teachers, or the lack of focused testing. Schools are graded on student performance, and teachers are evaluated on student growth and student success and failure.

But, what if the issue was not something that could be fixed by changing schools? What if the issues are more complicated? There is no question that students benefit from quality instruction from gifted and committed teachers, but does that mean that every successful student receives quality instruction every day from gifted and committed teachers? Or, does that mean that every student who fails does so because he never received quality instruction every day from gifted and committed teachers?

Education has ranked among the issues about which Americans feel most strongly, according to recent public opinion polls. Inequalities between affluent and needy areas have created an education gap across America. The way to remedy the issues is a discussion that must continue, but which will revolve around a number of issues and solutions.

While some turn to vouchers, charter schools, and national testing for the answers, others see solutions within the current framework. Class sizes have been mushrooming, and the courts have imposed more and more spending mandates on school districts since 1975. Regardless, until significant progress is made, education is likely to be a top priority for presidents, governors, and school board members alike.

**Reflect Poll: As a Student...**

If you are taking this course, you are a student. Experts always tell teachers and administrators what they need to do better to reach you and increase your learning. What do you think? Think about your time in school. When did you learn the most? What could be done to recreate that experience? Choose what you believe would have the most impact on your learning experience:

- Better trained teachers
- More resources in school
- The ability to go to a different school where you think you would learn better
- Less time focused on instruction and more down time at school
Expand: Issues Affecting Student Success

One of the major issues in public education in the United States is the enormous diversity in the population — racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically. No other country faces the challenges set forth by diversity that the education system in America faces. China is the largest country in the world with 1.4 billion people. Even there, 91.51% of the population is Han Chinese, and only 8.49% are minorities.*

The other major and minor countries in the world have similar population patterns, with the vast majority all being of the same race and/or ethnicity. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, the population in the U.S. will be less than 50% white, with about 46% of Americans being white. Hispanics will continue to increase their growth in the population and will be at almost 33%. African Americans will be around 15% of the population, Asians will grow to 9%, and Native Americans and Alaskan Natives will be at about 2%. This racial and ethnic diversity does not even begin to speak to the socioeconomic diversity in the American population. This diversity impacts no other area more than education.**

Obviously, much of the frustration and concern with the problems in public education focuses on the schools, the teachers, and the administrators, and perhaps rightfully so. The solutions being offered — charter schools, vouchers, and standardized testing to evaluate the school and/or the school personnel — are all focused on the “education” issues.

However, the studies being done point to other issues that separate the successful students from those who are less successful.

It is probably not surprising, but studies have shown that students with higher IQ scores perform better on the standardized tests. While there is no surprise here, it is a difficult problem for teachers and administrators to try to delicately communicate to parents that their child is not gifted.

Another unpopular predictor of success, but one that is supported by the evidence, is familiarity with the test and/or testing materials or “teaching to the test.” While there are many reasons to criticize teachers who spend their class time simply doing practice exams and designing curriculum that is focused on the testing materials, it is effective with regards to student success on the tests. And, if a teacher is evaluated on his or her student’s performance on the test, this is one way to ensure the students’ success.

Socioeconomics are another major factor in predicting student success on standardized testing, and those have nothing to do with the school itself. Over-all, students from higher income families perform better than students from lower income families. There are numerous factors involved, and the arguments as to why this is true are both heated and passionate. Is it because higher income students tend to attend schools with more resources, higher paid teachers, and better equipped classrooms? Is it because lower income families tend to have less time with the children due to work obligations, sometime requiring both parents to work two jobs? Is it because the higher income families have more experience with success in school and tend to focus more on the child’s education at home? Regardless of the reasons, the statistics are simply overwhelming on this issue.

Even when the students reach college, the percentage of college students who graduate is radically affected by family income. A report from the Pell Institute in 2015 showed that 77% of students from high-income backgrounds graduated from college in 2013, while only 9% of low-income students graduated in that same year.***

Obviously, there are many factors that play into the results of these studies. However, the obvious truth seems to be that neither failure nor success can be assigned solely to teachers or schools.
vouchers or charter schools may offer new experiences and incentives and possibly a fresh start for some students, they are probably not going to solve the education problems in America. Standardized testing may also offer some good insight into student performance and, perhaps, future performance. That said, just giving standardized tests without working to rectify other issues and resolve inequalities will not increase student learning or student performance.

*https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html; numbers are updated regularly and are subject to change
***http://pellinstitute.org/indicators/reports_2018_data.shtml

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A video briefly discussing some of the problems facing educational funding in America
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBjrdHANZXo

A video discussing how schools are funded in America
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlsYuHgFB_Q

A video helping you understand the impact of education spending and how to improve the quality of American education and academic performance in schools
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7vpeY772xY

Lesson Glossary
None

Check Your Knowledge

1. Public education is the second largest expenditure for state and local governments across the nation.
   a. True
   b. False
2. According to recent public opinion polls, education has ranked among the issues about which Americans feel most strongly.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Like most countries, state and local governments in the United States provide most of the funding for education.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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Title: Who Pays for Education? (2018): U.S. History Online Textbook, DOA. License: CC BY 4.0
Link to resource:http://www.ushistory.org/gov/12c.asp