

Public Education Works

Public education works. While this isn't news to NSPRA members and others who work in public schools, it may be to everyone else, including the parents whose children we serve so well.

A recent story in *The Atlantic* serves as a case in point. The article features an exhaustive study by two university researchers who discovered — to their shock and surprise — that public schools outperform private schools academically, when data is controlled to account for differences in student demographics. In other words, private and parochial schools have higher test scores because they have more affluent students and more educated parents. Well, um, duh. We choose every child; they choose some.

A Wake-Up Call for Advocates

Educators have known for some time that test scores align with socioeconomic status and the family's educational level, particularly the reading level of the mother. Teacher quality — a factor schools do control — usually ranks third, followed by principal leadership. The fact that this non-news item surprised the researchers and merits an extensive review by a national magazine should serve as a wake-up call for all public school advocates.

If this is a measure of how well we're telling the story of public education in America, we're all failing — and the kids are the ones who will suffer the consequences if we remain silent or unheard while the movement to privatize public education steamrolls across state legislatures.

Currently, public policy is being shaped by our failures rather than our successes, and if that's true, it's because we've allowed it to happen. By speaking as individual schools and school districts, rather than as a unified voice for all, we've allowed others to frame the national agenda regarding public education.

That national reform agenda, once seen as an urban problem, is now trickling down to rural and suburban districts — and more people are realizing that educators can't shoulder the burden for all of society's challenges alone.

Measuring Well-Being — the Role of Poverty, Class and Race

The strong correlation between test scores, class and race should also give us pause next time we crow about high test scores at relatively affluent schools or bemoan low test scores in high poverty schools — just what are we measuring, and why? And, what role does institutional and implicit bias play in all of this?

As one of our school board members often points out, if one or two fish in a lake go belly up, it makes sense to look at those individual fish to see what went wrong. If every fish in the lake goes belly up, it's time to look at the lake. A good place to start is to stop blaming the children, or their parents, and start having more forthright community conversations about the role

poverty, class and race play in nearly every measure of well-being we have in the U.S. — in education, health, employment, social services and criminal justice.

It's not coincidental that research shows achievement gaps in education were lowest when the war on poverty was at its peak. The good news in this latest study is that public schools' positive academic impact holds up across different student demographics, an encouraging sign for urban, rural and suburban schools alike.

Our Challenge — Welcome, Nurture and Inspire Every Child

As *The Atlantic* quoted researcher Christopher Lubienski, "If public schools are truly failing, then private schools are in even more trouble. But I'm not convinced that's the case when you look at a lot of the longitudinal data and even some of the international data." Every public school in every community should welcome, nurture, inspire and challenge every child. When one child suffers, or when the same groups of children suffer in every community in every state, we all suffer.

Let's work together to make sure that all children have what they need so they can take advantage of what our public schools have to offer, and let's keep challenging ourselves to change our schools so they truly welcome, nurture and inspire each and every child. We need to speak out on behalf of our public schools every chance we get. We need to let every politician, pundit, parent, volunteer, Realtor and senior citizen in our community know that our schools are doing a great job preparing kids for learning and for life.

We need to have honest and courageous conversations about what's going well, and where we have more work to do. We need to rebuild public trust and public support for our children, our educators, and our schools.

If you need help, call on your NSPRA colleagues and use the toolkits and resources we provide. From community organizing and public engagement to exploring diversity in deeper and more meaningful ways, we have proven strategies and tactics to guide and support you.

Public education works. What's broken is the public contract that recognizes the inherent value of each and every child, and truly supports moms and dads in the important work of bringing up the next generation.

Sources: Ryan, 2013, "Are Private Schools Worth It?" *The Atlantic*.

See also: Lubienski and Lubienski, 2013, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

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