

Education Matters

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Should Your School Eliminate Tracking?

The history of tracking and detracking in America's schools



By Maureen Hallinan

The practice that has come to be known as “tracking” began as a response to the influx of immigrant children into America’s schools during the early 20th century. To educate this newly diverse student population, school officials thought it necessary to sort children into different “tracks” based on their ability or past performance.

In the early days of tracking, junior-high and high-school students were assigned to academic, general, or vocational tracks.

Today this extreme form of tracking is relatively rare. With the new emphasis on preparing every student for college, tracking in its modern form has come to mean grouping students by ability within subjects. In each subject, students are assigned to advanced, regular, or basic courses depending on their past performance. For instance, students in the

advanced track might take pre-calculus as juniors in high school and calculus as seniors, while students in the basic track might go only as far as algebra II or geometry. The creation and growth of Advanced Placement courses is perhaps the best example of how tracking has become an institutionalized practice (see chart on page 2).

The Backlash

Teachers find that the modern form of tracking facilitates instruction by making it easier to gear lessons to the ability level of the whole class. Parents of high-performing students also favor tracking because research shows that students assigned to high-ability groups make greater gains in achievement. However, in studies published in 1986 and 1999, my colleagues and I found that students assigned to low-ability groups score

lower on standardized tests than if they had been placed in mixed-ability or high-ability groups.

That finding lies at the core of a backlash against tracking that began in the 1980s. Critics argued that tracking, especially in practice, created greater learning opportunities for high-performing students at the expense of their lower-performing peers. Tracking’s opponents alleged that students in lower tracks often had the weakest teachers in a school, an unchallenging curriculum, few academic role models, and low social status. Moreover, they argued, tracking enabled educators to claim that courses were academic or college preparatory in nature when, in fact, the content lacked even the semblance of rigor.

The movement picked up considerable momentum with the 1985 publication of Jeannie Oakes’s deeply influential *Keeping*

Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. Oakes provided empirical evidence of the disadvantages endured by students placed in lower tracks. Overall, Oakes characterized tracking as an elitist practice that perpetuated the status quo by giving students from privileged families greater access to elite colleges and high-income careers.

Perhaps the most notorious episode in the detracking movement occurred in Massachusetts and California in the early 1990s. Officials in both states mandated that middle schools eliminate or reduce tracking. However, in *The Tracking Wars: State Reform Meets School Policy*, Brookings Institution scholar Tom Loveless demonstrated how schools, possessing a considerable degree of autonomy, were able to implement the new policy in ways that were consistent with local preferences. While neither state withdrew the mandate, the detracking movement could hardly claim victory.

Minor Inroads

The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 asked a representative

sample of teachers whether students were assigned to classes comprising students who were above average, average, below average, or ranging widely in achievement. Their responses suggested that, nationwide, 15 percent of 8th-grade students were heterogeneously grouped for English classes, 14 percent for mathematics, 12 percent for science, and 18 percent for social studies. The remaining large majority of students were in classes with students of roughly the same ability level.

A second study, the Survey of High School Curricular Options, sampled 912 secondary schools in 1993 to obtain information about curriculum differentiation. It reported that 86 percent of high schools offered courses in which students were tracked. The data revealed that 14 percent of 10th graders took math courses in groups in which students' abilities differed widely; the same was true for 28 percent of 10th graders in English.

What explains the resilience of tracking? For one thing, teaching in a detracked school is far more difficult than in a tracked school. Teachers who have

been assigned to detracked classes often report that they must "teach to the middle" or omit some of the curriculum because they don't have time to instruct students at every different level within a class period. Moreover, detracking necessitates reallocating teachers and administrators, modifying the curriculum, and providing professional training. Schools may find these changes prohibitive for budgetary or logistical reasons. Finally, parents of high-ability students tend to prefer rigorous, homogeneous classes, while other parents are unconvinced that heterogeneous classes will benefit their children.

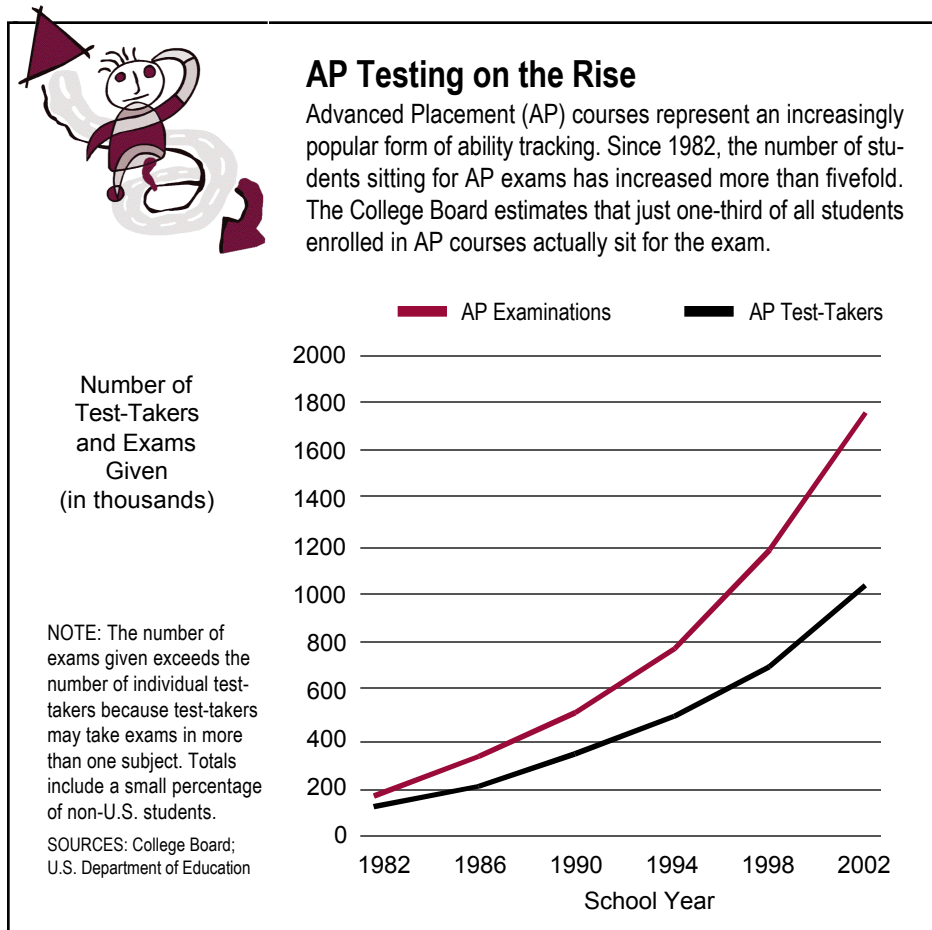
Subtle Influence

Despite widespread opposition to detracking and the failure of many efforts to institutionalize the policy, the detracking movement has had a major impact on school reform. While most schools still assign students to classes based on ability, the movement has heightened public awareness of the often inadequate resources and underwhelming curriculum provided to students in low-track classes.

Furthermore, the detracking movement has challenged widely held beliefs regarding the notion of "ability" and the role it plays in determining the kind of curriculum to which students will be exposed. More educators are now convinced that nearly all students are capable of mastering a challenging curriculum. New academic standards, state tests, and accountability requirements represent an effort to ensure that all students are given access to a rigorous curriculum. Detracking may never become widespread, but changes such as these are expected to improve the achievement of all students, particularly those who are ill served by the negative aspects of tracking as it is currently practiced. ■



Maureen T. Hallinan is a professor of sociology and director of the Center for Research on Educational Opportunity at the University of Notre Dame.



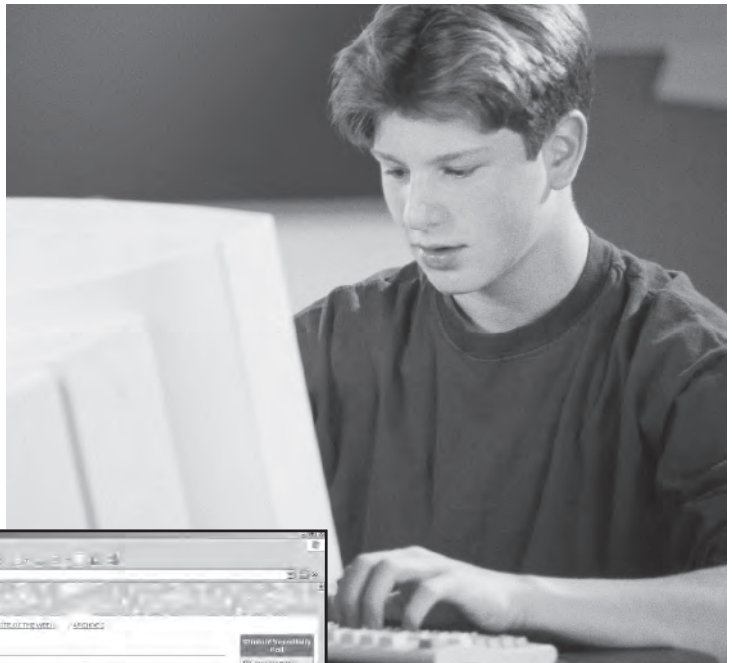
Diversity in Classroom News Source

High School Teacher Launches Multiple-Source News Website for Students

Teachers have a new resource to use with their students in class. *StudentNewsDaily.com* is a website promoting media literacy for high school students. “The goal is to build students’ knowledge of current events and strengthen their critical thinking skills,” says the site’s creator, Kathy Privat.

It provides teachers with simple, concise activities corresponding to the day’s top news story and weekly opinion pieces. *StudentNewsDaily.com* other features include: a student poll, the opportunity for students to interpret editorial cartoons, lessons on identifying bias in the media, as well as human interest items and links. The site aims to provide the media resources necessary for students to have a balanced view of the news.

Kathy Privat, a former New York City public high school teacher, created the news site to meet the need for providing students with multiple news sources. “In public schools, students are taught about current events using *CNN*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*,” says Privat. “Millions of American adults use many other



Studentnewsdaily.com welcomes teachers’ opinions regarding the site. Send your comments to Kathy@StudentNewsDaily.com.

new media sources, but these sites do not currently provide education pages with lesson plans. *StudentNewDaily.com* provides resources for teachers who recognize the importance of obtaining news from other perspectives.”

StudentNewsDaily.com is the first news site for high school students to use multiple news sources to teach current events.

News sites linked to include the *Washington Times*, *New York Sun*, *World Net Daily*, *Fox News*, *CNS News*, and *News Max*. Opinion sites include *Opinion Journal* and *Townhall*. Magazine sites include *The American Spectator*, *Human Events*, *National Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *World Magazine*.



Kathy Privat is an AAE member and taught ESL and literature classes in the New York public schools before launching *Studentnewsdaily.com*.

StudentNewsDaily.com Site Features

Daily Featured Article

The top news story of the day is posted here. A link to comprehension and critical thinking questions.

Daily “Best of the Web”

A collection of news items with commentary by the editor of *OpinionJournal.com*.

Tuesday’s News Issue

An in-depth look at a top news story of the week with a link asking students’ opinions.

Wednesday’s Biased Item

A weekly example of biased reporting and questions about it, along with definitions of the types of media bias.

Thursday’s Commentary

A commentary on the week’s top news story with a link to comprehension and critical thinking questions.

Friday’s News Quiz

A multiple choice quiz on the week’s Daily Featured Articles.

‘World’s Quick Takes’

Amusing and sometimes thought-provoking human interest news briefs.

Quote of the Week

Thought-provoking and amusing quote.

The StudentNewsDaily Poll

Student opinion poll



Degree or Not Degree: That is the Question

National Certification Study Unwittingly Exposes Salary Scale Flaws

By Mike Antonucci
www.eiaonline.com

The CNA Corporation (which operates the Institute for Public Research) released its study of nationally certified high school teachers in Florida and concluded that national certification “proved to be an effective signal of teacher quality,” according to author Linda C. Cavalluzzo. Well, that’s open to debate, but the test gains of students with nationally certified teachers (an additional 1.25 points over those with teachers who never got involved in the process) are not the most interesting finding of this study. Rather, it is what we learn about things that have nothing

to do with national certification: academic degrees.

The important measurement of variation in teacher effectiveness analyzed by researchers in the study is called “effect size.” National certification had a positive effect size of .074, which was statistically significant. However, the effect sizes of two other variables were even more interesting: teachers’ qualifications in their subject matter had the highest effect, and graduate degrees had minimal impact.

The researchers studied 9th and 10th grade math results on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, and the largest effect size went to those who were teaching in their appropriate subject area, namely math. The

effect size for those teachers was .114. Researchers also isolated another variable: whether the teacher held a graduate degree. The effect size was a paltry .017.

In other words, while a graduate degree had minimal effect, high school math teachers teaching high school math was more effective than their possession of National Certification.

The amount states spend on bonuses for teachers with national certification is a significant sum. However, if the CNA study is to be believed, schools can easily fund teacher bonuses, and more, if they stop paying teachers for that which has virtually no effect on student performance, namely, graduate school semester hours. ■

The report is available at <http://www.cna.org/documents/CavalluzzoStudy.pdf>

AP Scores Higher Last Year

According to the College Board’s first-ever “Advanced Placement Report to the Nation,” 13.2 percent of the graduating class of 2004 demonstrated mastery (at least a 3 on a 5-point scale) of one or more Advanced Placement (AP) exams, up from 10.2 percent from the 2000 class. Moreover, over the past five years, all fifty states and the District of Columbia reported an increase in the percentage of students succeeding on AP exams. For example, New York is the first state in the nation to see more than 20 percent of its students achieve a grade of 3 or higher on an AP exam, and California, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Utah are close to this level of achievement, with between 18 and 20 percent of students earning a 3 or higher.

Since 1996, there have been significant increases in African-American (+164

percent), Hispanic (+197 percent), and American Indian (+115 percent) students scoring 3 or higher on AP exams, and the proportion of Hispanic students taking AP exams (13.1 percent) is today about the same as the proportion of Hispanic students in public schools (12.8 percent). However, African-American

students remain significantly underrepresented in AP: African-American students make up 13.2 percent of the student population but only 6.0 percent of AP test takers. Research shows that students who succeed on one or more AP exams are more likely than their peers to complete a bachelor’s degree in four years. President Bush has proposed a 73 percent increase in the Department’s AP initiatives.



Quote of Note

“High self-esteem in schoolchildren does not produce better grades. (Actually, kids with high self-esteem do have slightly better grades in most studies, but that’s because getting good grades leads to higher self-esteem, not the other way around.) In fact, according to a study by Donald Forsyth at Virginia Commonwealth University, college students with mediocre grades who got regular self-esteem strokes from their professors ended up doing worse on final exams than students who were told to suck it up and try harder....

After all these years, I’m sorry to say my recommendation is this: Forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline.”

Roy F. Baumeister, professor in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University. (January 25, 2005 *Los Angeles Times*)

For more, go to http://www.collegeboard.com/about/news_info/ap/2005/.



Searching the Attic

How states are determining "Quality Teachers"

Most states are unlikely to make genuine strides in addressing teacher quality problems, insofar as veteran teachers are concerned, so concluded the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ).

It released the second in a series of reports that highlights states' progress towards meeting NCLB's goal of putting a highly qualified teacher in every classroom in the nation.

The chief conclusion of *Searching the Attic* is that most states aren't acknowledging the fallout from having demanded so little from teacher preparation over the years, nor are they looking for reasonable fixes.

NCTQ judged the 50 state HOSSE plans against a set of criteria that gauged states' ability to identify and support weak teachers. Unfortunately, 20 states earned a grade of D or F, usually because their plans consist of asking teachers to "search their attics" for documentation of any and all education-related activities that spanned their full careers, little of which provides current and objective evidence

"Most states aren't acknowledging the fallout from having demanded so little from teacher preparation over the years."

of competency. These state-approved activities commonly include attending workshops, either having been a mentor or being mentored, taking methodology courses, receiving a satisfactory teacher evaluation, serving on a school committee or attending conferences. The most disturbingly consistent features of many HOSSE plans are the many loopholes that allow weak teachers to bypass the more rigorous routes that most states offer.

Colorado stands alone as the only state to earn an A, insisting that all teachers have at least 24 credit hours in their subject area or take a test. Another seven states earned B grades by approving plans that should result in practicing teachers, no matter what the rules were when they entered teaching, to obtain at least an academic minor in their subject area. These seven states are Alabama, Hawaii, Kansas, Maryland, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas and Vermont.

Key recommendations:

1. At reauthorization, NCLB should be amended to grant middle school teachers highly qualified status, even if they only possess a college minor in their subject area. The law currently requires these teachers to have a major.
2. Subject matter tests for elementary teachers should also include a test in scientifically-based early reading instruction.
3. The federal government needs to take a more active role in bringing more public transparency to states' subject matter licensing exams, with an independent review body noting which tests are the most rigorous and recommending minimum passing scores on the most widely used tests. ■

For the full report, visit www.nctq.org



Educators Become Whistle-blowers

www.educatorswitnessprotectionprogram.com.

In Texas, the Americans for Prosperity Foundation has initiated a website encouraging individual educators, taxpayers, and others to report instances of alleged wasteful spending in the public school system without being subject to harassment or reprisals.

For example, one teacher complained her district considered laying off twenty teachers but no administrators. Another report comes from several teachers blowing the whistle on their district spending \$4 million for a

discipline management training program, only to see it quickly terminated by many schools.

While major losses result from bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence, individual

fraud is common.

For example, in September 2004, a kickback scheme in Fort Worth, Texas, resulted in a district director of maintenance and a contractor each being sentenced to eight years in prison for reportedly defrauding the district of nearly \$16 million.



"Only about 50 cents on every dollar actually goes to classroom instruction."

Source: David W. Kirkpatrick, www.freedomfoundation.us



Smaller Classes

Achievement and Class Size Reduction

Researchers at the University of London found no evidence that children in smaller classes made more progress in math, English, or science. The study covered students aged 7 to 11.

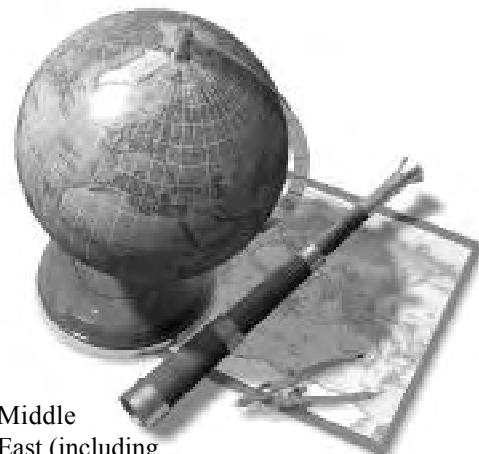
The researchers additionally found no evidence that teacher characteristics, such as age, level of experience, or length of time in their current school, "had any influence upon pupil attainment in any [academic] discipline."

A five-page summary of the report is available on the UK government's Department for Education and Skills website at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RBX13-04.pdf>.

Textbook Bias

Critical Thinking Needed in Evaluating Textbook on Islam

By Ginger Tinney



Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, teachers have tried to answer students' questions pertaining to the Middle East and the Muslim religion. As our American presence continues in Iraq, and as American politics continue to focus on foreign relations with the Middle East, our schools are hungry for ways to educate both teachers and students on the culture, politics, sociology, religion, and, of course, geography of the Arab World.

With growing Arab and Middle Eastern populations in our own country — as well as the growth of Islam in the United States — the need to pursue this type of multicultural curriculum has become a pressing one.

Unfortunately, in the search for curriculum to serve this purpose, Audrey Shabbas' *The Arab World Studies Notebook* (AWSN) has found its way into schools nationwide. While an academic, factual, and insightful presentation of Islam and the Arab World would be a welcome addition to a multicultural study in the classroom, Shabbas' AWSN is an inaccurate and indoctrinating curriculum that should not be allowed to continue in public schools. William Bennetta, president of The Textbook League, defined the AWSN as:

"A vehicle for disseminating disinformation, including a multitude of false, distorted, or utterly absurd claims that is presented as historical facts. I infer that the "Notebook" has three principal purposes: inducing teachers to embrace Islamic beliefs; inducing teachers to embrace po-

litical views that are favored by the MEPC and AWAIR; and impelling teachers to disseminate those religious beliefs and political views in schools. The promotion of Islam in the Notebook is unrestrained... In a public school setting, the religious-indoctrination work which Shabbas wants teachers to perform would clearly be illegal."

The Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators (APOE) is unwilling to stand by as falsehoods are taught to our children as facts. In response to Shabbas' AWSN, we at APOE have joined with former Shi'ite Muslim Reza Safa who is an international speaker and Christian pastor at Fisherman's House Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Unlike Ms. Shabbas, who grew up in America and married a Muslim, Safa experienced firsthand the Muslim beliefs and the way America is viewed by Muslims. Pastor Safa is a best-selling author and expert who has written several books on Islam and the Arab culture. In

the future, Pastor Safa will work with APOE Foundation not only to provide educational workshops to Oklahoma students, teachers, and school administrators, but also to develop a factual and informative alternative to Shabbas' propagandist curriculum.

APOE's first presentation with Pastor Safa was conducted in Weatherford, Oklahoma, for the Weatherford Public Schools teacher in-service day on January 3, 2005. As a part of this seminar, Pastor Safa discussed his personal background as an Iranian Shi'ite Muslim, the Culture of the

Middle East (including people groups, family structure, religion, economics, and politics), modern history of the Middle East (including Mohammad and the birth of Islam, Islamic dominance in the Middle East, major events of the 20th century, U.S. policy and the Middle East, growth of radical Islam, and growth of Christianity), and Middle Eastern Muslims in America (increased immigration and growth, areas of influence, and understanding Middle Eastern Muslim students).

One APOE local leader reported that, since hosting the seminar at her school, "many teachers have come up to me to tell me how informative and timely the Middle East/Islam presentation was. They have said that it was one of the most useful and interesting presentations we've had in a long time." The APOE Foundation has played the primary role in funding and coordinating this workshop to provide truthful and appropriate education on Islam and the Middle East to Oklahoma teachers. ■

For more information on Reza Safa's workshop on Islam, contact the Association of Professional Oklahoma Educators' Foundation, P.O. Box 713, Norman, OK 73070; 1-888-331-APOE; foundation@apoe.org; www.apoe.org



Upon his conversion from Islam to Christianity while living in Sweden, Reza Safa's father disowned him and his mother tried to admit him to a mental hospital through the Iranian Embassy in Stockholm.



Ginger Tinney is the Executive Director of the Associated Professional Oklahoma Educators, a partner with the Association of American Educators.

Source: Bennetta, William J. The Textbook League. "Arab World Studies Notebook lobs Muslim propaganda at teachers." E-mail letter of 8 October 2003 from The Textbook League's president, William J. Bennetta, to Stuart Elliott, of Wichita, Kansas. www.thetextbookleague.org.

You Don't Say

Vocabulary with a twist

Every year, Washington Post's *Style Invitational* asks readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing one letter, and supply a new definition. Here are this year's winners.



Bozone (n.): The substance surrounding stupid people that stops bright ideas from penetrating. The bozone layer unfortunately shows little sign of breaking down in the near future.

Intoxication: Euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts

until you realize it was your money to start with.

Reintarnation: Coming back to life as a hillbilly.

Cashtration (n.): The act of buying a house, which renders the subject financially impotent for an indefinite period.

Giraffiti: Vandalism spray painted very, very high.

Sarchasm: The gulf between the author of sarcastic wit and the person who doesn't get it.

Osteopornosis: A degenerate disease. (This one got extra credit.)



Karmageddon: It's like, when everybody is sending off all these

really bad vibes, right? And then, like, the Earth explodes and it's like, a serious bummer, dude.

Decafalon (n.): The grueling event of getting through the day consuming only things that are good for you.

Glibido: All talk and no action.

Dopeler effect: The tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you rapidly.

Caterpallor (n.): The color you turn after finding half a grub in the fruit you're eating.



Hipatitis: Terminal coolness.

Beelzebug (n.): Satan in the form of a mosquito that gets into your bedroom at three in the morning and cannot be cast out.

Inoculatte: To take coffee intravenously when you are running late.



Arachnoleptic fit (n.): The frantic dance performed just after you've accidentally walked through a spider web.

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barrel spending and funding for special-interest programs such as the Historic Whaling and Trading Partners Exchange Program, Ready-to-Learn Television, and the Women's Educational Equity Act, to name only three.

Rhetoric aside, the question remains: Is the level of federal funding for education sufficient? To answer this question, one must first put federal spending in perspective. Of the half a trillion dollars the nation spends on its schools, federal funding accounts for less than 10 percent – a small slice of a very large pie.

Internationally, the United States is the big spender. The U.S. is second only to Switzerland in K-12 spending, relative to per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and it rises to first place when post-secondary spending is added. However, in terms of achievement, American students are not at the head of the class. In fact, by the 12th grade, they drop to near the bottom in math and science on both international and national assessments. On one international science and math test for 12th graders, the U.S. ranked 18th out of 21 countries. On our own tests – the National Assessment of Educational Progress – less than a quarter of 12th grade students are proficient in either subject.

If big spending has left us near the bottom of the pile academically, is the funding question really the most important one to be asking? There will likely never be consensus on what constitutes adequate spending at either the state or the national level. But to make progress in education policy, it would be a good start to admit that money should not be the only question up for debate. ■



Krista Kafer is Senior Education Policy Analyst at The Heritage Foundation.
www.heritage.org.

A Question of Money

No Child Left Behind is Not an “Unfunded Mandate”

By Krista Kafer

Last fall the House of Representatives voted to increase education funding by \$2 billion. The Department of Education will receive a total of \$57.7 billion to administer K-12 and postsecondary programs in 2005. Programs serving poor and disabled students will receive the largest boost. Funding for education programs administered by other agencies, such as Head Start, also will increase. The bill passed with the support of Democrats and all but a few Republicans.

While the bill brings education spending to an all-time high, the National Education Association continues to claim that it “falls far short of what schools need to fully meet the mandates of the so-called ‘No Child Left Behind’ law.” Another advocacy group, the Committee for Education Funding, calls the bill a “fiscal starvation strategy.”

While it may be too much to expect them

to say “this is sufficient” or “this is too much,” or even “thank you,” these special-interest groups, at least, shouldn't mislead people. NCLB is not an unfunded mandate. The act is both funded and voluntary. Besides this, there were no promises. Congress sets funding levels for all programs in annual appropriations bills. Several studies suggest that these funding levels are adequate.

“The U.S. is second only to Switzerland in K-12 spending, relative to per-capita GDP.”

Special-interest groups are not the only ones guilty of disingenuous rhetoric. Congress routinely claims that it is doing all it can to maximize funding for poor and disabled children. Yet, the annual appropriations bills are invariably chock full of pork-

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