

# Cuts in education funding will improve academic performance. Honest.

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Given the capitalist system's need to mask its contradictions, no matter the ugliness that lies beneath, it was only a matter of time before the right wing of the mainstream media started spewing forth disinformation to prove, incredibly, that recent cuts in funding for public education will actually have a positive influence on academic performance. Counter arguments from opposing voices within the mainstream media do little more than support an unacceptable status quo and the bureaucracy of the teachers' unions.

The efforts of right-wing forces to manipulate public opinion are all the more sinister in that they are part of a larger, deliberate policy designed to destroy the public sector in favor of privatization, and, in the process, repudiate the democratic principles upon which public education was founded.

Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey, arguably the most influential proponents of public education in their respective eras, most clearly articulated the necessity for a democracy to disseminate a quality education to all its citizenry. In his proposal for an Elementary School Act (1817), Thomas Jefferson wrote that "talents and virtues" are found among the poor and the rich and "are lost in their country by the want of means for their cultivation."

Writing from Paris to George Wythe in 1786 about the Virginia Assembly's Code of Laws, Jefferson argued that educating the general population was of primary importance: "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness."

John Dewey, America's most progressive and influential thinker on education of the twentieth century, took Jefferson's thinking a step further in asserting that an inextricable connection between democracy and education was to be found in the material, communal basis of democracy: "Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (*Democracy and Education*).

An accounting of the successes and failures in meeting these expectations over the past two centuries is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say that Jefferson's and Dewey's thinking on the reciprocal relationship between democracy and a quality public education represents the major premise upon which the development of the American educational system has rested.

Although the partisans of public education gradually prevailed in the course of the first century and a half of US history, arguments for a privately based educational system have an equally long pedigree. In 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence, Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, called on the government to give money to parents so they might choose the best school for their children and thereby prevent the development of an education monopoly.

Other early critics claimed that education was a private concern and should not be entrusted to the government. Irish Catholics opposed public

education on the grounds that the argument for separation of church and state was a cover for the institutionalization of Protestantism.

In the end, the separation of church and state, as well as the belief that an informed, stable democracy depended for its existence on public education, held sway, and by the American Civil War public education for white children was firmly in place in the northern states. (Dr. Pedro A. Noguera, "Confronting the Challenge of Privatization in Public Education," *In Motion Magazine*, 1993).

However, from the late 1950s to the present, mounting social problems and the diversion of critical resources to military spending have resulted in a deteriorating public school system. The Vietnam War helped turn the United States into the world's largest debtor nation. At the same time, racial and class inequalities created by the capitalist system forced the federal government to pour billions of dollars into social programs to quell discontent.

During the 1950s and 1960s, millions of blacks migrated from poverty in the South to seek good-paying jobs in the North. One result was white flight to the suburbs, relegating black parents to tenement housing in city slums and their children to racially segregated schools that practiced a rigid tracking system.

The urban public school system, which had heretofore been viewed as a tool for equality and advancement, was increasingly seen as "little more than warehouses for children" ("Confronting the Challenge of Privatization in Public Education"). The deep economic recession of the early to mid-1970s, a crisis from which the world capitalist system has been unable to extricate itself, led manufacturers to move their production facilities to Mexico and overseas, thereby depriving many public schools of a large percentage of their tax base and exacerbating social conditions inimical to a good learning environment, e.g., poor nutrition, one or more parents out of work, crumbling physical plants, lack of money for textbooks and good teachers, the destruction of families and neighborhoods—the list is long.

White suburban dwellers are no longer exempt from these problems. They are caught in a vise between heavy household debts and drastic cuts in state funding for social services, resulting in large part from the Bush administration's policies of permanent war and tax cuts for the rich. Many suburban parents simply do not have the money to support a quality public school system for their children.

The history of privatization efforts during this same time period is one of abstracting these very real problems from their economic source, and proposing solutions that reveal the increasing antagonism between capitalism and democratic ideals. In 1955, conservative economist Milton Friedman's article entitled "Capitalism and Freedom," the basis for his 1962 book of the same name, announced a shift in purpose: the federal government was no longer to involve itself with social engineering; instead, its role would be limited to underwriting the basic cost of education.

Friedman went so far as to claim that the government's only other

obligation should be to insure that “schools meet certain standards, such as it now inspects restaurants to insure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards” (quoted in Noguera, “Confronting the Challenge of Privatization”). The same market-driven logic has informed more recent proposals for vouchers, with the aim of forcing public schools to compete for students, and the latest rationale for privatization, which is that privatizing schools will help reduce costs at a time when states are slashing funding for education.

One of the spokespeople for this latest rationale, David Salisbury, a member of the libertarian Cato Institute, argues in an article that first appeared on *FoxNews.com*, February 4, 2003, that because education accounts for the largest chunk of spending in every state, and private education costs less per pupil than government-run schools, parents should be given a “free choice of public or private schools.” Salisbury contrasts per-pupil spending in Washington State (\$6,100) to the national average per-pupil spending in private schools (\$4,600). Accordingly, if parents were to be given a voucher of \$4,600 for each child moving from a public to a private school, the state would save \$1,500.

Salisbury adds that some states, e.g., Florida, which “allows children with disabilities to attend private or public schools,” and Arizona, which gives tax breaks to residents who give money to private school scholarship funds, have already moved in this direction.

Salisbury’s method of argumentation is a familiar one: use slanted language and leave out uncomfortable information. Note his use of “government-run schools” instead of “public schools.” Over the past decade or so, voices booming forth from right-wing talk radio and much of television (not to mention the establishment press) have worked overtime to convince their audience that government programs which address critical social needs, from Social Security to health care to education, are actually destructive. What we don’t often hear is that since the 1980s the Social Security Administration has been collecting more annually in payroll taxes than it has paid out in benefits, and that the Social Security system is expected to follow this path “at least through 2025” (Ellen Frank, “Social Security Q & A,” *Dollars and Sense*, November/December 2001); or that in their thirst for profits, hospitals and insurance companies have contributed to the exodus of doctors and nurses from the profession and the privately based health system has led to more than 70 million Americans being without health care at some point during the past year; or, finally, that foreign “government-run” school systems often serve as benchmarks toward which US schools and their students are encouraged to strive.

Salisbury’s figures for states using the voucher system are misleading. Nowhere in his article does he note one very well-known difference between public and private schools: the former must admit any applicant, while the latter can choose. Despite this built-in advantage for private schools, studies comparing and contrasting the performance of public and private schools have been non-conclusive at best.

Drawing on a study of 70 public and private schools, the October 1994 issue of *Money* magazine concluded that “students who attend the best public schools outperform most private school students, that the best public schools offer a more challenging curriculum than most private schools, and that the private school advantage in test scores is due to their selective admission policies.” In the May 1998 issue of *Principal* magazine, Susan P. Choy, in an article entitled “Public vs. Private Schools,” wrote: “How successful students are in school does not depend on whether they attend public or private schools, but is related in complex ways to the abilities, attitudes, and problems they bring to school.”

Salisbury’s encomiums for privatization in Florida and Arizona are, moreover, based on incomplete information. “Nearly \$8 million this year,” the figure the author estimates Florida will realize in savings in 2003, is indeed a significant number; but this number, according to the same author, is based on the fact that Florida allows children with

disabilities to attend either public or private schools. However, public schools have no choice; they are mandated to educate *all* children, including the handicapped. Therefore, public schools have greater costs built into their mission.

Finally, Salisbury claims that Arizona’s policy of rewarding those who donate money to private education scholarship funds may save taxpayers as much as “\$100 million annually.” His projection may very well be accurate, but what if Arizona were to reward those same parents for donating money to public education scholarships? Might not the state save a similar amount of money while improving public education?

Nationally syndicated dissembler Thomas Sewell has weighed in on the side of Salisbury, adding that while we have been spending more on educating our children, the results have been a steady deterioration in academic performance, especially when compared to foreign countries. Sewell states that “many studies ... show that there is very little correlation between the amount of money that schools spend and the quality of the education that the children receive.” The author offers Washington DC as an example, where \$13,000 per pupil spending, among the highest in the nation, has produced some of the nation’s lowest test scores (*Toledo Blade*, May 26, 2003).

Proponents of privatization often drag out the whipping boy Washington DC to prove that more money does not equal a better education and that, therefore, “big government” (and its supposedly big-spending ways) is the culprit. However, when one looks at the financial problems that are often unique to urban areas such as Washington DC—financial problems that are not the result of “big government” spending but of corporate and property tax cuts carried out by both political parties with the complicity of a complacent and/or corrupt teachers union bureaucracy—one reaches a very different conclusion.

As *USA Today* pointed out in a May 23, 2003 article: “Construction and living costs, for instance, can drive up spending in urban areas, with schools essentially paying more to get the same goods and services that rural ones get.” In brief, urban areas are saddled with a higher cost of living. This situation has been exacerbated nationwide by the massive loss of property tax revenues following the exodus of good-paying manufacturing jobs to low-paying foreign countries, as well as the tax abatement policies instituted by urban areas to maintain and/or attract whatever good-paying jobs are still available.

Quite in line with their pro-Democratic Party, adamant defense of the status quo, the major teachers unions don’t offer this analysis of the problems besetting public schools. Instead, the National Education Association (NEA) advises teachers, students and parents to become more “accountable” (see the NEA web site, [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)). In other words, learn to do more with less.

The NEA is also allowing to pass, with the caveat that it not be used “as the sole measure of a school’s success,” the current emphasis on standardized testing, a policy that will require more funding for administrative and management positions and which the Bush administration and its corporate friends are using to close down “failing” public schools.

Thus, both pro- and anti-privatization voices are missing the point: instead of calling for private schools or asking public schools to do more with less, they should be focusing on the devastating social and economic consequences of gutting urban areas of revenue-producing jobs, consequences that are, in turn, serving as a justification for the American ruling elite to accelerate the same policies that led to the public schools’ decay in the first place.

Sewell, along with Salisbury and Myron Lieberman (another Cato Institute member), note that when compared to other developed countries, US students continue to lag far behind. In the same May 26, 2003, article, Sewell writes that “US students repeatedly finish at or near the bottom on international tests.”

Salisbury and Lieberman reach the same conclusion on the basis of the recently published report of the right-wing Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education, which echoed the findings of the famous, 20-year-old "A Nation at Risk" report. According to Salisbury and Lieberman, "The Task Force found that the performance of US public schools remains stagnant." They write that "about 80 million first graders have walked into schools where they have scant chance of learning more than the youngsters whose plight troubled the Commission in 1983" ("Keeping the Nation at Risk" originally appeared in *The American Prowler*, April 25, 2003).

Taken together, the authors' comments do point to unacceptably poor levels of student performance in public schools, but to the degree that their claims are unsubstantiated or selective, their conclusions lose credibility. Sewell doesn't provide any numbers to prove his conclusion, and Salisbury's and Lieberman's comparison of today's students to those involved in the 1983 Nation at Risk report is based on an incomplete assessment of the findings of that report. Conveniently, the authors do not see fit to include the report's findings that "The average salary after 12 years of teaching is only \$17,000 per year [1982 figures].... In addition, individual teachers have little influence in such critical professional decisions as, for example, textbook selection. The professional life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable." Once again, the proponents of privatization have chosen to ignore such issues as low pay and lack of control over the workplace.

Mainstream arguments against the misuse of both reports sound more like support for the status quo than a recognition of the deteriorating condition of public education and how we might go about the process of rebuilding. In "20 Years of School Bashing" (*Washington Post*, April 25, 2003), Gerald W. Bracey writes that while the Nation at Risk report "restored to popularity the sport of pummeling the public schools ... it was all wrong—then and now."

As an example, Bracey writes that when the report found "a steady decline in science achievement scores of US 17-year olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973, and 1977," the accuracy of the 1969 and 1973 numbers couldn't be determined because they were only "extrapolations from the 1977 assessment." And even if, the author argues, the "trend was true for 17-year-olds, it wasn't true for the other two age groups assessed, 13-year-olds or 9-year-olds. It also wasn't true for the three age groups tested in reading or math." Bracey also finds that "in the international reading study released this month (and ignored by most of the media), American students finished ninth among 35 nations, not at or anywhere near the bottom."

But, of course, there is something seriously wrong when the world's wealthiest nation can't reverse the steady decline in science scores for its 17-year-olds; and while placing ninth out of 35 nations in a reading study is better than being last or somewhere in the middle, it certainly doesn't call for self-congratulation.

Furthermore, when the results of this same recent study are broken down along class lines, one finds that a crisis does exist—a crisis that the likes of Sewell and Salisbury, as well as the teachers union bureaucracies, would rather ignore. Bracey contents himself with finding that "White American students outscored top-ranked Sweden 565 to 561." When economic differences are factored in, "Americans attending schools with less than 10 percent of the students in poverty (13 percent of all students) scored a whopping 589, and only those attending schools with more than 75 percent of the students in poverty (20 percent of all students) scored below the international average."

These statistics expose a disastrous situation for minorities and working class students. While we are expected to cheer the white American students who beat top-ranked Sweden 565 to 561 (as if the results of the reading study were being announced on ESPN sports TV), we are not, apparently, expected to care much about how the minority students fared.

Nor are we apparently to be overly concerned at the dismal results for students who attend schools in poor and working class communities.

The above-cited statistics, in fact, point to the underlying economic roots of the crisis in American public education, and the essential link between decaying schools and the enormous growth of social inequality in the US.

The recent articles and studies aimed at proving the futility of providing increased public funding for education—tracts that are founded on a selective and dishonest use of data—announce the willingness of the Republicans to scrap the democratic and egalitarian principles upon which public education was founded. The counter-arguments of the Democrats and the teachers union bureaucracies combine promises to be more "accountable" with a defense of the status quo and cover-up of the economic crisis underlying the deterioration of the public school system.

These positions must be understood in the context of the larger, international effort to address the underlying crisis of capitalism by fully privatizing the public sector. The liberal economist Paul Krugman recently wrote that "by pushing through another huge tax cut in the face of record deficits, the [Bush] administration clearly demonstrates either that it is completely feckless, or that it actually wants a fiscal crisis," which will result in the destruction of "programs that have become fundamental to the American way of life."

Public education is one of these programs, and neither spending less nor cheering the status quo will help to realize the ideals voiced by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Dewey. Instead, we must act to eliminate the market-driven, antidemocratic policies that have created this crisis in public education and replace them with socialist policies based on the needs and interests of the working population, i.e., the vast majority of the people.



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