



\$100 cash bonus when you open and use a Chase Checking™ account

CHASE CHECKING™


GET DETAILS


CHASE


ADVERTISEMENT


Home Inside RCP Election 2010 Polls Video Twitter Issues Comments Links World Markets Sports

NEWS & ELECTION VIDEOS

 Sen. Harry Reid: "I Had Nothing To Do" With State Of Economy

 Podesta: White House Has Some "Soul-Searching" To Do

 Limbaugh: America Was Built By Rugged Individualists Who'd Reject Obama

 Obama's Rosh Hashanah Message To Jews: Seek Peace

More Political Videos

| RCP POLL AVERAGES | |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| President Obama Job Approval | |
| RCP Average | |
| Approve | 46.0 |
| Disapprove | 49.8 |
| Spread -3.8 | |
| Congressional Job Approval | |
| RCP Average | |
| Approve | 23.0 |
| Disapprove | 72.0 |
| Spread -49.0 | |
| Generic Congressional Vote | |
| RCP Average | |
| Republicans | 48.4 |
| Democrats | 41.7 |
| Republicans +6.7 | |
| Direction of Country | |
| RCP Average | |
| Right Direction | 31.8 |
| Wrong Track | 61.2 |
| Spread -29.4 | |

LATEST ARTICLES

- ▶ **Obama's \$50 Billion Union Infrastructure Boondoggle**
- ▶ **What McCain's Tactics Teach**
- ▶ **"Dissension in the Ranks?"**
- ▶ **Burn the Quran? It's Un-Christian**
- ▶ **Can You Smell What Obama's Cooking?**

THE RCP BLOG

- ▶ **More Bad News for Dems in the Generic Ballot**
- ▶ **Fiorina Pulls Ahead of Boxer in California**
- ▶ **Real Clear Tuesday**
- ▶ **What Recent Polls Told Us**
- ▶ **That's Going to Leave a Mark**

Election 2010 Latest 2010 Polls Senate House Governor Generic Ballot Obama Approval

SEND TO A FRIEND | PRINT | COMMENTS | SHARE

September 6, 2010

Why School Reform Fails

By Robert Samuelson

WASHINGTON -- As 56 million children return to the nation's 133,000 elementary and secondary schools, the promise of "reform" is again in the air. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has announced \$4 billion in "race to the top" grants to states whose proposals demonstrate, according to Duncan, "a bold commitment to education reform" and "creativity and innovation (that are) breathtaking." What they really show is that few subjects inspire more intellectual dishonesty and political puffery than "school reform."

Since the 1960s, waves of "reform" haven't produced meaningful achievement gains. The most reliable tests are given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The reading and math tests, graded on a 0-500 scale, measure 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds. In 1971, the initial year for the reading test, the average score for 17-year-olds was 285; in 2008, the average score was 286. The math test started in 1973, when 17-year-olds averaged 304; in 2008, the average was 306.

To be sure, some improvements have occurred in elementary schools. But what good are they if they're erased by high school? There has also been a modest narrowing in the high-school achievement gaps among whites, blacks and Hispanics; unfortunately, the narrowing generally stopped in the late 1980s. (Average scores have remained stable because, although blacks' and Hispanics' scores have risen slightly, the size of these minority groups also expanded. This means that their still-low scores exert a bigger drag on the average. The two effects offset each other.)

Standard theories don't explain this meager progress. Too few teachers? Not really. From 1970 to 2008, the student population increased 8 percent and the number of teachers 61 percent. The student-teacher ratio has fallen sharply, from 27-to-1 in 1955 to 15-to-1 in 2007. Are teachers paid too little? Perhaps, but that's not obvious. In 2008, the average teacher earned \$53,230; two full-time teachers married to each other and making average pay would belong in the richest 20 percent of households (2008 qualifying income: \$100,240). Maybe more preschool would help. Yet, the share of 3- and 4-year-olds in preschool has rocketed from 11 percent in 1965 to 53 percent in 2008.

"Reforms" have disappointed for two reasons. First, no one has yet discovered transformative changes in curriculum or pedagogy, especially for inner-city schools, that are (in business lingo) "scalable" -- easily transferable to other schools, where they would predictably produce achievement gains. Efforts in New York City and Washington, D.C., to raise educational

SEARCH RCP



Robert Samuelson

Author Archive

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

- ▶ Why the Recovery Lags
- ▶ The Homeownership Fetish
- ▶ Bumper Sticker Nation
- ▶ The Parent Trap


RECEIVE NEWS ALERTS

Email Address SIGN UP

Robert Samuelson RealClearPolitics


USD Arne Duncan

[+] More



\$100 cash bonus when you open and use a Chase Checking™ account

CHASE CHECKING™



GET DETAILS

CHASE

standards involve contentious and precarious school-by-school campaigns to purge "ineffective" teachers and principals. Charter schools might break this pattern, though there are grounds for skepticism. In 2009, the 4,700 charter schools enrolled about 3 percent of students and did not uniformly show achievement gains.

The larger cause of failure is almost unmentionable: shrunken student motivation. Students, after all, have to do the work. If they aren't motivated, even capable teachers may fail.

Motivation comes from many sources: curiosity and ambition; parental expectations; the desire to get into a "good" college; inspiring or intimidating teachers; peer pressure. The unstated assumption of much school "reform" is that if students aren't motivated, it's mainly the fault of schools and teachers. The reality is that, as high schools have become more inclusive (in 1950, 40 percent of 17-year-olds had dropped out compared with about 25 percent today) and adolescent culture has strengthened, the authority of teachers and schools has eroded. That applies more to high schools than to elementary schools, helping explain why early achievement gains evaporate.

Motivation is weak because more students (of all races and economic classes, let it be added) don't like school, don't work hard and don't do well. In a 2008 survey of public high school teachers, 21 percent judged student absenteeism a serious problem; 29 percent cited "student apathy." The goal of expanding "access" -- giving more students more years of schooling -- tends to lower educational standards. Michael Kirst, an emeritus education professor at Stanford, estimates that 60 percent of incoming community college students and 30 percent of freshmen at four-year colleges need remedial reading and math courses.

Against these realities, school "reform" rhetoric is blissfully evasive. It is often an exercise in extravagant expectations. Even if George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program had been phenomenally successful (it wasn't), many thousands of children would have been left behind. Now Duncan routinely urges "a great teacher" in every classroom. That would be about 3.7 million "great" teachers -- a feat akin to having every college football team composed of all-Americans. With this sort of intellectual rigor, what school "reform" promises is more disillusion.

Copyright 2010, Washington Post Writers Group

 [SEND TO A FRIEND](#) |  [PRINT](#) |  [COMMENTS](#) |  [SHARE](#)

Related Topics: [USD](#), [Arne Duncan](#), [Washington](#), [Education secretary](#)

Sponsored Links Related Articles

September 5, 2010

[Boxer, Fiorina and the Endless Recovery - Debra Saunders](#)

September 8, 2010

[The Illusion of a Stimulus - Alvaro Vargas Llosa](#)

September 2, 2010

[Causes of the Recent Financial and Economic Crisis - Ben Bernanke](#)

September 8, 2010

[Entrepreneurs Under Attack - John Stossel](#)

August 25, 2010

[Interview with Florida GOP Gov. Nominee Rick Scott - John King, USA](#)

[About Us](#) | [Contact](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) © RealClearPolitics 2010