Credible Cassandras

This time, perhaps, the sky really is falling

High-school graduation rates are slipping? Can this be? Or is Chicken Little at it again? After rising for more than 100 years, reports in our lead feature, graduation rates started to slip during the 1970s. By the turn of the century, the graduation rate had dropped 7 percentage points from its high-water mark of 77 percent in 1969.

Surprisingly, the drop has gone practically unnoticed, mainly owing to the growing use of General Educational Development (GED) certificates. This certificate is awarded upon passage of an exam provided by the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education. The most popular measure of graduation rates equates the GED with a high-school diploma, lulling observers into believing that graduation rates are higher than ever. Yet in the marketplace, the GED is not worth much more than the bubble sheet on which most of the answers are marked.

Maybe we shouldn’t care. Maybe high school is not for everyone and the country does not need so many educated workers. The United States, moreover, has enjoyed robust economic growth despite our educational deficiencies. This issue’s forum dives into the debate over the link between education and economic growth. Eric Hanushek argues that human capital is crucial to long-term gains in economic productivity and growth—and shows how poor the U.S. standing in the world actually is. Meanwhile, William Easterly, in a fascinating discussion of education policy in the developing world, cautions against building human capital simply by throwing money at schools. The massive expansion of education in poor countries during the past four decades has failed to produce the expected surges in economic growth.

Yet it is dollar tossing that is now being mandated by judges, says Michael H. Eise. In a number of states, lawsuits are filed—and decisions handed down—that require states to up their education spending in the mistaken presumption that more money equals better schools. All these lawsuits are riding high on the back of the standards and accountability movement— even though Michael Cohen shows that states have been slow to implement their accountability systems.

Our research section contains a pair of striking articles. Joseph Guzman’s findings cast doubt on the value of bilingual instruction as practiced in America’s schools. His research indicates that Spanish-speaking students, if rapidly immersed in English-language instruction, are more likely to go to college than those placed in bilingual education programs. Darius Lakdawalla’s analysis of trends in class size is no less penetrating, cutting across political and ideological cleavages. He argues that over the years policymakers have responded to the increasing cost of skilled workers by lowering the pay of teachers relative to other professions, thereby reducing their relative quality as well. To make up for the loss in quality, policymakers have chosen to reduce class sizes by hiring more teachers.

The teacher quality problem can’t be solved, say Sandra Vergari and Frederick M. Hess, simply by tightening the accreditation and regulation of teacher-training programs. Today that responsibility rests primarily with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a private accrediting agency that claims to distinguish good teacher-education programs from bad ones. In fact, NCATE is an ideologically infused, largely unaccountable organization that has done little to demonstrate its ability to effectively police the quality of America’s schools of education.

Education Next has still more. Robert Boruch makes the case for randomized experiments in education. Then, Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup defend their polling techniques against criticisms first raised by Terry Moe in the Spring 2002 issue of this journal. They claim that Moe’s critiques are largely spurious, yet promise to conduct their own randomized polling experiments to see if Moe could be right after all. Terry Moe replies.

Also, check out the book reviews and the moving essay by Howard Fuller on the back page. Enjoy, or get angry, but in any case please send us your comments.

–THE EDITORS

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but Education Next partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.