

Common Core and the War on Self-Deception

Learning the truth about schools helps the school reform cause



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

“Think Globally, Act Locally” is a slogan around which the public should rally as much concerning education as environmental issues. Since the American school is in sad shape globally, one expects the pragmatic, Mr. Fixit American public to be actively engaged locally in school reform.

We have just been told again, for the 15th time, that U.S. students rank below the industrialized world average in both math and science and hardly above that average in literacy. Few doubt that persistent low performance endangers our nation’s prosperity (see “Underachieving in America,” *book reviews*, Spring 2014). Clearly, it’s time for local action to address a problem of global significance.

Yet at the local level, antireform forces are gaining strength. Both in New York City and in Boston, teachers union–financed candidates swept into the mayor’s office in the closing months of 2013, and there is reason to believe similar events could happen elsewhere. But the enemy of school reform is as much self-deception as it is the organized opposition of those with vested interests. Members of the public see the school problem globally, but they deny the reality in front of their local noses.

When asked where the U.S. ranked relative to other countries in math, the average answer made by a nationally representative sample of Americans surveyed by *Ednext* was 19, a pretty good guess and barely higher than the official estimate offered by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which reported that the United States stood somewhere between 22 and 28.

But many people, even when they know the nation’s schools are in trouble, give their local schools an exemption. Only 21 percent of Americans assign the nation’s schools an “A” or a “B,” while 49 percent hand out one of those higher grades to their own school, the *Ednext* poll shows.

Having accurate local information opens the door to reform. Conventional wisdom—the general knowledge circulating in informed circles—is probably quite accurate regarding global issues, about everything from the climate to car

dealers, Congress, and schools in general. Learning the truth about particular individuals and institutions can be as challenging as trying to figure out the weather next month.

So when the *Ednext* poll told respondents how students within their local school district compared to students internationally, their willingness to give their local district an “A” or a “B” slipped by 14 percentage points, from 49 to 35 percent. A slap in the face woke quite a few Americans up to the fact that things locally were not much different than things were nationally.

Not only was the public less willing to give local schools a pass, but it was also more inclined to call for change (see “Information Fuels Support for School Reform,” *features*, Spring 2014). Among those told of the national ranking of their local schools, the percentage willing to support school vouchers for all students rose by 13 percentage points, and backing for charter schools increased by 7 percentage points. People also became less inclined to grant tenure to teachers, and, in those districts that scored below the national average, enthusiasm for teachers unions fell noticeably.

To act locally, you need to think globally, but you also have to know what is in fact happening nearby. It’s not just the labor-electoral complex, as Mayor Bloomberg put it in a farewell address to New Yorkers, that blocks reform. The biggest opponents of all are Mr. and Ms. Self-Deception.

For that reason I do not join those who oppose common core state standards.

If the attempt to establish a common framework for what students need to learn can identify more precisely how well each school is doing, then it will provide the public with a tool it needs to correct its own self-deception.

— Paul E. Peterson

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.
