Education Next

Feature

Debunking deBoer's Education Reform Pessimism

The cultural critic's absolutist appraisal ignores clear evidence of progress

By Vladimir Kogan

ADOBE STOCK

In 2018, John White, then the state superintendent of Louisiana, warned about an emerging bipartisan movement premised on the idea that effective education interventions don't exist. "On the extremes of the right and the left, there is a growing desire to discredit a generation of progress in American public schools," he cautioned.

At the time, reformers could claim real success. Although scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had begun to decline modestly, they were doing so from a historic high that reflected two decades of steady gains. "This is no claim of 'mission accomplished,'" White conceded. "But this country has made important improvements over a generation, with real implications for the lives of families and the economic health of our states and communities."

Today, the generational gains White pointed to have been largely erased. And pessimism about the potential for education reform, once limited to the political fringes, seems to be gaining mainstream respectability.

One of the leading naysayers is writer Freddie deBoer. In 2020, the self-described Marxist published *The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice*, a manifesto seeking to discredit efforts to improve public education and close achievement gaps. In the years since, deBoer has built a large Substack following—more than 66,000 subscribers—and recently attracted attention by trying to debunk the so-called "Southern Surge" in reading achievement recorded by states such as Mississippi and Louisiana over the past decade, even as scores in the rest of the country continued their downward slide.

DeBoer's message is clear: "Put more simply and sadly, nothing in education works."

Academic achievement, deBoer believes, is largely genetically determined. Even when education interventions are effective in the short term, many of the benefits fade out over time or simply shift the entire distribution—increasing performance across the board, without closing the gap between top and bottom performers. Students' relative positions in that distribution remain "remarkably static over time, even in the face of massive spending and intense intervention, and . . . this persistence fatally undermines modern assumptions about schooling, its purpose, and its potential."

DeBoer is a skilled writer who combines an entertaining style, cheeky barbs, and apparent substantive expertise. It is easy to see how he has built such an impressive following and why many of his arguments may seem persuasive to a lay reader. And deBoer is right to criticize education reformers for exaggerating the likely impacts of even their most effective policy proposals. As the Fordham Institute's President Michael Petrilli acknowledged recently, "we have overpromised and underdelivered."

But dig into the details, and it becomes clear that deBoer's most fatalistic critiques of reform efforts are either greatly exaggerated or simply incorrect and the evidence he marshals to support his claims either cherry-picked or just made up.

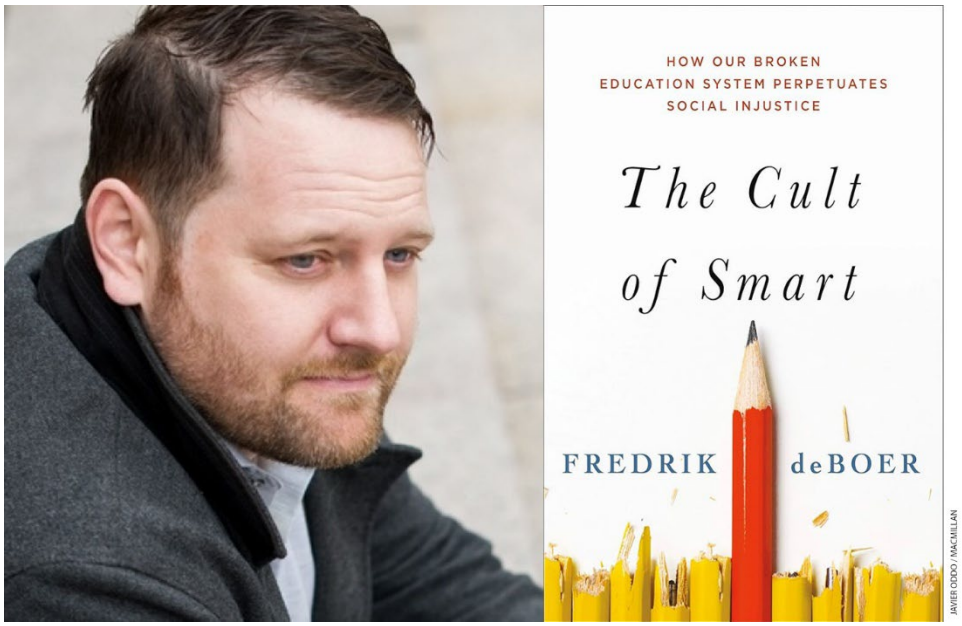
To understand why progress in closing achievement gaps is possible, it is important to examine each major element of deBoer's argument and see where he goes wrong.

Genetics are Not Academic Destiny

It is true that intelligence has a large heritable component and that genetic factors account for much of the variation in achievement observed in the population overall. It is also true, as deBoer has written recently, that "schools control 10% or less of the variance in student academic outputs." Neither fact, however, implies that education interventions are doomed to fail nor that the kinds of achievement disparities we most worry about can be explained by genetics.

Consider two traits with even greater heritability: weight and height. Obesity, for example, has a strong genetic basis, but genes cannot explain why obesity rates have grown threefold in the U.S. over the past six decades and have done so unequally among racial and income groups. Height is also largely heritable and varies far more within countries than between them. Yet North Koreans are several inches shorter on average than their genetically identical brethren across the border in South Korea, illustrating the importance of government policies and the social institutions that create them.

Similar dynamics apply to academic achievement. Studies from the 1960s and 1970s, for example, found large IQ gaps between East Germans and West Germans, despite no genetic differences between the two groups.



Freddie deBoer's 2020 book* The Cult of Smart *cemented his reputation as a skeptic of education reform efforts. But many of his assertions are misleading or false.

Although genes may be important for understanding differences in *individual* achievement, these genetic factors largely cancel out at higher levels of aggregation. And any remaining effects of genetics are already accounted for in traditional "value-added" models. Teacher quality, not genetics, explains why students in different classrooms post diverging rates of academic growth from year to year. And public policies, including union contracts governing educator assignment, evaluation, and layoffs, explain why low-income and minority students are more likely to be assigned inexperienced and ineffective teachers.

One of the most persuasive arguments against attributing group-level differences in achievement to genetics comes from deBoer himself.

"It's perfectly consistent to believe that differences between *individual* students is largely genetic while the differences between racial *groups* is not," deBoer wrote in *The Cult of Smart*, hoping to preempt the charges of racism leveled against scholars like Charles Murray. "My own take is a rather conventional position among liberal people: I suspect that the racial achievement gap is the product of social, economic, and cultural forces that lie outside of the control of their parents. The various burdens that Black and Hispanic students labor under work to depress their test scores and similar academic outcomes."

The list of "burdens" and "social forces" should include highly inequitable education policies. For example, prolonged school closures in heavily Democratic areas during the pandemic disproportionately impacted minority students, increasing racial achievement gaps. Policy drives disparities on other dimensions of inequality as well. For example, economists Lisa Barrow and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach have noted that similar inequities contribute to disparities between economic groups, with low-poverty schools characterized by "more experienced teachers, less teacher turnover, fewer crimes, and more specialized facilities."

Returning to the German example, it is encouraging that the East-West IQ gaps dissipated quickly after reunification. The lesson we should take away is that far too many U.S. kids remain trapped behind the iron curtain of bad policy. We can and should tear down those walls.

Yes, Upward Mobility is Possible

DeBoer's second key contention—that even effective interventions cannot narrow achievement gaps

despite increasing average performance—is similarly misguided.

Although test scores in early grades do strongly predict future achievement and attainment, there is "statistically and economically significant variance in upward [achievement] mobility across districts," according to one recent analysis examining 3 million students. Most disturbingly, such upward mobility is especially rare in districts serving disadvantaged students—the very students who begin school farthest behind academically and who most desperately need high-quality schools and compensatory interventions.

Recent national trends also demonstrate that achievement gaps are not fixed. When NAEP scores were improving in the 1990s and the early 2000s, the gains were driven disproportionately by the lowest-achieving students. Over the past decade, the observed decline has occurred almost exclusively among low performers. As the American Enterprise Institute's Nat Malkus has put it, "the bottom is falling out."

There are two reasons we should expect students at the bottom of the achievement distribution to be most sensitive to education policies. The first is that many interventions are intentionally targeted toward struggling students. If effective, they'll narrow achievement gaps by design, because high-performing students won't get them. The second is that disadvantaged students most need high-quality schools to compensate for disadvantages they face outside of the classroom. Higher-income students are more likely to have plenty of support at home, and their parents have the resources to compensate for bad schools.

So, if we find the right interventions and intentionally target the students who need them most, how much relative growth is possible? In her analysis of New York City charter schools using randomized admission lotteries, economist Carolyn Hoxby benchmarked her results against the observed achievement gaps between Harlem, a low-income Black neighborhood, and Scarsdale, one of the most exclusive and affluent suburbs in New York. Attending a New York charter school from kindergarten through 8th grade, Hoxby found, closed 86 percent of the "Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap" in math and 66 percent of the gap in reading.

To be sure, New York is exceptional in many ways. Charter schools are a mixed bag nationally, as deBoer has noted, though they have improved in recent years. But the source of this variation is important. One reason why charter schools seem to produce more positive effects in urban areas than in higher-income suburbs is because of the differences in the quality of the existing *non-charter* options. Such variation in impacts is precisely what we might hope to see if our goal was to narrow opportunity gaps and improve educational opportunities for kids currently left behind.

One of the most effective spokesmen for the idea that education interventions can help students at the bottom of the achievement distribution—and thus close achievement gaps—is once again deBoer himself. When Kelsey Piper and Karen Vaites wrote a persuasive rebuttal to his trashing of the "Southern Surge," deBoer penned a rejoinder conceding that phonics-based reading instruction does indeed work—but better for some students than others.

"Many studies show that the biggest gains from phonics are for the weakest readers, or those behind in fluency or decoding," he summarized. "(This is also true in math and all manner of other domains btw.) Children who already have decent oral vocabulary, background knowledge, home reading, etc., often get less additional benefit."

Exactly.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Third-grade students from Harlem Link Charter School learn about forestry in Mount Morris Park in 2007. Research by Caroline Hoxby found that attending a New York charter school from kindergarten through 8th grade narrowed achievement gaps—contrary to deBoer's assertion about the ineffectiveness of education interventions.

Test Scores Fade Out, Benefits Remain

One must concede that deBoer is on point when emphasizing the reality of fadeout—the impacts of interventions that increase test scores in the short-run often diminish as time passes. There is no way to sugarcoat it: deBoer is right.

But this is not the whole story. Education reformers obsess about test scores not because we care about them for their own sake but because they predict later-life outcomes, including college attendance, labor market participation, criminal involvement, and health. And teachers who improve test scores also improve these outcomes.

The good news is that even if test score effects go away, long-term benefits often remain. Consider deBoer's favorite example of fadeout: early childhood education.

"Once, pre-K was thought to be a great academic leveler, as initial studies of young children showed meaningful differences," deBoer has written. "But larger-scale and more sophisticated research demonstrated that these benefits fade out over time; that is, as students age, they revert to their initially assessed relative academic rank. This tendency of encouraging pre-K effects to eventually fade out reflects the greater malleability of outcomes in earlier life and the likelihood of regress towards an individual talent level over time."

Although the test score benefits of many early childhood education interventions do indeed dissipate over time, positive effects often reemerge later in life and improve important health and self-sufficiency outcomes.

Nor is this pattern limited to pre-K programs. A set of New York charter schools that closed racial achievement gaps in the short run subsequently reduced teenage pregnancy (by 60 percent) and incarceration (by 100 percent). And states that raised their 8th-grade NAEP math achievement also saw significant improvements in educational attainment, employment, incarceration, and teenage pregnancy rates—even though the test score effects largely faded by 12th grade.

That impacts on standardized test performance fade out over time suggests our evaluations of education interventions should examine a broader set out of outcomes, including non-cognitive measures such as student discipline and attendance, and prioritize achievement improvements that persist. But fadeout is not grounds for education-reform nihilism.

Lies and Falsehoods

Thus far, I have focused on the deBoer arguments that have some basis in reality, even if he is prone to misinterpreting and misrepresenting the facts. But others rise to the level of intellectual dishonesty at best and outright falsehood at worst.

Take his tails-I-win-heads-you-lose approach to evaluating evidence. When studies produce results that support his argument (e.g., the null effects on test scores of selective-admission high schools in New York, Boston, and Chicago), he proudly embraces them. But when studies are clearly inconsistent with his thesis, he either ignores them or asserts, without any proof, that cheating or gaming must be responsible. ("[W]hat's more likely to be true? That the Mississippi miracle has actually occurred, a sudden massive turnaround in outcomes in conveniently-bounded administrative units where there's inherent and immense pressure to fudge the numbers? . . . OR, is it more likely that the Mississippi miracle will prove to be like every other educational miracle that's come before it, a product of moving poorly-performing students off the books?")

On other topics, deBoer repeats long-debunked conspiracy theories. When describing the improvements in Washington, D.C., under the reforms put in place by former Chancellor Michelle Rhee, deBoer claims that "cheating scandals erupted" and that "the broader system never saw the transformation promised." In fact, independent evaluations focused on low-stakes tests showed that the achievement gains were real and that permanent reforms to teaching evaluations played a central role.

When discussing the dramatic turnaround of New Orleans schools after the governance reforms that occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, deBoer concedes: "Scores did rise—but in the context of massive demographic shifts (tens of thousands of the poorest children never returned after displacement), intensive state support, and years of philanthropic subsidy." In fact, Tulane economist Doug Harris, the definitive guru on the New Orleans reforms, showed that measurable demographics of families with school-age children changed almost not at all and students who returned after the hurricane were, if anything, lower-achieving to begin with. Yes, the state played a role—not in providing "intensive support" but simply by shutting down underperforming charter schools.

DeBoer is correct that the impact of education interventions—including pre-kindergarten—tend to fade over time, but only when looking at test-score effects. The benefits often appear in later-life outcomes, from college to career.

Don't Give Up on Reform

DeBoer is right about one thing: There are no miracles in education. Too much oxygen in education reform conversations gets sucked up by slick salesmen peddling the latest silver bullet or hyping new education technology.

But real progress in closing achievement gaps is possible. Realizing it requires difficult, incremental, and often politically unpopular efforts that must be sustained for many years.

It's not the kind of message likely to garner many Substack subscriptions, but it's the message we need to truly move the needle on academic outcomes and give the most disadvantaged students a real shot at a better future.

Vladimir Kogan is a professor of political science at the Ohio State University. He is the author of the recent book No Adult Left Behind: How Politics Hijacks Education Policy and Hurts Kids *(Cambridge University Press).*

This article appeared at EducationNext.org on December 9, 2025.