

RUSH!

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A NEED TO IMPROVE THE WALL CHART'S PARTIAL PICTURE OF U.S. SCHOOLS

The Department of Education's sixth annual State Education Performance Chart, unveiled earlier this month by Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos, compares the progress of education in each state during 1988. Known generally as the "Wall Chart" because of its oversized format, the survey rates the performance of states according to standard academic indicators, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) standard. The chart also compares such statistics as staff-pupil ratios and per-pupil expenditures.

The conclusions of the 1989 Wall Chart come as little surprise to most analysts. Simply stated, the United States still is outpaced by most other industrialized nations in education, and the performance of pupils today is inferior to that of a quarter century ago. Coming as little surprise too is the reaction of the education establishment. Education leaders, teachers, and school administrators typically blame what they call the "failed" policies of the Reagan Administration, the alleged lack of education dollars, or "poor teacher salaries" for the stagnation of American education. They call, reflexively, for more money, more teachers.

The Wall Chart and other studies, however, suggest that more money and teachers would not necessarily improve the disappointing performance of schools. For one thing, studies indicate that while the "solutions" offered by the education establishment would raise taxes, they would not raise standards. For another, the state-by-state figures mask the track record of key school districts in which a variety of reforms have been tried; the successes of these innovations thus do not appear in the Chart. Only a new Wall Chart version comparing such districts can show the likely route to improved education.

Theory Disproved. Consider the argument for more teachers. The theory is that employing more teachers, and thus reducing class sizes, will improve standards because students supposedly learn better in smaller groups. Many states already have tried this, reducing their schools' average pupil-teacher ratio. Yet the Wall Chart indicates that there has been little benefit from this. Thus while Connecticut, for example, enjoys the lowest pupil-teacher ratio in the nation, it saw the sharpest decline in its graduation rate during 1982-1988. Indeed, studies of each state reveal little correlation between average class size and achievement levels. Simply hiring more teachers to improve the pupil-teacher ratio is not the answer.

Increasing education budgets also does not appear to assure improvement. The average cost nationwide of educating each child this year is \$4,527. The cost in some states far exceeds this. Yet expenditures per pupil have little relationship to student achievement. Example: New Hampshire boasts the nation's highest SAT scores, yet ranks only in the middle of the nation in per-pupil expenditures. Example: California, which has a large minority population, ranks thirtieth in expenditures but shares the fourth place slot in SAT rankings. Extensive research

by such experts as Herbert J. Walberg of the University of Illinois demonstrates that generally there is little correlation between per-pupil spending and achievement test scores.

More Money for Less Achievement. Throwing more money at schools and teachers clearly is not the answer to America's ineffective educational system. Enormous sums of extra money, in fact, have been spent on education in recent years. Nationally, this spending has grown at three times the rate of inflation since 1983, while enrollment has risen by less than one percent. Yet national educational achievement has fallen.

It is quality, not quantity, that makes for educational achievement. Studies of public and private schools find that the key to success is good, sound education practice. The elements contributing most to an effective school appear to be community involvement and parental control. Finding ways for the schools to compete with one another encourages them to seek such involvement. Competition spurs schools to set high standards, thereby attracting and retaining dedicated teachers and administrators and producing well-educated graduates.

Private schools understand the stimulus of competition. If they do not attract "consumers," they perish. Competition for parents' dollars forces them to focus on what works in the classroom. Public schools, on the other hand, generally are not subject to the same forces, except in school districts where experiments in parental choice and involvement are under way.

Missing Bold Reforms. Unfortunately, the annual Wall Chart gives no attention to local examples of bold and successful education reform. For example, Prince George's County, Maryland, boasts a dropout rate of only 5 percent, thanks to various reforms introduced in its schools. Yet the Maryland state rate of 26 percent, which appears in the Wall Chart, gives no indication of this local success. State-by-state comparisons, in fact are a poor barometer of what really improves performance, since education largely is a concern of local governments. National attention does stimulate action in communities, and states can offer encouragement and reduce red tape, but the only way to discover the keys to improvement is to compare school districts.

The Bush Administration should do this. The White House should instruct the Department of Education to design a second annual Wall Chart comparing school performance in America's largest cities, since it is in these cities where the problems are most severe and the reform efforts most vigorous. In addition to the standard elements of comparison, such as achievement scores, graduation rates, and population statistics, the new chart should include a brief summary of changes undertaken in each city.

Refocusing Attention. The most effective reforms in recent years have been the introduction of open enrollment, magnet schools, site-based management, and teacher pay linked to performance. Because these reforms are introduced locally, rather than statewide, merely comparing states may indicate that raising state budgets does not secure success but it cannot highlight the success or failure of local reforms. The federal government can and should better assist the nation in addressing the challenge of raising education standards by focusing attention on school districts, rather than states.

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For further information:

Herbert J. Walberg, "Educational Productivity and choice," *Educational Researcher*, 1987, no. 17.

John Chubb, "Politics, Markets and the Organization of Schools," *American Political Science Review*, 1988.