

# Mythologizing past, present won't improve public schools



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Americans have been fed a steady diet of bad news about their public schools. Most people swallow it without protest. Most people-but not all.

Education researcher Gerald Bracey minced no words in a recent lecture at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association. Bracey refutes the notion that "student achievement has fallen" by countering oft-repeated misconceptions with the facts:

*"In 8th grade math we've fallen to 9th place. That statistic comes from the latest TIMSS report. First off, to me, 9th place out of 45 nations doesn't seem so bad, but it's that word "fallen" that is so harshly inappropriate. In the original TIMSS in 1995, American 8th-graders were 28th out of 41 nations. So... we've fallen up 19 ranks. If that reflects, a 'relative decline,' please... could I have some more?"*

*"Today's system of fifty different benchmarks for academic success means fourth-grade readers in Mississippi are scoring nearly 70 points lower than students in Wyoming and getting the same grade. I cannot think of any common test kids in WY and MS take except NAEP and in 2007, Wyoming 4th graders scored 225 and Mississippi 4th graders scored 208. That's 17 points, not 70 ..."*

Having set the record straight, Bracey goes on to question whether standards are the root of the difference in the two states: "How about, differences in poverty. Thirty percent of the students in Wyoming are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. In Mississippi it's 68 percent."

Why do so many people think schools have gotten worse? Two reasons: nostalgia and slander. People tend to think the "golden years" of education coincided with whatever years they attended school. Richard Rothstein, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, documented this phenomenon in his 1998 book, "The Way We Were?"

In recent years, the public schools have also been subjected to an especially heavy pounding of false information by ideological opponents of public education.

So, are schools doing just fine? Of course not. A report last week links the achievement gaps to the country's economic woes. We face enormous challenges, as did earlier generations. We can do better, and we know how: with smaller classes, high quality early childhood education, a qualified and dedicated teacher in every classroom, and programs that reduce poverty.

What won't improve schools one whit is mythologizing either the past or the present.



*Great Public Schools for Every Student*

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