

FROM A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

Briefings on Educational Research From The
Education Consumers Consultants Network

www.education-consumers.com

Phone & Fax - (423) 282-6832

November 2001

Volume 1, Number 11

Charles Arthur, M.S.Ed.
President and Executive
Director / Mastery Learning
Institute / Portland, OR

Virginia P. Baxt, Ed.D.
President / Education
Agenda, Inc.

Wayne Bishop, Ph.D.
Professor of Mathematics /
Department of Mathematics
and Computer Science /
California State
University-Los Angeles

William L. Brown, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher / Lansing
(MI) Community College

Guy Bruce, Ed.D.
President / A.P.E.
Consulting

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Professor & Chairman /
Department of Psychology in
Education / School of
Education / University of
Pittsburgh

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College of Education / East
Tennessee State University

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Professor / College of
Education / Western
Washington University

Nathan Crow, B.A.
Founder & Principal /
Littleton Preparatory Charter
School

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Professor / School of
Education / University of
Louisville

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Instructor & Student
Teaching Supervisor /
Northern Illinois University

Edwin J. Delattre, Ph.D.
Professor & Dean / School
of Education / Boston
University

Benjamin F. Eller, Ed.D.
Professor / School of
Education / Western
Carolina University

Featured Research:

["Why Students in Some Countries Do Better"](#)

[\(click here for full article\)](#)

By Ludger Woessman

Education Next, Summer 2001.

Briefing:

Other countries usually have a national ministry of education that sets forth uniform education goals and standards, but not here. Our Constitution leaves authority over schools to the states, which delegate much authority to local school districts, which leave much discretion to principals and teachers. This local control makes for great diversity in student learning, but students who move from one school to another often lack the knowledge necessary for success in their new schools.

Our system is distinctive in other ways that handicap efficiency. Ludger Woessmann of the Kiel Institute of World Economics reported the largest study of educational efficiency ever conducted. His analysis of thirty-nine countries showed what fostered high achievement:

1. close attention to test results,
2. school control over staff and operations,
3. teacher discretion over teaching methods, and
4. competition from private schools.

The influence of teacher unions on curriculum had negative effects. And surprisingly, spending made no difference!

So now we know much of why the U.S. stands out with high costs but poor student progress during the school years.

In his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith suggested that "division of labor" promotes efficiency. In many efficient organizations, three groups divide their efforts: external boards establish their distinctive mission, set goals, and measure progress; responsible and responsive to boards, management hires staff and directs operations; staff members hardly invent their own idiosyncratic goals but concentrate on carrying out their responsibilities to attain board goals. Sustained failure of any one of these three groups at their respective tasks means the organization fails.

Nearly the opposite is true of the U.S. public school system. No goal seems too remote from academic learning to adopt; no "stakeholder" too removed from having a say about the mission and goals. State and local

Mark Herring, Ed. D.
Professor & Dean of
Libraries / Winthrop
University

Daniel Hursh, Ph.D.
Professor of Educational
Psychology / College of
Human Resources &
Education / West Virginia
University

Carol Jago, M.A.
English Teacher / Santa
Monica High School /
Director, California Reading
& Literature Project / UCLA

Daniel Konieczko, M.Ed.
Science Teacher / King
Middle School / Portland,
ME

Martin Kozloff, Ph.D.
Watson Distinguished
Professor / School of
Education / University of
North Carolina at Wilmington

Rob Kremer, M.B.A.
President / Oregon
Education Coalition

Elaine McEwan-Adkins,
Ed.D.
President / McEwan-Adkins
Group

Richard P. Phelps, Ph.D.
Senior Study Director /
WESTAT / Rockville, MD

Michael Podgursky, Ph.D.
Professor and Chairman /
Department of Economics /
University of Missouri

Linda Ross, Ph.D.
Director and Instructional
Design Specialist /
Archimedia eLearning
Solutions

Valerie Rutledge, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor /
College of Education /
University of Tennessee at
Chattanooga / Member, TN
Board of Education

Mark C. Schug, Ph.D.
Professor & Director /
Center for Economic
Education / University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Lucien Ellington, Ed. D.
Professor / College of
Education and Applied
Professional Services /
University of Tennessee at
Chattanooga

John Eshleman, Ed.D.
President / EasyLearn
Systems

David R. Feeney, Ed.D.
Director of Digital
Education / Fox School of
Business & Management /
Temple University

Lawrence Fraley, Ed.D.
Professor / Department of
Advanced Educational
Studies / West Virginia
University

Carol C. Gambill, M.Ed.
Head - Lower School /
Beaufort Academy /
Beaufort, SC

Patrick Groff, Ed.D.
Professor of Education
Emeritus / San Diego State
University

Bonnie Grossen, Ph.D.
Professor / College of
Education / University of
Oregon

Richard Gruetzemacher,
Ed.D.
Director / Planning,
Evaluation, and Institutional
Research / University of
Tennessee at Chattanooga

school boards fail to set clear goals and measure progress. And they tend to interfere with school management.

Teachers, principals, boards, and national interest groups compete to set priorities and control teaching. Yet when everyone is responsible, no one is responsible, and having twenty-three priorities means having none. Contention, noise, and fads prevail. In the end, teachers cannot depend on what their students were previously taught. Boards, leaders, and staff all overreach, and yet each group tends to fail at its distinctive task. A thousand flowers bloom but do not a garden make.

Other countries provide much better accountability. While making goals clear, they allow parental choice of privately and publicly governed schools, both publicly financed. Competition encourages educators to identify the best practices and helps parents choose the best schools. We spend public funds only on public schools, which limits most parents to the beggar's choice of only a single school, which has little incentive to improve since its customers have nowhere else to go.

The answers to these problems are easy as one, two, three:

1. measurement and accountability for results,
2. public support of schools that compete with one another, and
3. parental choice of schools.

[This Briefing is digested from an essay by Herbert J. Walberg, Ph.D., University Scholar, University of Illinois-Chicago. It was published May 7, 2001 as a Hoover Institution Weekly Essay, copyright Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University, www-hoover.stanford.edu/pubaffairs/we/current/walberg_0501.html]

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Lewis Solmon, Ph.D.
Dean Emeritus / UCLA
Graduate School of
Education / Senior Vice
President / Milken Family
Foundation

Robert Spangler, Ed.D.
President / Spangler &
Associates, LLC

J. E. Stone, Ed.D.
Professor / Department of
Human Development &
Learning / College of
Education / East Tennessee
State University

Sara Tarver, Ph.D.
Professor College of
Education University of
Wisconsin-Madison

John Towner, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus /
Woodring College of
Education / Western
Washington University

Herbert Walberg, Ph.D.
University Professor of
Education & Psychology /
College of Education /
University of Illinois-Chicago

Richard Western, Ph.D.
Professor (ret) / School of
Education / University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee