

## Education's 'Groundhog Day'

Point of View Essay

by

Gerald Bracey  
Associate Professor  
**George Mason University**

Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)  
Education Policy Studies Laboratory  
College of Education  
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
Box 872411  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

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Media stories about public schools show the reporters as non-Bill Murray characters in "Groundhog Day." In the 1993 movie, the same Groundhog Day repeats itself over and over again, but only Murray's character sees the repetition. About schools, the media report the present with no apparent historical awareness that it's the same story once again. As a consequence, Americans keep waking up to headlines declaring that, apparently for the first time ever, the public school sky is falling. The public doesn't seem to notice the recurrences, either.

On Dec. 7, 2004, papers presented the results from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA 2003, announcing, "U.S. Teens Have Weak Practical Math Skills" (USA Today). The Wall Street Journal and The Christian Science Monitor tied for scariest headline of the day: "Economic Time Bomb," said the Journal; "Math + Test = Trouble for the U.S. Economy," said the Monitor. The Monitor quoted Susan Traiman of the Business Roundtable: "It's very disturbing for business if the capacity to take what you know ... and apply it to something novel is difficult for U.S. teenagers." (The OECD's assertions that PISA measures "application" are both glib and without theoretical or conceptual grounding.)

On Dec. 14, 2004, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS 2003, presented us with better news, and most of the media overlooked it. Those that did report it expressed worries that other countries, "particularly in Asia, continue to outperform the United States [in] fields at the heart of research, innovation, and economic competitiveness" (Associated Press).

For many years, the media, the Business Roundtable, and others have saturated us with a myth: Low test scores = economic perdition. In 1998, the headlines over stories about the Third International Mathematics and Science Study read: "U.S. Seniors Near Bottom in World Test," (March 4, 1998); "Why America Has the World's Dimmest Bright Kids" (The Wall Street Journal).

Under the headlines we read, once again, our awful schools were leading us to economic ruin. No one seemed to remember the headlines from four years earlier: "America's Economy, Back on Top" (The New York Times); " 'Rising Sun' Meets 'Rising Sam' " (The Washington Post); "America Cranks It Up" (U.S. News & World Report). Although we did not know it at the time, those headlines heralded the longest sustained economic expansion in the nation's history.

Did improved schools explain the turnaround? Not according to the critics. A mere three months after "America's Economy, Back on Top," the then-chief executive officer of IBM and perennial school scold, Louis V. Gerstner Jr., took to the op-ed page of the Times with "Our Schools Are Failing. Do We Care?" They are failing, said Gerstner, because their "products" can't compete with the products manufactured in European and Asian factories, er, schools.

Gerstner, not admitting he was wrong 10 years ago, recently turned his attention from students to teachers in an Education Week Commentary ("An Education Reform Agenda for the Next Four Years—and Beyond," Jan. 5, 2005) imparting the same Groundhog Day message: We need better teachers "because, as Asian nations get their information economies firing on all cylinders, America's global competitiveness is under threat."

If neither our teachers nor our kids can compete with their Asian peers, one must wonder why the World Economic Forum keeps ranking the United States first or second in its global-competitiveness ratings of 104 nations. When we fall out of first, events outside the control of the schools cause the slump. In the latest WEF ratings, we slipped to second behind Finland because the World Economic Forum didn't like a number of Bush programs and policies.

In 1992, again reacting to an international study, the media declared the schools' performance dismal. "In World Study, U.S. Students Fare Poorly," said The Washington Post. Newsweek was more succinct: "An 'F' in World Competition."

Both Gerstner and Newsweek trumpeted a theory that arrived fully formed in 1983's mostly forgotten *A Nation at Risk*: A developed nation without high test scores is doomed. And our scores, the Risk report said, looked bad. "There was a steady decline in science achievement scores," it argued. "Average achievement of high school students is lower now than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched."

Measured against other countries, we looked even worse: "International comparisons reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times." The risk was clear. No longer was the threat that the Soviets would vaporize us with nukes. Given our poor test scores, we risked having our friends, especially Germany, Japan, and South Korea, steal our profits. Risk exhorted us: "If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system. ..."

A few years after *A Nation at Risk* appeared, the economy of high-scoring Japan slumped. It has yet to recover. Japanese kids still ace tests. They finished sixth in math and second in science in PISA 2003, and second, second, third, and fifth in the four rankings in TIMSS 2003. But somehow their stellar performance with tests doesn't grow Japan's gross domestic product.

When Risk appeared, we, too, were slipping into recession, and many variations on lousy-schools-are-producing-a-lousy-workforce- and-that-is-killing-us-in-the-global-marketplace were heard. Then the economy recovered. Then slipped enough to deny George H.W. Bush

a second term. Then recovered. Then slipped. Then recovered. And all the while our test scores looked middling compared with those of other nations.

If you think critically about this myth for a moment, the disconnect between test scores and a nation's economic health is obvious. Only the foolish would think that 13-year-olds' skills at bubbling in answer sheets would mean much for a nation's well-being. As if to prove that contention, the other "Asian Tiger" nations, also atop the world in test scores, saw their economies tank in the mid-1990s. Singapore, which typically outscores everyone—it scored well above even other Asian nations in all comparisons in TIMSS 2003—declared itself in recession in 2001. The slump continues: In 2003, its per capita GDP was \$23,700, down from \$26,500 in 1999.

At least *A Nation at Risk* noticed history, even if the media coverage of it did not. Its reference to Sputnik took the tale back to October of 1957, when the Russians orbited the first man-made satellite. American schools took the hit for letting the Soviets get into space first.

In red ink, the March 24, 1958, post-Sputnik cover of *Life* magazine screamed, "Crisis in Education." Two high school juniors stared out from the cover, a stern-faced Alexei Kutzkov in Moscow, and an easy-smiling Stephen Lapekas in Chicago. Inside, Alexei was seen conducting complicated science experiments, reading aloud from *Sister Carrie* in his English class, and using his free time to learn even more skills. By contrast, photos showed Stephen walking his girlfriend home, rehearsing for the school musical, practicing his swimming stroke, and otherwise having an easy time because "the standards of education are shockingly low." In one picture, Stephen retreats from a geometry problem on the blackboard. Says the text: "Stephen amused class with remarks about his ineptitude."

(I tracked down Stephen Lapekas. He became an Air Force fighter pilot, then a commercial pilot. Not bad for a slacker in a system with "shockingly low" standards—his son said *Life* chose him because he looked so average; "he was a C student and thought of college as a golfer might think of a sandtrap." Receiving little cooperation from the Russian Embassy, I enlisted the assistance of Anne Garrels, then the Moscow correspondent for National Public Radio, in the search for Alexei Kutzkov. The hunt intrigued her, but several months later she called to say that, in spite of the many specific facts I provided about Alexei, his school, and his teachers, she had been unable to find any evidence he ever existed. She questioned the story's veracity: "There is no way in hell that an American journalist and photographer could have gotten into a typical Moscow high school at the time.")

Of course, the economic-free-fall myth is sustained in part by the media's errors of omission: Happy results do not see print. When the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, or PIRLS, appeared in April of 2003, only four papers carried bylined articles. About 15 other, mostly small-market, papers picked up all or part of an Associated Press story.

The non-news was good: Only three of 35 participating countries scored significantly higher than the United States. American students attending schools with fewer than 10 percent of their students in poverty stomped Sweden, the highest-scoring nation overall (Finland did not participate). American students in schools with 10 percent to 25 percent poverty also outscored Sweden. American students in schools with 25 percent to 50 percent poverty attained a score that, had those students constituted a nation, would have ranked it fourth. Those three categories of students contain 58 percent of all U.S. students. Only students in schools struggling to cope with more than 75 percent of their students in poverty scored

below the international average. The same analyses show similar results for TIMSS 2003 (they're not available yet for PISA 2003).

Alas, this miserable coverage of PIRLS represented progress. When its predecessor had appeared 10 years earlier, American 9-year-olds were second in the world and our 14-year-olds were eighth; and for both ages, only one country (Finland) had a significantly higher score. Press coverage was nil.

For almost 50 years, the media have repeatedly played the schools-are-failing-our-economy's-sunk tune, but neither they nor the public seem aware that it's an old refrain—and false. It's education's Groundhog Day all over again.

Gerald W. Bracey is an associate professor of education at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va., an associate of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, in Ypsilanti, Mich., and a fellow at the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, in Tempe, Ariz. His most recent book is *Setting the Record Straight: Responses to Misconceptions About Public Education in the U.S.*, Revised Edition (Heinemann, 2004).

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