

## On The Effectiveness of Teachers

by Tom Reeves

The July/August issue of the always provocative magazine *The American Enterprise* contains three powerful articles critical of public school teachers. Jay Greene's "Education Myths" documents in detail the truth that there is no direct correlation between funds expended and student test scores. Those who continually cry that public schools are being starved financially, that class size is crucial, and that higher teacher salaries would improve educational quality need to confront Greene's data to the contrary. Frederick Hess's "When Unaccountable Courts Meet Dysfunctional Schools" reinforces this thesis, adding that after-inflation school spending has more than tripled since 1960. Hess observes, "America will devote more than \$550 billion to public schools during the 2006-07 school year, more than \$10,000 for every K-12 student....U.S. spending outstrips Germany, France, and the U.K. by more than 50 percent, and Japan by more than 20 percent, on a per-pupil basis." And the spending has yielded little. "Math and reading scores for today's 17-year-olds are about where they were during the Nixon administration." Lewis Andrews's "A Coming Crisis in Suburban Schooling?" notes that many suburban public schools, feasting on high taxes, have spent lavishly on non-essential services, hobbies, recreational activities, and exotic elective courses. "Much of what passes for a quality education today in America's prosperous suburbs has little to do with academic rigor."

Public school teachers and administrators have few defenders these days, especially among conservatives. (The marriage of teachers' unions and the Democratic Party may well have something to do with this, as well as mediocre test scores.) Data coming out of many urban public schools are especially chilling, featuring high dropout rates, low test scores, and violence. In New Jersey, parents are suing to be permitted to take the pro rata share of the public money spent on their children in order to send them to better public or private schools. In Newark's 24 schools, fewer than half the students can demonstrate basic proficiency in language arts or mathematics, this despite funding that includes \$16,351 per student and an average teacher salary of \$76,213.

The expectation one often encounters is that all students are capable of learning, and that failure is the fault of bad teaching. Students are often said to

be “trapped in failing schools.” This is the theory behind the federal government’s No Student Left Behind legislation. While there is surely some truth in this concept, something politically incorrect needs to be said in defense of the teachers. Yes, there are no doubt more than a few lazy and indifferent teachers in the public schools. But there are also a great many, no doubt the majority, who really care about kids and work hard at educating them. Today’s simple truth: There are limits to what they can do.

First, there are those who can’t learn. The issue of intellectual capacity is currently taboo, of course. People speak of the Bell Curve only in whispers. But the harsh truth, which everyone with an ounce of common sense recognizes, is that a great many people, of all colors and socio-economic levels, simply can’t learn some things, sometimes even the most basic things, offered in the classroom. To pretend that anyone can learn anything is, well, simply absurd. That persistent failure can result in disruptive behavior should surprise few; school can become a prison to these young people, a source of continuous anguish and humiliation. Special attention, even tutors, can’t alter the situation. Some young people cannot even master the proper use of spoken English. I know a young computer whiz who is, quite happily, semi-literate.

Secondly, there are those who refuse to learn. For a variety of reasons, personal and cultural, there are many who simply will not do the work required in the classroom. Or even attend class. Overcoming militant anti-intellectualism is the toughest challenge facing any teacher, and I’m not sure that anyone has come up with a successful prescription. Teachers may preach and threaten, but if most of their students refuse to learn, little can be achieved. I routinely encountered college students in an open admissions campus who absolutely refused to read, and I was unable to change their attitude. That those who reject learning are permitted to graduate is a scandal, of course, but what are teachers to do? The public would hound them from their jobs if they failed large numbers. A second simple truth: The life of the mind has rarely been a priority in this country, and public school teachers offering subjects not immediately related to employment have often endured much frustration.

And so, costs of public education continue to rise, the masses continue to graduate each June, test scores remain flat, and the intellectual and aesthetic quality of the popular culture continues to decline. I know of no panacea for altering this state of affairs. But let us not pretend that teachers are solely to blame. There is only so much they can do. Indeed, we should encourage them in every way to be the best they can, and express at least some sympathy when they inevitably fail to be popular and effective.