

# Student Failure in America is the Result of Poverty and Underfunded Schools

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A recent New York Times article, “Curious Grade For Teachers: Nearly All Pass,” finds incredulous the idea that, “In Florida, 97 percent of teachers were deemed effective or highly effective in the most recent evaluations.”

The author goes on to cite similar percentages in other states and concludes:

“The teachers might be rated all above average, like students in Lake Wobegon, for the same reason that the older evaluation methods were considered lacking.” In other words, the teachers score well because the measuring standard is flawed. And this conclusion is reinforced by the observation that teachers’ high marks were achieved “even when students were falling behind.”

Unfortunately, newspaper journalists are apparently not held to any standards at all because the article omits all the crucial information that situates these statistics in a meaningful context.

Teachers typically must have a college degree and between one and two years, if not more, additional college course work to obtain a teaching credential, not to mention hours spent in classrooms where they can practice teaching and receive mentoring from experienced teachers. Is it really surprising that after such intense training almost all teachers achieve competency?

Imagine a course in basic welding where students attend class for several months. At the end of the course students are required to take a test. Would it be surprising that 98 percent of those who completed the course passed the test? If fewer passed, one might reasonably raise questions about the quality of the welding course.

More importantly, there is no mention in The New York Times article of the authoritative study on student performance conducted in the 1960s, as reported by New York Times columnist, Joe Nocera in an April 25, 2011 article (“The Limits of School Reform”): “Going back to the famous Coleman report in the 1960s, social scientists have contended – and unquestionably proved – that students’ socioeconomic backgrounds vastly outweigh what goes on in the school as factors in determining how much they learn.”

Similarly, the article fails to note the growing poverty among children in the U.S. Currently more than one in five children live in poverty. Between 2009 and 2010, child poverty grew by more than a million. Given the debilitating impact of poverty on child development, there can be little wonder that more students are “falling behind,” despite teachers’ valiant

efforts. And when the poverty statistics are coupled with the dramatic decline in government funding of public education, one can only marvel that our public schools succeed at all.

The current corporate narrative that has pervaded the mindset of politicians and the mainstream media inverts logic. Student failure is not a result of poverty or underfunded schools. The blame lies entirely with the teachers and the unions that defend them – a classic example of blaming the victim. Of course, politicians find it much more convenient to blame teachers and their unions for student failure rather than address the real causes of student failure since the politicians themselves are at fault. They have chosen to cut the social safety net and funding for schools so that the rich can continue to enjoy their ludicrously low tax rates and huge tax loopholes.

As inequality in wealth grows, inequality in power grows proportionately. The corporations and the rich want to eviscerate the teacher unions, impose market relations on public education, and open the door to private, profit-making alternatives. As corporations funnel more money into lobbying and campaign contributions, politicians have become cheerleaders for the corporate agenda. By underfunding schools and allowing poverty to grow, they are causing the kind of failure that can be used as an excuse to open the doors to private profiteers.

What is really curious is why The New York Times author was so quick to uncritically adopt the corporate perspective and jump on the bandwagon of attacking the teachers. Perhaps he was one of the few students who failed his critical thinking course.

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