

Educational Odds and Ends

A few of my old posts were about education but did not fit into any of the chapters.

Schooling is Getting Better — and Worse

I graduated from high school in 1961. The school I went to was a top private school run by the University of Chicago, the same school to which Barack Obama later sent his children.¹ While I have no hard data, the impression I get from a variety of sources, including my experience as an alumnus volunteer interviewing applicants, is that top schools today work their students harder and cover more advanced material than my school did.

And yet my impression is that the average quality of American K-12 schooling has declined since then. A little googling found [data](#) on SAT scores from 1972-2016 and the adjustment needed to take account of the renorming of the tests in 1997. Over that period the average verbal score fell by 116 points, the math by 31 points. Changes over time in how many students took the test, reflecting the increase in the fraction of the population going to college, might explain some of the decline but not, I think, all.²

Does this mean that the dispersion of quality of K-12 schooling is increasing, the best schools getting better and the worst worse? That is relevant, among other things, to the question of whether and why income inequality is increasing. Quite a long time ago the authors of *The Bell Curve* expressed concern that one result of an increasingly meritocratic society was an increase in both assortative mating and the correlation between innate ability and status, hence an increased division between social groups. In the old days, the students who went to Harvard and the students who went to Podunk U. differed a lot in parental income and status, not so much in innate ability. As the system got better at identifying kids who were poor but smart and offering them scholarships to Harvard, an opportunity to become doctors, lawyers, or professors, it increased the odds that high status people would not only believe they were smarter than those lower down but be right — with potentially unattractive social consequences. If they were correct, it would not be surprising if the K-12 schools, public and private, that serve the upper end of the income and status distribution were getting better while the schools serving the lower end were getting worse.

One problem with evidence about the current high end is that it is based on what is covered and how hard the students work, not on any measure of how much they know — judging by my experience interviewing applicants, the fact that a student has taken an AP course and gotten a 5, the top grade, is at best weak evidence that he actually understands the subject. It is not necessarily the case that working students harder results in getting them better educated.

Some years back, I attended a reunion of my high school at which members of the current staff took the opportunity to tell the alumni what a good job the school was now doing. One of their central points was, between classes, homework, and extracurricular activities, how much of the

¹ Searching online for Illinois private school rankings, the first site I found ranked my school #1.

² College enrollment increased from about 4.5% of the population in 1972 to about 6.4% in 2016. My very rough calculations suggest that the 1972 average on the combined math and verbal score corresponded to about the 67th percentile on the 2016 exam. That is a little higher than the result we would expect if all of the additional students in 2016 were students who would have been at the bottom of the distribution in 1972, which is unlikely. So it looks as though at least part of the decline in the average SAT score represents a real decline in average ability, although I don't have good enough data to be sure.

students' time was being consumed. My suspicion was that what I was hearing was "The Devil Finds Work for Idle Hands" theory of education. Keep the kids busy enough and they won't have time to do drugs or get pregnant.

I doubt it works; it might just result in eating up time they could have used to educate themselves. Reading science fiction, arguing politics, playing board games, even playing D&D or World of Warcraft are, I suspect, more educational than homework given for the purpose of keeping kids busy.

One of the students I interviewed for Harvard told me that he used to read a lot and write stories, but once he was in high school he didn't have time.

Private Schools for the Poor

James Tooley studied private schools in poor countries, private schools for the poor; the results of his research, published in *The Beautiful Tree*, sound extraordinary. In slum areas of countries such as Nigeria a majority of poor children are being educated in private schools, charging on the order of five dollars a month. Parents are willing to pay that because they believe they are getting a better education for their children than in the free public schools. Tooley tested a random sample of both private and public school children and confirmed that opinion; the children going to the (inexpensive, slum) private schools consistently tested higher than the children going to the public schools. His account reminded me of E.G. West's fascinating book *Education and the Industrial Revolution*, where he described a very similar pattern among the English working class poor in the early 19th century, in that case with no free public schools available.

As a libertarian I found Tooley's account encouraging not merely because it provides evidence to support my beliefs, evidence that public schooling is unnecessary, even perverse in its effects, but because it suggests that, however difficult the push for libertarianism may be in the political arena, we have allies, billions of human beings applying their intelligence to living their lives as best they can, frequently below the radar of their governments.