



## education review // reseñas educativas

editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

August 14, 2014

Volume 17 Number 7

ISSN 1094-5296

*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas* is a project of the  
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware  
the National Education Policy Center, and the  
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook



and on Twitter: @EducReview

---

Calling Out the Myth Makers:  
An Essay Review of *50 Myths and Lies  
That Threaten America's Public Schools*

Paul D. Hood  
WestEd

Berliner, David C.; Glass, Gene V & Associates (2014). *50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America's Public Schools: The Real Crisis in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pp. xii + 260 ISBN 978-0-8077-5524-2

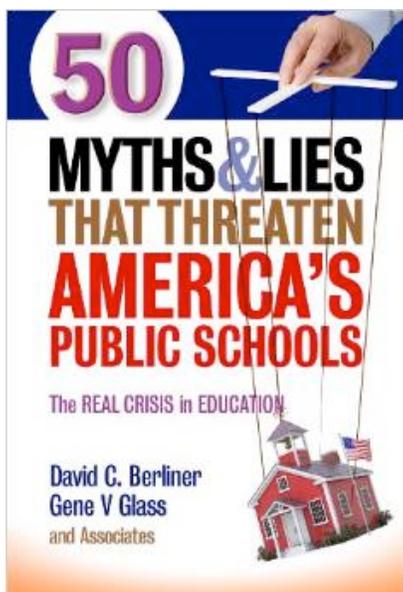
Citation: Hood, Paul D. (2014 August 14) Calling out the myth makers: An Essay Review of *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools*. *Education Review*, 17(7). Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/essays/v17n7.pdf>

The odds are very high that readers who turn to *Education Review* are strongly interested in public education. If this is true for you then *50 Myths and Lies* probably belongs on your reading list. The reputations of the senior authors, David Berliner and Gene

Glass, or the book title may be sufficient to catch your attention. However, it is difficult to do better than to cite the terse reviews found on the back cover. So let's start with those.

“*50 Myths and Lies* is a powerful defense of public education and a discerning refutation of the reckless misimpressions propagated by a juggernaut of private-sector forces and right-wing intellectuals who would gladly rip apart the legacy of democratic schooling in America. It is a timely and hard-hitting book of scholarly but passionate polemic. The teachers of our children will be grateful.” ~ Jonathan Kozol.

“What do you get when two world-class scholars and a team of talented analysts take a hard look at 50 widely held yet unsound beliefs about U.S. public schools? Well, in this instance you get a flat-out masterpiece that, by persuasively blending argument and evidence, blasts those beliefs into oblivion. Required reading? You bet!” ~ James Popham



“Berliner and Glass are long-time critics of wrong-headed education reforms. *50 Myths and Lies* continues the record of evidence-based truth-telling. Joined by 19 young

scholars in identifying 50 of the worst ideas for changing our nation’s schools, they are able to sort through the cacophony of today’s all too often ill-informed debate. Anyone involved in making decisions about today’s schools should read this book.” ~ Linda Darling-Hammond

“This book is true grit. It’s the gritty reality of hard data. It’s the irritating grit that makes you shift in your seat. And it’s the grit that sometimes makes you want to weep. Well argued, well written—whether you agree or disagree with this book, if you care about the future of education, you mustn’t ignore it.” ~ Andy Hargreaves

As the book title suggests, the body of the book is composed of 50 short essays, each examining a particular lie or myth. The essays average four to five pages in length, although an essay in Section VI about science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs is almost 12 pages long. In contrast, Myth 8 in Section I, about finding the best high schools in America, is just over two pages long.

Two quotations from the Preface capture the thrust of book:

- “The mythical failure of public education has been created and perpetuated in large part by political and economic interests that stand to gain from the destruction of the traditional system.”

- “Many citizens’ conception of K-12 public education in the United States is more myth than reality. It is essential that the truth replace the fiction.”

Following this brief Preface the main body of the book is divided into six parts.

#### Section I, Myths, Hoaxes, and Outright Lies.

This section introduces the book, briefly describes myths, hoaxes, and lies and explains how each is different. A second section explains why the authors wrote the book and how they wrote it. The authors explain that in all 50 myths they try to debunk the myths and lies by employing both logic and credible data to make their point. All except the briefest essays include selected citations to enable readers to check further. A third section describes whose interests are served by myths about public schools. The fourth and concluding section examines where the myths about schools come from and who perpetuates them.

#### Section II, Myths and Lies About Who’s Best: Charters, Privates, Maybe Finland?

This section includes an introduction and eight essays. The authors of these essays examine the myths about U.S. public schools being in crisis and performing poorly on some international tests. They assert that we do quite well. Some of the tests reveal that public school students who attend schools with few students in poverty are among the best in the world. But students in schools that serve the poor are not achieving well. It is poverty rather than overall school achievement that appears to

be the problem that must be faced.

Similarly, finding ways to judge private schools, parochial schools, charter schools, and home schooling is very dependent on context. Given the great variability in all the factors that affect school achievement such as family income, family members’ education level, health care, treatment of minorities, etc., it becomes difficult to distinguish best from worst schools. And big differences among schools systems turn out to be small or nonexistent when you control for the many factors that affect academic achievement.

Section III, Myths and Lies About Teachers and the Teaching Profession: Teachers Are “Everything,” That’s Why We Blame Them and Their Unions. This section also includes an introduction and eight essays. In this section the authors examine a number of myths and lies about teachers and teaching. They start with a myth that teachers are the most important factor in student achievement. Although teachers may influence students’ lives dramatically, teachers are much less powerful than are family and neighborhood influences. And it may be that classroom peer group and school-level factors have the greater influence on overall classroom achievement. In this section the authors also examine the myths, lies, and misunderstanding regarding the role of teachers’ unions. They also address the contentious issues of merit pay for teachers and the controversial program, Teach For America.

#### Section IV, Myths and Lies About How to Make Our Nation's Schools Better.

Section IV is the longest part of the book. It includes an introduction and 18 essays. The contents of these essays are so diverse that perhaps it is best to simply list their titles (with some editing). Among the myths examined are:

- Class size does not matter.
- Retaining children in grade helps struggling students to catch up.
- Tracking is an efficient and productive way to organize teaching.
- Immersion programs for English language learners are better than bilingual education programs.
- Preserving heritage language among English language learners is bad for them
- Abstinence-only programs work to reduce sexual contact and unwanted pregnancies.
- Homework boosts achievement.
- Group projects waste children's time and punish the most talented.
- School uniforms improve achievement and attendance.
- Longer school days and weeks have big payoffs for achievement.

- If a program works well in one school or district, it should be imported and expected to work well elsewhere.
- Zero-tolerance policies are making schools safer.
- The benefits of preschool and kindergarten programs are not convincing and thus not worth the investment.
- Character education will save America's youth and strengthen the nation's moral fiber.
- Bullying is inevitable; it's just kids. It's rite of passage. The national effort to eliminate bullying is effectively addressing the problem in our schools.
- American K-12 education is being dumbed down.
- Mayoral control of city schools has paid off in terms of student achievement.
- Forced integration has failed.

Section V, Myths and Lies About How the Nation's Schools Are Paid For: All Schools Are Equal, but Some Are More Equal Than Others. There is an introduction and seven essays in this part. The first essay in this section, Money doesn't matter!, highlights three fallacies: the misleading and blatantly false claims about spending and test scores; the strength of the research demonstrating that money matters; and the ironic fact that school choice, despite being embraced by proponents of the "money doesn't matter"

argument, demonstrates that money actually does matter, since the rich spend a good deal of money to send their children to expensive schools.

The second essay in this section examines funding disparities among states, districts within states, and schools within districts. The third essay refutes the myth that public money is not used to support religious schools. The fourth essay examines the myth that education is primarily a private, not a public, benefit. The fifth essay discusses the contentious issues surrounding tax credits provided by eleven states for families that choose private schools. The sixth essay looks at a related set of issues regarding tuition tax credits and education savings accounts. The final essay in this section investigates portfolio management models of schooling and claims that these models increase district performance.

#### Section VI, Myths and Lies About Making All Students Career and College Ready.

An introduction and nine essays are included in this last section. This section deals with a collection of current education fashions, including: claims that all children can learn; that there is a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills shortage; the related myth that the United States needs to import scientists and engineers because our education system cannot produce enough of them; myths that quality is ensured by high school exit exams; dubious claims that advanced placement (AP) courses are providing

minority student an opportunity to get a head start on a college education; misconceptions that college admissions are based on student achievement and their SAT and ACT scores; exaggerated claims that education will lift the poor out of poverty and materially enrich the entire nation; myths about intelligence testing; and myths that teaching problem-solving, creativity, and general thinking skills is a waste on the general population of students.

The final sections of the book include: Additional Resources, Acknowledgements, About the Authors, and an Index. The list of books in the Additional Resources section, only a little more than a page long, lists 19 books that complement the arguments made in this publication. Please note that you need to go to the About the Authors section to discover who wrote the various essays. The Index is extensive, running 11 pages, each with two columns of listings.

#### Commentary

Readers familiar with either *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, fraud, and attacks on America's public schools* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) or *Fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips: The fate of public education in America* (Glass, 2008) will easily recognize that the current volume continues this tradition of defending public education in America against the myriad special interests that attack it from many sides. However, by recruiting 19 talented young scholars to assist in writing the 50 essays found in this volume, Berliner and

Glass may succeed in perpetuating their legacy of stalwart defenders of American public preK-12 education for many more years to come.

Although there are just 50 essays some encompass related collections of myths, hoaxes, lies, or misconceptions so the actual number substantially exceeds 50. Moreover, near the end of the Preface the authors state that they intend to update this book with new arguments and new data in a few years. So the number is likely to climb higher.

The next time you encounter an Op-Ed, blog post, or claim in a book or article that seems questionable in terms of its assertions about public education you might want to turn to *50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America's Public Schools*. You may find cogent counterarguments. And if the topic is not covered, DO write to the authors who solicit ideas for their next version of the book.

Although various critics may find flaws or misinterpretations in some of the 50 essays, on balance, the essays are fair, solid in their logic, and well supported by facts and research findings.

Considering the well-organized campaigns that have been mounted by business and industry, and especially technology employers, it seems highly likely that the essays questioning that the nation's economy is suffering because our schools are not producing enough scientists, engineers, and mathematicians (Myth 43) or the need for more H-1B visas allowing U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign

workers in specialty occupations (Myth 44) will be challenged. Nevertheless, the logic and data presented in these two essays will be difficult to refute.

The two short essays examining tuition tax credits (Myths 39 and 40) are primarily informative, and basically raise questions about fairness because these policies provide many more benefits for wealthy children. Still, these essays are likely to be criticized vigorously by supporters of those policies. Many other essays are sure to receive criticism; however, it will be interesting to examine the critics' arguments. The cases made in the book are not bullet-proof. Still they are remarkably convincing.

## References

- Berliner, D.C. & Biddle, D. J. (1995). *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, fraud, and attacks on America's public schools*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley.
- Glass, G. V (2008). *Fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips: The fate of public education in America*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers.

## About the Reviewer

Paul D. Hood is the Director of Institutional Planning at WestEd, a research, development, and service firm headquartered in San Francisco. Since receiving his PhD in social psychology from Ohio State University in 1953, he has continuously worked in military training, systems development, and education R&D,

serving the past 47 years at WestEd (previously the Far West laboratory for Educational Research and Development). His special interests are in educational policy, dissemination, change, and reform and in organizational restructuring.



---

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas* is a project of the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware The National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>, and the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University



### Editors

David J. Blacker

[blacker@edrev.info](mailto:blacker@edrev.info)

Gustavo Fischman

[fischman@edrev.info](mailto:fischman@edrev.info)

Melissa Cast-Brede

[cast-brede@edrev.info](mailto:cast-brede@edrev.info)

Follow *Education Review* on



Facebook and on Twitter:



#EducReview

---