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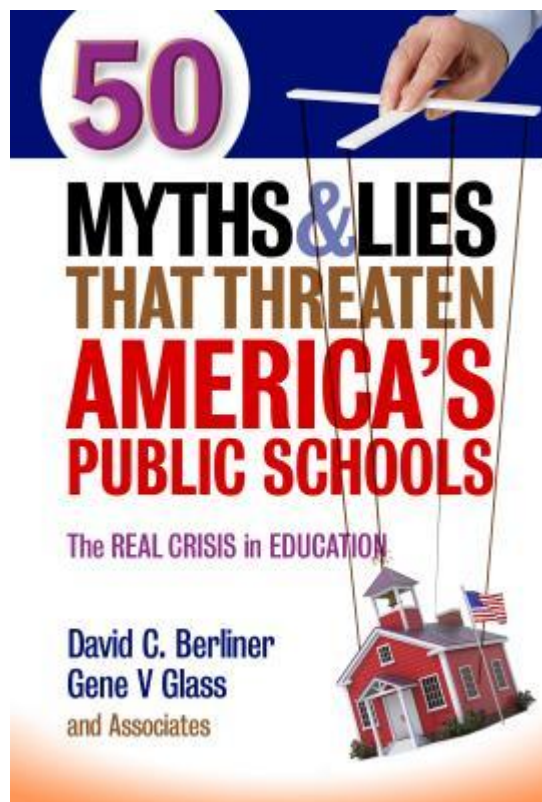
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United States

The radical conservative political and corporate movement to privatize the nation's public school system has intensified. Its proponents argue that schools should be held to accountability standards by giving parents greater choices in non-public schools. Hence, we see a trend toward more rigorous testing procedures for students that reputedly are used solely to identify the quality of teachers and schools, and to harangue and embarrass public schools for unacceptable performance. We see trends to dismantle schools and move them away from traditional public educational systems towards private, entrepreneurial administration in the form of charter schools, tuition tax credits, and voucher schemes – first proposed by the anti-government economist Milton Friedman. Throughout the United States we see a federal and state legislatively organized agenda of reducing funding to programs that serve socioeconomically disadvantaged children and the schools that serve them, resulting in teacher layoffs and a greater increase in class sizes. There has also been a curtailment of unions that give voice to collective teacher concerns.



Sharpes, D. (2014, November 24). Review of *America's Public Schools: The Real Crisis in Education* by David C. Berliner, Gene V Glass & Associates. *Education Review*, 21.

These tactics manifestly reflect the self-interests and profit motivations of corporate America and its push to reduce taxes, regardless of the consequences this agenda has on diminishing the learning environments of the nation's children. Unquestioningly, school reform at every level must be ongoing and comprehensive to maintain quality and focus. In reality, this new political strategy is not school reform, but school redistribution: a hijacking of public schools to advance the ambitions of corporate interests. The real crisis in education – also evident in the fields of medicine, pharmaceuticals, and health – is the misdirected and publicly perverse profit ideology and the propaganda supporting it.

Together with this national trend goes a robust and sustained advertising campaign that, while sometimes deliberate and sometimes unintentionally misguided, is loaded with slogans, often with limited or no research reliability and confidence, seeking to discredit schools and teacher performance. Politicians, and a handful of elected administrators, evangelize these educationally suspect slogans, like school choice, to embolden the conservative political base. A worse consequence of this neoliberal agenda is that many foreign countries, like Chile and Denmark, have bought into America's drift toward greater accountability measures, with their (usually) exclusive reliance on student achievement test scores, and school choices.

Berliner, Glass, and Associates expose the conservative and corporate propaganda that has stultified legitimate educational discourse about school improvement in order to justify its corroded ideology of privatization. But myths and deceits about schools are not all equal. Myths are just fictions or dubious beliefs, while lies are pernicious.

One such myth is that charter schools outperform public schools – an example of a political ideology that underlies the privatization movement.

Charter schools enroll nearly 5% of the total school population in the U.S, and this percentage is increasing. There are now estimated to be more than 6,000 charter schools nationally that, in the 2012-2013 school year, served about 2.3 million students, according to researchers at CREDO, a research unit at Stanford University. This was an 80% increase since 2009. The number of charter schools is distributed differentially depending on city and state.

Clearly, charter schools give parents a choice in their children's education, certainly as much as if they were to choose a private or religious school. The difference is that charter schools absorb public funds that are diverted to what is essentially a profit-driven administration. These schools only close if they have too few students. They rarely admit special need students, and often treat teachers as contract workers rather than public employees. Charter schools were assumed to be like test laboratories where best practices would be transferred to public schools. That has not happened.

Researchers at CREDO concluded in 2013 that, on average, charters schools perform no better nor worse than traditional public schools, and are rarely audited by state authorities. Lack of state accountability, and lack of research evidence for higher performance of charter schools, dampens the claim that they are preferable to public schools because they are administered by entrepreneurs and operated as a business.

The CREDO team's analysis revealed that the standards for school performance were set too low, as evidenced by the fact that too many underperforming charter schools exist. Setting reasonably high standards for schools is at least as important as setting high standards for students. The irony is that the conservative community wants high performing public school standards, but seems unconcerned with lackluster charter school performance.

Schooling myths and misperceptions continue because educators, the disseminators of public knowledge, have done a relatively poor job of instructing the public about significant research evidence, and also about the public and legislators' lack of meaningful understanding of educational research and its politicizing of complex schooling concepts. Must we not question how it is that so many misperceptions and misinformation litter the public landscape about schooling?

This book greatly helps remedy this informational deficiency. Yet ominously lurking over all these discussions are active legislative policies that reduce funding for public schooling, a real threat that tends to undermine particulars of the research dialogue. Myths and lies about education, and the legislation that acts on them – like the federally-funded abstinence only sex legislation – usually emerge from an ideology that appeals to a particular political constituency and not from scientific or evidentiary facts.

Some “myths,” like Myth 26 for example, “Longer School Days and Weeks Have Big Payoffs for Achievement,” appear to be straw men. The ambiguous word here is “big.” There may not be disproportionate gains overall for all American schools for lengthening a school year – although it is unknown whether or not there may be smaller, selective gains – but there is plenty of research on learning improvement for “time on task” activities. There are also convincing studies that demonstrate learning gains for increased schooling for preschoolers. Depending on how school time is managed is obviously a significant factor in student performance.

Myth 38, “Education benefits children individually, not the public in general,” poses a dilemma that is more a philosophical choice than a broadly acknowledged distinction or real myth. I suspect a national poll of this statement would find a broad positive acceptance for both aspects.

Myth 46, “Advanced Placement (AP) courses are providing minority students an opportunity to get a head start on a college education,” is not a myth, and the chapter arguing against the statement is unconvincing. Admittedly, minority students are not the largest populations in AP courses, but if they attend it cannot be argued that they do not have the *opportunity* to succeed. And which minority parent would not want their child in an AP program?

Neither is Myth 47, “College admissions are based on students’ achievement in grades K-12 and their SAT or ACT scores,” a myth for all students. The quick answer is actually, Yes, on grades and scores, but not exclusively, not for selected athletes, legacy, or special consideration candidates.

There is no prioritizing in this report of which of the 50 listed statements are outright lies and need to be vigorously exposed, and which just fables and misperceptions that need to be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.

Amid the pervasive theme of combating this negative discourse, it would have been more balanced to have a concluding chapter on evidence-based ideas and schooling programs that work, and a few chief educational statements that do have reliable and positive research evidence supporting them. We have to acknowledge too that a large part of our national dialogue about schooling will always be politicized by elected officials, and often

antagonistic to educational evidence to achieve political aims.

The crisp writing in this book is uniformly high and the standards exacting. There is some repetition in the school examples (Myths 3 and 7 for example). Authors should have preferably signed off on each chapter, or identified themselves at the chapter's beginning, as is common in most anthologies, with the short biographies kept at the end. That said, kudos to all these authors for contributing to a needed debate: debunking misperceptions about American schooling.

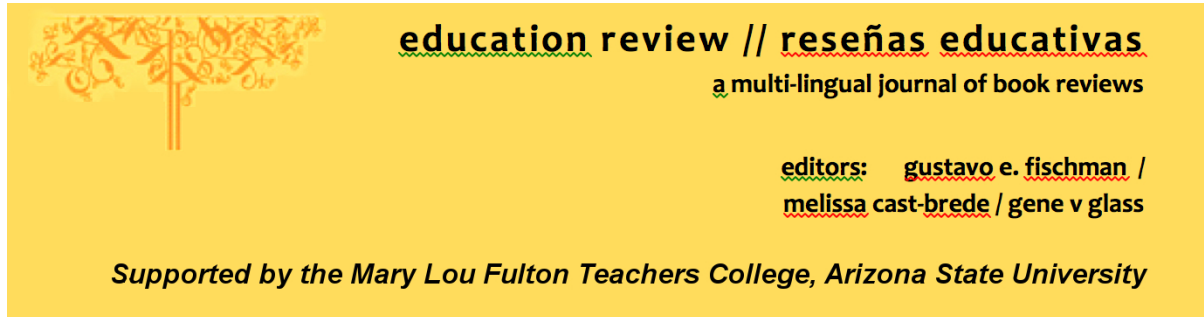
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Donald K. Sharpes Ph.D. is Professor in the Emeritus College at Arizona State University, a senior visiting fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge University, a former research associate at Stanford University and director in the U.S. Dept. of Education in Washington DC. He has taught at the universities of Maryland, Maine, Virginia, Virginia Tech, Utah State, Weber State and Arizona State. He did postdoctoral studies at the University of Sussex, was a Visiting Scholar at Oxford University in 1998-1999, and has lived and worked in the Middle East. He has authored 21 books and over 235 articles in the social and behavioral sciences, humanities, and teacher education. He has been a foreign correspondent for The Salt Lake Tribune, and a contributor to several western newspapers. He has been published in the U.S., England, Finland, Norway, Germany (in German), India, Malaysia, China (in Chinese), Hong Kong, and Denmark (in Danish). He has been awarded four Fulbright scholarships, one each to Malaysia, Cyprus, Denmark and Indonesia. He has been sponsored by the governments of Malaysia, China, South Africa, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and universities throughout the world.



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