


## **Education and The Politics of Consumption**

### **Abstract**

Various studies have shown that parents (approximately 74%) are generally satisfied with the quality of their children's schools (e.g., Hart Research Associates, 2017; Education Next, 2016). Such studies have reported that parents commonly complain, however, that classes are too crowded and that schools are underfunded.

Historically, public schools in the United States were funded through local property taxes. This approach gave communities significant control over their schools and the education their children received. Parents were motivated to be active participants in public education, and they had more direct opportunities to hold their schools accountable. If we consider that communities and children have different needs and priorities, and if we consider that children have different abilities and aspirations, community control of education makes sense, for it thwarts attempts to impose a "one-size-fits-all" model of education that is based on the false perception that all children are alike. 

### **Funding and Academic Performance**

One negative consequence of local property-tax funding was that schools in middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods received more funding than schools in poor neighborhoods, where property values were low. Politicians in poor communities had two choices: they could impose high property taxes on low-value property, or they could provide comparatively low

funding for their schools. None opted for the first choice because it was not feasible in light of socioeconomic realities.

The civil rights movements of the 1960s, however, heightened awareness that school funding is a sociopolitical issue, not simply an educational one. Arguing that the existing funding system constituted de facto discrimination, plaintiffs in California filed suit (*Serrano v. Priest, 1971*), and the State Supreme Court ruled in their favor. The case had a nationwide effect, leading a majority of states to vest public-school funding in their state legislatures and their departments of education. The money was then distributed from a state's general fund on the basis of full-time enrollment (FTE) and average daily attendance (ADA). The result was funding equity.

When, in 1978, California voters objected strongly to the ruling and the higher property taxes that it entailed, they passed Proposition 13, which capped property tax increases at 2% per year. The state legislature, led by Senator Henry J. Mello and Assemblyman Mike Roos, responded immediately, passing legislation to circumvent the proposition. The legislation allowed politicians to impose an ad valorem tax of 1–2% on property, giving California one of the higher property tax rates in the nation, potentially close to 3% annually of a home's assessed value. The value could be (and usually was) reassessed upward by 2% every year. Although initially this tax was limited to 10 years per parcel, that term was deemed too brief and was subsequently extended to 45 years, which given the average length of homeownership is forever. Thus, over time, a homeowner's property tax could exceed the mortgage payment. Even so, California ranked 37<sup>th</sup> in the nation in public school funding, and its dropout rate is higher than every state except Nevada (World Population Review, 2021).

The shift away from community-based funding is based on the theory that more funding for schools improves academic performance across the board. The outcome is especially important for schools with high levels of minority students, for it would remedy the historically lower funding that schools serving subaltern minority children receive, extending to them all the personal and social benefits that accrue from educational success. In theory, all schools would be able to provide students with, for example, computers, field trips, and improved school libraries while also increasing teacher salaries, enabling schools to hire highly qualified teachers.

Reality proved to be something else, largely because the idea that students' academic success is driven by funding ignores the role of parents and students themselves in the educational enterprise. Matters were further confounded when schools began abandoning academic tracking. In an effort to match curricula to student abilities, tracking began nationwide in the early 1930s, with schools using a battery of tests, including IQ tests, to assess students' academic potential.

Although tracking did not follow a uniform pattern nationwide, it is possible to describe the approach in a general way and still capture the primary features of a system that was widely used from about 1930 to around 1972. Testing commonly was conducted initially in elementary school, during either the third or fifth grade. Because elementary schools maintained the common curriculum model, testing had no consequences for most children until junior and then senior high school. (In exceptional cases, however, a child in elementary school with a very high IQ score would be advanced to a higher grade, especially if he or she demonstrated that the age-level coursework was easy.) Actual tracking began in junior high school, where children were placed in academic tracks associated with the diversified curriculum and retested to ensure test reliability.

Students in a high-level track were required to follow an established curriculum and were allowed very few elective courses. The emphasis for all high-level students, especially after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, was on advanced math and science, complemented by advanced courses in history, language, and writing. They would complete the first courses in algebra and geometry in middle school, then go on to advanced algebra, solid geometry, trigonometry, and calculus in high school. They also would complete chemistry and physics in high school and at least three years of a foreign language.

Students in the mid-level track would take algebra and geometry in high school, along with life science or introduction to biology; they had far more program flexibility and were free to choose from a variety of electives that aimed to provide them with occupational skills. Girls, for example, were encouraged to take typing, shorthand, accounting, and home economic classes, whereas boys were encouraged to take classes in accounting and business math.

Students in the low-level track had few options. They would take a general introduction to science course, basic math, general courses in history, along with developmental English. Girls again were encouraged to take typing and home economics, and boys were encouraged to take various shop classes—auto shop, where they learned basic mechanics; wood shop, where they learned basic carpentry; and metal shop, where they learned basic welding and fabricating.

Overall, tracking successfully met its goals. IQ testing enabled schools to assess students' intellectual ability quickly and objectively to sort children into different programs suited to their individual cognitive levels. Recent research has suggested that academic tracking also has a positive effect on students' intelligence, provided that they are placed in a challenging curriculum in elementary school.

Although we cannot readily generalize from a small number of studies, Becker, et al. (2012), compared students in an academic curriculum (Group 1) and a matched group of students in a vocational track (Group 2) and found that psychometric intelligence scores increased among Group 1. Guill, Lüdtke, and Köller (2016) reported similar results. Using the *Culture Fair Test of Intelligence* (which provides a more accurate assessment of general intelligence, or “g,” than other IQ instruments), the researchers studied a sample of approximately 13,000 students from 183 schools over a 4-year period. Propensity-score analysis matched the tracked students with a “partner” in a non-tracked curriculum, achieving a 95.2% success rate.

The tracked students had higher pre-treatment intelligence scores, higher test achievement scores, better grades, more primary school recommendations for the academic track, and a more favorable social background than the non-tracked students. The research question, however, was whether there were different levels of cognitive growth after four years of education (some growth occurs maturationally). The answer was “yes.” The results showed that IQ scores among the academic track students had increased significantly more than the IQ scores of their matched, non-tracked students. Certainly, a number of factors, personal and environmental, could have affected the results, but they nevertheless are suggestive: challenging students to perform at high levels may result in improved cognitive function.

Economic as well as education theories propose that tracking benefits students because teachers work more efficiently when groups are homogenous. This proposal does not endorse a “one size fits all” model; it merely recognizes that when students share similar characteristics, teaching them is not only more efficient but also more effective. Using IQ and other test results, children were grouped on the basis of similar levels of intelligence, motivation, and attention span. The resulting groups did not change substantially all the way through high school.

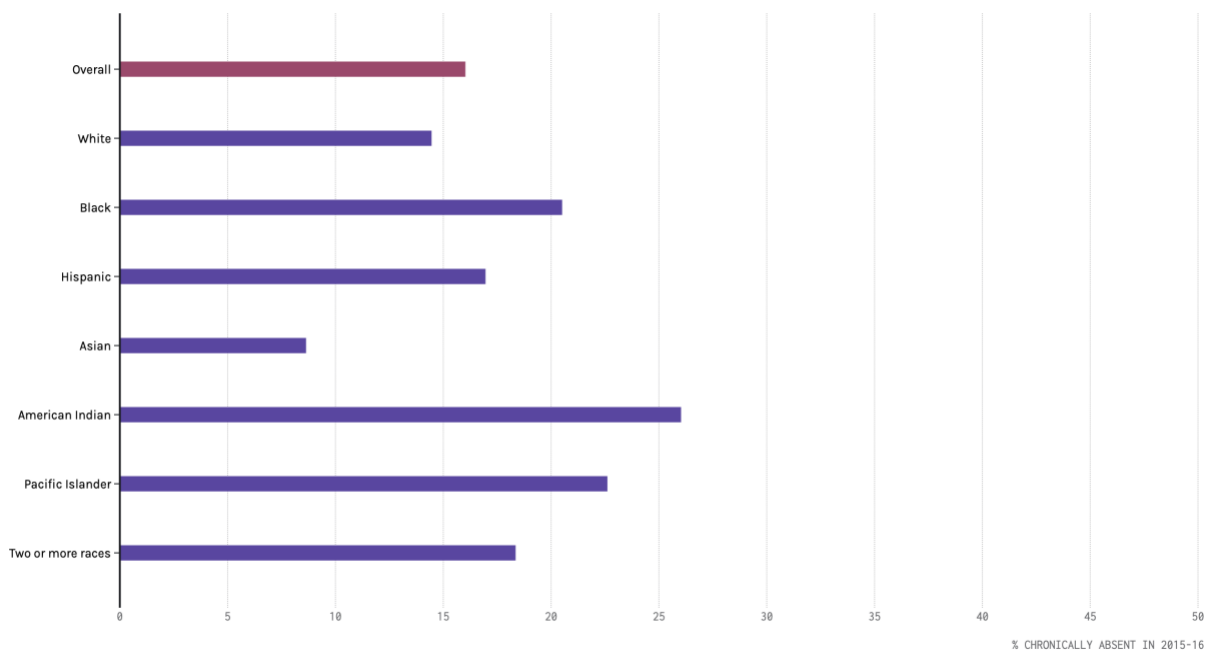
In the early 1970s, tracking came under attack owing to the fact that the number of minority students who tested into the high-level track was very low. Charges also began to emerge at this time that IQ testing is discriminatory. Although these charges were based on the false claim that IQ scores are highly correlated with environment rather than genetics (see Plomin & Deary, 2019), they nevertheless became widely accepted, even among teachers. This acceptance is understandable up to a point if we consider that IQ's genetic basis seems deterministic, but the fact that other personal characteristics, such as height, eye color, and gender are also based on genetics and thus are also deterministic appears to cause no controversy.

In any event, the abandonment of tracking resulted in the de facto implementation of the "one size fits all" model of education. This model necessarily requires dumbed-down curricula owing to the great variation in student abilities and motivation. Not every high school student has the motivation and ability to succeed in Physics or Calculus I, for example. As a result, the new reality of American public education meant that a student could attend a school flush with money, great teachers, and technology galore and still fail every class.

One of the more obvious problems of the Mello-Roos tax scheme is that only about 30% of funds go toward education. The rest go toward development and infrastructure, which can include everything from roads and swimming pools to shopping malls. Moreover, the overall disparity in funding did not change. The most significant reason was that schools with a high percentage of minority students generally experience chronic absenteeism. The resulting low FTE and ADA numbers mean that vesting public school funding in the legislatures and state departments of education failed to improve academic performance among the very students the

move away from community-based funding was supposed to benefit—minority children. As the graphs below illustrates, absenteeism is highly correlated with ethnicity:

**Figure 1: Absenteeism by Ethnicity**

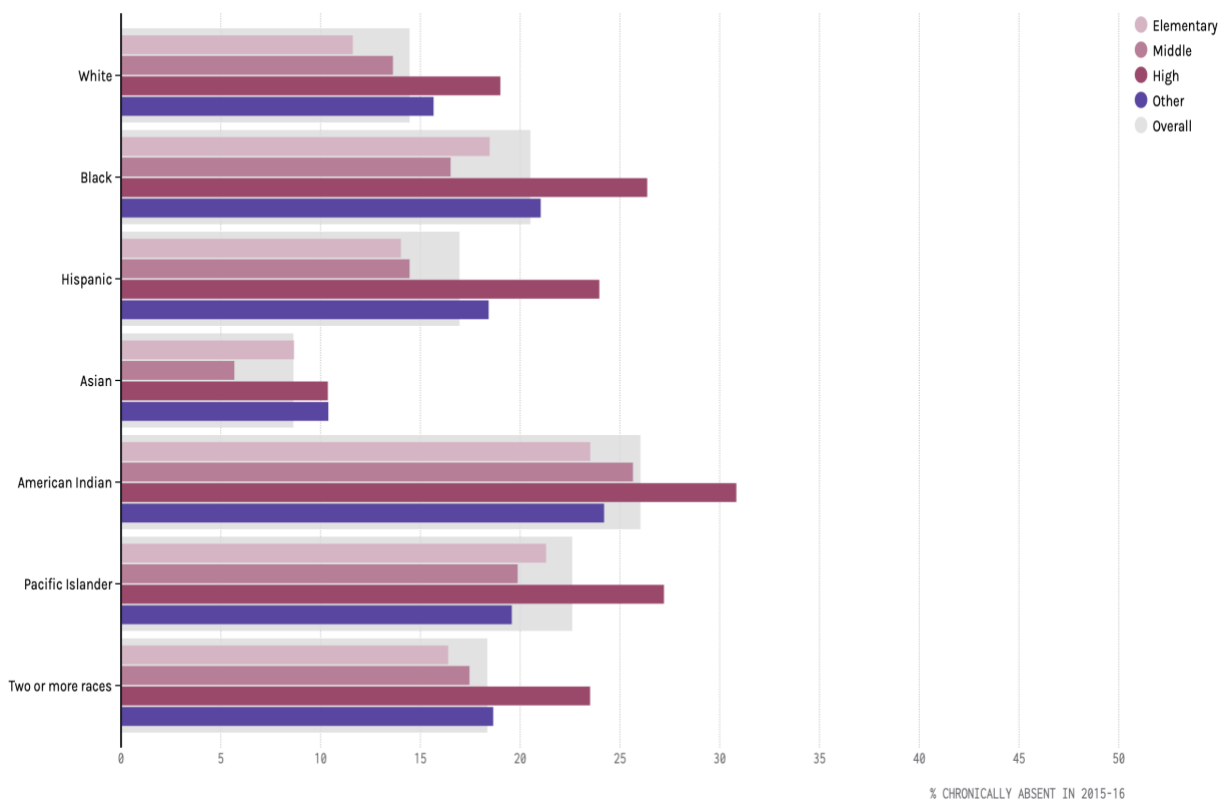


Source: US Department of Education, 2017

Equally troubling is that chronic absenteeism increases with age. Figure 2 below shows absenteeism by grade level and ethnicity.

**Figure 2: Absenteeism by Grade Level and Ethnicity** 

Chronic absenteeism spikes in high school for students of every race and ethnicity.



Source: US Department of Education, 2017

On any given day, an average of 26% of African American students, 24% of Hispanic students, and 31% of American Indian students are absent (National Center for Education



Statistics, 2010, 2016), affecting both ADA funding and academic performance among these groups. At some schools, the percentages are even higher. The absentee rate in predominantly African-American Detroit, for example, has hovered around 58% for years (Chang & Balfranz, 2016).

Absenteeism is a significant factor in the low achievement we find in urban districts and it is also a significant factor in the achievement gap between students of color and their white and Asian counterparts. Thus, reducing absenteeism can serve as a means of reducing educational disparities. Students who are chronically absent in the early school years are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade, making them four times more likely to drop out of high school compared with their peers. In other words, low attendance in elementary school predicts low attendance throughout schooling. This trend culminates during the high school years, when 20 percent of students, on average, are chronically absent, compared with 12 percent in middle school and 11 percent in elementary school. Ninth grade is a particularly vulnerable year for low attendance, and it correlates strongly with achievement and dropout rates for students in urban schools.

### **Class Size and Academic Performance**

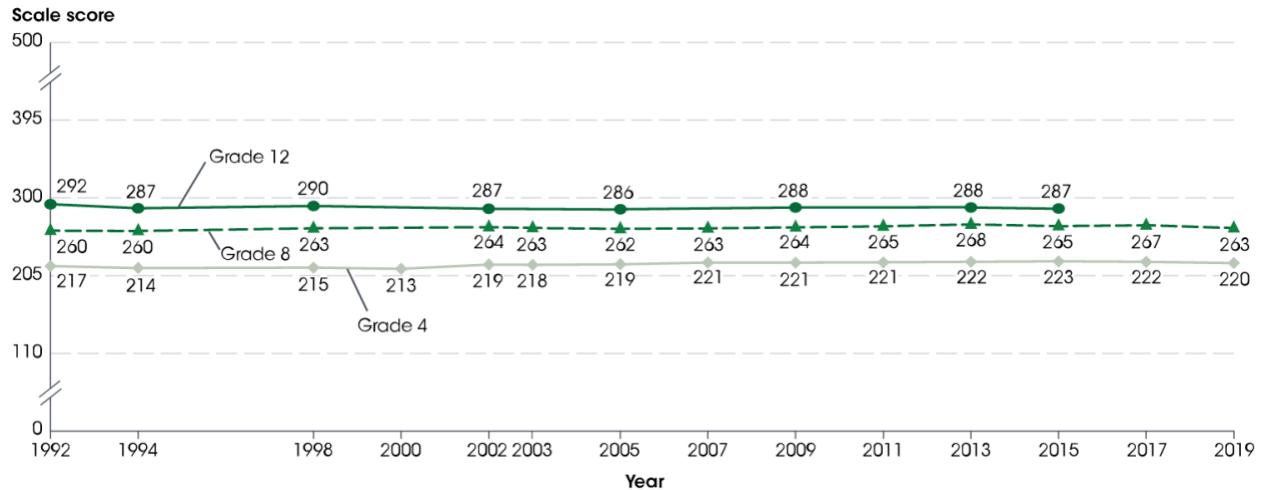
When voices rise concerning high dropout rates and low student achievement, the political response is always the same: addressing the problem requires more funding and smaller classes. Although simple logic seems to support this claim, available research and data fail to provide meaningful support. Two of the more widely cited studies reported conflicting results for the effect of class size on student achievement. The STAR Project (Achilles, et al., 2008) found that “students who attended small classes (K–3) consistently made better grades than students in regular and regular/aide classes by the end of the 1994–1995 school year. In English,

math, and science, the students in the small classes outscored their counterparts by over 10 points” (p. 2). Hoxby (2000), however, found that “reductions in class size . . . have no effect on student achievement. The estimates are precise enough to identify improvements in math, reading, or writing achievement of just 3/100ths of a standard deviation.” (p. 1). Hoxby concluded that previous studies that reported a “significant” class-size effect suffered from “substantial bias” as well as methodological flaws. Among the latter, one of the more significant was failure to account for “male-female differences in test scores” in light of the fact that girls outperform boys in writing, reading, and math until 12<sup>th</sup> grade, making gender a significant but commonly ignored factor in any study of academic performance, including those on the effect of class size.

Also worth considering is that class size has dropped considerably since 1950, when the average was 30 per class. Today, the nationwide average is 25. Although there are difficulties associated with comparing academic performance of children across many decades, determining the effect of class size is straightforward. As the graph below illustrates, class size has dropped steadily since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although we often hear reports of overcrowding, the data don’t support them. The average classroom in 2020 averaged 25 students.

If smaller classes result in higher academic performance, the research data should show measurable improvement over time, provided that we aren’t attempting to do so over many decades. The available data, however, fail to show any improvement in performance as class size dropped. With regard to reading, which most educators identify as a fundamental criterion for educational success, student proficiency—shown in Figure 3 below—has remained static even though class size dropped and massive federal intervention programs such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core were initiated specifically to improve student performance:

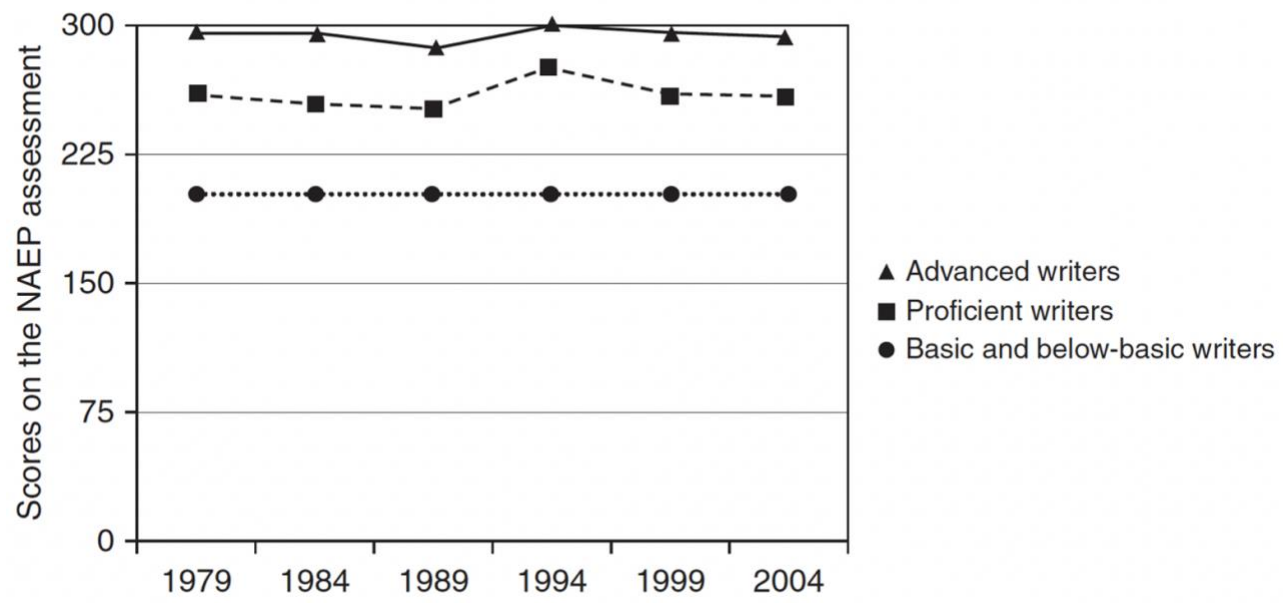
**Figure 3: Trend in Reading Scores for 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Students.**



Source: US Department of Education, 2020

Given the importance of writing ability in an interconnected world, our public schools arguably devote more time to writing instruction than any other single subject. It begins in kindergarten, extends through high school, and is one of only a few subjects that almost every student is required to take as an undergraduate. The sheer amount of instruction would seem to ensure that our students graduate with superior writing ability, but that is not the case. As Figure 4 shows, students' writing performance has remained unchanged for decades.

**Figure 4: Trend in 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Writing Performance**



Source: US Department of Education, 2020.

The consequences of our schools’ failure to teach reading and writing is significant. Williams (2019) reported that 40–80% of matriculating students test remedial in reading and writing, as well as in math. A majority of entering students have never written an academic paper, and they have never read an academic text. When these students arrive at university, their teachers must accommodate them, which explains why the most commonly required books for undergraduates include titles such as those below, taken from common reading lists at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, which overall have a reading level of 7.6—that’s halfway through 7<sup>th</sup> grade:

1. Letter from the Birmingham Jail (King)

2. The Prince (Machiavelli)
3. The Clash of Civilizations (Huntington)
4. Invisible Man (Ellison)
5. The Iliad (Homer)

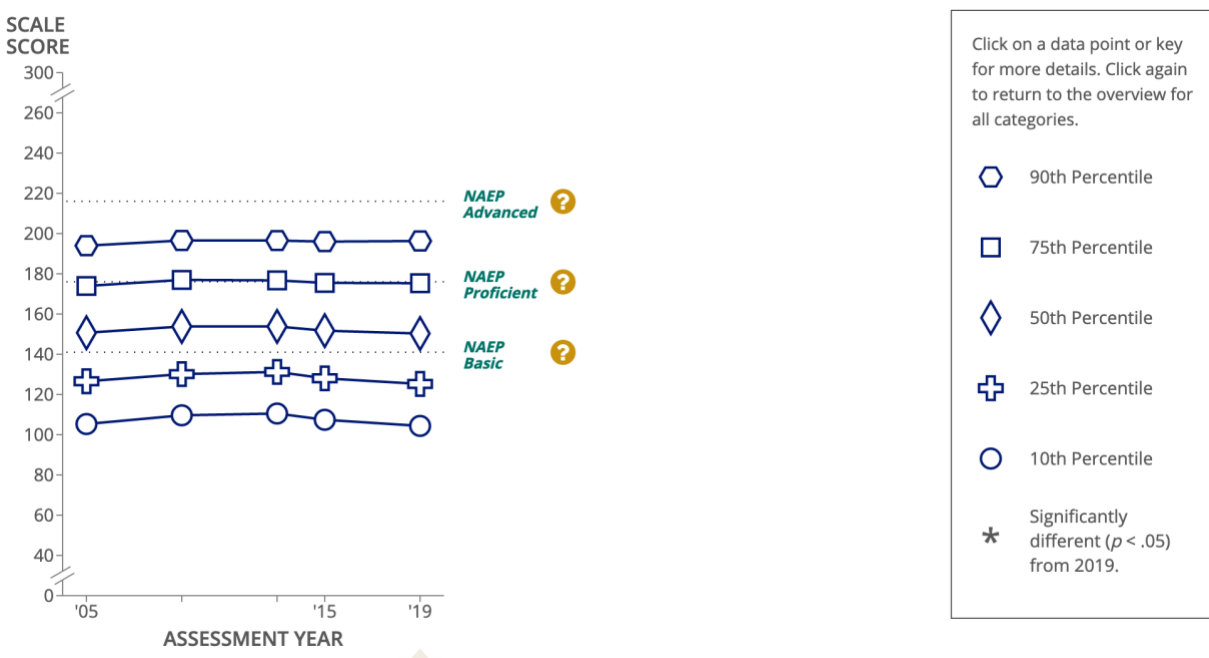
The failure to ask students to read more varied and more challenging texts—or at least to ask them to read at grade level + 1—has real consequences. A recent report from the Modern Language Association found that 25% of 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students read below the basic level and are only semi-literate. Reading is foundational for writing, and the low reading levels of American students results in significant difficulties when they try to write. In an effort to increase motivation among teachers to provide more effective instruction and among students to work more diligently to improve their writing, the College Board added a writing component to the SAT in 2005. Unfortunately, few students performed successfully, which had a negative effect on their overall scores. Outrage and protests followed, prompting the College Board not only to make the writing portion “optional” but to change it from an assessment of writing ability to an exercise in *editing*. Students are provided a text that has various form errors (misplaced or missing punctuation, subject/verb agreement errors, and so on) and are instructed to correct them—essentially an editing exercise that has only marginal relevance to actually producing a text.

The failure of American students to produce effective writing has been examined from various perspectives, but most of the available evidence indicates that this failure is almost entirely the result of student illiteracy and faulty writing pedagogy. Eschewing the significant research on writing pedagogy from the 1980s, nearly all writing assignments students have received since the early 1990s consists of personal experience essays or thought pieces on the

meaning of a work of literature (Williams, 2016, 2017). None of these assignments has any relation to the writing required of students in their other courses, and they also have no correlation with what the students will be asked to produce when they enter the workforce. The reason is that such assignments are a form of what is known as *personal writing*—that is, writing for/to oneself, as in a diary. *Professional writing* is for others and it is agentive insofar as it is social, with the aim of affecting others, i.e., providing information, influencing decision-making, and so forth.

The results of math instruction are equally troubling. The most recent data from the US Department of Education shows that although 4<sup>th</sup>-grade math scores improved 27 points between 1990 and 2009, but between 2009 and 2019 they rose by only 1 point. With regard to 8<sup>th</sup>-grade math, it actually dropped 1 point between 2009 and 2019. More problematic is grade-12 performance, which shows no increase in math proficiency over nearly a 15-year period.

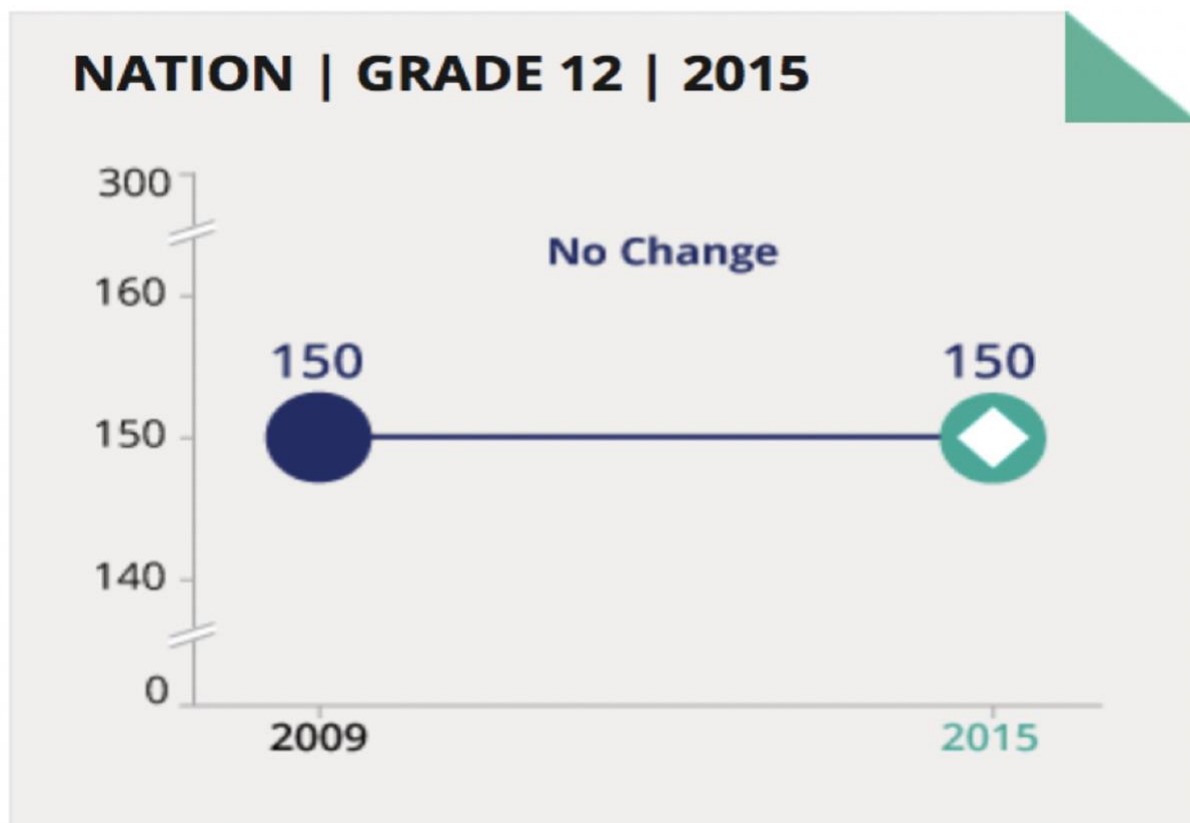
**Figure 5: Trend in 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Math Scores**



Source: US Department of Education, 2020

The US emphasis on science education began in the 1950s in response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite. Although this emphasis produced many highly productive scientists in the 1960s, science education has not kept pace with the increased demands for scientific training or the complexity of modern science. Figure 6 below illustrates the problem, showing that our schools have not produced more scientifically knowledgeable students by 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Figure 6: 12<sup>th</sup>-Grade Science Report Card**



Source: US Department of Education, 2019

### **Education as a Commodity**

Although it is natural for students and parents to think of education in personal terms that commonly focus on admission to a college or university and finding sustainable employment, education is recognized at the national level as a significant factor in *productivity*. That is, education—or more properly educational achievement—is an important economic resource that sustains and ideally amplifies the nation’s productivity. For this reason, our students and the schools they attend are ultimately in competition with students and schools around the world. This reality adds yet another dimension to the issue of school funding, class size, and student performance.

Researchers are aware of these factors, but few parents are. What they see is that their children struggle to read and struggle to work through Common Core math, which has changed simple addition and subtraction into an incomprehensible jumble of Xs and arrows, as illustrated below for how 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are being taught to add  $29 + 17$ :

$$\begin{array}{r}
 20 + 9 \\
 10 + 7 \\
 \hline
 30 + 16 \\
 (10 + 6) \\
 40 + 6 = 46
 \end{array}$$
  

$$\begin{array}{r}
 11 \\
 1 \\
 \hline
 30 + 10 + 6 \\
 40 + 6 = 46
 \end{array}$$

When parents complain that their children are struggling with something as simple as addition, the response from our schools and politicians is always the same: schools need more money and smaller classes. They never mention the curriculum or pedagogy. The claimed



connection among performance, class size, and funding is challenged by the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The PISA is a global test that measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics, and science knowledge to meet real-life challenges. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is responsible for the PISA, and it also tabulates class size for public and private education among member nations. These data allow for a correlation of class size and student performance on the PISA. Figure 7 below shows that, with the exception of Australia, the nations with the largest class sizes are in Asia. More important is that even with a class size that is 72.7% higher than the average class size in the US, students in these countries significantly outperform all other students who have lower class sizes and far less funding.

The US level of funding is among the highest in the world. Only three countries invest more per student: Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria. With regard to class size, some countries, such as Estonia, Russia and Norway, have low class sizes and low PISA scores. China and Korea have large classes but high PISA scores. The United States, which ranked slightly above the mean PISA performance at number 13, has an average class size that is well within the global mean of 25. Such findings clearly indicate that the claim that low student achievement is linked to funding and class size is simple unsupportable.

**Figure 7: PISA Scores and Class Size Rank**

Nation	PISA Scores			Average Class Size
	READING	MATHEMATICS	SCIENCE	
B-S-J-Z* (CHINA)	555	591	590	38
SINGAPORE	549	569	551	38
MACAO (CHINA)	525	558	544	38
HONG KONG (CHINA)	524	551	517	38
ESTONIA	523	523	530	18
CANADA	520	512	518	20
FINLAND	520	507	522	25
IRELAND	518	500	496	32
KOREA	514	526	519	20
POLAND	512	516	511	24
SWEDEN	506	502	499	22
NEW ZEALAND	506	494	508	24
UNITED STATES	505	478	502	24
UNITED KINGDOM	504	502	505	23
JAPAN	504	527	529	34
AUSTRALIA	503	491	503	-
CHINESE TAIPEI	503	531	516	20
DENMARK	501	509	493	25
NORWAY	499	501	490	-
GERMANY	498	500	503	23
SLOVENIA	495	509	507	-
BELGIUM	493	508	499	-
FRANCE	493	495	493	23
PORTUGAL	492	492	492	-
CZECH REPUBLIC	490	499	497	-
NETHERLANDS	485	519	503	24
AUSTRIA	484	499	490	20
SWITZERLAND	484	515	495	-
CROATIA	479	464	472	18
LATVIA	479	496	487	-
RUSSIA	479	488	478	22
ITALY	476	487	468	22
HUNGARY	476	481	481	22

## Inequality, Education, and Economics

Historically, education has been a central factor in upward mobility. The growing problem we have faced since the 1960s is greater awareness that education functions as a socioeconomic sorting mechanism, identifying those who are good at certain types of tasks—remembering, analyzing, categorizing, and so forth—and who also have certain personality

characteristics—patience, determination, self-motivated, able to think long-term. More than a hundred years of research and testing has demonstrated that a relatively small portion of the population has this combination of abilities and characteristics. Stated simply, a college education was never designed for everyone. Historically, it was never really designed to prepare young people for the blue-collar jobs that have defined America’s middle class since the Industrial Revolution. More problematic is that today higher education does not prepare young people for much of anything other than disappointment.

This reality presents a significant problem to societies that not only embrace the idea of egalitarianism but strive to achieve it. As a nation, we have determined that the solution to the reality of inequality is to claim that it is the result of “social construction” rather than cultural and individual differences. That is, we are solely products of our environment, regardless of what the Human Genome Project has reported (see Plomin & Deary, 2019). From this perspective, when a child fails at school or is unable to gain admission to a college, he or she is a victim of discriminatory social factors. There is no question that discriminatory social factors exist, but there also is no question that the characteristics listed above are not defined by those social factors.

After World War II, colleges made various structural changes that for decades provided working-class children entry into the middle class. Millions of returning veterans from working-class families enrolled in the nation’s colleges and universities on the GI Bill. In many respects, those returning GIs were different from the young people who rushed to colleges in the mid-1960s. The increased inability of this younger generation and their children and grand-children to matriculate has been viewed as a form of discrimination, not because it bars them from the intellectual stimulation to be found at university but because a college degree became

increasingly viewed as a commodity linked to potential income and social status that began to disappear owing to economic changes, including the reality that there were simply too many people with a college degree.

Expressed in economic terms, the plethora of people with college degrees robbed those degrees of their exchange value. The work-life benefits of education turned the associated costs of higher education into an *investment* rather than a fee, and this investment message has come to permeate America even as unemployment figures for recent graduates jumped as high as 75% for recent graduates in majors such as criminal justice and English literature. The narrative of income differentials between those who have a high school diploma and those who have a college degree remains powerful beyond all reason, and it is delivered in every conceivable way—through movies, TV, books, teachers, and parents. Politicians have proclaimed for years that not only should every American go to college and earn a degree but that they *deserve* to go to college, get a great job, and earn lots of money. And although that message may have been true in the past, it isn't today.

If we consider the common marketplace, we understand that consumers are expected to pay for the commodities they desire. Economically, however, the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s was driven by debt-based consumerism. The economic crisis of the 1970s and the subsequent election of Ronald Reagan ten years later created a new economic reality in which no one had enough ready cash to buy much of anything. Credit became ubiquitous so as to keep the consumer-based economy from total collapse, resulting in *debt-based consumerism* as banks handed out credit cards and loans like Halloween candy to people who not only had no credit history but in many instances had *negative* credit histories.

Education was not exempt from the forces of commodification. In a few short years, the nation embraced the perception that education, unlike, say, a shirt or a rug, is linked to *potential income*. If debt-based consumerism could provide for life's necessities, it could provide for higher education. The federal government became a "bank" for students and their parents who sought loans to pay for education. The democratization of higher education accelerated—but for the wrong reasons. From 1980 to 2020, the number of college and university students in the US grew from 8.5 million to 18.5 million. Total student loan debt rose from approximately \$10 billion in 1980 to \$1.6 trillion today.

Many of our students now are the first in their families to seek a degree, and with federal money and student loans readily available, they have changed the demographics of higher education. Approximately 70% of today's undergraduates are nontraditional students, the first in their families to go to university. Although this growth is commonly celebrated as illustrating the nation's embrace of diversity, it is the case that many young people matriculate even though they graduated from high schools that only charitably can be described as "under-performing."

In addition, today's students graduated from high school without the qualifications that historically governed college admissions. Not too long ago, the University of California system required applicants to have completed two years of a foreign language in high school as well as Calculus I. In 2016, the university system dropped the calculus requirement and changed the language requirement to "recommended." The explanation for the change focused on relevance: that is, few entering students major in math or engineering, so the majority do not need to know how to solve differential equations to gain admission; with regard to a foreign language, students can take courses at the university and provide more tuition to the school. Ignored completely was the fact that the purpose of the requirements was not to create a nation of multilinguals and

mathematicians but to ensure that entering students had demonstrated the dedication to hard work on difficult subjects that was expected in a premier university system.

The SAT exam became widely used as an assessment tool in 1932 for identifying such students. Based on intelligence tests that Alfred Binet developed in the late 1800s, the SAT was designed to assess the characteristics mentioned above—remembering, analyzing, categorizing—that are linked to intelligence and academic success. The correlation between SAT scores and socioeconomic success is high, even when we remove college graduation as a variable. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, is a well-known example. The correlation is also high for college success, but it served as an obstacle to the forces of commodification that were driving college enrollments to record levels, for there also was a strong correlation between SAT scores and ethnicity. White students from low socioeconomic backgrounds score about 10 points below white and Asian students from middle socioeconomic backgrounds. African American and Hispanic students have even lower scores, a full standard deviation or more below whites and Asians. These results have been confirmed so many times over the years that among the scientific community there are no doubts regarding their validity (Bouchard, 2013; Davies, et al., 2011; Deary, Johnson, & Houlihan, 2009; Devlin, Daniels, & Roeder, 1997; Visscher, et al., 2006).

This reality clashed with the nation's position on social justice and social equity, but it also clashed with the view of higher education's status as a commodity. SAT scores, like the Calculus I requirement, were preventing colleges and universities from tapping into the vast working class and the student loans they could obtain for their tuition. The College Board, which owns the SAT, was sensitive to this problem and began a series of "reforms" aimed at making the SAT easier. In 1992, for example, they re-normed the exam, which resulted in

giving every test-taker that year an extra 150 points. The few hundred students who achieved a perfect score had the rare distinction of having more points than the exam actually offered.

When this effort failed to increase the number of minority students who earned sufficiently high scores for admission into top-tier universities, the College Board revised the SAT again and again, without success. One revision involved removing vocabulary items that test analysis showed were unknown to subaltern minority test takers. “Yacht” was one such word, and the stated rationale for its removal was that children who grow up in the city are unlikely to have seen a yacht. Of course, one could reach that conclusion regarding most children, regardless of where they live, but the real issue is not whether a test taker has seen a yacht but whether he or she has done enough reading to encounter the word. After a certain age, vocabulary grows on the basis of reading, not on the basis of what we may think of as “life experience.”

None of these efforts to make the SAT easier succeeded in raising the scores of blacks and Hispanics. Asian and white children continued to score significantly higher. The arguments against using the SAT as an admission tool shifted to socioeconomics. Students with high scores must come from more affluent households with all the advantages (assumed to include access to walls of books, private tutoring, boating on yachts, and enjoying international travel) that minority families lack. The problem with this argument is that when researchers examined scores on the basis of family income and race, they found that even when socioeconomic factors were the same—family income, home life, neighborhood, etc.—race continued to differentiate SAT scores.

Table 1: Mean SAT Scores by Family Income

<u>Family Income</u>	<u>Black Test-takers</u>		<u>White Test-takers</u>		<u>Total Sample</u>	
	<u>Math Score</u>	<u>Verbal Score</u>	<u>Math Score</u>	<u>Verbal Score</u>	<u>Math Score</u>	<u>Verbal Score</u>
Less than \$10,000	382	381	478	480	418	418
\$10,000 to \$15,000	395	398	478	481	435	439
\$15,000 to \$20,000	400	405	485	488	446	450
\$20,000 to \$25,000	409	413	493	495	460	463
\$25,000 to \$30,000	411	419	495	497	466	470
\$30,000 to \$35,000	419	426	502	504	479	482
\$35,000 to \$40,000	422	430	504	505	484	487
\$40,000 to \$50,000	431	438	510	510	496	498
\$50,000 to \$60,000	441	450	516	514	507	506
\$60,000 to \$70,000	440	450	521	519	512	512
\$70,000 to \$80,000	448	457	528	524	521	518
\$80,000 to \$100,000	461	468	539	534	533	529
More than \$100,000	490	495	568	557	564	555
No Response						

Source: College Board, 2015

In light of such findings, the growing response has been to abandon the SAT as part of the admission process. Initially, applications surged as heretofore ineligible high school seniors applied to colleges nationwide. Administrators and faculty made quick adjustments, cutting difficult classes and revising curricula to make remaining courses easier. With regard to the first-year writing classes that all students are required to take, there was an increase in personal



experience assignments (What did you do over your summer vacation?), a reduction in paper length from an average of 5 pages to an average of 3, and an increase in “feeling” assignments (“How did Lenny’s death at the end of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* make you feel?”) (Williams, 2016). History departments chose to ignore President Kennedy’s comment on history: “There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going” (np).

*The American Council of Trustees and Alumni* (2016) reported research showing that, as a result of efforts to rewrite history to make it congruent with sociopolitical doctrine, college graduates’ ignorance of United States history and government has become deep and widespread. Fewer than 20% of those who participated in the study could identify the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation. Fewer than 50% could identify George Washington as the American general at Yorktown. Only 42% identified the Battle of the Bulge as having occurred during World War II. Just over one third could not connect the New Deal with Franklin Roosevelt. Almost 50% did not know that Theodore Roosevelt was instrumental in building the Panama Canal. More than a third did not know when the Civil War occurred.

Meanwhile, The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (2018) published a study reporting that 22% of Americans aged 15-45 had never heard of the Holocaust. Among those who had at least heard about it, 44% believed that fewer than 2 million persons died during Germany’s industrialized slaughter of the Jews. Nearly 50% of the study participants could not name a single concentration camp, and 66% had never heard of Auschwitz.

## **Conclusion**

The remarkable changes in America's social climate have allowed many millions of children to graduate from high school and get admitted to college. Although we rightly celebrate this accomplishment and resulting diversity, it has come at a high cost. Although the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment clearly specifies that funding for public education is the province of the states, not the federal government, interventions since the Johnson administration made education funding the second most costly budget item in the nation, second only to health care. In addition, millions of college students and college graduates are carrying a mountain of debt, currently \$1.6 trillion, that they cannot repay. This already unsustainable level of debt will continue to grow as colleges and universities continue raising tuition, which at many universities has increased 2000% since 1970. William Bennett recognized in 1987 that easy access to federally subsidized student loans would lead to the rapid rise in college tuition: "If anything, increases in financial aid in recent years have enabled colleges and universities blithely to raise their tuitions, confident that Federal loan subsidies would help cushion the increase."

Basic economics tells us that when supply is greater than demand, the value of a good drops. According to the US Census Bureau, approximately 6% of the US population had at least a bachelor's degree in 1960. By 2020, this figure had increased to 36.6%, fueled by the abandonment of academic standards, easy to obtain student loans, and the strident political message that every American must have a college degree. The problem is that education is no longer progressive—that is, it is not moving us forward—but rather it aims to turn the poor into the new middle class while simultaneously shrinking the old middle class, which has dropped below 50% of the population for the first time since the end of World War II through the privatized-Keynesian economics that has turned colleges and universities into a quasi-monopoly.

Nowhere is this more evident than in current employment data: While up to 75% of recent college graduates are either unemployed or underemployed and have \$30,000 or more in student-loan debt, blue-collar jobs that do not require a college degree and that pay \$50,000 per year or more cannot find enough qualified workers to meet demand (Carnevale, Strohl, & Ridley, 2017). These blue-collar workers are the new middle class, significantly smaller than it was in the past, while those with a bachelor's degree have become the new poverty class burdened with debt and unable to find work in the fields they studied.

All this debt is primarily owned by the big banks and investment firms that bundle the debt and sell it on the derivatives market much in the same way that subprime mortgages were bundled and sold in the early 2000s. Exact figures are hard to determine, but even approximations provide an idea of what is at stake:

- More than 44 million Americans have student-loan debt.
- The total debt outstanding is approximately \$1.6 trillion.
- The delinquency rate on student loans is above 11%.
- In academic year 2016/2017, nearly 80% of all enrolled students had loan debt.
- The average undergraduate loan debt per student is approximately \$30,000.
- The interest rate on undergraduate student loans in 2015 was 5.2%.
- The average monthly payment is approximately \$350.
- The average time required to pay off a \$35,000 student loan on an annual income of \$25,000, assuming paying 10% of salary toward the loan, is 25 years, 2 months.

One consequence of lowering admission standards is that the caliber of students admitted today is below what it was in the past. Nationwide, the number of students needing remediation (in reading, writing, and/or math) upon entering college varies widely, from a low 30% to a high

of 70% (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). The numbers are higher at community colleges—80% at some schools (Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thompson, 2016).

The remediation efforts are well-intended, although they obviously raise further questions about the efficacy of our public education system, but the data indicate that they are not very effective. The National Conference of State Legislatures (2017) reported that, nationwide, only 17% of students enrolled in remedial reading and 27% of students enrolled in remedial math completed a degree—and that it took 6 years or more to do so. In our community colleges, the dropout rate for those requiring remedial courses can be as high as 80%. These students don't receive a degree when they walk away, but they nevertheless carry considerable debt. For them, education was not an investment.

Today, the most important questions facing education are these: (1) Why are we insisting that all young people should go to university when we are graduating high school students who generally are unprepared? (2) Why are we admitting students who lack the preparation necessary to succeed?

The answers appear to lie in commodification of education and the politics of consumption. Education is now a very expensive commodity, and the pressure is on to maintain a high level of consumption. The growth in our colleges and universities over the last 30 years means that schools must fill seats or face the unthinkable prospect of downsizing and reducing their incomes and endowments. The fact that so many students drop out after two years allows higher education to intensify recruitment efforts, which from a financial perspective is an overall positive, for it means high inventory turnover. High turnover is associated with high revenue. Universities don't offer refunds, and the loan money is already in the bank. Likewise, if a

student takes 5 or 6 years to earn a degree rather than four, which has become the new norm owing to overcrowding, that's good news for the schools—more seat time translates into more loans and therefore more tuition.

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