

MATHIS: ‘WHEN I WAS IN SCHOOL ...’

Editor’s note: This op-ed is by William J. Mathis, managing director of the National Education Policy Center and a former Vermont superintendent. He lives in Goshen. The views expressed are his own.

“When I was in school, kids worked harder and were better behaved,” declared the young man just seven years out of high school.

“Son, every generation says schools have gone to pieces since their day,” I replied. “A friend said his college professor colleagues were complaining about the ‘alarming’ degeneration. ‘Kids today don’t know how to write a clear sentence, lack knowledge of history and don’t even know when the Civil War occurred!’”

This widely held folk legend deserves a closer look. What are the facts?

The federal government just reported that Vermont, compared to all states and nations, ranked seventh in the world on science and math. The nations that outscored us were the test-obsessed nations of South Korea and Japan. Three Asian city-states also posted higher scores and only Massachusetts, among the United States, scored better.

National assessment scores in reading and mathematics have gone up for all groups in the United States. Black students, as a group, are scoring where white students scored 30 years ago. In writing, the Center on English Language Learning reports that writing scores have “kept steady” over time.

As for the “dumbed down” curriculum, a new study in Educational Researcher dug through 117 reading textbooks in use from 1905 to 2004. Reading complexity either stayed at the same level or became more difficult across the century.

High school risky behavior is generally going down and children’s well-being is second in the nation. High school graduation rates are also second in the nation.

So, why do we constantly hear schools have gone downhill?

First, is the point of view of the speaker. It is probably just as well that most of our high school writing has been lost. (Mine would be rather embarrassing). Regarding history and social studies, high school is just the beginning. As folks continue to learn and experience more of the world, they unconsciously ratchet up their expectations and judge by a higher standard.

As for the greatly lamented “unprepared” college students, only the top scoring 45 percent enrolled in higher education in 1960. Today, 73 percent of Vermont children attend higher education — although fewer graduate. As we dip deeper into the pool, we are comparing different cohorts.

Then, there's the "school failure" industry. Charter school advocates, test manufacturers and politicians profit by manufacturing bad news. They are ably assisted by the media. For example, with the release of the latest national assessment scores, instead of touting the record high scores, ABC led with the theme of "not good enough." The media did not report that the standard is set so high that no nation in the world could have even half their students meet it.

Yet, there are troubling signs:

- For high schools, the conventional practice is to ability group students into different tracks. This system is supported by many teachers and parents. The rude effect is that some students receive a better education than others. This leads to educational inequities and segregation.

For example, except for a small percent of students in higher level writing workshops, students do not get the opportunities for extensive writing and constructive feedback. Forty percent of 12th graders seldom write a paper greater than three pages in length. If the teacher's load is heavy, then extensive writing doesn't happen.

- The over-emphasis on standardized reading and math tests has also led to an unbalanced curriculum. Arts and humanities courses have been reduced or eliminated so that schools could concentrate on "high-stakes" outcomes. Financial pressures also squeeze "non-essential" subjects. Even within reading and math, the focus has been reduced to easily tested lower-level skills. Testing higher level skills is an oft-touted claim of the national testing consortia but the reality is that "standardized creativity" is an oxymoron.

- Even with Vermont's very equitable funding formula, our low-income communities provide less in educational spending and programs. Granted, this discrepancy is far greater in other parts of the country.

- The increasing income gap represents the greatest of problems for our society and our schools. Pretending that adopting higher standards and more tests, by themselves, will close the achievement gap is an irrational distraction.

So are the schools worse than they were in my day? Not by any external measure. In all kinds of ways, they are much better. But, we must focus on the real problems. Within the schools, we must provide more equitable opportunities. Federal and state governments must balance their obsession with test scores and concentrate on improving teachers and support systems. And society must address income disparity if we are to have good schools and a functioning democracy.