

# The “Failing Schools” Myth

by Bill Morelan, PhD

“American public schools are failing!” That’s something everyone knows—like lightning never strikes twice, Earth is warmer in summer because it’s closer to the Sun, and objects float because they’re lighter than water.

But just like the “facts” above, it’s simply not true.\*

Then why do so many people believe our public schools are failing when the reality is far different? Perhaps it’s because special interest groups have spent millions of dollars over the last two decades promoting this false narrative. What’s their motive? Private companies have made hundreds of millions of dollars from this misconception, and they see the potential to make billions more in the future.

So let’s take a closer look at some key arguments used to support the “failing schools” myth.

## Test Scores

First, it’s not hard to bend test results to support your position, as long as you only tell part of the story. For example, critics constantly point to America’s low scores on international tests. What they neglect to tell you is that many high-scoring countries don’t offer free education for all. Children from low-income homes often receive little or no schooling. In addition, American schools don’t faze out poor performing students after middle school so that only the most capable are allowed to finish high school. These and similar practices have a huge impact on average national test scores.

Critics also tend to cherry-pick international tests to find the results that support their agenda, ignoring other indicators. For example, the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) shows American elementary students have made gains every year since the test began in 1995. Currently our students rank above the international average and are within a few percentage points of the global leaders (in spite of huge testing inequities between countries). And yet it’s doubtful you’ve heard that as of November 2016, we outrank Canada, Germany, and even Denmark in Math and Science.

In addition, American schools constantly struggle against ever-changing laws and new tests. For example, over the past four years, Arkansas has used three different types of assessments—the Benchmark, the PARCC, and now the ACT Aspire. This makes it nearly impossible to make meaningful comparisons. While the “testing wars” seem to be settling down in our state, other parts of the country still face the challenges of trying to hit a constantly-moving target, which diverts time and energy away from focused instruction.

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*\* The Empire State Building gets struck by lightning over 100 times a year; Earth is actually farthest from the sun when it’s summer in America; objects float primarily due to displacement, not just weight.*

### Special Needs Students

Another significant factor relates to Special Education. Special Education programs in the United States far exceed those of most countries. In many countries, SPED students are excluded from regular school or even institutionalized. In addition, those countries certainly don't test such students or include their scores in national reports. While one could argue for or against this practice (as the father of a special needs child, I personally have strong opinions), what you can't argue with is the fact that scores from such students have a negative impact on national test scores.

### What About Choice?

School choice, as is presently practiced in Arkansas, can play a positive role in offering students viable educational options. Well-designed, focused Charter Schools can be an excellent resource for some communities. The Arkansas Arts Academy in Rogers is a great example.

But that certainly doesn't mean that all Charter Schools have excellent curricula and high test scores. In general, for-profit Charter Schools, especially most "virtual" schools, not only have scores at or below their public school counterparts, but they also compete directly for students, drawing away funds local districts desperately need to serve diverse student populations.

While many Charter Schools brag about their high scores (again, cherry-picking data), there are no reputable studies supporting the concept that Charter Schools are better at increasing student achievement once you factor in student socio-economic data. Michigan's Charter Schools (a high percentage of which are run by for-profit corporations) provide a good example. After almost two decades of rapid Charter School growth, Michigan's overall academic progress has failed to keep pace with neighboring states.

### Follow the Money

As mentioned above, the "failing schools" narrative has helped huge corporations make millions of dollars. In addition to for-profit Charter Schools corporations, various educational publishers sell "better" standardized tests, "improved" test preparation materials, "targeted" workshops for teachers, "updated" textbooks and related materials—the list is almost endless. In order to drive those sales, the false narrative that American schools are failing must be kept alive at all costs.

In addition, an obscure change to the U.S. federal Tax Code banks allows wealthy investors to claim a huge tax credit when they invest in certain charter school initiatives. According to some analysts, this would allow them to double their money in just a few years. That's one reason hedge funds are spending millions of dollars to support for-profit Charter Schools.

### So What Can We Do?

Since the movement to privatize public schools is growing, and several state legislators actively support such groups, it is vital that Arkansas educators spread the truth about what this version of "school choice" really means.

Yes, American public schools still face many challenge such as huge inequities in school funding formulas, assessment systems that focus on meeting arbitrary goals instead of measuring growth, laws passed for political gain rather than real student improvement, and so on. But despite their flaws, **America's schools are still among the finest in the world**, and our goal should be to

make them even better—not arbitrarily replace them with for-profit businesses (some of which have already been prosecuted for deceptive advertising practices in other states).

True school choice is one thing. The current “school choice” movement is quite another. Unless we clearly understand the motives behind this current movement and what’s really at stake, we stand the risk of being manipulated into supporting disastrous policy changes that will enrich private corporations at the expense of our most needy children.

### For More Information

#### **TIMMS Study**

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/11/29/revealed-world-pupil-rankings-science-maths-timss-results/>

#### **National “School Choice” Bill**

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/610>

#### **Articles of Interest**

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/opinion/op-ed/article9499466.html>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/20/whats-wrong-with-school-choice-heres-what/?utm\\_term=.3645e606bfc5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/20/whats-wrong-with-school-choice-heres-what/?utm_term=.3645e606bfc5)

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/06/04/why-hedge-funds-love-charter-schools/?utm\\_term=.893468e60d95](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/06/04/why-hedge-funds-love-charter-schools/?utm_term=.893468e60d95)

<http://thetruthaboutk12.com/tag/graduation-rates/>