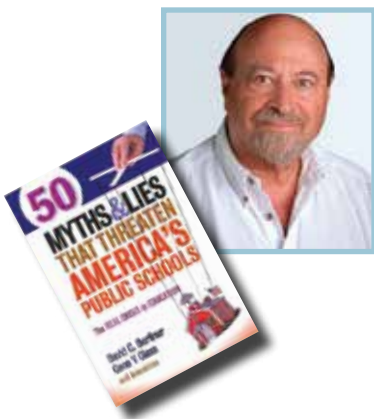


DAVID BERLINER ON

“50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America’s Public Schools”

By Paul Grondahl

David C. Berliner is an educational myth buster with a raspy, nasal accent courtesy of the Bronx. When he gets passionate about refuting what he considers an affront to public education – which is often – he speaks in blunt, profane language. He’s an iconoclast, whose clear-eyed assessment of public schools is gleaned from decades of sifting data for his books and research, visiting dozens of schools across the country, and tracking the latest scholarship as a past president of the American Educational Research Association and the Division of Educational Psychology of the American Psychological Association.



Berliner is Regents Professor of Education Emeritus at Arizona State University and he's been a faculty member at the University of Arizona, University of Massachusetts, and Stanford University. He has also taught at universities in Canada, Australia, and several European countries.

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"The nation is caught up in a furious battle trying to figure out why not all our schools are working well and I'm explaining how remarkably good our schools are," Berliner said by phone from his home in Tempe, Arizona. "The reality is that almost all of our schools that are not doing well are schools where poverty is endemic. I am also pointing out that there's an awful lot of BS out there when it comes to educational policy that is based on myths and lies." He considers it his job to serve as a BS detector and to wade through a swamp of falsehoods, faulty logic, and flat-out misinformation and to call out the hogwash, bunk, and hokum perpetuated by what he sees as a Machiavellian mix of political special interests and corporate opportunists.

Berliner delivered the keynote address at the SAANYS annual conference on October 18, where he encouraged his allies - principals, and building supervisors - in their ongoing efforts for excellence in public schools and he aimed his fierce brand of truth-telling at the special interest myth-perpetuating targets in his most recent book, *50 Myths and Lies About Public Schools* (Teachers College Press, 2014), co-authored with Gene V. Glass, a research professor at the University of Colorado Boulder's School of Education and a senior researcher at the National Education Policy Center.

The purpose of the *50 Myths and Lies* book was to launch a thousand conversations, which it has done, not to mention generating brisk sales and bringing Berliner invitations to speak from Montana to Texas. It has also stoked passions and spurred spirited arguments across the blogosphere, at school board meetings, and in newspaper editorial pages.

Among the myths the book busts are these:

- International tests show that the United States has a second-rate education system.

"It is a bald-faced lie," Berliner said. "I have irrefutable data that shows if you attend a public school where poverty rates were below 10 percent and you combine reading, math, and science scores, the U.S. is the top nation in the world. If we raise the poverty rate to 25 percent, which includes 13 million American kids, the U.S. students are still among the highest scoring students in the world. Even where poverty rates were 25-50 percent, U.S. students scored above the international average."

- Teachers are the most important influence in a child's education.

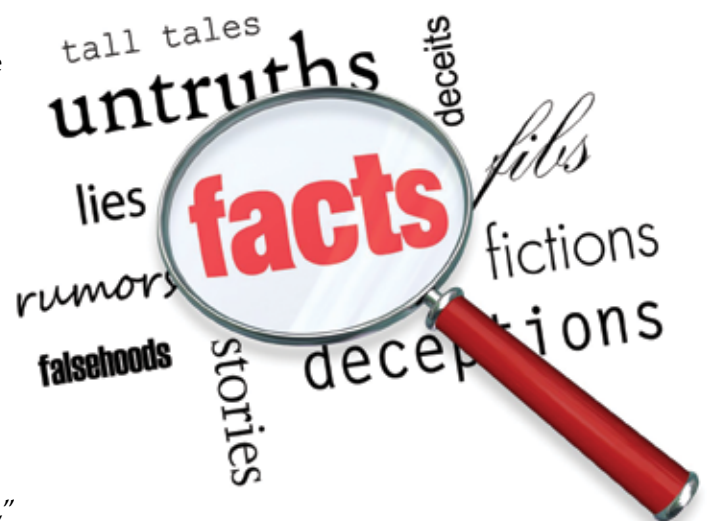
"New York and a lot of other states are using systems and standardized achievement test scores to evaluate teachers that are sensitive to social class, neighborhood quality of life and family income, but not to teachers,"

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Berliner said. "It is almost impossible to move those metrics by instruction alone. In only rare instances does a teacher or a school break the pattern. I have extensive data that clearly shows about 60 percent of test scores' variation is determined by out-of-school factors and only 10 percent on the teacher. Teachers do make a big difference on individual kids. Good teachers change lives and influence students, but they do not significantly change the metrics."

- Firing the bottom 5 to 8 percent of teachers will move the U.S. to the top of international science and math rankings.

"Economist Eric Hanushek has been touting this idea for years, but there's absolutely no evidence it would have that effect," Berliner said. "Microsoft tried firing the bottom 5 percent of its employees and it just alienated people, drove the place crazy, and created a lot of paranoia and stress



without measurably improving the company's results. Microsoft ended up ending the practice because it was a horrible system that created many problems.

- Schools need to increase STEM courses to make our students more competitive and to guarantee that they find jobs.

"There are 11 million Americans with STEM degrees who are not working in a STEM field," Berliner said. "Each year we produce 100,000 more people with STEM degrees than there are STEM jobs. There is no national shortage of STEM graduates. I get really crazy over all the STEM BS."

- Holding a child back who is not doing well academically is good for the child.

"Holding kids back if they are not reading well in third grade, which Arizona and Florida passed, is a stupid policy," Berliner said. "We have a lot of data that shows that holding a child back is a mistake that significantly increases the child's chance of dropping out of school. Those students not reading well by third grade require attention, not retention. Tutoring is cheaper and more humane than flunking a child."

Berliner's type of aggressive debunking has earned him enemies and he's no stranger to controversy. His 1996 book, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*, co-authored with Bruce J. Biddle, raised public outrage over their arguments that legislators and Presidents Reagan and both Bushes manufactured an assault on American public schools based on misleading data that spawned misguided reforms. The real problems in our schools run

much deeper and are caused by fundamental societal and economic failures, they argued. The themes explored in *The Manufactured Crisis* are extended and broadened in *50 Myths and Lies*.

"We have a long history of anti-intellectualism that runs really deep in the American psyche that comes and goes in waves," Berliner said. "It just takes a few declines in test scores to bring it all to the surface again and we pin it all on the teachers. Our poor schools are not working because of poverty in those neighborhoods, not because of poor teachers. It's a misattribution. I've studied and written about public versus private schools for a long time. When you adjust for social class and poverty, in every case the public schools do better than the privates. Don't give me the BS that private schools are better. They're skimming kids and it's only higher social class, not a better school."

Berliner has a simple formula for improving schools: address the underlying social problems and invest in failing neighborhoods if you want the quality of the public schools there to rise.

"My bottom line message to administrators and school boards is that if you expect to improve education without improving communities, it cannot be done," Berliner said. "Administrators who have schools with many low-achieving kids have to figure out how to get them jobs and to find more

money for drug prevention, adult education, and effective social programs for their communities. They need to increase funding for breakfast and lunch programs because poor kids can't learn if they're hungry. If

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school administrators do not engage the community and they just work on what goes on inside the school, they will never achieve the academic success they dream of for their students."

In the past six months or so, Berliner has actually become more of an optimist when it comes to the contentious education debate. "I thought we had lost the battle and I was losing faith, but the things I've seen recently are encouraging. Nearly 200,000 students opted out of standardized tests in New York. People are saying we've had enough testing, just teach our kids some useful things that will help them learn and grow. Teachers are fighting back in the state of Washington and striking for more pay because of additional requirements being demanded of them. I see these things happening all over the country. I say it's about time and I like to think our books are playing a part."

MYTH



PAUL GRONDAHL is an award-winning reporter at the *Albany Times Union*. A paperback edition of his political biography, *Mayor Corning: Albany Icon, Albany Enigma*, was recently published by SUNY Press.



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