



FIVE MYTHS ABOUT EDUCATION



The United States is mired in a swamp of doubt mongering, outright hokum, and fake accusations of fake news. Education has hardly been immune. A new book aims to address this morass of “alternative facts” by providing evidence-based answers to a series of frequently asked questions about schools. Entitled *Public and Private Education in America: Examining the Facts*, the volume was written by NEPC Fellows [Casey Cobb](#) of the University of Connecticut and [Gene Glass](#), Regents’ Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University. It’s the latest addition to ABC-CLIO’s *Contemporary Debates* series, which uses evidence to counter common misperceptions about high-profile issues such as immigration, climate change, and guns. Below are five of the myths refuted in the book.

Myth 1: Private schools outperform public schools.

Private schools typically come out on top in direct comparisons between their academic performance and outcomes in public schools. However, once researchers account for the fact that private school students are, on average, from wealthier families than public school students, these differences virtually disappear. In fact, some studies have found that, all things being equal, public school outcomes are [superior](#).

Myth 2: U.S. schools lag way behind schools in other nations.

Scores on the internationally administered Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that U.S. students rank toward the middle of the pack, worldwide, in science and in math, but toward the top in reading. The Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the world’s other most commonly cited international exam, indicates that the U.S. ranks 14th out of 49 in Grade 4 math and 10th out of 39 in Grade 8. However, scholars have raised numerous [concerns](#) about the validity of these rankings, including differences in

the socioeconomic status of the students taking the test in different nations and difficulties related to translating and equating tests in different languages. Scholar Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor at the University of Kansas, has also raised questions about claims that tests are actually measuring “knowledge and skills essential for the modern society.” In the end, these exams and their associated rankings have limited utility when it comes to identifying higher and lower performing educational systems.

Myth 3: Unlike in private industry, it is nearly impossible to fire teachers for poor performance and that’s because of unions.

While it is true that it is uncommon for teachers to be fired for poor performance, evidence actually suggests that teachers are more likely to be fired for performance-related issues in unionized school districts and states. Further, schools fire teachers at rates similar to those of the finance and insurance industry, which was used as a comparative benchmark because it requires similar levels of education for its employees.

Myth 4: Schools are getting more and more dangerous.

The opposite is true. Although high-profile shootings are certainly tragedies, today’s students are actually less likely to be the victims of violence or theft at school than were their predecessors at the turn of the 21st century. For instance, four times as many children were killed in schools in the early 1990s than in 2015.

Myth 5: More homework will definitely lead to better student achievement.

The amount of homework assigned to U.S. students has nearly tripled since the early 1980s. Yet research findings are mixed when it comes to whether or not homework increases student achievement, with any benefits varying by grade level, by subject, and by the method used to assess student outcomes. An added wrinkle is that homework assignments themselves vary widely, ranging from worksheets requiring basic memorization to complex tasks like essay writing. Yet studies have rarely attempted to tease out the impact of different types of homework or the appropriateness of different types and amounts of homework for students at different grade levels. The reality is that U.S. students spend a good deal of time at home on tasks that, while potentially beneficial, are not necessarily evidence-based.

NEPC Resources on Private Schools

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