

# Introduction

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In recent years, the American public has become increasingly concerned about the academic performance of its children and the structure and organization of the nation's elementary and secondary schools. According to a 2000 Gallup Poll, the majority, 61 percent, of those surveyed are somewhat dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with the quality of education that students receive in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The public wants quality education for the children in the United States but is not getting it. Despite the terrible tragedy of September 11 and the country's subsequent focus on terrorism, domestic security, and international relations, President Bush has restated his mantra "No child left behind" and reaffirmed the administration's resolve to return its interest to education—the main focus of his domestic policy agenda during the 2000 presidential campaign.

Many remedies to the perceived problems have been offered. Some emphasize fixing the system—better teachers, smaller classrooms, changes in curriculum. Others offer "outside the box" solutions that wander far from the current pedagogical path—school vouchers, charter schools, home schooling. Whatever the solution—and there are merits to most options offered—to discuss the problems intelligently, one must argue from reliable data and with recognized source material. Consistent and accurate data and well-defined and critical analysis are imperative if we are to separate the true problems from myth and then proffer solutions to solve the problems.

Reasonable people can disagree; however, we feel participants in discussions about students and their educational performance and environment cannot enter into a sound debate without first stipulating to the facts. In this volume, we hope to help establish the baseline for discussion and debate by providing relevant data in words, graphs, and tables.

It seems, too often, what masquerades as debate is really argument and polemics. Debates about academic performance, resources, teacher quality, and school choice sometime appear more like a *Monty Python* skit than a discussion among learned education professionals. We invite and encourage debate, but debate based on well-documented facts.

Harry Truman said, “We must have strong minds, ready to accept the facts as they are.” One of the functions the Hoover Institution provides is to act as an educator—a provider of facts from which public policy debate can be launched. We were motivated to write this book by our desire to contribute to achieving this institutional goal in an area we feel is of vital importance if the United States is to continue as a world leader in freedom and commerce. We believe this volume will contribute to educating, raising the level of the public policy debate, and increasing awareness regarding issues of vital importance to Americans.

We do this not with our original research. Rather, our aim is to find data, to review previously published analysis, and to report on survey results. We organize these data and, then, present them in a user-friendly format.

To be all-inclusive would require a volume much greater than ours. We did not undertake that task, and we do not purport that our volume is that—we do not tackle every topic in the field. Moreover, there are numerous resources available to provide much more data than we do. Our goal is to identify selected, salient facts that will provide fodder for discussion, cause people to think, and equip them to refute what has become accepted wisdom when it may be fictitious or misleading.

Investing in human capital through education can only lead to a more economically prosperous nation, to a country better prepared to listen to and understand the policies our government leaders propose, and to innovation that will secure a better way of life—economically, socially, and politically. What follows are six chapters, each addressing a specific area of the educational experience. Our first chapter is about schools—after all, they are a fundamental aspect of the educational experience. If our goal is to better educate today’s youth (measuring improvement by whatever metric one may choose), we must first know what is happening in our schools.

In some sense our presentation parallels *A Primer on America’s Schools* (Hoover Press, 2001). That volume, authored by the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, provides more in-depth analysis and history. Chapters 2–5 are on teachers, achievement, expenditures, and school reform. Finally, we close with a chapter on students and their families. Clearly students are what the educational experience is all about. Moreover, student’s families provide the foundation for a successful education.

We finish with an appendix that includes the most basic of demographic and educational data. This section provides the facts we think every reader should have some knowledge of—for example, the U.S. population and its makeup (by age, sex, race, ethnicity, family size), the number and composition of schools in the United States, and family income levels.

We believe our presentation is unique. Within each chapter, we present a number of propositions. Some are obvious, some controversial, and some just plain informative. Based on each proposition, we lay out facts. In some cases, the facts fully support the proposition; in other cases, our factual finding may startle the reader—the accepted norm may not be factual and, hence, should not be accepted. Furthermore, what was true in 1960 may no longer be true in the new millennium.

Our Hoover colleagues, who serve as editors for the journal *Education Next*, state that the research reported in their journal takes them where the facts lead. In this volume, we hope to provide the readers with facts that will better equip them on a journey to make their own assessments.

This project could not have been undertaken without the guidance and support of a number of people. At the earliest stages, Hoover fellows Williamson Evers, Terry Moe, and Peter Montgomery helped define the issues, and Michael Kirst of the Stanford School of Education provided us with leads to numerous data sources that proved most valuable. Mark Boucher, Matthew Nobe, Nicole Saltzman, Andrew Schnell, and Hope Skandera provided valuable research assistance by collecting, collating, and checking vast amounts of data that are the basis for this volume. Members of Hoover's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education (John Chubb, Williamson Evers, Checker Finn, Rick Hanushek, Paul Hill, E.D. Hirsch, Caroline Hoxby, Terry Moe, Paul Peterson, Diane Ravitch, and Herb Walberg) were most generous with their time and comments; special thanks go to Herb and Rick, who went above and beyond to help us avoid pitfalls. Finally, our deepest debt goes to Hoover Institution Director John Raisian, who gave us the opportunity and encouraged us every step of the way throughout this project.

“Honesty is the first chapter of the book of wisdom.”  
—Thomas Jefferson