

## **Education's hidden scandal**

### **Schools often conceal high dropout rates for minority students**

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Among the "talented tenth," those in the top 10 percent of test takers, reading scores have dropped four points since 1971 and math scores have not budged since first measured in 1978. So say the latest (2004) results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's report card.

At the other end of the scale, dropout rates have actually increased since 1990, rising to 30 percent of all 17-year-olds.

#### **Half of blacks drop out**

Among blacks the dropout rate is running somewhere between 50 and 60 percent, a sad fact that remains one of the best-kept secrets in American education. Because few people know the facts, in a recently issued book Michael Dyson scolds Bill Cosby for (accurately) lamenting the fact that only about half of blacks graduate from high school. Dyson "corrected" him, saying the dropout rate is only 17 percent, an inaccuracy that earned Dyson warm praise from a New York Times book reviewer.

#### **Statistical smokescreen**

The reviewer's error only shows how successful the public education cartel has been in misleading the public. To hide actual dropout rates, most school districts report as dropouts only those who entered the year as seniors but did not remain in school until the end of that year. All other dropouts over the preceding three years -- and all the summers in between, when most dropping out actually occurs -- are statistically ignored.

The U.S. Department of Education has long been complicit in fostering that misperception. To his credit, Russ Whitehurst, head of the department's Institute of Education Sciences, is now actively working to remedy the situation, as are the nation's governors, who are now embarked on a Herculean effort to develop a multistate common definition and gauge of high school completion.

Getting the facts right will be a start. But we then need to do something about it.

We currently base our high school policies on two contradictory assumptions:

1. That adolescents are responsible enough that they can choose their own curriculum from the shopping mall of choices available.

2. That adolescents should not be held responsible for their performances. Testing expectations should be minimal, and graduation requirements should be easily achievable.

### **Higher expectations needed**

No wonder the United States is desperately searching for ways to import talent from abroad. If we are to regain our educational strength in a world where other nations are passing us by, we need to hold students responsible for more than just selecting the courses they want to take.

To graduate from high school, students should be expected to pass, at as high a level as they can, a challenging, substantive examination in a variety of subjects that allow them to demonstrate -- to colleges and employers -- just how accomplished they are. The Advanced Placement Test is a good beginning, but until more than 9 percent of all public school students take that test, it won't have a broad impact.

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