



## **Think Tanks: The perils of 'evidence-based' education**

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Frederick Hess for the American Enterprise Institute: A new study by WalletHub has concluded that Philadelphia and Detroit are two of the nation's top 10 "most efficient" school systems. Seriously. This illuminates one of the perils with "evidence-based" education — namely, the likelihood that data will be used in nonsensical ways and that foolishness will be passed off as evidence.

WalletHub analysts combined fourth- and eighth-grade test scores, spending data, and various socioeconomic controls to rank cities on cost-effective performance. In a truly bizarre move, however, they didn't use per-pupil spending. Rather, they calculated cost efficiency based on per-capita spending (in other words, school spending per local resident.) This decision inflated the reported cost-effectiveness for those cities with lots of elderly residents (which helps explain why Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, and Orlando all finished in the top 15.)

The results were then adjusted for rates of poverty, median household income, single-parent households and non-English speakers. Add it all up and, voila, we learn that, when it comes to efficiency, Miami is tops and Grand Rapids, Mich., is number two. More to the point, we see that Detroit and Philadelphia are top 10 school systems. Let's not pay any attention to the bankruptcies, state takeovers, hundreds of millions of dollars in shortfalls, empty schools, or abysmal scores with which these two cities are struggling. After all, the data tells the tale.

### **WHERE ARE ALL THE BLACK IVY LEAGUERS?**

Jonathan Rothwell for the Brookings Institution: Black students make up just 4 percent of undergraduate enrollees in the top decile of the nation's four-year colleges, ranked by mid-career alumni earning figures. By contrast, 26 percent of students in the bottom rank of colleges are black. ...

Most of the small number of black graduates from the 92 schools in the top decile will go on to successful careers. The problem is that a vastly larger number of blacks — 59 percent — attend

colleges ranked in the bottom half, with just 4 percent in top schools. By contrast, 9 percent of white students attend top colleges and 26 percent of Asians.

Are things getting better? Not on this front. While the number of blacks enrolling in top colleges increased from 1980 to 2013, the share of black students at such colleges and the likelihood of a black college student attending top colleges have not. The change in black enrollment shares at top decile colleges between 1980 and 2013 was just 0.3 percentage points, and the percentage of black students attending such schools fell from 6 to 4 percent. Most of the gains have been in lower tier colleges.

### **SELF-FULFILLING OPTIMISM**

Julian Sanchez for the Cato Institute: Back when I was the editor of the school paper at my affluent public high school, a bunch of the paper's staff took a trip to a much poorer high school in Patterson, N.J., to meet and talk with some of our counterparts. The gap in resources between the two schools was, as you might guess, pretty striking.

But so was this: During a break between meetings, one of my fellow editors casually mentioned to an adult employee of the Patterson schools her college plans — the schools she was applying to, the majors she was considering; unremarkable stuff we discussed with peers and teachers all the time. The adult's response was something along the lines of: "Oh, that's great sweetie; it's wonderful to have dreams" — as though my friend had declared her goal of becoming president or the next Madonna. This was meant to be an "encouraging" response, of course, but my friend and I were both taken aback at the (presumably unintended) implication that something she'd regarded as a simply the obvious next step in her life — because of course you graduate high school and then go on to college — was a kind of childish fantasy to be indulged, but not taken terribly seriously.

Statistically, the adult's attitude was, of course, perfectly realistic: The odds of a student at that Patterson school making it into the elite colleges my friend was considering (she ultimately went to Wellesley) were slim indeed. But we both sensed intuitively that this "realistic" attitude, even couched in words of "encouragement," had to make the odds longer still. ...

Perhaps — and there's a whiff of paradox here — a belief in that kind of personal responsibility for outcomes is one of the lucky advantages that affluent parents pass on to their children.

This is not mere speculation: There's abundant empirical research around what psychologists call "locus of control" suggesting that this is precisely the case. If students are primed to think that one's performance on a math test, say, is largely a matter of how hard they work, they will do better on a subsequent test than students primed with the suggestion that some students simply have a natural aptitude that others lack.