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# TEACHABLE MOMENT

THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING IN AMERICA

MONDAY, JULY 27, 2009

## What Massive Collapse?

On the Economix blog on the New York Times website, they've [posted a challenge](#) from Andrew Coulson, the director of education policy at the ultra-conservative (getting into libertarian) Cato Institute. He writes:

*I've been claiming for some time (most recently in IBD) that K-12 education has suffered a massive and unique productivity collapse over the past 40 years: student achievement has been stagnant at the end of high school (see the NAEP [National Assessment of Education Progress, a standardized test]) and graduation rates have actually declined slightly (see James Heckman's work), despite a more than doubling in real expenditures per pupil.*

*But some have challenged the claim that this economic catastrophe is unique to education, so this morning I decided to challenge readers of the Cato Institute's blog to present an example of another field that has suffered the same productivity collapse. So far the most promising contender is live theater, but after looking into it, I find it doesn't hold up.*

*Since Economix has a great many well-informed readers, and ones who are perhaps less predisposed to think ill of public schooling, I'm writing to enlist your help. Would you be willing to pass along my challenge to your readers? I'll look into the most promising candidates suggested, and will publicly acknowledge any "winners" (i.e., fields that have seen productivity cut in half, or worse, since 1970).*

Sorry to quote so extensively, but I wanted to give you the full picture of what we're discussing here. The thing is, I don't know that this "massive and unique" collapse in productivity is really born out by the facts as we know them. In fact, I think that the very premise is self-contradictory.

Let's assume that Coulson is right and that no major industry has

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Teachable Moment focuses on educational policy with occasional forays into politics, culture, or other topics that interest me. The blog publishes three times a week - on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

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