

The Corner

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The Value of Better Teachers

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Greg Mankiw [points to an article](#) showing how much the education system in America would improve and how much of an economic boost the country would get if only we had better teachers:

. . . replacing the bottom 5-8 percent of teachers with average teachers could move the U.S. near the top of international math and science rankings with a present value of \$100 trillion.

This issue of the poor performance of U.S. schools has gotten a lot of attention recently. As you may know, China made its debut in international standardized testing, and [the results](#) of the OECD exam showed not only that students in Shanghai outscore their counterparts in dozens of other countries, in reading as well as in math and science, but also that students in the U.S. were barely reaching the middle of the pack.

Contrary to universities, K-12 schools in America are in pretty bad shape, especially if compared to other countries. Of course, we always hear that this is because other countries spend more than we do, that we need more money to improve performance, or that we could improve the quality of education if only teachers didn't have such overcrowded classrooms. All these excuses are myths. What the country's K-12 system needs is more competition between schools, more competition between teachers, and a connection between student performances and teacher pay.

Last week, [I talked about this issues](#) and some of the myths surrounding poorly performing public schools with Carol Massar and Matt Miller on [Bloomberg TV](#):



The data that I find the most striking was provided to me by Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute. It shows that over the last 40 years, per pupil spending in real dollars has tripled. However, long-term trends on NAEP (the “nation’s report card,” with data stretching back to the early 1970s) shows flat achievement for 12th graders (graduating seniors) for reading, math and science. In other words, there is no correlation between how much money is spent and achievement in the classroom. You can see the chart provided by Coulson in the TV clip — it’s striking.

But the official data doesn’t even tell the whole story about how much we spend on education. Andrew Schaffer recently looked at a sample of school districts from all over the country, and he found their actual spending was, on average, 44 percent more than the officially stated amount. That’s because things like buildings and renovations are frequently considered off-budget

The bottom line is that we are paying more and more on education for the same quality service. We would not tolerate such an outcome in any other area.

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