

John Stossel's 'Stupid in America'

How Lack of Choice Cheats Our Kids Out of a Good Education

By JOHN STOSSEL

Jan. 13, 2006 — - "Stupid in America" is a nasty title for a program about public education, but some nasty things are going on in America's public schools and it's about time we face up to it.

Kids at New York's Abraham Lincoln High School told me their teachers are so dull students fall asleep in class. One student said, "You see kids all the time walking in the school smoking weed, you know. It's a normal thing here."

We tried to bring "20/20" cameras into New York City schools to see for ourselves and show you what's going on in the schools, but officials wouldn't allow it.

Washington, D.C., officials steered us to the best classrooms in their district.

We wanted to tape typical classrooms but were turned down in state after state.

Finally, school officials in Washington, D.C., allowed "20/20" to give cameras to a few students who were handpicked at two schools they'd handpicked. One was Woodrow Wilson High. Newsweek says it's one of the best schools in America. Yet what the students taped didn't inspire confidence.

One teacher didn't have control over the kids. Another "20/20" student cameraman videotaped a boy dancing wildly with his shirt

off, in front of his teacher.

If you're like most American parents, you might think "These things don't happen at my kid's school." A Gallup Poll survey showed 76 percent of Americans were completely or somewhat satisfied with their kids' public school.

Education reformers like Kevin Chavous have a message for these parents: If you only knew.

Even though people in the suburbs might think their schools are great, Chavous says, "They're not. That's the thing and the test scores show that."

Chavous and many other education professionals say Americans don't know that their public schools, on the whole, just aren't that good. Because without competition, parents don't know what their kids might have had.

And while many people say, "We need to spend more money on our schools," there actually isn't a link between spending and student achievement.

Jay Greene, author of "Education Myths," points out that "If money were the solution, the problem would already be solved ... We've doubled per pupil spending, adjusting for inflation, over the last 30 years, and yet schools aren't better."

He's absolutely right. National graduation rates and achievement scores are flat, while spending on education has increased more than 100 percent since 1971. More money hasn't helped American kids.

Ben Chavis is a former public school principal who now runs an alternative charter school in Oakland, Calif., that spends thousands of dollars less per student than the surrounding public schools. He laughs at the public schools' complaints about money.

"That is the biggest lie in America. They waste money," he said.

To save money, Chavis asks the students to do things like keep the

grounds picked up and set up for their own lunch. For gym class, his students often just run laps around the block. All of this means there's more money left over for teaching.

Even though he spends less money per student than the public schools do, Chavis pays his teachers more than what public school teachers earn. His school also thrives because the principal gets involved. Chavis shows up at every classroom and uses gimmicks like small cash payments for perfect attendance.

Since he took over four years ago, his school has gone from being among the worst in Oakland to being the best. His middle school has the highest test scores in the city.

"It's not about the money," he said.

He's confident that even kids who come from broken families and poor families will do well in his school. "Give me the poor kids, and I will outperform the wealthy kids who live in the hills. And we do it," he said.

Monopoly Kills Innovation and Cheats Kids

Chavis's charter school is an example of how a little innovation can create a school that can change kids' lives. You don't get innovation without competition.

To give you an idea of how competitive American schools are and how U.S. students performed compared with their European counterparts, we gave parts of an international test to some high school students in Belgium and in New Jersey.

Belgian kids cleaned the American kids' clocks, and called them "stupid."

We didn't pick smart kids to test in Europe and dumb kids in the United States. The American students attend an above-average school in New Jersey, and New Jersey's kids have test scores that are

above average for America.

Lov Patel, the boy who got the highest score among the American students, told me, "I'm shocked, because it just shows how advanced they are compared to us."

The Belgian students didn't perform better because they're smarter than American students. They performed better because their schools are better. At age 10, American students take an international test and score well above the international average. But by age 15, when students from 40 countries are tested, the Americans place 25th.

American schools don't teach as well as schools in other countries because they are government monopolies, and monopolies don't have much incentive to compete. In Belgium, by contrast, the money is attached to the kids -- it's a kind of voucher system. Government funds education -- at many different kinds of schools -- but if a school can't attract students, it goes out of business.

Belgian school principal Kaat Vandensavel told us she works hard to impress parents.

She told us, "If we don't offer them what they want for their child, they won't come to our school." She constantly improves the teaching, saying, "You can't afford 10 teachers out of 160 that don't do their work, because the clients will know, and won't come to you again."

"That's normal in Western Europe," Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby told me. "If schools don't perform well, a parent would never be trapped in that school in the same way you could be trapped in the U.S."

Last week Florida's Supreme Court shut down "opportunity scholarships," Florida's small attempt at competition. Public money can't be spent on private schools, said the court, because the state constitution commands the funding only of "uniform . . . high-quality" schools. Government schools are neither uniform nor high-quality, and without competition, no new teaching plan or No Child Left Behind law will get the monopoly to serve its customers well.

The longer kids stay in American schools, the worse they do in international competition. They do worse than kids from poorer countries that spend much less money on education, ranking behind not only Belgium but also Poland, the Czech Republic and South Korea.

This should come as no surprise if you remember that public education in the United States is a government monopoly. Don't like your public school? Tough. The school is terrible? Tough. Your taxes fund that school regardless of whether it's good or bad. That's why government monopolies routinely fail their customers. Union-dominated monopolies are even worse.

In New York City, it's "just about impossible" to fire a bad teacher, says Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. The new union contract offers some relief, but it's still about 200 pages of bureaucracy. "We tolerate mediocrity," said Klein, because "people get paid the same, whether they're outstanding, average or way below average."

Here's just one example from New York City: It took years to fire a teacher who sent sexually oriented e-mails to "Cutie 101," a 16-year-old student. Klein said, "He hasn't taught, but we have had to pay him, because that's what's required under the contract."

Only after six years of litigation were they able to fire him. In the meantime, they paid the teacher more than \$300,000. Klein said he employs dozens of teachers who he's afraid to let near the kids, so he has them sit in what are called rubber rooms. This year he will spend \$20 million dollars to warehouse teachers in five rubber rooms. It's an alternative to firing them. In the last four years, only two teachers out of 80,000 were fired for incompetence. Klein's office says the new contract will make it easier to get rid of sex offenders, but it will still be difficult to fire incompetent teachers.

When I confronted Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers, she said, "They [the NYC school board] just don't want to do the work that's entailed." But the "work that's entailed" is so onerous that most principals just have just given up, or gotten bad teachers to transfer to another school. They even have a name for it: "the dance of the lemons."

Zoned Out of a Good Education

I talked with 18-year-old Dorian Cain in South Carolina, who was still struggling to read a single sentence in a first-grade level book when I met him. Although his public schools had spent nearly \$100,000 on him over 12 years, he still couldn't read.

So "20/20" sent Dorian to a private learning center, Sylvan, to see if teachers there could teach Dorian to read when the South Carolina public schools failed to.

Using computers and workbooks, Dorian's reading went up two grade levels -- after just 72 hours of instruction.

His mother, Gena Cain, is thrilled with Dorian's progress but disappointed with his public schools. "With Sylvan, it's a huge improvement. And they're doing what they're supposed to do. They're on point. But I can't say the same for the public schools," she said.

Lying to Beat the System

Gena Cain, like most parents, doesn't have a choice which public school her kids attend. She followed the rules, and her son paid the price.

In San Jose, Calif., some parents break the rules to get their kids into Fremont Union schools. They're so much better than neighboring schools that parents sometimes cheat to get their kids in by pretending to live in the school district.

"We have maybe hundreds of kids who are here illegally, under false pretenses," said District Superintendent Steve Rowley.

Inspector John Lozano works for the district going door-to-door to

check if kids really live where they say they live. And even seeing that a child is present at a particular address isn't enough. Lozano says he needs to look inside the house to make sure the student really lives there.

Think about what he's doing. The school district police send him into your daughter's bedroom. He even goes through drawers and closets if he has to.

At one house he found a computer and some teen magazines and pictures of a student with her friends. He decided that student passed the residency test.

But a grandmother who listed an address in his district is caught. The people who answered the door when Lozano visited told him she didn't live there.

Two days later, I talked with the grandmother who tried to get her grandson into the Fremont schools.

"I was actually crying. I was crying in front of this 14-year-old. Why can't they just let parents to get in the school of their choice?" she asked.

Why can't she make a choice? It's sad that school officials force her to go to the black market to get her grandson a better education. After we started calling the school, the school did decide to let him stay in the district.

School-Choice Proponents Meet Resistance

When the Sanford family moved from Charleston to Columbia, S.C., the family had a big concern: Where would the kids go to school? In most places, you must attend the public school in the zone where you live, but the middle school near the Sanford's new home was rated below average.

It turned out, however, that this didn't pose a problem for this family,

because the reason the Sanfords moved to Columbia was that Mark Sanford had been elected governor. He and his wife were invited to send their kids to schools in better districts.

Sanford realized how unfair the system was. "If you can buy a \$250,000 or \$300,000 house, you're gonna get some great public education," Gov. Sanford said. Or if you have political connections.

The Sanfords decided it was unfair to take advantage of their position as "first family" and ended up sending their kids to private school. "It's too important to me to sacrifice their education. I get one shot at it. If I don't pay very close attention to how my boys get educated then I've lost an opportunity to make them the best they can be in this world," Jenny Sanford said.

The governor then proposed giving every parent in South Carolina that kind of choice, regardless of where they lived or whether they made a lot of money. He said state tax credits should help parents pay for private schools. Then they would have a choice.

"The public has to know that there's an alternative there. It's just like, do you get a Sprint phone or an AT&T phone," Chavous said.

He's right. When monopolies rule, there is little choice, and little gets done. In America the phone company was once a government-supported monopoly. All the phones were black, and all the calls expensive. With competition, things have changed -- for the better. We pay less for phone calls. If we're unhappy with our phone service, we switch companies.

Why can't kids benefit from similar competition in education?

"People expect and demand choice in every other area of their life," Sanford said.

The governor announced his plan last year and many parents cheered the idea, but school boards, teachers unions and politicians objected. PTAs even sent kids home with a letter saying, "Contact your legislator. How can we spend state money on something that hasn't been proven?"

A lot of people say education tax credits and vouchers are a terrible idea, that they'll drain money from public schools and give it to private ones.

Last week's Florida court ruling against vouchers came after teacher Ruth Holmes Cameron and advocacy groups brought a suit to block the program.

"To say that competition is going to improve education? It's just not gonna work. You know competition is not for children. It's not for human beings. It's not for public education. It never has been, it never will be," Holmes said.

Why not? Would you keep going back to a restaurant that served you a bad meal? Or a barber that gave you a bad haircut? What if the government assigned you to "your" grocery store. The store wouldn't have to compete for your business, and it would soon sell spoiled milk or stock only high profit items. Real estate agencies would sell houses advertising "neighborhood with a good grocery store." That's insane, and yet that's what America does with public schools.

Chavous, who has worked to get more school choice in Washington, D.C., said, "Choice to me is the only way. I believe that we can force the system from an external vantage point to change itself. It will never change itself from within. ... Unless there is some competition infused in the equation, unless that occurs, then they know they have a captive monopoly that they can continue to dominate."

Competition inspires people to do what we didn't think we could do. If people got to choose their kids' school, education options would be endless. There could soon be technology schools, science schools, virtual schools where you learn at home on your computer, sports schools, music schools, schools that go all year, schools with uniforms, schools that open early and keep kids later, and, who knows what else. If there were competition, all kinds of new ideas would bloom.

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