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UNH Professor of English

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# Presidential Candidates Engage in Educational Myth-Making

A commentary by Thomas Newkirk  
UNH Professor of English

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UNH News Bureau

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The good news is both presidential candidates are making education an issue. They are speaking about a topic that concerns Americans in their daily lives. The bad news is they make it an issue by exaggerating the failure of our schools, as George W. Bush recently did when he said the nation is in an "educational recession."

Two myths permeate this debate. The first is that we are in educational decline. The second is that even if schools aren't in decline, the literacy demands of the 21st century will be so high that our schools will not be ready to meet these new demands. So even if the first argument doesn't stick, the second is adequate to proclaim a "crisis."

It is, of course, tempting to look back to an educational Golden Age -- invariably, the years when today's parents and teachers were in school -- and then trace a downward line to the present. Nostalgia is seductive.

Yet the most reliable records of national achievement show that students' reading and writing ability has remained remarkably constant, an almost perfectly flat line for the general population with modest improvements for Black and Hispanic students. In mathematics, a special area of concern for Bush, students have posted small but steady increases over the past decade. The "educational recession" is a myth deployed for political advantage.

Even Gallup polls have suggested that the dissatisfaction with schools may be more illusory than it seems. When the general population was asked to evaluate U.S. schools with a grade, only 19 percent gave an A or B. When the same group was asked to rate their own school system, 44 percent gave top grades. Yet when parents of children in school were asked to rate the schools their children attended, a stunning 72% gave top grades. So while there may be a generalized dissatisfaction about American schooling, parents view their own local schools positively.

At this point, the debate invariably morphs. Even if there is no basis for a decline, critics claim, the current standard of achievement is inadequate for the literacy demands of jobs in the 21st century. Without dramatic increases in literacy levels, they say, we won't have enough qualified workers for the more complex jobs being created -- and our economy will suffer. Yet again evidence suggests otherwise.

A recent study by the Educational Testing Service, "What Jobs Require," concludes that "averaging all occupations, the literacy requirements in 1986, 1996, and 2006 are the same." The modest increase in literacy demands since 1940 have been more than offset by higher graduation rates and increasing enrollment in post-secondary education. Paul Barton, the author of the report, concludes that there is no crisis in literacy preparation.

Of course, we have been here before. In the early 1980's the Department of Education published the alarmist report, "A Nation at Risk," which warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" that would undermine the economic vitality of the country. Schools were to blame for what the report called "an act of unthinking, unilateral, educational disarmament."

Talk about poor predictions. The students who attended those "mediocre" schools are now in the workforce posting productivity gains that are the envy of the industrial world. Schools received the blame for the economic downturn of the early '80s, and with the resurgence of the economy they still get the blame.

I do not mean to make a case for complacency. There is serious work to be done -- to close the racial achievement gap, to recruit and prepare a new generation of teachers, to move all students beyond a basic level of literacy. Certainly, there are some students unprepared for the job market.

These problems demand patient, thoughtful local action, which must involve -- not simply blame -- teachers. We need distance runners, undistracted, in for the long haul. Yet the crisis mentality breeds sprinters looking for quick fixes.

We will make little progress if politicians persist in denying the factual record, creating the myth of crisis, and overstating the effects that will come from fairly modest federal initiatives.

*(Thomas Newkirk, University of New Hampshire professor of English, is director of the New Hampshire Writing Program. Professor Newkirk recently won the*

*David Russell Award, the nation's top honor in the field of composition research.)*

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