

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation**

by Bob Wise, Jossey-Bass, 2008

*Reviewed by Richard P. Phelps*

Bob Wise is passionate about his cause and indefatigable in promoting it. A former nine-term member of Congress and state governor (West Virginia, 2001–2005), he also knows his way along the corridors of power. Wise currently serves as president of an advocacy group, the Alliance for Excellent Education.

*Raising the Grade* comprises two parts. Half the chapters and the many appendices describe the extent and ramifications of alleged low high school graduation rates and underinvestment in high schools. The other chapters recommend actions, such as adjusting federal regulations and reallocating education expenditures.

Wise believes that education-policy discussions too often neglect America's deeply troubled high schools in favor of elementary schools or colleges. If his agenda is successful, more federal dollars (and mandates) will flow to high schools.

There's nothing wrong with arguing that more money and attention be devoted to America's high schools. Those arguments, however, characterize only the smaller part of *Raising the Grade*. The rest of the book often denigrates our country's most trustworthy education statisticians and labels our most challenged high schools *en masse* as "dropout factories."<sup>1</sup>

### **Statistics Are Made to Be Used**

Long ago, meteorologists adopted the mercury scale to measure temperature. But anyone who follows weather coverage in the

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media today can consider a variety of temperature measures. Two of them, the Heat and the Wind Chill indices, measure apparent temperature—how the human body feels under different atmospheric conditions of wind and humidity. The Heat Index recognizes that the human body feels warmer in humid air (because the opportunity to cool down through perspiration is reduced) and so adds humidity-derived degrees to the mercury scale. The Heat Index gives us temperatures higher than does the mercury scale alone.

Conversely, the Wind Chill Index acknowledges that the human body feels colder with wind (because the opportunity to cool down through perspiration is increased) and so subtracts wind-derived degrees from the mercury scale level. The Wind Chill Index gives us temperatures lower than does the mercury scale alone.

These varying measures of temperature are now widely accepted and understood. It is also understood that the three measures of temperature—mercury scale, wind chill, and heat index—are complementary, not compensatory. Each tells a slightly different, and distinctively useful, story about the same topic. Few would argue that one should always be preferred to the others.

The three different measures are widely accepted and understood in large part because their official calculation is conducted and disseminated by the U.S. Weather Service, a governmental agency widely respected for its dogged pursuit of accuracy in measurement.

### **Education Statisticians Get No Respect**

It should be no different with education statistics. Superficially, it may seem straightforward to measure a high school's graduation rate simply by dividing the number of students who graduate by the number who started there a few years earlier. But not only do there exist several different definitions for graduating and for starting—the population of students itself is a moving target as well. Students come and students go for a variety of reasons throughout the high school years.

As a result, the number of valid and useful measures of high school completion is no smaller than that for temperature. Completion measures producing higher ratios may count graduates of any age and employ a liberal definition of "graduate" (e.g., including those passing GED tests, those leaving high school with non-academic credentials such as a certificate of attendance) but a conservative definition of "student" (e.g., counting only those who start the senior year at a particular high school). Completion measures producing lower ratios may count only those students who

graduate strictly “on time” (a.k.a. in four years or “with their peers”) and include all students who started at a particular high school as freshmen (including those who have since transferred to different high schools).

The most conservative count results in a U.S. graduation rate below 70 percent, whereas the most liberal exceeds 90 percent. Which is correct? I would argue that they all are: each tells a different story about the same topic and can prove useful in different contexts. There is no single best method for calculating graduation rates (or “completion ratios”). There are several, each of them valid and useful. One can assume that the federal government’s statisticians feel the same way, because they have calculated and reported a variety for decades.

Bob Wise, however, asserts that they have reported but one and, further, that there can be only one valid and accurate graduation rate, referring to it throughout *Raising the Grade* in the singular. He advocates exclusive use of a conservative count—a “wind chill graduation rate,” as it were. Other, “warmer” graduation rate counts are rudely disparaged.

His favored graduation rate is one of the coldest possible. He counts the number of students graduating “on time” (i.e., at the end of the final regular term of their senior year) divided by the number who started at the same high school either three or four years earlier. Students who transfer or who graduate “late” for any reason whatsoever are classified as “dropouts” (even if they never actually drop out of school).

A much-warmer graduation rate count, which Wise considers misleading, may be the most familiar and widely used education measure of all. It is the Census Bureau’s level of educational attainment by age. In each decennial census, and annually in sample surveys, the bureau asks respondents to report their highest level of educational attainment.

The difference between Wise’s colder, “wind chill” graduation rate and this warmer, “heat index” graduation rate represents around 20 percent of the U.S. population, or close to one million human beings a year. Bob Wise calls them dropouts, despite the fact that they possess high school diplomas. When the Census Bureau asks them at, say, age thirty or forty if they are high school graduates, they answer “yes,” if they have graduated from a high school by then. They do not respond “no” because they happen to have transferred from one high school and graduated from another. They do not respond “no” because they took five, rather than four, years to graduate.

Ironically, Wise himself, likely unknowingly, uses the heat-index graduation rate throughout *Raising the Grade*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his own favorite calculation multiplies wind-chill graduation counts by heat-index educational attainment counts to arrive at the alleged number of high school dropouts in the adult population—comparing grapes to grapefruits, so to speak. The number of high school dropouts Wise counts in the U.S. adult population comprises one-third genuine (i.e., permanent) dropouts and two-thirds *faux* dropouts, who graduated either “late” or after transferring schools.

The Census Bureau’s adult respondents are asked to report not only level of educational attainment, but in addition their weekly earnings, annual salaries, time spent employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force, time spent in prison, time spent in public libraries, etc. Subtracting the average number for any of these measures for, say, forty-year-old high school graduates from their high school dropout counterparts results in an estimate of the social or economic impact of attaining a high school diploma. As one might guess, with higher levels of educational attainment, adults earn more, and spend more time in public libraries and less time in prison or unemployed.

The bread-and-butter work of Wise’s Alliance for Excellent Education is publishing reports on the beneficial social and economic impacts of a high school diploma and, conversely, the negative impacts of dropping out. But in each case, the alliance multiplies its wind-chill dropout counts by heat-index-derived social and economic impacts, thereby *tripling* estimates of the scale of the problem.

### **What Could Be Wrong with Impassioned Advocacy?**

So, Bob Wise wants more attention paid to (and money spent on) education in general and high schools in particular, and he may be overexuberant in his estimation methods. But they are just numbers, and they are employed in service to a good cause. What could be wrong with that?

I find at least four wrongs with it:

1. Justifying his advocacy—and encouraging others to advocate—by citing fallacious evidence. In the process, he insists on the exclusive use of misleading statistics that polarize debate.
2. Undermining the integrity and authority of our country’s most trustworthy and responsible education statisticians and recommending instead a few highly publicized researchers whose expertise is limited at best and irresponsible at worst.

3. Favoring measurement conventions that encourage social promotion and discourage learning for mastery.
4. Blaming the victims by disparaging the most-challenged high schools (the “dropout factories”). Wise promotes a system of accountability that favors high schools already well-off (where freshmen arrive at or above grade level) and in which the most-challenged high schools (where freshmen arrive three or four grades below grade level) cannot possibly succeed.

In his defense, Wise might validly argue that “the other side” in many education debates—the stand patters who brook no criticism of the status quo—also distort education statistics and mislead the public. Indeed, many local school districts have misled the public on graduation and dropout rates. Given that most receive state funding based on their student head counts, they have had a clear financial incentive to overstate retention and undercount dropouts.

But as we learned as children, two wrongs do not make a right. Instead, those two wrongs prolong a polarized and mutually misleading debate over education statistics that certainly does our children and our nation’s future no good.

### **The Squeaky Wheels Turn Education Research**

It would certainly be unfair, however, to point the finger at Wise alone. It could just as validly be pointed at other organizations and publications that have abused dropout statistics: the Manhattan Institute, *Education Week*, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *Time* magazine, and others. How could such high-profile, amply resourced organizations get their facts so wrong? As is so often the case in education research: when only those on one side of an issue are talking, many observers simply assume that they must be correct.

Had the expert statisticians at the Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) been allowed to debate the graduation rate issue in public forums eight years ago, the misinformation might have been stopped before it started to spread. But generally in Washington, civil servants, no matter how expert, do not represent their agencies in public. That responsibility is left to the political appointees in the agencies’ top ranks. So why didn’t we hear counterpoints from the top officials at the NCES and the Institute of Education Sciences defending the stellar work of their agencies? Could it be because the accusations came from conservative-oriented think tanks and those appointees were Republicans? I don’t know, but it’s a pertinent question.

Wise, then, perhaps assumed that since so many heavy hitters were saying one thing and he heard no counterpoint, the heavy

hitters must be correct. But he's a veteran politician; he knows how Washington works and how these games are played. He should have known better.

He and the others who hopped on the "silent epidemic" bandwagon succumbed to the eyewitness fallacy—concluding that what they see and hear on a topic is all there is to see and hear on that topic. Concluding that what one sees and hears is a representative sample of all points of view and evidence is fine when all points of view and evidence are made equally available. Unfortunately, such is a rarity in education research (see, for example, Phelps 2007).

### **Hurry Up and Learn**

Contrary to the belief of some cynics, there exist some near-certainties in education research. For example, the essential characteristics of an effective school are well-known. Thousands of studies over the past several decades have produced astonishingly similar results. Helpfully, Bob Wise includes a nice summary of this research literature's findings in chapter 6 of *Raising the Grade*.

Almost as voluminous are studies verifying the success of mastery learning programs. The term "mastery learning" may be unfamiliar to many today; it has been absorbed inside other, more trendy phrases, such as "formative assessment" and "assessment for learning." It is the mastery learning components, however, that drive the success of the programs currently labeled with more trendy names. These components were designed and refined between a quarter- and a half-century ago by a group of intrepid investigators such as Bloom, Kessler, Block, and others.

Mastery learning is arguably the most democratic, egalitarian, and productive method of learning known. Like Einstein, mastery learning theorists made time variable. Letting "time to mastery" of subject matter vary from student to student allowed them, at the same time, to fix standards across all students. In mastery learning, all students must reach the same standards and, in the end, accomplish the same goals.

Mastery learning programs eliminate any pretext for the many standards-shaving scandals so prevalent in U.S. schools today, such as changing grades so that failing students may graduate, and dumbing down the content of required courses while substituting lollipop electives that require no effort to pass. In mastery learning, the standards are always the same and each student takes the amount of time needed to meet them.

The egalitarian converse to mastery learning is age-cohort succession, a.k.a. social promotion. To be egalitarian in an age-cohort

promotion system—in which time is fixed—standards must vary. Socially promoted students all graduate “on time” but at varying levels of academic achievement. No one can know for certain what socially promoted high school graduates have achieved academically, only that they are of a certain age.

The effect of the embedded incentives in Wise’s proposed policies would squeeze all mastery learning characteristics out of U.S. education and entrench age-cohort promotion.

### **Is Ignoring Inputs Any Better Than Ignoring Outcomes?**

In the world that Wise would make, only masochistic principals would prefer to work in “a typical high-poverty urban high school [where] approximately half of incoming ninth-grade students read at a fifth- or sixth-grade level” (p. 7). Even the principal who pulls off a miracle and raises their educational achievement six grade levels in four years will still be classified a failure by Wise’s preferred graduation rate, and her school labeled a “dropout factory.”

Wise accuses the dropout factories of doing too little to help their students succeed and suggests imposing higher standards and a more rigorous curriculum on students who arrive as freshmen two, three, or four grades below level. Moreover, he chides these already-beleaguered schools for using the most-effective methods of dealing with underachievement they currently have available: retaining students in grade and repeating failed courses.

In a letter to the *Des Moines Register* (Sebring 2007), the local district’s superintendent, responsible for four high schools labeled “dropout factories,” expresses her understandable frustration:

Johns Hopkins [University] used a formula that, at first glance, is logical in its simplicity. Divide the number of high school seniors by the number of freshmen three years earlier. If the result was 60 percent or less, the school was branded a “dropout factory.”

Unfortunately, such a simplistic formula is imprecise, at best, and biased, at worst. This formula would make sense only if every student completed high school in exactly four years and never moved.

For example, according to Johns Hopkins, students who move to a different school district or transfer to a different high school within a district are dropouts. Students who move into alternative programs during high school (in Des Moines, that accounts for more than five hundred students)

or to a private school or are home-schooled are dropouts. Students who die are dropouts.

In fact, the study didn't even consider students who graduate early. A commencement speaker last year at Hoover High School in Des Moines graduated at the end of his junior year. Yet, according to Johns Hopkins, this straight-A student was a dropout.

When studies use bad research to intentionally undermine confidence in our urban high schools, they contribute nothing to the education of our children.

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In a section of *Raising the Grade* entitled "Portrait of a Successful School" (pp. 119–121), Governor Wise assures the reader that his formula for success is practical by showcasing three high schools that have followed his formula and achieved greatness.

The first, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in Washington, D.C., happens to be anything but typical. Banneker is the university-track magnet school for the District; it admits only the most academically advanced students from a city of three-quarters of a million people. Of course the school has a high graduation rate; it selects only the best students from throughout the entire city.

The second, J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, is part of the Fairfax County School District, which happens to rank among the wealthiest in the nation and near the top in parental levels of education.

Governor Wise wants us to believe that selection does not matter—all high schools can succeed regardless of the incoming students' academic level—and then to prove his point chooses as examples one of the most selective high schools and one of the most selective communities in America.

The third example is the only one that could reasonably be characterized as one of the challenged high schools for which Governor Wise claims to be devoting his energies and his solutions. New Mexico's Crownpoint High School serves a high-poverty population of Native Americans along with a small minority of Hispanic Americans. Wise claims that Crownpoint initiated programs that reduced its dropout rate to 0.5 percent. That's wonderful news, if true. I found nothing about the school's dropout rate on its Web site. I did notice, however, that Crownpoint had not met its Adequate Yearly Progress objectives and was designated for Corrective Action. Crownpoint students may move to "higher performing" schools.



## Summary and Conclusion

A fair reading of *Raising the Grade* leads to several conclusions:

- The author often misuses education statistics.
- He charges two of the world's most expert and responsible statistical agencies—the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics—with incompetence, neglect, and willfully misleading the public without making any effort to learn their side of the story.
- His proposed solutions are illogical: he advocates increasing rigor for students who are unable to meet current standards, and at the same time he shames schools for course repetition and grade retention. The inevitable result will be lower, not higher, standards.

There is no single best method for calculating graduation rates or completion ratios. There are several, each of them valid and useful in different contexts. Ironically, Wise proves this point himself by (unknowingly) employing various, and sometimes quite-different, graduation measures throughout his book. Only the semantics are constant in *Raising the Grade*—each quite-different measure is consistently identified as *the* graduation rate.

## Notes

1. Work of the U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics is characterized, for example, as: a “charade” (p. 17), “statistical sleight of hand” (p. 40), using “questionable data and methodologies” and “misleading” (p. 67), and “misrepresentation” (p. 69).

2. Moreover, Wise's reference list includes more than a dozen sources from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics. If they are such untrustworthy sources for graduation and dropout rates, why does he trust them for so many other statistics?

## References

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*Richard P. Phelps is the editor of Correcting Fallacies about Educational and Psychological Testing (APA Books, 2009).*

## **Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspectives**

by Donald B. Holsinger and W. James Jacob, Comparative Education Research Centre and Springer Publishing, 2008

*Reviewed by Brenda L. H. Marina*

The cover of *Inequality in Education* displays tilted scales precariously balanced on the globe. The editors propose to identify the “axis along which educational goods are differently distributed and describe inequalities beyond class, race, gender, and geographical location” (p. xxv). Forty-one scholars contributed to this in-depth and insightful examination of inequalities in education. Notes about the contributing authors—their professions, places of employment, and research—add credibility and demonstrate a collective commitment to the field of education and the possibilities of future research findings.

Holsinger and Jacob arrange topics from broad to specific, with an introduction, then conceptual issues, and last, country-specific issues. The terms *equity* and *equality* are examined from multiple international perspectives, with considerable use made of the Gini coefficient.<sup>1</sup> Education equity and equality are broadly defined (p. 4) at the beginning; however, the author of each chapter further defines those words and similar terms to assist the reader. Used in education, the Gini coefficient measures the distribution of education (formal schooling) opportunities (p. 6).

The introduction summarizes the organization of the book, its theoretical framework, topical themes, and chapter content, helping the reader to find topics of interest quickly.

Part 1 comprises seven chapters on conceptual issues, set in the contexts of India, China, South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The chapter’s authors, Thomas and Yan, overview the literature and employ the Gini coefficient to measure and compare the inequality of the distribution of education in 140 countries over four decades, as well as its impact on economic growth. Whereas several formulas may interest quantitative researchers, the figures may be more palatable to qualitative researchers, scholar practitioners, and laypersons. Another chapter, comparing capitalist economic inequality and education in the United States and the United Kingdom from a Marxist perspective, suggests that education promotes classism, inequality, and conformity. The authors also explore supply-and-demand factors that contribute to inequality; conceptions of gender that shape educational policies; the exclusion or marginalization of persons with disabilities; and language policies.

Part 2 of *Inequality in Education* contains six chapters on Asian countries and issues. The section begins with a poignant description of gender and geographic education gaps that persist in Cambodia. China has geographic disparities, too, but that nation's current higher education reforms are meant to close its rural-urban divide. Taiwanese students from rural areas also have less opportunity to attend top universities. Part 2 also reviews the research literature on India's education system, and it alleges both a disparity of education participation by gender and a lack of attention in the literature on educational inequality. The chapter's authors, Matthew Burt and Park Namgi, detail the demand for and devotion to education in South Korea. Vietnam enjoys relative equality—masked, however, by inequalities within various ethnic and gender groups. A reliance on aggregate indices alone can mislead and render policies that impede rather than support equity.

The two chapters of part 3 focus on European countries and issues, where unequal access to higher education in Britain and France is often determined by gender and geographical origin. Whereas those two countries support distinct higher education systems, the level of inequality remains remarkably unchanged—or, it is disheartening to note, it has worsened in admission to elite higher education institutions. The discussion of private and religious education and subsidies raises uncomfortable, yet necessary, questions. This excerpt illustrates my point:

Even when Muslim schools live up to the stated requirements and are formally eligible for subsidy, they are not approved to the same extent as Christian and Jewish schools. (p. 357)

The topic of educational opportunities for Muslims in Europe adds a dimension to the book that may be new to many readers.

Part 4's two chapters focus on Middle Eastern and North African countries and issues. Statistics summarize inequities in Egyptian schooling that are then described with qualitative data. Citing descriptions of social class, gender, and ethnic minority status, a chapter on textbook content in Iran implies that schools convey and promote the message of homogeneous identity. The reader is left to decide if treating everyone the same has made the schools an instrument of inequality.

The four chapters in part 5 focus on North and South America. Education inequality in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico is examined using the Gini coefficient; an intersection with earning inequality is introduced. Similarly, a discussion of Peru emphasizes

the distribution of learning results and the distribution of income. Such heavily quantitative sections may particularly interest economists. The United States' record on race and educational equity is no surprise, with evidence of disproportionate discipline practices and policies related to race. This section concludes with vivid descriptions of reform efforts to increase participation in Latin American countries.

*Inequality in Education's* globe trek winds down in part 6 on sub-Saharan Africa. As in previous sections, gender inequality is highlighted. However, it is difficult to read about the "Mad Rush to Protect White-only Education" and the stagnation or regression of some education reform efforts. The reader is also reminded of the disease pandemic that exacerbates educational inequity.

## Conclusion

At book's end, Hollinger and Jacob return to the relationship of education inequality, correlating the Gini coefficient and test scores across nations. Brazil is highlighted because it ranked last among thirty-two nations participating in a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluation. The authors also revisit Vietnam, which may have the highest level of education equality in the developing world (p. 561). Finally, the editors ask, "So what?" Considering Vietnam's successful efforts at equity, they recommend focusing on providing primary and lower-secondary schooling. As in many nations, upper-secondary education can be supported through school fees.

An awareness of inequities is needed in the formulation of educational policies at all levels. The book's information can assist policymakers in evaluating economic growth policies. The text presents strategies for facing the challenges associated with education-policy formation, planning, and implementation at local, regional, national, and global levels.

*Inequalities in Education* is most suitable as a text for graduate-level courses and for readers interested in international education issues and research. The eclectic style and tone add to the richness of the subject matter. This book, however, is not for the casual reader. I will use *Inequalities in Education* as a resource for my professional research and as a reference for my dissertation students. I have traveled to several countries over the past decade to gather data for global education and multicultural competency research projects; *Inequalities in Education* made me pause and reflect on my own contribution to liberty and justice for all.

**Note**

1. Named for its inventor, Italian statistician Corrado Gini, the Gini coefficient represents the cumulative share of a good, from those possessing the least amount to those possessing the most. Gini coefficients range from zero to one, with zero representing complete equality (i.e., all possess the same amount of the good) and one representing complete inequality (i.e., one person possesses all of a good and all others none of it).

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