

# July 2017 Theme: False Witness Schools

*Why do most schools lie about their students' performance?*

By

David V. Anderson

[david.anderson@asoraeducation.com](mailto:david.anderson@asoraeducation.com)

Our theme in this edition, about educator misrepresentations, contends that:

- Schools, public and private, engage in deliberate social promotion.
- State assessment systems exaggerate student performance.
- Individual schools lie about student performance.
- Schools often “bear false witness.” Respecting only Nine Commandments.
- Doing instruction and testing is a conflict of interest- never called corruption.
- Relaxed parents have not been vigilant and informed customers.
- Relaxed parents often lobby for social promotion- but don't use that term.
- Relaxed students want school to be easy.
- Religious congregations seem agnostic about K-12 schooling
- Many pro-education volunteer and civic organizations are not helpful.
- Adventure capitalists could fix market failure in the K-12 sector?
- Where is Milton Friedman now when we need him?

Of these factors, Asora believes the parents of school children can be the most important agents of change. For that reason, we have developed guidebooks to schools that parents can use to help manage their children's education providers. Once parents understand the basic fact that K-12 education is not even remotely as good as what they think, they will react by making better choices, both individually and politically.

This Asora update has two related documents you can download:

- Our theme essay, (which you are reading here)

## False Witness Schools

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To obtain the downloadable essay, **FalseWitness.pdf**, please access ASORA's **Reports on Reform** page here: <http://asoraeducation.com/page35/page35.html>

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- Our prototypical private and public school guidebook that we have recently completed for the two states of Rhode Island and Massachusetts,

## **Parents' Guide To Schools & Services In Rhode Island & Massachusetts:**

***A Guide to Private and Public Schools & Other Educational Resources***

To obtain a downloadable copy of this 89-page book in the file **RIMA-Guide-01.pdf** please access ASORA's **Regional Guidebook** page here: <http://asoraeducation.com/page59/page59.html>

## **On False Witness Schools**

The general concept of "False Witness Schools" has two aspects:

- That some of the spread of misinformation has been unintentional though careless.
- That in other cases the spread of misinformation has been intentional.

We listed twelve contentions above. Let's now discuss each one of them in turn.

### **Schools, public and private, engage in deliberate social promotion.**

To understand social promotion it is probably best to be convinced that it is a phenomenon closely tied to the administration of age based grade levels. These concepts of social promotion and age based grade levels may seem different but they are really the same. We believe that these "traditional" practices of social promotion are mostly responsible for the large percentages of students who are sub-proficient on the Nation's Report Card- or officially the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Here's how:

Historically, and surely in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children not performing at grade level were flunked. Such children were then either remediated in summer school or retained to repeat the grade. Retention altered the correspondence of a child's age with the normal grade level associated with that age. It gave the child an opportunity to learn more and eventually master enough of that grade level's material to finally pass into the next grade- as most did. By

retaining slow learners and double-promoting rapid learners, the systems put children into grade levels where tests indicated they belonged. In a rough sense, this prevented many sub-proficient students from being placed in classes beyond their capabilities. It tended to ensure that most children were so to speak at grade level or proficient therein.

In this author's family there is an example: Let's look at my mother's family for an example of these common practices from the early 1920's. My mother, Virginia, was double-promoted after first grade. About the same time her older brother, Alfred, was flunked. And according to family legend, "more than once." This was the opposite of social promotion. It was rather awkward, socially, for the two siblings to end up in the same third grade classroom despite their age difference of about three years!

But that's old history. Enter the psychological worry that flunking a child upsets his or her feelings and self-regard. Over the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even more so recently, the criteria for retaining a student in a grade level has become more and more restrictive with the result that flunking is now rare. Double promotion, for the same reasons, is also less frequent. The presumed social importance of keeping a child with peers has now come to outweigh the need to keep him or her from falling behind or from getting ahead. So we now promote nearly every student for these social reasons. Hence, it's called *social promotion*.

When there is no longer any retention within a grade level, the child stays with his or her age cohorts- thus ensuring age-based grade levels. That's why *social promotion* and *age based grade levels* are so much the same.

### **The cure for deliberate social promotion.**

A key inference from the foregoing suggests how social promotion can be cured. Simply abolish age based grade levels. End of story.

Well not so fast.

The cure is self-pacing. Under it, children do not advance to the next course of instruction based on their age. Rather a child is advanced to the next level when he or she has mastered the prerequisite course or courses. Implicit in this system is the abandonment of the concept of academic semesters, quarters and years. Instead each child is advanced on or soon after the date on which they demonstrate mastery of the preceding course.

### **State assessment systems exaggerate student performance.**

Asora Education Enterprises has for sometime been reviewing published student proficiencies at the state level for the subjects of mathematics and reading and then comparing such numbers to the highly regarded measured proficiency percentages of the Nation's Report Card- officially the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The proficiency percentages of the latter are regarded by most educational professionals as the standard definition of grade level performance. Asora makes that same judgment.

When we look around the United States we see gross exaggeration of student proficiencies by the states. On average states report proficiency percentages about twice the level measured by the NAEP in the two subjects of mathematics and reading. The worst offenders quadruple

the numbers while the most honest states are sometimes near parity with the NAEP.

Even the most honest state, Massachusetts, loses that integrity for high school testing. At 4<sup>th</sup> grade its state reported proficiencies in 2015 averaged over the two subjects were very close to the NAEP- less than 1% higher. Not so good at 8<sup>th</sup> grade where the average inflation factor was 1.22 or 22% higher “boost” of state proficiency levels reported over their NAEP counterpart. Sadly, for high school the inflation factor was 2.23 or 123% higher. So even the most honest state is a big liar in its reporting of high school student performance levels.

### **The cure for state assessment systems.**

To regain credibility states need to establish assessment systems that are comparable to the NAEP. Being proficient in any given subject should not be defined so much differently than the national standards that it would result in grossly inflated numbers being reported. The deservedly maligned Common Core is not what is needed. Rather existing tests and new ones are needed- that pass the smell test. ACT provides testing that, for example, produces proficiency percentages comparable to those of the NAEP. Other established testing services, such as those of Pearson, could be considered if the contract specifies proficiency standards similar to the NAEP or ACT. There are 50 state jurisdictions as well as the District of Columbia that are deficient in this. All need repair.

### **Individual schools lie about student performance**

If state assessments exaggerate student performance levels above those of the NAEP, how do individual schools rate their own students? Answer: Even higher. Published statistics tell us that student retention rates hover near 2% suggesting that 98% are passing. If we assume a school defines its own proficiency by the percentage who pass then the average individual school proficiency rate would be around 98%.

For 4<sup>th</sup> grade students who nationally have about 34% proficient on the NAEP and roughly 68% proficient on a typical state’s test do we really believe that 98% are proficient? At 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade the stories are quite similar. Thus the state education departments grossly exaggerate student skills while the individual schools go far beyond those bogus claims to claim near perfection.

For private schools the story is similar though the magnitude of the numbers is different. The average private school, according to the NAEP, has about 48% of its 4<sup>th</sup> grade students proficient. Very few private schools take the state tests, but when they do the estimated state proficiencies are much higher than the NAEP- perhaps around 90%. Ask the private school what is their passing rate and we think they will give a number about 99%. So again the state test would grossly exaggerate their NAEP performance and the school would give you a number even higher.

### **The cure for lying schools.**

As we discussed in the foregoing, the incentive for misrepresenting student skills comes from the perceived need to keep the children socially promoted to maintain their age based grade levels. One cure for this is to significantly increase the amount of flunking and the associated remediation. But we think the better cure was given in the preceding article on curing social

promotion: That of using self-pacing with a mastery of prerequisite courses requirement.

### **Schools often “bear false witness.” Respecting only 9 Commandments.**

On a more subjective level the previous article about lying schools could be recast in a qualitative light. Nearly everyone involved in public and private schools, including students, parents, teachers, principals and others, know that the schools promote or graduate students who have not met the schools’ own standards. They also know or suspect that the school’s own standards are weak compared to those of the state’s education department and might even know that their school’s performance is, on average, no where near the NAEP standards.

The schools know this too and they know that they are lying. But they seem free of guilt. This would suggest a moral compass that allows the “bearing of false witness.” It’s OK to misrepresent a child’s progress- maybe because it makes everyone feel good. It is almost as if one of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor,” does not apply. Perhaps there are only nine Commandments?

Maybe lying is OK as long as it does not harm your *neighbor*? Or does *neighbor* mean anyone harmed by the lie? So let’s make a list. Whom do schools that bear false witness harm? Surely the student is harmed when little or no remedial effort is made. The parents experience harm when their children later have difficulty achieving economic independence due to their poor academic skills. Society is harmed when some of these poor performers turn to crime or become social burdens on the government. Doesn’t society include the neighbors? Thy neighbor probably voted for good schools and the schools told the neighbor they were good. So, indeed, false witness was given against the neighbor. Let’s not forget that false witness can also mean saying something is good when it is bad.

### **The cure for “bearing false witness.”**

Here the cure is the recognition, firstly, that there are Ten Commandments, not nine. And secondly, those involved must tell the truth to and about their neighbors. The community must learn the truth and as is said elsewhere in the Bible, *the truth will make you free*.

### **Doing instruction & testing is a conflict of interest- never called corruption**

One habit of nearly all schools, public and private, is that they provide two related services: They instruct. And they test students on that instruction. Naturally schools want to look good. And this becomes a conflict of interest when they measure their own service or product. How can such an unwise combination persist? The answer, is the same one given by the character Tevye in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*: **Tradition**.

It’s always been done this way. Few educators have ever thought about the conflict of interest. And few would think it corruption. Similarly, parents and other stakeholders rarely see this combination as corruption. But it is corruption and the corruption is evident when schools and others managing them produce “look good” information about their performance and other characteristics that effectively deceive those depending on these institutions.

### **The cure for conflicted and corrupt schools.**

The solution to this problem is to remove the conflict of interest. That can be done by having the testing done by an external and independent organization, which does not benefit from the

school artificially looking good.

Examples of this cure abound for a number of professions where such independent testing is done. For lawyers, the testing is done by the bar association and not the law school. Ditto for medical doctors. To be a CPA you must pass an external exam. There is even an example of a K-12 charter school wherein its high school instruction is tested externally. This school, The Advanced Math and Science Academy (AMSA), in Massachusetts, gives its high school instruction via Advanced Placement courses for which the testing is done externally by the College Board. Guess what? It is the only public school in the state for which every student was deemed proficient on the state tests and as such was the best performing public school in Massachusetts. Arguably, it is the only public school in the state not suffering from corruption.

### **Relaxed parents have not been vigilant and informed customers**

Most parents and many stakeholders have positive views of the schools around them. They know, or more accurately think they know, that many public schools are good. They generally think that private schools are better. We at ASORA know they are wrong.

Some of the more supportive parents participate in PTO or PTA organizations where friendly faces of teachers and other parents lull them into a false sense of appreciation for the school's qualities. Oh, "look at our long honor role," they might say while not telling the parent that the school's testing is easy enough that being on the honor roll is no great achievement.

Many studies of reported performance levels of various kinds of schools have shown that public school systems routinely exaggerate the skill and knowledge levels of their students. Nationally, the average public school system deems twice as many students performing at or above grade level as what the well-respected Nation's Report Card measures. So the typical public system lies.

Then we have the private schools that hide behind their unearned reputations of being much better than public schools. Again, a close review of the Nation's Report Card shows a rough parity between public and private schools when the comparison is done fairly. That is, when these schools are compared for a demographic that is difficult to educate, there is a rough tie in performance. The specific demographic used is the one of economically disadvantaged students that is defined by eligibility for the Free and Reduced Price meals of the National School Lunch program of the US Department of Agriculture.

The rejoinder to this assertion will likely be that the private school students performed better on the SAT or the ACT. And that a higher percentage was accepted in prestigious colleges. Superficially, these claims are correct. Private schools benefit from the many children who come from families of some means. Those children often learn a great deal in their homes from their usually better than average educated parents.

Very few parents are aware of this poor performance of private schools. So we suspect that private schools keep their performance numbers secret whenever those numbers are modest. It's a silent yet **corrupt** practice whereby many parents of means are separated from their money with little academic benefit going to their children. In the prototypical school guidebook we have produced for Rhode Island and Massachusetts, available here on this website, we

discovered an interesting correlation from studying the estimated student proficiency levels of private schools. For private high schools reporting SAT scores we noticed that their estimated performance levels on the Nation's Report Card were significantly higher than other private high schools not reporting them. It reminds us of the old adage about dirty linen: Don't show it in public. But if your linen is clean or your SAT scores are high then by all means display them for all to see.

### **The cure for inattentive parents**

Our guidebook project is intended as an example of what can be done. The idea is to provide parents and others the information they need to make intelligent choices among schools. We often think of the information provided as the second element of a school voucher program. There should be two components to parental choice in education:

1. Provide the parent the financial means to make a choice of schools for their children.
2. Provide the parent with consumer information allowing them to make an intelligent choice. We call this informational choice. It hardly exists except in our prototype.

Our studies suggest that almost all school voucher programs, whether funded publicly or privately, suffer from parents making uninformed choices. Research on the effectiveness of school vouchers has shown minor benefits and only black children benefited in a statistically significant way. Think of it this way: The parent takes the voucher to enroll the child in a private school that they think is better than the public school attended before. But, as we know, the private school is, on average, no better than the public school. So the child is moved to a school where there is little additional benefit.

If this 2<sup>nd</sup> informational component of parental choice is provided then the parent can seek out those private schools that actually perform better than the previous school. That should not only help the parent but it should introduce more energetic competition among the schools. That competition would likely lead to improvements in both the private and public schools. Now that would be a real "race to the top!"

Not every parent will have a voucher to use. But when parents know about school quality they can put political pressure on the public schools when they see poor performance. And private school parents can vote with their feet when they see low proficiencies in a private school.

Probably more important than choosing a different school is the option for a student to receive some external independent testing followed by supplemental instruction when that student needs help to achieve grade level performance.

Parents will probably make good choices once they are aware of the degradation in their schools. They will be more active in the educational management of their children. We think every parent of a school child should regard themselves as a homeschooling parent. But not necessarily in the sense of doing homeschooling in their home. Rather they can become the managers of each child's education by taking an active role in monitoring their skill levels and then seeking remedial help when it is needed.

## **Parents who lobby for social promotion**

Then there is another category of parents: *The schools are too hard* lobby. Many parents actually think that the public or private school is too demanding of their children. Yet they want their children accorded the distinction of having mastered the school's curriculum. If the school attempts to flunk such students, these kinds of parents complain that their children are learning well enough to pass. If it is a private school, the parent does not want to pay for an additional year of instruction so there is a large incentive to "move the child along." These parents rarely call their suggestion "social promotion," but the result is the same.

### **The cure for lobbyist parents.**

Here the remedy is the same one given for the conflict of interest inherent to schools that do their own testing: Farm out the testing to an independent agency. Any complaints to the school about student performance and grades would be referred to the external agency that in turn would reject any improper complaints about a student's performance. Such parents would be encouraged to seek remedial attention for their children if the school wasn't already taking such measures.

## **Relaxed students want school to be easy.**

Shouldn't the students act responsibly as they work to acquire the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed after high school graduation? Gauging the culpability of students for the lackluster schools they attend is difficult because they are the most innocent of the participants in K-12 education.

But there are things students can be encouraged to do. Playing educational games, particularly ones that are competitive, can help them acquire skills. Some students like the idea of showing off their skills in various areas. Why not consider academic contests that would help them acquire mastery of skills? The more competitive students might realize that their school is not challenging them enough. They could complain.

### **The cure for lazy students**

In the end, students can't really do much to improve the schools. But they can become aware of some of the problems and maybe "push" the system at the margins in the right directions. They can be partners with their parents keeping track of the events at school and giving valuable feedback to their parents who are the ones really in charge or should be in that role.

Such as the true story from the 1970's in a California 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom where a boy came home and complained to the parents that the teacher told them  $3 + 4 = 8$  when he knew the answer was wrong. In that case the teacher was eventually fired.

## **Religious congregations seem agnostic about K-12 schooling.**

Churches and other religious organizations in our communities generally support American traditions and culture. As such they frequently have positive attitudes towards the schools in their communities. These schools obviously play a role in the education of their members' children.

Historically, some denominations established their own schools to ensure their children

received academic, religious and ethical instruction consistent with their beliefs. Catholics have done this more than the others though Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists and many independent churches have also run their own schools. Some, such as Methodists and Presbyterians, rarely if ever operate schools at the K-12 levels. Overall, the number of schools operated by religious organizations is small. In Rhode Island and Massachusetts we count approximately 100 high schools with a religious affiliation out of approximately 3000 religious congregations. That's about 3%. Why so small?

Part of the explanation comes from the fact that public schools were essentially protestant Christian schools in their early history. Over their existence in the United States, now getting close to 200 years, public schools have evolved to become more secular. No longer are prayers recited in them. Some have even abandoned the Pledge of Allegiance. Given that the public schools traditionally taught ethical and moral principles consistent with many of the various churches' teachings, churches felt comfortable with their members' children attending them. But that was then.

Now the public schools have been pushed into the politically progressive and agnostic realm to such an extent that their teachings often contradict what religious groups espouse. As many churches and other religious organizations are losing membership, part of the explanation may be related to their loss of children and young adults to other creeds and philosophies.

### **The cure for inattentive religious congregations**

What can a congregation or denomination do to correct these trends? One obvious answer: start your own school. But that might not be feasible. There are measures that can help however. Add a component to the religious education that counters contradictory messages being taught in the secular schools. Teach some history when the schools are calling Thomas Jefferson's reputation into question, exaggerating the faults of Columbus or even calling Lincoln a liar. And deal with political correctness- of whatever stripe- when it tries to impose one line of political thinking to the exclusion of the others.

Or if that's is not possible, maybe just have a sermon or two alerting parents to the troubles? In that vein religious groups can also consult parents to help them understand the problems in their schools. Give them advice similar to what our planned guidebooks will suggest. If you are in Rhode Island or Massachusetts, buy one or more of our forthcoming guidebooks for your church library! Depending on community details, the local schools may be your adversaries. Or they may be drifting in a politically unfriendly direction and may need a nudge or course correction. And when it comes to public schools, churches and other religious groups should consider becoming politically active in educational issues. Encourage someone to run for school board. Elect friendly faces to the town council or the legislature. Elect folks who will push public education in what you see as a healthy direction.

### **Many "pro-education" volunteer and civic groups are not helpful**

Kiwanis and Chambers of Commerce come to mind. These are among a number of civic organizations, with chapters at the community level, that are friendly to private and public schools in their areas. Yet many of them remain unaware of the problems within the schools.

In an effort to be friendly to all sides, some of these organizations involve public school officials

in their leadership, as is often the case among Chambers of Commerce. These organizations help their local schools usually according to the requests of those schools. They typically refrain from any kinds of investigations or research into problems within the schools.

When ASORA approached Chambers of Commerce about sponsoring a county level guidebook to schools for their areas, not one expressed interest or even curiosity. It is hoped that some of these organizations will take interest in such projects in the future. They may be inspired and encouraged by the new administration in Washington?

### **The cure for civic groups inattention**

Study the status quo in your communities. Get good data on school performance and characteristics for your local schools. If you are in Rhode Island or Massachusetts you can work with ASORA to produce its guidebooks like the prototypical one available now on this website. If you're elsewhere, hire us to help you produce a guidebook or perform related work.

### **Adventure capitalists could fix market failure in the K-12 sector?**

Asora Education has witnessed market failure from a front row seat. Over ten years ago we put forward a business plan that would franchise novel schools. But no investors came forward. Other entrepreneurs put forth their business plans for novel schools. Again, no investors took interest. Asora Education offered its estimates of public school performance levels to companies in the supplementary services niche of the education industry to be used in marketing their services. Once again, no interest. Queried why, a public relations consultant to the industry told us that these firms would be punished by their public education patrons if they dared to compete against those patrons. We offered our numbers to the operators of for-profit schools. Even they were seemingly afraid of the blow back from the public systems if they were to dare use our data in advertising. Lots of meek venture capital people out there! But will they "inherit the earth?"

### **The cure for K-12 market failure.**

We have not found any venture capitalists interested in supporting firms that would compete and help energize the K-12 sector. So we are seeking *adventure capitalists*. Are there any? We foresee philanthropically inclined investors who are willing to take mega-risks heretofore not contemplated by garden variety venture investors. Come on guys! Somebody must be out there with the guts to try this adventure. Step up! Call me at 508 409 8597.

### **Where is Milton Friedman now when we need him?**

Milton Friedman died over ten years ago so he can't help us directly. As readers of our Asora Updates are probably aware we believe that the best path to education reform lies in a competitive marketplace for the suppliers and consumers of the products and services within the K-12 economic sector. This is the theory or philosophy that guided Milton Friedman to be the author of school voucher proposals- from his initial work in the 1950's to his authorship and participation in political campaigns in California that sought to establish school voucher programs. In the early years of Asora's existence we benefited from Professor Friedman's feedback. He was particularly interested in our proposals to build systems of franchised schools based on self-paced instruction- what we call Stellar Schools. There was a "choice" aspect to such schools because they have been designed to operate much less expensively

than their conventional peers. When a school costs less to run, it can stay solvent at lower tuition charges. More parents can afford such schools so for them they have the ability to choose among them.

We have been looking for an economist with a Friedmanesque vision to help us develop ideas for a healthy competitive marketplace of K-12 education. Of particular interest to us is the role that information economics can play in producing healthy incentives within this sector. It is our contention, verified by research, that vouchers alone do not provide much competition when the consumers are unaware of the characteristics of the products/services being offered. We believe that parents need good information about the schools around them if they are to have maximal benefit from the vouchers. Without that information schools are chosen that seem better but that on average are not much better than the public school formerly attended. We have approached a number of economists but have yet to find a collaborator for this work.

Many free-market oriented think tanks around the United States have explored various kinds of school choice. In fact, there are too many of them to list them here. One gets the impression, sometimes, that these organizations are more focused on the politics of public policy than on the actual outcomes various policy choices engender. None of them, including the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice- now renamed EdChoice- seems to be looking at the informational economics aspects.

### **The cure for missing economists**

We had various proposals on the “cures” in the preceding articles but on this one we don’t know how to proceed except to advertise our needs. We are not in a position to hire anyone but we’d sure like to collaborate. This author is too old to get trained as an economist but not too old to help. If anyone reading this has suggestions please get in touch. 508 409 8597.

## **What Is ASORA Doing About This?**

ASORA has always been engaged in much pro bono work. In recent years the contract services we had been offering found little interest. In fact, we have suspended our business activities since 2014 while awaiting better circumstances.

Those better circumstances may be here. The new administration in Washington will likely allow significantly more freedom for commercial activity in this sector.

We have decided to focus our attention in our own region here in New England. Pro bono work will be restricted to Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Our commercial efforts, if any develop, will be focused over a wider geography. We therefore are seeking business in the form of collaborations, contracts and speaking engagements.

The players in the education industry do not really need a national scale to be competitive. Working more locally can still be profitable. The United States Constitution, by its silence, also considers education activities something regional rather than national. When we work at, let’s say, the state level we can compete against other states as well as against competitors in our own localities.

For example, ASORA's guidebook projects are state based or regional. If we succeed with our first publications, then we'll have the experience and resources to develop others. If we succeed, others will imitate and compete with us. If our guidebook projects prosper, the benefits will be profitable to us and profitable to K-12 education: A win-win situation.