“Schools are not just about reading and math, they are about nurturing our children in a society that’s toxic for young people.”

BY SARAH AUFFRET

PEOPLE who say our schools are failing are just flat wrong!” thundered David Berliner, leaning forward at the podium. “The hard evidence to the contrary is irrefutable. What was the engine that drove America to take its place among the great nations of the world in the 20th century? It wasn’t the factory system or the internal combustion engine, it was the common school. America’s schooling is under attack, for some peculiar reason. I am outraged, and I’m not going to be silent any more!” Five hundred men and women at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education convention in Houston rose to their feet, cheering, yelling, and rushing forward to clasp Berliner’s hand.
The United States ranks ninth among 16 industrialized nations in per-pupil spending.

American students in college perform equally well with their counterparts in other countries.

—David Berliner in The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools

He is an unlikely champion, this balding, bespectacled professor with twinkling eyes. But he is intent on running the bullies off the playground. He stands his ground as they try to kick sand in his face, and plants his feet in the stance mustered by a kid from the Bronx.

Presidents and politicians and national secretaries of education have made cat-calls about the sad state of America’s public schools, scathing allegations of incompetence and inflated spending. Student achievement is declining, they claim, and American students have fallen behind their counterparts in Europe and Asia.

Hogwash, says David Berliner, drawing up to his full 5-feet-11-inches. A Regents Professor of both psychology in education and educational leadership and policy studies at Arizona State University, Berliner is a researcher who has spent the past 25 years studying teachers in classrooms. He knows otherwise.

Berliner did a slow burn when the public hammering of teachers started, after the publication of a stunning doomsday document in 1983, A Nation At Risk. He knew the report’s claims about America’s failing school system flew in the face of what he had seen.

President Bush’s chief of staff, John Sununu, waved the red flag in front of taxpayers in 1989, declaring that the United States spends “twice as much as the Japanese and almost 40 percent more than all the other major industrialized countries in the world.” But no manipulation of figures on education spending could back up such an astonishing claim, Berliner found.

What was going on here? Berliner suspected a political agenda that had nothing to do with measuring the quality of American education. At the least, he felt that schools had been the victims of incomplete research.

So the kid from the Bronx, his slow burn now a fire, dug in his heels and gathered hard data. In 1995, he published The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools, throwing down the gauntlet in front of school-bashing politicians and media. He exploded the myths that student achievement is dropping, that the United States spends more on its schools than other countries, that students are less intelligent and teachers less capable than before.

Since Manufactured Crisis was published, Berliner has become a hero. He is champion to schoolteachers throughout the country who slog in the educational trenches to reach children with MTV attention spans, fractured home lives, and damaged psyches. The wonder is that they still manage to teach at all, Berliner says.

A BASEBALL CAP slung backwards on his head, the 15-year-old boy hunched over his desk, his eyes cast down. No one spoke to him during the entire class, not even the teacher. As Berliner sat at the back of the room observing, it seemed to him that the youngster was being shunned. After class, Berliner asked the teacher why everyone ignored the boy.

“It’s a difficult day for him,” she said quietly. “His brother was shot last night and died in his arms. I talked to him before class back of the room observing, it seemed to even the teacher. As Berliner sat at the back of the room observing, it seemed to him that the youngster was being shunned. After class, Berliner asked the teacher why everyone ignored the boy.

“His brother was shot last night and died in his arms. I talked to him before class and told him, ‘You signal me when you’re ready to participate.’"

“This teacher was so caring and sensitive, so intuitive,” Berliner says. “I was taken by her absolute humanity. How do you train a teacher for something like that?”

“Our schools are remarkably resilient, and they’ve done pretty well in the face of enormous complexity and social turmoil. Teachers are dealing with the effects of divorce, family violence, drugs and crime, with consumerism and sexuality and their pernicious effects on kids.

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Good teachers are worth their weight in gold, Berliner says, and there are more of these talented people in our schools than is assumed. They balance subject matter and complex classroom needs with the demands of a delicate performance art that can only be learned through years of practice.

Berliner has observed thousands of teachers over the years, most of them competent, hardworking educators who have chosen the profession because they care about children and are dedicated to their craft. He says a smaller number have evolved into bonafide experts, flexible and intuitive, with an uncanny ability to engage young minds in the most abstract concepts.

But in 25 years of sitting at the back of classrooms, evaluating and taking notes, Berliner says he has never seen a genuinely bad teacher. Never.

“I’ve seen tired teachers, mediocre teachers, burned-out teachers,” he says. “Some need rejuvenation. But I can’t recall ever seeing a bad one, a teacher who was cruel or inadequate or evil.

“Basically, I’ve seen decent people, many of whom are extraordinary teachers, working for low pay under difficult conditions. It’s tough work.

“As for our schools, there are some that are miserable, particularly in rural areas and in the inner city,” he continues. “Schooling is at its worst where the kids’ life experiences are at their worst. But by and large, our public school system is remarkable, one of the finest in the world, despite the enormous complexity of our society.”

Huge funding inequities among districts mean that most suburban children have smaller classes, better-paid teachers, and more computers than poor children. Those kids struggle with gross overcrowding, decaying buildings, and inadequate funding for even basic instruction.

The students’ standardized test scores generally reflect the difference, Berliner explains. Unlike other Western countries, American scholastic achievement varies widely from school to school and even from state to state. Eighth graders in high-achieving states score even in mathematics with those in the highest-achieving foreign countries, he says. Other states score even with scarcely developed nations.

A month after The Manufactured Crisis was released, U. S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley called the book to the attention of his senior staff. He recommended they take a more constructive approach to school improvement, Berliner says.

Last May, a USA Today survey showed that three-quarters of Americans think their schools are doing a pretty good job. Berliner says that’s a more positive number than would have been reported 10
years ago. He believes that he and his co-author, the University of Missouri’s Bruce Biddle—and a half-dozen other “contrarian” authors who also have taken on the pundits—are helping to moderate the tone of public debate.

Meanwhile, he and Biddle have become traveling myth-busters, speaking before groups of educators, parents, and legislators throughout the country.

A YOUNG WOMAN peeks through the doorway of Berliner’s ASU office, apologizing for interrupting him. “Are you Dr. Berliner? Would you mind signing my book?”

She thrusts a copy of Manufactured Crisis into his hands. “I’ve wanted so much to meet you,” she gushes. “I’m glad someone finally spoke out.” Somewhat embarrassed, he signs his name and thanks her for stopping by. “This is all new to me,” Berliner says. “Suddenly I’m very much into public policy, arguing with legislators, being on call-in shows, speaking at two or three places a week. It’s quite interesting, but it’s exhausting. It’s not something a professor usually does.”

The core of Berliner’s career until now has been his influential research into teaching and learning, shaping the scholarly view of teaching as a highly professional activity. He has advanced the understanding of teacher expertise by observing teachers who were able to actively engage their students in the classroom. Using a sophisticated analysis of instruction in different classrooms, Berliner discovered a wide variation, not only in the time individual teachers spent on a given subject, but the amount of time they were able to actively engage their students in the subject. He found this “time on task” was directly related to student achievement.

Berliner was research director for Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development when he conducted his landmark research into academic learning time. He later moved to the University of Arizona, where he began to study the development of teaching expertise by observing teachers who were reputed to be extraordinary.

He continued this research after joining the ASU faculty in 1988. Now 58, and entering the final phase of his career, Berliner has ideas about how public education should be reformed. Aspiring teachers should receive more practice teaching in a laboratory setting while in college, under the supervision of expert teachers, for instance, and more training in learning theory. Young teachers need much more mentoring during their first few years in the field.

“There’s no easy answer to any of this,” he says. “Legislators want to put in higher standards, but if they do, we have higher dropout rates. Do you want 17-year-old kids on the street corners? It’s the same thing with laws against providing education for immigrant kids. Is it healthy to have a bunch of young males with nothing to do, feeling anomie in society, or should we pay $4,000 a year and keep them in school?”

One thing Berliner is certain of, however, is that America’s public schools, while not perfect, are getting a bum rap. His recommendation: parents must talk to their children’s teachers, find out what’s going on in their schools, and then either get involved in supporting the schools or become vocal about the need for change.

“Bureaucracies get crazy sometimes, and when they do, you have to jump up and scream. Parents have the right to be mad if something is wrong, and to fight for better schools. The common public schools are our schools,” he adds. “We have to stay interested and involved in them. That’s our cultural heritage.”

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