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My God, Marc, what a diatribe! I hope you enjoyed writing it as much as I enjoyed reading it.

You and I go back a long way. Since my name is in the *Iceberg Effect*, I wish you'd called me so that I could have pointed you in the right direction. You're commenting on a 20-page summary of a 192-page dissertation that I produced at Seattle University. It was grounded in social indicators theory, which argues that complex enterprises like education cannot be understood by reductive single measures – and drew on models from the U.S. Department of Education and UNICEF.

I thought we were pretty clear in the *Iceberg Effect* that this was a summary of another 54-page public document (*School Performance in Context*) published by the Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable. We urged readers repeatedly to go to the full document. Unfortunately, as the English say, you got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

You are certainly entitled to your opinions. Let me touch on several of your comments.

1. “[The *Iceberg Effect*] is a polemic unhinged from any serious analysis.”

We made every effort to use moderate and temperate language. I believe we succeeded.

2. “The choice of countries to include in their survey” is “outlandish.”

We followed a 2011 model from the U.S. Department of Education that examined education inputs, processes, and outputs in G-8 nations and a 2007/2012 model from UNICEF that examined child welfare on several dozen indicators in wealthy nations. When Russia was pushed out of the G-8, we focused on the G-7. You may consider our decision to follow models from UNICEF and USED to be “outlandish,” we do not.

3. “It is hardly clear why the countries included in the G-7 and China and Finland are ‘like the United States.’ The authors never say.”

You misstate what we said. Even the summary you examined talked of nations that “are somewhat similar or are often compared with the United States.” The lengthier reports talked of the G-7 nations as similar and an obvious point of comparison since they are wealthy, democratic, and account for more than 50% of global wealth (*School Performance in Context*, p. 7). The dissertation and the full report explain this at length.

4. “They picked the G-7 and, for good measure, added China and Finland in the light of interest (on the part of parties unnamed) in the educational performance of these countries.”

That’s fair enough. Here are a few of the unnamed parties: Marc S. Tucker, *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants* (2011); Marc S. Tucker and Andreas Schleicher, “Response to the Brookings Institution Attack on PISA” (2013); Sam Dillon, “Top Test Scores from Shanghai Stun Educators,” *New York Times*, December, 2010; LynNell Hancock, “Why are Finland’s Schools Successful?” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2011. There’s clearly been a lot of interest in the PISA results for Finland and Shanghai, which is regularly conflated with China.

5. “We don’t need this study to tell us that . . . other countries have lower rates of violence in their societies than does the United States. We have known that for a long time.”

That’s a questionable assertion. Our judgment was that most Americans, like the proverbial fish in water, take the social environment for granted. I doubt that most members of the public understand just how much more violent this society is than other advanced nations. The quantification of the rate of violence in different nations and the connection of that violence to childhood trauma and its consequences in schools seemed to be something that needed to be put in front of the American public and policymakers.

6. “None of the top performers think that doing a good job on early childhood education and providing support to families with young children is a substitute for greatly improving the performance of their schools. They would be amazed at such a proposition.”

I’d be amazed too. We did not put forth this proposition and feel no need to defend it.

7. Your comment, Marc, about the top performers doesn’t fully flesh out the foundation of your argument, but I take it to be your belief that we should uncritically accept the accuracy and purported scientific credibility of international assessments such as PISA.

I and many other researchers do not share your confidence. These assessments were never supposed to be used as horse-race tables, as the full report emphasizes. What explains Finland’s tumbling from first to 12th place on PISA standings in the course of three years? There is a long list of distinguished scholars who have sharply questioned PISA’s methodology and its flaws: David Berliner (Arizona State), Heinz-Dieter Meyer (SUNY at Albany), Tom Loveless (Brookings), Yong Zhao (University of Oregon), Kam Wing Chan (University of Washington) Martin Carnoy (Stanford University), Richard Rothstein (Economic Policy Institute), and Pei-chia Lan (National Taiwan University). The criticisms range from “profoundly skewed comparisons,” issues of cultural differences and charges that Shanghai operates an “apartheid system,” to documented claims of sampling nightmares in Shanghai and sampling challenges in the United States. Some 100 educators and scholars sent a 2014 letter to OECD questioning international

assessments, OECD's lack of standing to insert itself into educational issues, and the negative consequences of over-reliance on PISA league tables.

When these issues are brought to the attention of OECD officials they are met with smooth evasions and bland denials, at one time accompanied by an email tag line: "Without data, you are just another person with an opinion." I cannot, Marc, resist pointing out the irony of the *Iceberg Effect* and the documents on which it is based providing data, to which you respond with opinion.

8. "I want to deal with their claim that the United States has the best-educated work force in the world. That is a stunningly ignorant claim."

Our conclusion rests, as you know, on years of schooling completed, high school and 4-year college completion rates, and the proportion of the world's high achieving science students—areas in which the United States is extremely strong. You dismiss these findings with a reference to OECD's PIAAC study (A Survey of Adult Skills). I turn to PIAAC below. But even OECD in its *Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion* notes the following: "Barro and Lee (2010) argue that at the macro-level, accurate time series of years of schooling . . . provide a reasonable proxy for the stock of human capital in a broad range of countries." What you describe as stunning ignorance is considered a reasonable proxy by others.

9. "The possibility the authors . . . have not entertained is that the rising levels of inequality, the poverty among schoolchildren, the violence in our most destitute communities . . . could be the result of failing to make the changes in our education system that other countries have made."

You are correct. Entertaining such an idea never entered our minds. Occam's Razor would require us to look at policies governing the minimum wage, unionization, gun control, community policing, the residual effects of discriminatory mortgage practices, and tax policies that have helped destroy domestic manufacturing, hollowed out the middle class, and sent jobs and profits overseas long before we would lay the blame for the social ills you cite at the schoolhouse door.

10. "OECD's PIAAC report is based on data from carefully conducted surveys of working-age adults . . . It is very unlikely that the authors of this study were not aware of it. So we must conclude that they ignored it because it did not support their outlandish claims."

You are both right and wrong. We were aware of PIAAC and we ignored it, not because it ran counter to our outlandish claims but because it is shoddy research. The dissertation listed surveys that were set aside, with explanations as to why. PIAAC was one of them.

PIAAC was put aside because it is not possible to connect the American adults surveyed with American schools, because the comparisons sampled non-comparable populations, and because publication of the results violated the survey's own *Technical Standards and Guidelines*. In the case of the United States, the population sampled included all adults 16-65, regardless of citizenship or immigrant status (*Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion*, p. 53). Meanwhile, although the U.S. sample included adults regardless of

documentation, 13 of the 19 PIAAC nations excluded what OECD calls “illegal immigrants” (*Reader’s Companion*, p. 53). Finally, PIAAC’s *Technical Standards and Guidelines* set a response rate goal of 70%. Just five of the 23 participating jurisdictions met OECD’s own standard (*Reader’s Companion*, pp. 56-57).

11. “[The authors want to make] the United States look bad . . . That should not be too hard. . . . You just need to cherry pick the data tables.”

Earlier I noted that in terms of selecting nations and data points we followed social indicator theory and significant models developed by the U.S. Department of Education and UNICEF. (As an aside, it is intriguing to me that American scholars conceived of social indicator theory, which Americans subsequently ignored while Europeans and especially OECD embraced.) Far from cherry picking data, we provided 24 separate data points to put school performance in context.

It does seem odd that you would accuse us of cherry picking data, while you seem content with settling on just one piece of data – assessments of student performance. That’s some cherry you like to pick!

12. “Consider first the report’s first education policy recommendation: ‘Minimize alarmist rhetoric around the schools.’ Yup, the problem with the schools is . . . the alarmist rhetoric about their performance.”

Well, yes. Marc, both of us have done our fair share of cranking up the alarm over the years. In our lifetimes, we’ve gone through the Sputnik scare (1957), *A Nation at Risk* (1983), *A Nation Prepared* (1986), *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (1990); *What Work Requires of Schools* (1991), *Prisoners of Time* (1994), *The Lost Opportunity of the Senior Year* (2001), and *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2006), to name a few. With the exception of the Sputnik crisis, you or I were largely responsible for each of those subsequent reports.

But with the passage of time, it becomes clear that the predicted catastrophe did not arrive. Consider some of those dates and where the U.S. stood in terms of Gross Domestic Product at the time (inflation adjusted, 2009 dollars): 1957 – GDP: \$2.85 trillion; 1983 – \$7.00 trillion; 1991—\$9.02 trillion; 2001—\$12.71 trillion; 2006—\$13.72 trillion. In March of this year, U.S. GDP stood at \$16.30 trillion. It’s hard to make the case that either of us has been notably successful in predicting the future.

Let me close

I’ve gone on at too great a length. Let me make two final points. First, when James Fallows, a distinguished writer and observer of the American scene, returned from China in 2010, he published a lengthy article in the *The Atlantic*, commenting on the centuries-long habit in the U.S. of assuming that economic and moral calamity bordering on irreversible decline was right around the corner. He concluded, “America the society is in fine shape! America the polity most certainly is not.”

He urged us to celebrate our resilience and to be very clear about our strengths. The important question, said Fallows, isn't whether we are "falling behind" someone else, but whether we are falling apart or falling short of our own values.

Second, I want to applaud you, Marc, for NCEE's *9 Building Blocks For a World-Class State Education System*. They track many of the recommendations incorporated in the *Iceberg Effect*. Like you, we want strong supports for children and their families. We want better preschools. We want more resources for at-risk students. We want coherent instructional systems, clear gateways, and no dead ends. We strongly endorse the search for what you call "an abundant supply of highly qualified teachers." We want the best teachers in the most challenging environments, and we want teachers treated as professionals. We want to improve on-time graduation rates and close the achievement gap. We couldn't have been clearer about these issues. We would also like an independent international convocation about these international assessments — and I hope you'll join us in that recommendation.

That's why I was so surprised to see you cherry pick, just to light on a phrase at random, only one of our recommendations, "Minimize alarmist rhetoric around the schools" and go to town on it. I am reminded of a brilliant aphorism from one of the great political leaders of 20th century Britain, Tony Benn: "Hope is the fuel of the future. Fear is the prison in which we put ourselves." I vote for more hope, less fear, and yes—I vote for minimizing the alarmist rhetoric!

Respectfully,

James J. Harvey
Executive Director