



The Stupidity Epidemic: Worrying About Students, Schools, and America's Future (Framing 21st Century Social Issues)

By Joel Best

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Critics often warn that American schools are failing, and that our students are ill-prepared for the challenges the future holds, and may even be "the dumbest generation." We can think of these claims as warning about a Stupidity Epidemic. This essay begins by tracing the history of the idea of that American students, teachers, and schools are somehow getting worse; the record shows that critics have been issuing such warnings for more than 150 years. It then examines four sets of data that speak to whether educational deterioration is taking place. First, data on educational attainment show a clear trend: more students are getting more education. Second, standardized test scores suggest that American students are performing somewhat better; certainly most test scores do not indicate that students are getting worse. Third, measures of popular knowledge also show evidence of improvement. Fourth, there is clear evidence that IQ scores have been rising. In other words, the best available evidence fails to support claims about a Stupidity Epidemic. The essay then turns to exploring several reasons why belief in educational decline is so common, and concludes by suggesting some more useful ways to think about educational problems.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Joel Best is Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. His work focuses on deviance and the sociology of social problems. His most recent books are "Social Problems" (2008), "Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data" (2008), and "Everyone's a Winner: Life in Our Congratulatory Culture" (2011).

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