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The NIMBY view on bad schools

Why oblivious parents often give high marks to where their kids are taught.

By Andrew J. Coulson

*senior fellow in education policy at the
Mackinac Center for Public Policy*

When we're asked about the overall quality of our nation's or state's public schools, Americans are fairly pessimistic. But when it comes to the schools in our own neighborhoods, we generally offer a much more upbeat appraisal.

This pattern was repeated yet again in a poll released last week. Four out of five Californians say there's a quality problem with the state's schools - most think it's a "big" problem. But when respondents were asked about their neighborhood schools, just over half rated them an A or a B, and only 13 percent gave them a D or an F.

What gives?

One popular explanation is that most Americans are misinformed about our nation's and our states' public school performance, but we do know about the performance of our own kids and our own schools. The more we know, so this theory goes, the more satisfied we are. Sounds plausible enough - until you look at the facts.

A few years ago, I proposed an alternative explanation for the "class is keener" phenomenon: that Americans know more about the nation's overall performance than about the performance of our own children or neighborhood schools. We read the papers, we see the international rankings, and eventually deduce that U.S. public education is in trouble. Since we have no idea how our own kids rank internationally, we tend to

believe - we want to believe - the inflated grades they bring home from school. All the bad public schools must be in other people's neighborhoods.

I came to this curmudgeonly conclusion based in part on an international study of student achievement and parent opinion conducted by researchers Harold Stevenson and James Stigler. Stevenson and Stigler tested students in various Asian and American cities, and then asked their parents how well they thought their children were doing. Asian students consistently outperformed those in the United States, while their parents downplayed their abilities. American parents, generally oblivious to their children's poor showings, thought they were raising little Einsteins.

But are these results nationally representative? Do American students as a whole really perform badly, and are their parents really so ill-informed about their own kids' academic shortcomings?

The short answer to the first question is yes. Though American children start off all right in the earliest grades, they fall more and more behind students in other countries the longer they stay in school. By the end of high school, the results aren't pretty.

Parents have already answered the second question themselves. Seventy-one percent of public school parents say that they have "no information" on how well their children compare academically to those in other nations, according to a na-

tional poll by the nonpartisan Public Agenda organization. A majority also say they have "no information" on how well their children compare to other students. We can add to all those parents another sizeable group who say they have only a "little information" on the subject.

So much for the claim that people are better informed about the performance of their own schools and children than they are about the nation's overall performance.

The moral of this story is that no news is not necessarily good news. What you don't know about your schools' and children's performance can hurt you.

Then again, would it make much difference if you did know how your neighborhood public schools were doing? It isn't as though you have much choice in the matter. As a parent, it might just keep you awake at night to know that there was a better school not too far away, one that you couldn't easily afford. And as a taxpayer, would you really feel better knowing that you were being forced to pay for a substandard education for local kids when better alternatives exist?

What a shame that we don't have some sort of parental choice program that would let parents pick the best schools for their kids without facing a huge financial penalty. That way, when we found out that the class was actually keener on the other side of the street, we could just walk over and sign our kids up.