

Education in Northwest Indiana

Executive Summary

It has been nearly six years since Heartland Center reported on the education system in Northwest Indiana (*Calumet Region Schools*, Summer 1995). Despite the passage of time, the topic has continued to be on the forefront of public issues, as evidenced by the Hudson Institute report *On Shaky Ground*, and the furor caused by its release. Their scathing review of public education in Indiana, particularly focusing on educational outcomes measured by standardized tests, placed much of the blame on the school systems for failing to prepare students properly. The responses from the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents and Dr. Gerald Bracey seriously question the methodology of the Hudson Institute, as well as the use of standardized tests to rank schools, school corporations, and states.

The current study serves two purposes. First, it replicates to a limited extent the earlier *Calumet Region Schools* report by utilizing an Index of Excellence to determine the relative strength of the school corporations in Lake and Porter counties (those included in the original report), and it gauges levels of improvement during the six years that have elapsed. Second, the present report also further analyzes data from school corporations in all three counties of Northwest Indiana (Lake, Porter and LaPorte) to ascertain what factors may lead to differences in educational outcomes among the various corporations in the region.

Key findings

- ▶ There has been little change in the 23 corporations included in the original Heartland Center report. Index scores show minimal gains and declines, with the gap between the low and high scores nearly the same as six years ago. Schools faring well in 1995 are doing well today, while those faring poorly in 1995 continue to do so today. While it is possible for index scores to converge, they have not done so.
- ▶ Of the four school corporation factors (per student expense, corporate enrollment, average teacher age, and average teacher salary), only average teacher age shows an even moderate effect in explaining the gap in index scores. The results suggest that as average teacher age increases, index scores decline. This is interpreted as indicating potential “teacher burnout,” leading to a loss of effectiveness over time. That the other three factors are relatively weak suggests that overall spending, teacher salaries, and enrollment levels have little influence on index scores.
- ▶ All four socioeconomic factors (per capita income, percent family poverty, percent students eligible for free lunch programs, and percent single parent families) are strong predictors of differences in index scores. As per capita income increases, so do index scores. Conversely, as family poverty levels or percent eligible for free lunch programs increase, index scores decline. Index scores are lower in those school corporations that

have greater percentages of single parent families. Of these factors, the strongest appears to be eligibility for school lunch programs, probably because it is the most direct measure of the economic well-being of the students in each corporation. Those in poverty may have to overcome a sense of fatalism about their life situation, leading to a lack of motivation to get the education needed. Those from single parent families not only are more likely to be effected by poverty, but may also lack parental supervision in their studies.

- ▶ The two community factors (percent of adults with less than a high school education and percent of minority students) are also strong. Index scores are lower in corporations with higher levels of adults who have not completed high school, as well as those with higher levels of minority students. The former suggests that students in those corporations with low index scores may suffer from a lack of strong role models, persons who can demonstrate the importance of education. The latter finding is probably indicative of the higher rates of poverty, single parent families, and lower levels of educated adults in those corporations with higher percentages of minorities. The idea that it might reveal an innate inability of minorities to succeed scholastically is totally rejected.

Conclusions

While the public school system is not without fault, it should not be made a “scapegoat” for any problems that exist. There are a variety of factors outside the direct control of school corporations which have a powerful influence on student outcomes. In order for major improvements to occur in the education of young people in the region, there must be a concerted effort on the part of all interested parties (families, schools, communities, businesses, state and federal governments) before real change is possible. To suggest that the problem lies solely with school corporations does a disservice to them and to their students.✘