

Starr, A. (2005, August 8). They're not stupid – they're lazy: The real reason

American high-schoolers have such dismal test scores. *Washington Post*, pp. A1, A12.

If you believe in test scores—and education policymakers seem to believe in little else these days—American high-school students are a pathetic bunch. Witness the results of National Assessment of Educational Progress (or NAEP)—the "nation's report card"—which were released last month. While younger students broke records in both math and reading, 17-year olds' scores as a whole showed no improvement from the early 1970s.

Older students fail globally, too. When high-school seniors were last ranked internationally, in 1995, American students placed at the bottom, trounced by kids from countries like Slovenia and Cyprus. U.S. high-school sophomores have continued to sit international exams every three years, and their performance hasn't been much better. On the 2003 global exam that evaluates the reading, math, science, and problem-solving skills of 15-year-olds, for example, the Americans scored below average in every category except reading literacy.

You could conclude from these exams that American high-schoolers are ill-taught and ill-prepared for the competitive global economy. But what if you look at these tests like a capitalist rather than an educator? Nothing is at stake for kids when they take the international exams and the NAEP. Students don't even learn how they scored. And that probably affects their performance. American teenagers, in other words, may not be stupid. It could be that when they have nothing to gain (or lose), they're lazy.

The fact that 8-year-olds and 17-year-olds have different attitudes toward low-pressure exams isn't going to come as a surprise to anyone who has raised a teenager—or has been one. The NAEP is used to judge school systems and overall student performance, but the test doesn't matter at all to individual kids. In 2002 nearly half of the 17-year-olds tapped to take the national NAEP exam didn't bother to show up. Students who did show up left more essay questions than multiple-choice questions blank, an indication that they weren't going to be bothered to venture an answer if it required effort.

The "who cares?" phenomenon probably plagues older students' performance on international exams, too. Granted, kids in Japan and the United Kingdom don't pay a personal price for how they do on global tests, either. But cultural pressures can be very different in other countries. Korean schools have staged rallies to rev their children up before they take international assessments. And Germany created a national "PISA Day" to mark the date when 15-year-olds take the exam that will rank them against students in other countries. The U.S. Department of Education, meanwhile, has a hard time convincing principals to administer voluntary international tests at all.

The dubiousness of these test results becomes clear when you compare them to the results of tests that actually do matter for teenagers: high-school exit exams and college boards. Nineteen states now require their students to pass assessments before they can don a cap and gown; seven others are testing students but not yet withholding diplomas. When states begin imposing penalties for failure, it makes a difference—sometimes a big one. Look at Texas: In 2004, results counted toward graduation for the first time, and pass rates on both the math and English portions of the test leapt almost 20 points. According to Julie Jary, who oversees student assessment for the state, no substantive alterations were made to the test. What changed was students' motivation: When their diplomas were hanging in the balance, they managed to give more correct answers.

Kids are making strides on college boards, too. Between 1994 and 2004 math SAT scores increased 14 points, while verbal scores inched up nine points. At the same time, the diversity of the test takers increased: Last year, 37 percent were minority students, compared with 31 percent a decade earlier, according to statistics compiled by the Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C. You would expect that minority influx to have pulled SAT scores

down, since minorities post lower marks than college-bound seniors as a whole, with the exception of Asian students on the math section of the exam. But scores went up.

Scores on the ACT are similarly encouraging. Over the past decade, the number of students taking the ACT has jumped 20 percent, to roughly 1.2 million, in large part because four years ago Illinois and Colorado began requiring virtually all its juniors to take the exam. According to a spokesman for the ACT, a chunk of the new test takers were lower-achieving students who had no plans to continue their education after high school. That was reflected in the 2002 test results, which fell to their lowest level in seven years. But scores have since rebounded: By 2004 students posted marks that were marginally better than students' performance in 1994 (20.9 out of 1-36 scale, compared to 20.8 a decade earlier). Scores have also improved since 1982 (by 0.6 points), despite the fact that the exam was rejiggered in 1989 to include tougher math and science questions. (While it's true that test preparation has something to do with kids' improving performance, their success can't be exclusively chalked up to hours spent in Princeton Review classrooms: A 1999 study by the College Board found that only 10 percent of test takers spent over \$135 on test prep.)

All this is not to say that American high schools do a great job of educating kids. They are called the weak link of the U.S. educational system for a reason. But regarding low-stakes test scores as a snapshot of high-schoolers' knowledge overstates how poorly kids are doing. Analysts at the Department of Education know "senioritis" probably influences test results. Earlier this year, a commission established by the department floated some potential incentives to get kids to take the NAEP more seriously. Among the ideas were dispatching thank-you notes on White House stationery and offering scholarship money to two kids who sat the NAEP in each state. While the lucky boy and girl who are randomly selected for a check would no doubt be pleased, it's hard to see how it would cure the broader problem.

Put yourself in the shoes of these teenagers: After more than a decade of filling out multiple-choice bubbles where a lot is at stake, it is not surprising that some of them don't apply themselves on an exam that generally comes in the second half of their senior year—a test that has no bearing on which college will accept them, what kind of job they can land, or if they'll earn a high-school diploma. Face it: You'd probably be tempted to skip school that day—or, at the very least, leave a couple of the essay questions blank.