There's good news from the nation's classrooms

Last May at the finals of the National Geographic Bee held in Washington, DC, Alex Trebeck was getting concerned because he thought that he would be running out of questions for the ten finalists who came from throughout the country. Well, he did have enough, although it was close.

In the previous year it took just 80 questions to determine a winner of the Bee, an annual event sponsored by the National Geographic Society in which over five million kids nationwide from grades four through eight compete. In 1999, however, it took 140 questions before a winner was determined. In other words, the contestants answered an additional 60 questions before they were eliminated. This illustrates the continuing success of the Geographic's efforts to improve geography instruction in the schools of this country.

At the fourth biannual international Olympiad held in Canada this past year, with 11 countries competing and this country being represented by winners of the Bee, for the second time the United States' team won. Another indicator of the increasing improvement in geographic knowledge of American students because of the Geographic's efforts.

Is this heightened performance of American students in the field of geography just an isolated event or does it mean that this is an indicator of improved American school education? Just a quirk, if one is to believe the readings common in the media about the sad state of affairs in our schools today: just another example of how education in our schools has gotten better, according to the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, an independent national nonpartisan advocate for improved public schools.

Jack Jennings, Director of the CEP, was the chief expert on education for the U.S. House of Representatives for more than 25 years before he moved to head up this organization in 1995. Since that time this lawyer-educator has written books and articles, writes a national legislative newsletter for Phi Delta Kappa and is on the road to spread the word on the state of public education in our country. This time he spoke at the National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington to university and school geography educators from every state as well as Puerto Rico and Canada.

Consider some of these findings from the study:

1. High school dropouts have declined. The percent of 16- to 24-year-olds without a high school diploma has gone from 15 percent in 1972 to 11 percent in 1997. Among black youth the rates are even more dramatic- from 21 percent to 13 percent.

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2. High school students are taking more challenging courses. From 1982 to 1994 the percent of students completing Algebra 11 went from 36 to 58; Trigonometry 8 to 12; Chemistry 31 to 56; and Physics 14 to 25 percent. Results for girls are even more striking, with girls now completing these courses, with the exception of physics, at a greater rate than among boys; a far cry from 1984 when boys were ahead of girls in all four courses. In 1994 59 percent of girls completed chemistry compared to 53 percent for boys.

3. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the only national testing program in key subjects by age groups. Results from 1982 to 1996 were that 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds all showed improvement in math and science, with greatest gains among blacks and Hispanics.

4. Improvement also occurred on college entrance exams. SAT scores in math and verbal went up from 1983 to 1999 and total scores also went up for the ACT test.

5. A surprise to many is that American students get more hours of instruction in public schools, at the primary, lower and upper secondary level than they do in Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy Spain and Sweden.

6. More students are going on to higher education and more are finishing their degrees. From 1983 to 1997 college enrollment rates of high school graduates 16-24 went from 53 to 67 percent and bachelor degree recipients went from 26 to 31 percent. Among women gaining professional degrees, 36 percent were Dental, 41 percent were Medical and 43 percent were Law. In 1972 none of these fields had more than 9 percent women.

This is not to say that school reforms are not necessary, and are certainly being pursued nationwide at this time because of general dissatisfaction with the current state of our schools. But perhaps the problem is bigger than just the schools, as James Traub writes in *The New York Times*. Claiming that the problem is in the home and neighborhood environment, Traub says schools have had little impact in the few hours children spend there and greater efforts should be made in those other areas.

There are problems with our schools, as the media constantly and quickly point out, but periodically we need to look at the changes that have taken place over time.

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