



The Continuing Hope: A Rejoinder

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A REJOINDER

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The most persuasive critique of my conclusion that variations in school resources are not related systematically to students' performance would be evidence to the contrary. But none is offered by Spencer and Wiley, and none is to be found.

The main substantive argument in their article relates to the possibility that schools or teachers pursue different goals. They argue that measures of performance that do not reflect differences in goals might be misleading. School resources may be related to the achievement of these goals even though unrelated to "performance" as measured in the studies that my article summarizes.

Their discussion is quite unspecific about the nature of these different goals, and it contains no suggestions about how research should be fashioned to test their idea. Nor do they present any evidence that differences in goals are truly important in understanding school resource use. The only explicit example of goal differences that they provide is "new math." However, this example does no more than illustrate that schools indeed do a poor job of decision-making, a subject that is the heart of my analysis.

From a public policy view, it is probably unwise for society to accept unquestioningly the goals of any school or any teacher. Suppose a school system chooses a very specific but limited goal (say, that all students should know that the first word in a sentence should be capitalized). Without evidence of performance in other dimensions, we probably would not applaud even perfect attainment of such a goal. Most standardized achievement tests, on the other hand, are designed to measure such things as basic reading or math skills—skills whose value is widely accepted by society.

In any case, many of the analyses reported in my article do consider the possibility that performance must be measured in more than one dimension. Thirty eight of the 130 studies covered in my article consider jointly determined outcomes, using the appropriate statistical techniques. Looking at these studies alone,

there is no evidence that different resources levels are related to performance. Further, 56 of the 130 studies analyze performance within a single school system, where presumably variations in goals are not great. These analyses again suggest little relationship between resources and performance. Finally, the measured outcomes include not only the familiar standardized measures of performance but also measures of student attitudes, success in the job market, college continuation rates, and so forth. Despite the variety of performance measures, no consistent relationship with resource use is found.

The assertions that goals differ from one school to the next do nothing to reduce the value of the accumulated evidence which are related to performance. Nor do the assertions provide guidance about how to better research or how to make better school decisions. Studies of the sort that I have summarized in my article have now shifted the burden of proof fully on the shoulders of those who feel that the problems of the schools can be met with more resources. That challenge can only be met with painstaking research, not with promise or hope.

The second half of the Spencer and Wiley critique does not address the question of goals and performance measurement, and instead presents a set of hypotheses about the learning process, hypotheses that are said to be based on theory. Their hypotheses actually seem quite close to those tested in a number of the input-output studies—differing perhaps slightly in the measurement of inputs or the functional form of the relationship. Yet those studies fail to confirm the validity of the hypotheses, and Spencer and Wiley provide no additional evidence about the beneficial impact of additional resources.

Moreover, contrary to their assertions, the input-output studies are based on theory. In fact, these studies incorporate a simpler and more powerful theory than their own, namely, that efficient resource use requires that increased expenditures be accompanied by increased performance. This is not a specific theory of the educational process, but it is the appropriate viewpoint for public policy decisions.

Educational policy, since before John Dewey, has been guided more by hope and assertion than by evidence. My view is that policies that are guided by the accumulated evidence offer more promise than continued reliance upon unsubstantiated ideas.

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