Ultimate Test
Who Is Accountable for Education If Everybody Fails?
—By Jennifer Sloan McCombs and Stephen J. Carroll
People in all professions—from accountants to artists, from warriors to homemakers—routinely compare inputs and outputs. Expenses and revenues. Costs and benefits. Only then can people justly determine if a course of action is warranted, be it a budget, a masterpiece, a battle, or a feast. Usually, professionals compare the sum of inputs to the sum of outputs.

But public education in America today is being subjected to a narrower kind of accounting. More than ever, policymakers and educators are focusing on a single measure of output: test scores. Since passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, teachers and schools nationwide have been held accountable to high-stakes testing regimes that could determine the fate of public schools in all 50 states. The quest for higher test scores has been enshrined as the law of the land.

Our cover story by Jennifer Sloan McCombs and Stephen Carroll stresses the need to take account of the inputs as well as the outputs. For instance, if the national goal is to raise the level of literacy among adolescents, then the nation must not merely test the students but also allocate the inputs—money, time, curriculum materials, and professional development of teachers—that are necessary to help the students achieve the goal. As the authors point out, “It’s unfair to hold students and schools accountable for success without giving them the resources they need to succeed.”

California is a telling example of an imbalance between inputs and mandated outputs. The authors provide the first full accounting of 27 years of diminishing inputs into public schools in the state, home to 13 percent of the nation’s students. The outputs come as little surprise.

In our story about the arts, Kevin McCarthy and his colleagues assert that arts advocates have focused on a set of outputs that is imprudently narrow. In this case, the outputs are the public benefits of the arts. The authors propose a broader view of these benefits and suggest how arts organizations, local education partnerships, and state arts agencies can boost the benefits.

Our story about nation-building not only offers an accounting of inputs and outputs on a global scale but also compares the balance sheet of the United Nations with that of the United States. James Dobbins explains that the United Nations has steadily crafted an exceptional ability to extract maximum output (or at least moderate output) from only minimum input. For the United States, however, there appear to be only two options: either maximum output from maximum input or minimum output from minimum input.

—John Godges
After 9/11: How Should the United States Deal with the Muslim World?

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is easy to view a military response as the way to wage the war on terrorism. But according to Angel Rabasa, lead author of a new RAND study, America and its allies can reduce support for radical Islam and terrorism—and improve relations with the Muslim world—by empowering liberal and moderate Muslim sectors in what is essentially an ideological struggle within the Muslim world.

Doing so requires a strategy that, in turn, requires a better understanding of the political environment in the Muslim world. Rabasa’s report helps to develop that understanding. It charts the major ideological orientations in the different regions of the Muslim world—from Morocco to Mindanao to Muslim diasporas in the West—examining critical cleavages between Muslim groups and tracing the long-term and immediate causes of Islamic radicalism.

Rabasa and his research team developed a typology (see the figure) showing that Muslim groups fall along a spectrum—from those that uphold democratic values and reject violence to those that oppose democracy and embrace violence. This typology can help U.S. policymakers identify potential partners in the Muslim world.

Researchers highlighted those cleavages within the Muslim world—between Sunnis and Shi’ites, between Arabs and non-Arabs, and among ethnic communities, tribes, and clans—that have implications for U.S. interests and strategy. The researchers also pointed to some of the long-term factors, such as the failure of political and economic models in many Arab countries, that have fueled anger at the West.

“While only Muslims themselves can effectively challenge the message of radical Islam, there is much the United States and like-minded countries can do to empower Muslim moderates in this ideological struggle,” Rabasa noted. He and his team suggested the following strategies:

• Help to create moderate, international networks “to retrieve Islam from the hijackers.”
• Disrupt radical networks.
• Foster reform of madrassas (Islamic schools) and mosques.
• Expand economic opportunities.
• Support Muslim civil society groups that advocate for moderation and modernity.
• Deny financial resources to extremists.
• Calibrate the war on terrorism so that it does not play into the hands of Islamic radicals.
• Engage Islamic groups in democratic politics.
• Engage Muslim diasporas.
• Rebuild close military relationships with key countries (Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia).
• Assert a different kind of military presence in sensitive regions, reducing U.S. visibility as an “occupying power” and increasing its capabilities in areas such as civil affairs (offering medical assistance) and cultural intelligence (deploying more linguists and regional specialists).

Countermeasures Not Ready to Protect Commercial Planes from Missile Attacks

A decision about installing countermeasure systems on commercial aircraft to protect them from shoulder-fired missile attacks should be postponed until such technologies can be developed and shown to be more compatible in a commercial environment, according to a new RAND study.

“At the moment, there are significant uncertainties about how much such systems will cost and how effective they will be in reducing our overall vulnerability to catastrophic airline damage,” said lead author James Chow. “Immediate and full installation of anti-missile systems would be more appropriate if we could operate them more cheaply or if the federal government would decide to spend more money on transportation security as a whole.”

He and his colleagues explained that installing laser jammers—the most promising near-term solution—on the nation’s fleet of 6,800 airliners would cost an estimated $11 billion, with operating costs ramping up to $2.1 billion annually upon full operational capability. The full life-cycle costs over 20 years would amount to around $40 billion. As a point of comparison, the $2.1 billion annual operating cost would represent almost half of the annual budget spent on U.S. transportation security of all types.

But if the recommended U.S. Department of Homeland Security reliability goals could be met and thus increase the dependability of laser jammers over their lifetimes, the operating costs could be cut in half, reducing the overall cost to around $25 billion over 20 years. Meeting the federal reliability goals, however, is a key uncertainty.

Beyond efforts to reduce uncertainties, the study also argues for a concurrent effort to better understand (1) exactly how shoulder-fired missile systems and other man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) damage airliners and (2) the likelihood that such damage will be catastrophic. Such an effort will help clarify the damage caused by single or multiple MANPADS hits, inform choices about possible mitigating measures, and assess the comparative seriousness of other forms of potential attack against airliners.

Finally, technical countermeasures alone will not completely remedy the problem. The study recommends taking a layered approach to defend against such threats. This approach includes, for example, striking and capturing terrorists abroad, impeding their acquisition of missiles, and preventing them and their weapons from entering the United States.

Some measures show that America’s “war on drugs” might be considered successful; others show it to be generally a failure. Explaining such conflicting evidence and suggesting guidelines for improving policy are the aims of a RAND report that reviews 15 years of research on national drug problems and policy.

Explicit national policy goals relate primarily to reducing drug use. By this measure, the drug war has had a mixed record. The percentage of the population reporting “past-month use” of some illicit drugs declined by half between 1985 and 1992 but has since rebounded by about a third. Meanwhile, “current” use of marijuana by teenagers also increased in the mid- to late 1990s and has not decreased since.

But none of these conflicting trends can be uncritically credited to (or charged against) the war on drugs, because trends in drug use are not determined solely by government policy. Rather, they represent the national aggregation of a variety of factors. “While specific use-reduction targets represent laudable objectives, they may be very easy or very difficult to achieve, depending on factors largely outside the government’s control,” said study coauthor Jonathan Caulkins.

The RAND team offered four suggestions for a better policy mix and a healthier debate. First, because drugs are here to stay, the drug problem needs to be managed over the long term, with long-term costs and benefits in mind. Second, the critical decisions are about the mix of policies, since there are many kinds of policies that can contribute to reducing drug problems.

Third, the federal government should welcome and learn from variations in state drug control strategies that fall within the broad scope of national policy, rather than resisting such variations. Fourth, the public should demand information about the effects and effectiveness of drug policy.

Taking the nation’s experience with cocaine as an important example, the study notes that two factors within the government’s control may have contributed to shortfalls. First, the balance among the three control policies—enforcement, treatment, and prevention—has probably not been optimal.

Most of the drug control budget has gone toward enforcement, whereas—at least in the later stages of the cocaine epidemic—treatment of heavy drug users might usefully have played a more central role in reducing drug consumption, drug-related crime, and other consequences. Thus, besides the choice of strategies, their timing also determines the effectiveness of national drug policy (see the figure).

Second, the balance among the various enforcement strategies themselves also may not have been optimal. For example, cocaine consumption may have been reduced if some of the money spent trying to control cocaine in source countries or in transit had been spent instead on targeted types of enforcement within the United States.

VA Outpaces Nation in Delivering Recommended Care

Systemwide quality improvement initiatives established by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the early 1990s seem to have paid off, according to a new RAND/VA study. Today, VA patients are more likely to receive recommended care than patients in a national sample.

The study compared the quality of outpatient and inpatient care for a national sample of patients (drawn from 12 metropolitan areas with populations of 200,000 or more) with the quality of care for a sample of VA patients (drawn from 26 facilities located in the Midwest and Southwest United States). The study, published in the December 2004 issue of the Annals of Internal Medicine, used 348 clinical indicators to assess the quality of care for 26 acute and chronic conditions—such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease—as well as for preventive care.

Overall, VA patients received 67 percent of recommended care compared with 51 percent for the national sample. VA patients received consistently better care across the entire spectrum of care, including screening, diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.

VA patients received 72 percent of recommended chronic care compared with 59 percent for the national sample. Quality of preventive care showed even greater differences, with 64 percent of indicated preventive care being delivered to VA patients compared with 44 percent for the national sample. The VA uses a sophisticated electronic medical record system and holds regional managers accountable for their performance based on measures of the quality of preventive care and selected chronic conditions.

The study found that the differences between the VA sample and the national sample were greatest in the areas where the VA actively monitors performance, with VA patients receiving 67 percent of recommended care in such areas versus only 43 percent of patients nationwide receiving such recommended care (see the figure). The VA also performed better in delivering care processes that were not specifically measured but were in the same general clinical areas that were monitored.

“These findings are important because they show it is possible to improve the care patients receive,” said lead study author Steven Asch, who has appointments at RAND, at the Veterans Affairs Greater Los Angeles Health Care System, and at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“It challenges all of us to consider how the methods that the VA is using to improve care could be used to raise the bar in other health care settings.”

The differences between the VA sample and the national sample were greatest in the areas where the VA actively monitors performance.

![Performance Measurement and Accountability Systems: Effective Approaches to Quality Improvement](image-url)
URBAN VERSUS SUBURBAN. Congestion, noise, and crime versus open space, quiet, and safer neighborhoods. Such contrasts, along with the growth of high-speed, multilane highways, spawned a massive exodus of families out of U.S. cities and into suburban communities after World War II. More recently, the continuous growth of suburbs—what has come to be known as suburban sprawl—has created a backlash against suburbs, with a new movement of families back into urban cores.

Adherents on both sides of what has become a passionate debate cite quality-of-life issues. Those who favor urban cores often stress the vitality and cultural diversity, while those who favor suburbs often stress the better environment for raising children.

Meanwhile, there is a growing body of research, including a series of studies from the RAND Center for Population Health and Health Disparities, on how “built space” affects our health. One of the pioneers in the field is Lawrence D. Frank, associate professor of community and regional planning at the University of British Columbia. In a visit to the RAND Corporation, he presented results from his latest studies, in which he highlighted not just the link between built space and obesity but also the larger questions about common patterns of land use.

**You Can’t Walk There from Here**

The key study by Frank focused on individuals living in Atlanta, Ga., which has some of the highest levels of suburban sprawl in the nation. Frank’s study sought to assess the links between where individuals live in Atlanta and the likelihood of their being obese. The study compared self-reported data on body mass index from about 11,000 individuals with objective assessments of the “urban forms” in which they lived.

In terms of urban form, Frank used parcel data to rate the level of land use mix, placing neighborhoods into quartiles based on the mixture of uses—or on “how evenly distributed the neighborhood is between residential, retail, employment, and institutional elements.” At issue is the interconnectivity of the neighborhoods and the access to such things as retail stores, workplaces, schools, and hospitals.

Higher mixed-use areas (more urban) enable people to walk to these locations, while lower mixed-use areas (more suburban) often require people to drive to them. The cul-de-sacs that are such a common feature in suburban developments pretty much force people to drive to “get there from here” (see the figure).

**Mixed Use, Clear-Cut Results**

The results of the study were strikingly consistent. Controlling for age, income, and education, each quartile increase in mixed use was associated with a 12-percent reduction in the odds of being obese.

Results were the most striking for white males. After controlling for sociodemographic factors, the study showed that on average, a 5-foot, 10-inch white male who lived within the lowest quartile of mixed use (in a word, sprawl) weighed 190 pounds versus 180 pounds if he lived within the highest quartile of mixed use (a walkable environment).

Moreover, Frank found that every 30 minutes of driving per day translated into a 3-percent increase in the likelihood of being obese. In contrast, every additional kilometer walked per day translated into a nearly 5-percent reduction in the likelihood of being obese.

Time spent driving increased as “walkability” decreased. (Frank defined “walkability” as mixed land use with high levels of density and street connectivity.) As one would expect, the distances walked increased with walkability. In a more recent study, Frank documented that residents in the most walkable environments in the Atlanta region were 2.4 times more likely to get the recommended daily 30 minutes of moderate physical activity prescribed by the U.S. Surgeon General than were residents of the most sprawling environments of Atlanta. Using activity monitors, Frank found that 37 percent of the residents in the most walkable environments met the 30-minute target, versus 17 percent in the least walkable environments.

Frank was quick to point out that lack of physical activity because of the built environment is only...
one part of the explanation for obesity; nutrition and the predisposition to active lifestyles also play a role. Still, Frank noted that his results “are consistent with what other studies in the field have shown and that it is encouraging to see independent studies supporting, rather than refuting, one another.”

**The Case for Smart Growth**

The results make a strong case for “smart growth”—incorporating mixed use—in designing and building communities. But Frank made it clear that his intent is not to tell people where they should live. The real question for Frank is where do individuals want to live? Is there really a demand for suburban living, or is that demand driven by what the marketplace wants to provide?

“It’s like going into a grocery store looking for wheat bread and finding only white bread,” said Frank. “You buy the white bread because that’s all there is. This can be interpreted as a high demand for white bread, when in fact we are just masking the demand for wheat bread.”

There may be more demand for smart growth than is reflected in the building patterns we see. According to another study by Frank, a third of those living on larger lots in Atlanta neighborhoods that are 15–18 miles from work, school, and other important destinations said they would rather live on smaller lots and be closer to those destinations. This finding represents latent demand; as of yet, the supply to meet the demand does not exist.

Based on Frank’s research, it is becoming apparent that the housing market may be, in economic terms, “externalizing” most, if not all, of the health and environmental costs of living in suburban areas. In other words, the market price of suburban housing may be failing to capture, or to internalize, the full costs borne by suburban residents and by society at large.

“It is much cheaper for developers to build suburban communities than it is to build mixed-use ones,” said Frank. And even if developers wanted to build mixed-use communities, the deck is stacked against them. There is not a lot of financing available to do so, and, in many cases, mixed-use areas are designated as illegal by exclusionary zoning restrictions.

Frank finds this ironic, because zoning is predicated on ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of individuals. Based on his studies (and those of others in the field), mixed-use areas might serve the underlying purposes of zoning better than some of the existing zoning laws.

**Related Reading**


Ultimate Test

Who Is Accountable for Education If Everybody Fails?

By Jennifer Sloan McCombs and Stephen J. Carroll

Jennifer McCombs is a policy analyst. Stephen Carroll is an economist.

Student test scores nationwide raise doubts about the ability of the 50 states to meet the ambitious federal goal established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002: that 100 percent of students in each state pass a state-administered achievement test within 12 years. As of 2003, the most recent year for which test scores are available from every state, the majority of the states are not even close to reaching the goal of 100-percent proficiency.

Equally dubious is the meaning of “proficiency,” the definition of which varies from state to state. To validate the state test results, therefore, students must also take a national test, called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Known as the Nation’s Report Card, the NAEP is the only common criterion by which to compare student achievement across the states. Statewide proficiency rates on the NAEP are often much lower than on the state tests.

But even according to the state tests, the majority of the states have a long way to go to reach the national goal. The evidence suggests that success in education cannot be guaranteed merely by mandating standards and tests. Americans must focus their resources for education not just on the mechanics of testing and accountability systems but also on the fundamentals that matter most: preparing students to learn, to become literate, and to become critical thinkers. Tests do not, in and of themselves, teach these things.

The gulf between the national goal and the state realities poses a challenge for all 50 states (see Figure 1). But one state, California, serves as an especially compelling case study. Widely regarded as one of the best systems of education in the country as recently as 30 years ago, the California public school system has since become, according to most measures, one of the worst.

Since the 1970s, California schools have been buffeted by legal, political, and financial turbulence, along with rapid demographic change. Home to major shifts in educational policy in the last few decades and to 13 percent of the nation’s students, California has become an immense laboratory for nearly everything that can go right or wrong with education in America.

By reviewing the recent history of California’s public schools, their precipitous decline, and their potential for revival, policymakers nationwide can learn important lessons about how to manage public schools. Today, for example, the citizens of California need long-term, comprehensive solutions, beginning with an improved financing system that can tap into what the state can really afford and that can then provide the resources that the schools really need.
Whether at the national or at the state level, public education needs both accountability and resources. Although providing resources without demanding accountability can lead to a waste of resources, demanding accountability without providing adequate resources can be an evasion of accountability by setting up public schools for failure.

A National Challenge: Adolescent Literacy

Reforms in education have helped to raise reading achievement among the nation’s children in the primary grades. But many children are not moving beyond basic decoding skills—deciphering words and sounding them out—to fluency and comprehension, even as they advance to the 4th grade and beyond to tougher classes in history, mathematics, and science. This trend is especially troubling because today’s adolescents (defined as students in the 4th through 12th grades) are facing a job market that demands high literacy and critical-thinking skills.

NCLB requires states to adopt accountability systems that set challenging content and performance standards for all students. To ensure that students meet the standards, NCLB relies on a battery of high-stakes tests. By 2005–2006, the states must annually test all children in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and in one grade in high school. By 2007–2008, the states must test students in science at least once in grades 3–5, 6–9, and 10–12. States must establish goals for performance on the tests and track performance for all students and subgroups of students, including racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and migrant students.

By 2014, all schools are required to reach 100-percent proficiency—that is, all children must pass the state test. Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward this federal goal will face escalating sanctions over time, such as being required to offer school choice, to accept a lesser role in decisionmaking, to reconstitute school staff, to institute a new curriculum, to extend the school year or school day, or to appoint an outside expert to advise the school.

To gauge the state of literacy among adolescents in America, we analyzed the extent to which adolescents are meeting the state literacy goals, as measured by the 2002 or 2003 state tests. We analyzed the extent to which adolescents are meeting the national literacy goal, as measured by the 2003 NAEP. And we analyzed the extent to which the state and national results are consistent with one another.

We focus here on the reading achievement of students in middle school (grades 6–8). Forty-three states had readily reportable data for middle school students. We report 8th-grade scores for 36 states, 7th-grade scores for 5 states, and 6th-grade scores for 2 states. Meanwhile, the NAEP tested 8th graders in all 50 states.

The results were sobering. In 11 states, fewer than half the students met the state proficiency standards. And in all states, fewer than half the students met the NAEP proficiency standard.

On the state tests, the proficiency rates ranged from 88 percent in Texas to 21 percent in South Carolina. But on the NAEP, the proficiency rates ranged from 43 percent in Massachusetts to 20 percent in New Mexico (see Figure 2). Massachusetts and New Hampshire were the only states to have proficiency rates of 40 percent or higher on the NAEP. The average state proficiency rate for reading among 8th graders nationwide on the NAEP was just 32 percent.

There are large differences in the rigor of the state tests and in the performance levels that states deem
“proficient.” Compare, for instance, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Wyoming. Among 8th graders, 21 percent in South Carolina and 39 percent in Wyoming passed the state test, compared with 86–88 percent in North Carolina and Texas (see Figure 3). But on the NAEP, only 29 percent of 8th graders in North Carolina and 26 percent in Texas scored at the proficient level, similar to the 24 percent in South Carolina and 34 percent in Wyoming. Therefore, even if each state were to meet its 100-percent proficiency goal on the state tests, the students in each state would likely have quite disparate abilities, knowledge, and skills.

Likewise, discrepancies appear between the state and national scores for subgroups of students. Compare the scores for white and Latino 8th graders in California, Idaho, New Mexico, Texas, and Wisconsin. According to the Texas test alone, Latino students there trailed white students by only 11 percentage points, the smallest reported difference of any state. The Idaho test reported one of the largest differences. But on the NAEP, the differences between white and Latino 8th graders were identical across the five states (see Figure 4). If a state test shows small performance gaps between subgroups while the NAEP shows much larger performance gaps, then it is important for state policymakers to reflect on what this information might imply.

Overall, the data show that our nation faces a tremendous challenge to raise the literacy skills of our nation’s adolescents. Simply mandating standards and conducting tests will not guarantee success. Unless we, as a nation, are prepared to focus attention and resources on this challenge, our schools are likely to continue producing students who lack the necessary skills for, and are thus ill-prepared to deal with, the demands of higher education and the workplace.

As part of NCLB, the federal government has made hefty investments in early reading programs. One NCLB program, called Reading First, aims to improve reading skills among children in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Another NCLB program, called Early Reading First Grants, aims to improve the pre-reading skills of children from birth to age 5.

However, our nation has not made a commensurate effort to cultivate the literacy of students as they progress to 4th grade and beyond. Middle school and high school students need to build on the literacy
strategies of grade school to make sense of abstract, complex subjects that are removed from personal experiences. The need to guide adolescents to advanced stages of literacy is a necessary next step in normal reading development.

As a nation, if we fail to properly address adolescent literacy, the reading gains made by students up through the 3rd grade may be lost or diluted. Policymakers, schools, and teachers need to accept the responsibility of teaching adolescents to read and derive meaning from complex texts in the disciplines taught. The costs of inattention are very high, both in personal and in economic terms.

A Case Study: California

As recently as the 1970s, California’s public schools were considered to be among the nation’s best. Today, that reputation no longer stands. There is widespread concern that the state school system has slipped badly relative to its past performance and to that of systems in other states.

Widespread social and demographic changes throughout the state are obvious. But we believe that these changes have not been decisive in the decline of the public schools. Other large states that have undergone similar shifts—Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas—have not suffered similar setbacks in education. We point instead to a series of legal and political factors that have rocked California’s school finance system for three decades (see centerpiece on pp. 16–17).

California was the first state to implement comprehensive school finance reform, beginning in 1971, when the California Supreme Court ruled that the state’s school finance system was unconstitutional. In Serrano v. Priest, the court agreed with the Serrano plaintiffs that basing large differences in school district spending per pupil on property values violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In a series of related actions, the state legislature limited the amount that district revenues from property values could vary from district to district and the amount that districts were allowed to raise on their own.

In 1978, California voters passed Proposition 13, which limited property tax rates to 1 percent and capped annual increases in property taxes. In response, the California legislature passed Assembly Bill 8, under which the state took control of school district funding. In the following academic year, the percentage of school district funding coming from the state government ballooned from 32 percent to 62 percent. In 1979–1980, the state’s portion swelled to 71 percent. The state equalized resources across school districts so that students in poorer districts were at less of a disadvantage in terms of spending per pupil than they had been before. However, this reform also appears to have contributed to lower overall levels of spending statewide.

Prior to 1978, local voters had decided at the ballot box how much to tax themselves for local schools. But when the resources started to become equalized
across districts statewide, local voters lost some of their incentive to spend so much on schools, thus precipitating a substantial decline in statewide school spending relative to that in other states. The decline in spending likely led to larger class sizes and, perhaps, to lower achievement levels for students in California compared with those across the nation.

Indeed, Proposition 13 marked a dramatic turning point in funding for K–12 public education in California. Revenues and expenditures per pupil had grown fairly rapidly both in California and nationwide until the early 1980s. But California fell well behind the nation by the late 1980s. Despite recent funding increases for K–12 education, California schools have continued to spend far below the national average. Measured in year 2000 dollars, spending per pupil in California went from more than $600 above the national average in 1978 to more than $600 below the national average in 2000.

Proposition 98, passed by California voters in 1988, did not help much. Despite its good intentions (of guaranteeing to public schools a minimum percentage of the state’s budget), Proposition 98 practically institutionalized the bad habit of subjecting school finances to the extreme fluctuations in the state’s economy. More than a third of state funding under Proposition 98 has also been earmarked for specific local purposes, further limiting local discretion.

In 1996, California enacted a popular voluntary program to reduce class sizes in grades K–3 and 9. The program succeeded in reducing K–3 class sizes—but at great expense, financially and otherwise. The program offered schools $650 per student (later $800 per student) for each K–3 classroom with 20 or fewer students. An unintended consequence was that the state needed to hire lots of teachers who lacked certification to teach the growing number of smaller classes. Other programs in education were cut to pay for the additional teachers and to make room for more classes. The evidence is mixed on whether the program has raised academic achievement.

Today, California still has the second-highest ratio of students per teacher of any state, at 20.9 students per teacher. The U.S. average is 16.1. As a group, California’s public K–12 teachers are formally trained, state-certified professionals. But by 1999–2000, about 15 percent of the teacher workforce consisted of newly employed teachers, the majority of whom were not yet formally trained and certified (see Figure 5). These relatively underqualified teachers have been concentrated in urban schools, in low performing schools, and in schools with high percentages of low-income and minority students.

California public school facilities have also seen better days. Per-pupil spending on construction in the state has fallen behind that of the nation. From 1991 to 2000, the cumulative gap in construction spending in year 2000 dollars came to about $890 less per pupil in California than in the United States.

California has made recent progress in addressing K–12 facility needs, thanks largely to voter approval of several state general obligation bonds and to legislative changes that have enabled local districts to approve local general obligation bonds. In 2000, the passage of Proposition 39 reduced the voter approval requirement for local bonds from two-thirds of district voters to 55 percent. Then in 2002 alone, California voters approved the issuance of more than $11 billion in state bonds and nearly $10 billion in local bonds.

However, the state still lags the nation in terms of the adequacy of school buildings and per-pupil construction spending. The inadequacies are concentrated in central cities, where the schools serve disproportionately minority and low-income populations, and in rural areas. (The 1971 court order that sought to shrink the financial disparities between low- and high-income districts pertained to the state’s duty to provide money for operating expenses, not for construction.)

The low funding levels for California’s K–12 public schools reflect comparatively low effort, considering the state’s financial capacity. Figure 6 shows public school spending as a percentage of personal income. By the standards set nationwide, California could have afforded to spend more on schools in the 1980s and 1990s than it actually did. Proposition 13 may have caused the rapid decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s in expenditures as a fraction of personal income.

It is impossible to make a direct link between low funding levels and low student achievement levels in California, because the state has no reliable longitudinal data on achievement reaching back to the 1970s. However, relatively low achievement levels would be expected given relatively low funding levels, relatively
high class sizes, relatively inadequate facilities, and students with relatively great needs.

Sure enough, the scores of California public school students have hit nearly rock bottom. We averaged the NAEP scores on reading and mathematics for 4th graders and 8th graders in all 50 states from 1990 through 2003 (see figure on p. 17). The data, shown as units of standard deviation from the national average, place the test scores for California below those for every state except Louisiana and Mississippi. The figure also highlights the average scores for the four other most populous states, all of which perform well above California.

On the bright side, California is making gains in its NAEP scores. Using the average scores from just the 2002 and 2003 assessments, California ranks 45th out of 50 states, up from 48th.

Accountability with Resources
California’s experience offers the nation numerous valuable lessons. Whether in California or across the country, it is unfair to hold students and schools accountable for success without giving them the resources they need to succeed. The steep decline in local discretion over spending, which has occurred not just in California but in many other states as well, also runs counter to the increased emphasis placed on accountability in K–12 education in recent years.

A different approach is needed. In California, coming up with better solutions will be the central charge of a new bipartisan California State Quality of Education Commission. It is our hope that the commission will square the school accountability system with a new statewide finance system that together can provide the incentives and resources that the schools really need to help all students meet the state performance standards.

We further hope that this kind of comprehensive approach will spread nationwide. If federal and state lawmakers insist on holding school districts accountable for student performance, then the school districts need to be entrusted with sufficient resources and with the local budgetary discretion to allocate the resources according to local need.

Related Reading

As sources of public school revenues in California shifted from local districts to the state beginning in 1978 . . .

. . . per-pupil expenditures on instruction began to dip below the national average . . .

. . . from more than $600 above the national average in 1978 to more than $600 below in 2000.

As one likely consequence, student-teacher ratios rose much higher than the national average . . .

. . . with nearly 40 percent more students per teacher in California classrooms than in U.S. classrooms in the mid-1990s.

Throughout the 1990s, the state lagged the nation in financing school facility needs . . .

. . . but California voters are approving more and more state and local bonds for school construction.
Three Decades of Financial Earthquakes Rattle California Education

1971: School finance reform in California begins with the *Serrano v. Priest* decision. The California Supreme Court rules that the state’s school finance system is unconstitutional, because it bases large differences in school district spending per pupil on property values, thereby violating the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In response, the state legislature limits the amount that school district revenues from property values can vary from district to district.

1978: California voters pass Proposition 13, which limits property taxes to 1 percent and caps annual increases in property taxes. In response, the state legislature passes Assembly Bill 8, under which the state takes control of school district funding.

Unintended consequences: Because resources are equalized across districts, local voters have less incentive to spend so much on public schools. Statewide, school spending per pupil declines relative to that in other states, which likely leads to larger class sizes and, perhaps, to poorer achievement in California compared with that in other states. District funding becomes subject to fluctuations in the state economy.

1982–83: Spending per pupil in California dips below the national average.

1988: California voters pass Proposition 98, which guarantees to public schools (from kindergarten through community college) a minimum percentage of the state’s budget.

1996: The California legislature passes a class-size reduction initiative (Senate Bill 1777), providing $650 per student for each K–3 classroom with 20 or fewer students. The incentive later grows to $800 per student. The legislation also allots money to build 8,000 additional classrooms.

Unintended consequences: The cash incentive creates a windfall for schools with fewer minority students and lower percentages of low-income students than other schools, counteracting the redistributive efforts of the state’s school finance reform. At low-income schools, there are inadequate supplies of available classrooms and of qualified teachers. Overall teacher quality declines, while the quality gap increases between low-income and high-income schools. Many schools transfer space and money from other programs to accommodate smaller classes.

1998: California voters pass Proposition 1A, a state bond measure earmarking $6.7 billion for school construction and repairs.

2002: California voters approve nearly $10 billion in local bonds for schools and pass Proposition 47, a state bond measure that allocates an additional $11.4 billion for school construction and renovation. Despite the passage of several state and local bonds, construction spending per pupil still trails the national average.

Lower Student Achievement Might Very Well Be an Aftershock

There are no reliable longitudinal data on student achievement in California that reach back to the 1970s, thus preventing a direct comparison between school funding and student achievement. However, RAND researchers found that California students taking national achievement tests from 1990 to 2003 performed, on average, below those in every state except Louisiana and Mississippi. Moreover, the low performance in California was evident among students of all races and ethnicities relative to students in other states with similar family characteristics.

The figure below compares the average scores of students across the country and in the five largest states. The data combine reading and mathematics scores of 4th graders and 8th graders from 1990 to 2003 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

RAND researchers have concluded that the very low scores in California reflect not just student or family characteristics but also school characteristics. Relatively low scores would be expected given relatively low funding levels, relatively inadequate facilities, and students with relatively great needs.

![Graph comparing student achievement across states](https://example.com/graph.png)

As late as the 1960s and 1970s, arts advocates still treated the value of the arts as a given. By the early 1990s, however, social and political pressures, culminating in what became known as the “culture wars,” had put pressure on arts advocates to articulate the public value of the arts. The advocates responded by touting the instrumental rather than the intrinsic benefits of the arts. By intrinsic benefits, we refer to those effects that are embedded in the arts experience, such as the insights into the human condition gained from reading Shakespeare—in contrast to those instrumental effects, such as higher grades in English literature, that are a byproduct of that experience.

People are drawn to the arts not to improve their test scores or to stimulate the economy. People are drawn to the arts because they provide people with meaning and stimulate the emotions.

Kevin McCarthy is a social scientist, Melissa Rowe is a behavioral scientist, and Julia Lowell is an economist at RAND.

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Of course, arts advocates acknowledge that the instrumental benefits are not the sole benefits of the arts and that the arts also “enrich people’s lives.” But in general, the advocates have downplayed intrinsic benefits in favor of aligning their arguments with society’s increasingly output-oriented and quantitative approach to public-sector management. Their underlying assumption has been that the intrinsic benefits of the arts promote individuals’ personal goals and are thus irrelevant to the public policy debate about the benefits of the arts to society as a whole.

We propose a broader view that recognizes both intrinsic and instrumental benefits and the ways in which both categories of benefits can yield both private and public value. Specifically, we distinguish among three categories of benefits: those that are primarily of private value, those that affect individuals but have spillover effects for the public, and those that are primarily of public value.

We argue that the private, intrinsic benefits are the starting point for generating all benefits of the arts since the intrinsic benefits trigger individuals to become involved in the arts in the first place. Therefore, the goal of policymakers should be to help greater numbers of Americans enjoy these benefits fully enough to demand even more of them, thus benefiting society. We suggest how arts advocates, local education partnerships, and state arts agencies can pursue this goal.

How Art Lost Its Message

To bolster the argument that the arts produce instrumental benefits that help all Americans, not just those involved in the arts, arts advocates have borrowed from the language of the social sciences and the broader policy debate. The arts are said to improve test scores and self-esteem among the young. They are said to enhance mental health among the old. They are said to be an antidote to myriad social problems, such as gangs and drugs. They are said to be good for...
business and tourism—raising income, employment, investment, and tax revenue. They are said to be a mechanism for urban revitalization.

Most of the empirical research on instrumental benefits suffers from conceptual and methodological limitations that cast doubt on the purported magnitude of these effects. For example, this literature fails to distinguish between correlation and causality. It does not indicate how a specific arts experience generates benefits or identify for whom and under what circumstances. Moreover, the arts are just one of many means by which these benefits can be derived.

These problems with the empirical research do not negate the value of the instrumental benefits but do suggest that their value might have been overestimated in the past. On the other hand, we emphasize that all attempts to calculate only the instrumental benefits underestimate the true value of the arts.

People are drawn to the arts not to improve their test scores or to stimulate the economy. People are drawn to the arts because they provide people with meaning and stimulate the emotions. In other words, people flock to the arts for intrinsic, not instrumental, reasons.

Many arts supporters are uncomfortable espousing the argument about instrumental benefits to justify the arts, because they know that some of the claims are exaggerated and that they fail to capture the unique value of the arts. Yet the supporters realize that many of the people who authorize public spending for the arts—and often private funding as well—respond only if the arguments are cast in terms of the easily quantifiable and measurable instrumental public benefits.

Our goal is to improve both the way that the benefits of the arts are understood and the way that policies to increase the benefits are designed. We challenge the widely held view that the intrinsic benefits are purely of value to the individual. Some intrinsic benefits are largely of private value. Others are of value to both the individual and society. Still others are largely of value to society as a whole. Moreover, the intrinsic benefits of the arts are often unique to the arts and may not be attainable through other means.

A Larger Canvas

The current policy debate about the benefits of the arts suffers from a limited perspective (see the table). Policymakers have focused almost exclusively on the benefits of the arts in the two categories shaded purple in the table: the instrumental benefits of value to the public at large. Policymakers have discounted all other benefits, including those primarily of value to individuals and those intrinsic benefits that provide value to the public.
We argue that policymakers and arts advocates must begin to debate the bigger picture. All six categories of benefits are relevant to the arts policy debate. Ironically, the category of benefits that has been downplayed the most—the intrinsic benefits that are primarily of value to individuals (shaded in gold)—is the gateway to all other benefits of the arts, be they instrumental or intrinsic, public or private. These intrinsic, private benefits are the ones that keep individuals coming back for more of the arts and thus are the key to sustained arts involvement—without which none of the other benefits can be obtained.

The table lists two examples of the benefits in this core category: captivation and pleasure. Captivation refers to the rapt absorption that moves an individual away from habitual and everyday reality into a state of focused attention on the arts experience. Captivation transports the individual elsewhere, even if only for the sake of comic relief or sheer escapism.

Pleasure refers to the satisfaction derived from an imaginative experience that can be more intense, revealing, and meaningful than everyday experiences. An aesthetic experience can be deeply satisfying even if individuals find a particular work of art to be unsettling, disorienting, or tragic.

Arts policy misplaces its focus when it emphasizes those instrumental benefits that are not even unique to the arts. Many other public policies can contribute to higher test scores, better health, and economic growth, for instance. If the arts must compete with other policies based on their educational, health, or economic impacts, then the arts may not always fare well by comparison.

However, the arts can be particularly conducive to generating intrinsic benefits that are advantageous to the public. These public benefits have been ignored in the policy debate. We provide four examples of them here.

“Expanded capacity for empathy” refers to the ability of the arts to expose us to a wide variety of experiences and perspectives. Such experiences can provide us with greater insights and understanding of people and of cultures different from our own. Although these benefits are initially personal, they can provide crucial spillover benefits to society to the extent that they increase tolerance and understanding at a time when our society is growing increasingly diverse and when the differences that divide us seem more important than what we have in common. This tolerance and understanding are central to a society that places critical importance on freedom of speech and religion.

“Cognitive growth” refers to the broadened perspective that the arts can provide on how we experience the world around us and draw lessons from those experiences. Unlike the dominant scholastic paradigm that stresses the importance of measurable outcomes and the “right” way to approach a problem, the arts suggest that there is no single “right” answer, that problems can be approached and solved in a variety of ways, and that phenomena and values that do not lend themselves to measurement are still important.

“Creation of social bonds” refers to the communal experiences shared by people who participate in the arts—from book groups to music festivals to religious ceremonies. These experiences can create communities of interest that transcend class, ethnic, and political

### Table: Benefits of the Arts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of the arts</th>
<th>Private benefits</th>
<th>Private benefits with public spillover</th>
<th>Public benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental benefits</td>
<td>Improved test scores</td>
<td>Improved self-efficacy, learning skills, health</td>
<td>Development of social capital, Economic growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic benefits</td>
<td>Captivation, Pleasure</td>
<td>Expanded capacity for empathy, Cognitive growth</td>
<td>Creation of social bonds, Expression of communal meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Gifts of the Muse, 2004.

- Source of all benefits of the arts
- Current focus of policy debate on benefits of the arts
- Suggested focus of policy debate on benefits of the arts (all six categories)

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The arts suggest that there is no single “right” answer, that problems can be approached and solved in a variety of ways, and that phenomena and values that do not lend themselves to measurement are still important.
lines; allow private feelings to be expressed jointly; and reinforce both an interest in the arts and a more general sense of community.

“Expression of communal meaning” refers to the ability of art to convey what entire communities of people yearn to express. Public memorials and monuments, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., not only commemorate important events but also give people a common outlet for expression of public values. Some art forms, such as jazz music, give voice to communities often ignored by the culture at large. Other works of art are created with the explicit purpose of changing attitudes and bringing about positive social change.

The key to reaping the full benefits of the arts is to provide people with personally rewarding arts experiences, particularly at a young age. In this way, people will be more likely to sustain their involvement in the arts over the years, and it is this sustained involvement that is often decisive in ultimately generating the public benefits of the arts. Although this process starts with the individual’s personal involvement in the arts, the individual’s continued involvement can benefit all of society.

**Reclaiming the Spotlight**

The goal of arts policy, therefore, should be to spread the benefits of the arts by introducing more Americans to engaging arts experiences. This goal requires that resources be shifted away from simply expanding the supply of arts experiences (such as live theater, concerts, and museum exhibits) and toward cultivating demand. Without sufficient demand, the supply of arts experiences alone will not guarantee audience appreciation. A demand-side approach will help to sustain and to build a market for the arts by developing the capacity of individuals to extract the greatest possible benefits from the arts. We recommend four steps that the arts community can take to redirect its emphasis in this way.

1. **Develop language for discussing intrinsic benefits.** A central reason for the current emphasis on instrumental benefits is the difficulty we have in discussing phenomena that are not easily defined in concrete terms. Correspondingly, the arts community needs to develop language to articulate how the arts, in and of themselves, create benefits at both the private and public levels. The greatest challenge will be to bring the policy community to recognize the importance of intrinsic benefits. The arts community will need to raise awareness in the policy community about the need to look beyond quantifiable results and to examine qualitative issues.

2. **Address the limitations of the research on instrumental benefits.** Arguments about instrumental benefits should not be abandoned, but arts advocates need to become more credible and rigorous in presenting these arguments. Moreover, research should not be limited to instrumental benefits.

3. **Promote early exposure to the arts.** Early exposure is often key to developing lifelong involvement in the arts. The most promising way to build audiences for the arts would be to provide well-designed arts programs in the nation’s schools. Currently, arts educa-
tion is most likely to take place in elementary school and then all but disappears in middle school and high school except in literature courses and such extracurricular activities as school plays and bands.

Excellent arts education programs would require more funding and greater cooperation between educators and arts professionals. In addition, most of the research on building effective arts programs calls for incorporating art appreciation, discussion, and analysis along with artistic production. As much as possible, “one-shot” learning experiences should be spurned.

4. Create circumstances for rewarding arts experiences. High-quality arts experiences are characterized by enjoyment, a heightened sense of life, and imaginative departure. Individuals who have such experiences seek more of them. Frequent participants are those whose experiences engage them in multiple ways—mentally, emotionally, and socially. The policy implication for arts organizations is that occasional participants must be introduced to compelling arts experiences if they are to become frequent participants.

Role of Education Partnerships

Budget crises in many states, combined with federal requirements for educational testing systems under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, have compelled many school districts to increase instructional time in tested areas and to decrease instructional time in areas that are not tested, such as the arts. One strategy adopted by some schools to address this problem is to tap the expertise of community arts organizations. Partnerships between schools and arts organizations could move arts education beyond offering students only occasional, one-shot exposure to the arts.

In 1999, the Los Angeles Unified School District launched one of the most ambitious arts education programs in the country: a ten-year, multimillion-dollar effort to implement a substantive, sequential arts education curriculum in four major disciplines—dance, music, theater, and the visual arts—for all children in kindergarten through grade 12. A core component of the plan is to build partnerships with community arts organizations to supply the programs.

We found, however, that the schools and arts organizations had some notably different goals for the partnerships. Schools emphasized professional development for teachers as a key goal, but that was rarely mentioned as a goal of the arts organizations. Schools were equally concerned with finding grade-appropriate programs that could be integrated with the school curricula. But providing such programs was not an explicit goal of the arts organizations. The goal most often mentioned by arts organizations was promoting public awareness and appreciation of the arts. More than half of the schools said the arts organizations were not accommodating their needs.

The most significant policy implication pertaining to education partnerships is that schools must assume responsibility for creating a coherent arts curriculum and must become better-informed consumers of arts programs. The key is to move the programs away from being exposure-only experiences and toward becoming integrated components of a sustained, sequential curriculum.

Role of State Arts Agencies

Since the 1980s, the primary providers of public resources for the arts in America have been state arts agencies (SAAs). Important changes in public arts policy are thus likely to require SAA involvement.
The 1990s and early 2000s have been difficult for many SAAs. In 2003, a record 43 of 56 SAAs reported declines in the general fund appropriations budgeted to them by their state legislatures. In 2004, 34 SAAs reported further budget reductions, with 9 reporting cuts of more than 30 percent. Six SAAs faced serious threats of elimination.

The budget cuts reflect a culmination of social, economic, and political trends over the past 40 years. These trends have made all public arts agencies, not just SAAs, vulnerable. Society has become more pluralistic, making it harder for public agencies to choose what sort of art to fund. State fiscal squeezes have translated directly to pressure on arts agency budgets. And growing political expectations for government to be more efficient, accountable, and responsive have required SAAs to justify every arts program like never before.

A big problem for SAAs is the perception, if not the fact, that SAAs exist to support arts providers rather than citizens of the state. Since the 1990s, SAAs have tried to counter this perception by focusing more on the instrumental benefits of the arts provided to citizens. The problem with this strategy is that other industries or activities also deliver instrumental benefits, perhaps better than the arts do.

Fortunately, many SAA managers are now rethinking the public purposes of the arts and how to serve those purposes. “Why art?” the managers are asking themselves. “Why should tax dollars go to the arts and culture, rather than to a sports team or a shopping mall?” Despite the recent hard times for SAAs, they may turn out to be pioneers in redefining government’s proper role in promoting the arts in a pluralistic democracy.

An important first step for the managers of each SAA is to recognize that its constituency comprises all state residents, not just arts aficionados, artists, and nonprofit arts organizations. As public servants, the SAAs should invest in those arts institutions, activities, and artists that produce the greatest possible benefit for state residents by engaging them in rewarding arts experiences.

**Audiences Eagerly Await**

Policies that focus on building individual capacity for arts experiences should find broad support among the American people. According to public surveys, over 75 percent of Americans agree that the arts “are a positive experience in a troubled world,” “give you pure pleasure,” and “give you an uplift from everyday experiences.” Nearly 90 percent of Americans routinely agree that the arts are vital to the good life and that they enhance the quality of communities.

A majority of American parents believe that the arts are as important to their children’s education as reading, math, science, history, or geography. Close to 90 percent of American parents believe that the arts should be taught in school, and 95 percent believe that the arts are important in preparing children for the future. This breadth of public support testifies to the extraordinarily high value our society places on the arts—a view so widespread that it practically calls out for policies that can tap into this strong grassroots support.

The first task at hand is for arts advocates to work with schools, community groups, state agencies, and policymakers to craft a new language to communicate the value of the arts. All of these groups have a shared interest in serving their communities by articulating a common vision of the role and public benefits of the arts.

The overarching goal is to boost the benefits of the arts by extending their reach as vital tools of communication among the citizenry. After all, art alone does not make for a vital arts culture. It is the interplay among artistic creation, aesthetic enjoyment, and public discourse that creates and sustains such a culture. The goal of arts policy should be to bring as many people as possible into engagement with their culture and into communication with one another through meaningful experiences of the arts.

**Related Reading**


since World War II, the United Nations (UN) and the United States have developed distinctive styles of nation-building derived from their very different natures and capabilities. The United Nations is an international organization entirely dependent on its members for the wherewithal to conduct nation-building. The United States is the world’s only superpower, commanding abundant resources of its own and having access to those of many other nations and institutions.

We at the RAND Corporation define nation-building as “the use of armed force in the aftermath of a crisis to promote a transition to democracy.” We have examined eight instances in which the United Nations took the lead in such endeavors and eight in which the United States took the lead.

UN operations have almost always been undermanned and under-resourced, because member states are rarely willing to commit the manpower or the money any prudent military commander would desire. As a result, small and weak UN forces are routinely deployed into what they hope, on the basis of best-case assumptions, will prove to be post-conflict situations. Where such assumptions have proven ill founded, UN forces have had to be reinforced, withdrawn, or, in extreme cases, rescued. Nevertheless, UN nation-building missions have often met with success.

Throughout the 1990s, the United States adopted the opposite approach, basing its plans on worst-case assumptions and relying on overwhelming force to quickly establish a stable environment and to deter resistance from forming. By intervening in numbers and with capabilities that discouraged significant resistance, U.S.-led coalitions achieved progressively higher levels of success throughout the 1990s, from Somalia to Haiti to Bosnia to Kosovo.

But in sizing its stabilization operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the new American leadership abandoned the strategy of overwhelming preponderance, known as the Powell doctrine, in favor of the “small footprint” or “low profile” force posture that had characterized UN operations. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the original American-led forces proved unable to establish a secure environment.

In both countries, the initial U.S. force levels have had to be significantly increased, but in neither country has this yet sufficed to establish adequate levels of public security. In Afghanistan, reduced levels of insurgent violence have been replaced by organized crime on a massive level, with some 60 percent of the entire country’s gross domestic product now coming from illegal drug production. In Iraq, resistance to
a U.S. occupation may be morphing into a sectarian civil conflict.

The low-profile, small-footprint approach to nation-building is much better suited to UN-style peacekeeping than to U.S.-style peace enforcement. The United Nations has an ability to compensate, to some degree at least, for its “hard power” deficit with “soft power” attributes of local impartiality and international legitimacy. The United States does not have such advantages in situations where America itself is a party to the conflict being terminated or where the United States has felt compelled to act without an international mandate.

The United States would be well advised to resume supersizing its nation-building missions and to leave the small-footprint approach to the United Nations. At the same time, the United States would be well advised to emulate the track record of the United Nations in implementing lessons learned from prior operations.

Inputs and Outputs

The UN experience with nation-building began in the newly independent Congo in 1960. Since then, the instances in which UN forces have been used for nation-building have all occurred since the end of the Cold War in 1989, to include Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Eastern Slavonia (in Croatia), Sierra Leone, and East Timor. The U.S. experience began with the occupations of West Germany and Japan in 1945; continued in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo after 1989; and expanded to Afghanistan and Iraq in this decade.

Nation-building can be measured in terms of inputs (such as manpower, money, and time) and outputs (such as casualties, peace, economic growth, and democratization). Success depends not just on the inputs, of course, but also on the wisdom with which the resources are employed and on the susceptibility of the society in question to the changes being fostered. Nevertheless, success depends in some measure on the quantity of international military and police personnel, the quantity of external economic assistance, and the time over which they are applied.

In terms of personnel, military force levels for UN missions ranged from nearly 20,000 troops deployed in the Congo and 16,000 in Cambodia to fewer than 5,000 in Namibia and El Salvador. UN missions have normally fielded much smaller contingents than American-led operations. In absolute numbers, the largest UN contingent was smaller than the smallest U.S. contingent. However, the UN missions in Eastern Slavonia and East Timor did deploy sizable military forces relative to the local populations (see Figure 1).

In terms of money, UN-led operations have tended to be less well supported with international economic assistance than U.S. operations, in both absolute and proportional terms. This reflects the greater access of the United States to donor assistance funds, including its own, and to those of the international financial institutions to which it belongs. In effect, the United States can always ensure the level of funding it deems necessary. The United Nations seldom can. Many UN operations are consequently poorly supported with economic assistance.

In terms of time, UN forces have tended to remain in post-conflict countries for shorter periods than have U.S. forces. In the early 1990s, both UN- and U.S.-led operations tended to be terminated rather quickly, often immediately following the completion of an initial democratic election and the inauguration of a new government. As experience with nation-building grew, both the United Nations and the United States recognized that reconciliation and democratization could require more than a single election. By the end of the decade, both UN- and U.S.-led operations had become more extended.
For each of the eight UN and eight U.S. missions, we measured “outputs,” including casualties suffered, peace sustained, economic growth, and democratization. Casualties suffered are a good measure of the difficulties encountered in a nation-building operation. Missions with high casualty levels have been among the least successful.

Among the UN-led cases, the Congo had the highest number of casualties, reflecting the peace enforcement nature of the operation. The Cambodian operation, lightly manned as a proportion of the population, had the second-highest casualty level, followed by Sierra Leone.

Following the loss of 18 U.S. soldiers in Somalia in 1993, the United States took great precautions to avoid casualties through the rest of the decade. But American sensitivity to casualties diminished in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. At the same time, the United States abandoned its strategy of deploying overwhelming force at the outset of nation-building operations. Significantly lower force-to-population ratios in Afghanistan and Iraq than in Bosnia or Kosovo have been accompanied by much higher casualty levels. There have been more casualties among U.S. forces in Afghanistan than in all American nation-building operations studied going back to 1945, and the casualty levels in Iraq are ten times higher than in Afghanistan.

Peace is the most essential product of nation-building. Without peace, neither economic growth nor democratization is possible. With peace, some level of economic growth becomes almost inevitable, and democratization at least possible. Among the 16 societies studied, 11 remain at peace today, and 5 do not (see Table 1). Of the 8 UN-led cases, 7 are at peace. Of the 8 U.S.-led cases, 4 are at peace; 4 are not—or not yet—at peace.

These categorizations are necessarily provisional, particularly for the ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Peace in Bosnia, Sierra Leone, East Timor, and Kosovo has been sustained, but so far only with the ongoing presence of international peacekeepers.

The key determinant of economic growth seems to be not the level of economic assistance but rather the presence of international peacekeepers and their success in suppressing renewed conflict. As illustrated by the present situation in Iraq, security is a prerequisite for growth, and money is no substitute for adequate security forces. Indeed, security without economic assistance is much more likely to spur economic growth than is economic assistance without security.

The final output is democratization. Table 1 characterizes each of the 16 societies as democratic or not based on ratings from Freedom House and the Polity IV Project at the University of Maryland. Among the UN-led cases, all but the Congo and Cambodia remain democratic, some of course more than others. Among the U.S.-led cases, Germany and Japan are clearly democratic; Bosnia and Kosovo are democratic but still under varying degrees of international administration; Somalia and Haiti are not democratic; and Afghanistan and Iraq are seeking to build democratic structures in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

### UN 6, U.S. 4

UN-led nation-building missions tend to be smaller than American operations, to take place in less demanding circumstances, to be more frequent and therefore more numerous, to have more circumspectly defined objectives, and—at least among the missions

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**Table 1—Peace and Democracy Are the Most Important Measures of Success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or Territory</th>
<th>At Peace</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Slavonia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Afghanistan*</td>
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<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq*</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: The UN’s Role in Nation-Building, 2005.

* Ongoing operation.
studied—to enjoy a higher success rate than U.S.-led efforts. By contrast, U.S.-led nation-building has taken place in more demanding circumstances, required larger forces and stronger mandates, received more economic support, espoused more ambitious objectives, and—at least among the missions studied—fallen short of the objectives more often than has the United Nations.

There are three explanations for the better UN success rate. The first is that a different selection of cases would produce a different result. The second is that the U.S. cases are intrinsically more difficult. The third is that the United Nations has done a better job of learning from its mistakes than has the United States (see Table 2).

Throughout the 1990s, the United States became steadily better at nation-building. The Haitian operation was better managed than Somalia, Bosnia better than Haiti, and Kosovo better than Bosnia. The U.S. learning curve was not sustained into the current decade. The administration that took office in 2001 initially disdained nation-building as an unsuitable activity for U.S. forces. When compelled to engage in such missions, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, the administration sought to break with the strategies and institutional responses that had been honed throughout the 1990s to deal with these challenges.

The United Nations has largely avoided the institutional discontinuities that have marred U.S. performance. Current UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was Undersecretary-General for Peacekeeping and head of the UN peacekeeping operation in Bosnia throughout the first half of the 1990s, when UN nation-building began to burgeon. The United States and other member governments chose him for his current post largely on the basis of his demonstrated skills in managing the UN peacekeeping portfolio. Some of his closest associates from that period moved up with him to the UN front office while others remain in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. As a result, an increasingly experienced cadre of international civil servants has run UN nation-building missions over the past 15 years. Similarly, many UN peacekeeping operations in the field are headed and staffed by veterans of earlier operations.

Whereas the United Nations has gradually built up a cadre of experienced nation-builders, the United States starts each mission more or less from scratch. The United States tends to staff each new operation as if it were its first and destined to be its last. Service in such missions has never been regarded as career enhancing for American military or Foreign Service officers. Recruitment is often a problem, terms tend to be short, and few individuals volunteer for more than one mission.

The UN success rate among the missions studied—seven out of eight societies left peaceful, six out of eight left democratic—substantiates the view that nation-building can be an effective means of terminating conflicts, ensuring against their recurrence, and promoting democracy. The sharp overall decline in deaths from armed conflict around the world over the past decade also points to the efficacy of nation-building. During the 1990s, deaths from armed conflict were averaging over 200,000 per year. Most were in Africa. In 2003, the last year for which figures exist, that number had fallen to 27,000, less than 15 percent of the previous average. Despite the daily dosage of horrific violence displayed in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world has not become a more violent place within the past decade. Rather, the reverse is true. International peacekeeping and nation-building have contributed to this decline in deaths from armed conflicts (see Figure 2).

The cost of UN nation-building tends to look quite modest compared with the cost of larger and more demanding U.S.-led operations. At present, the United States is spending some $4.5 billion per month

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**Figure 2**—The Number of Civil Wars Has Declined Since the Early 1990s as the Number of UN Operations Has Grown

![Graph showing the decline in number of ongoing civil wars and UN peacekeeping operations from 1945 to 2000](source: "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," International Security, Vol. 28, No. 4, Spring 2004, pp. 5–43, James D. Fearon, David D. Laitin.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or Territory</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Peak Troops</th>
<th>Lead Actors</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Lessons Learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>1989–1990</td>
<td>4,493</td>
<td>UN-led</td>
<td>Successful. UN helped ensure peace, democratic development, and economic growth.</td>
<td>Compliant neighbors, a competent government, and a clear end state can contribute to successful outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>1991–1996</td>
<td>4,948</td>
<td>UN-led</td>
<td>Successful. UN negotiated lasting peace settlement and transition to democracy after 12-year civil war.</td>
<td>UN participation in settlement negotiations can facilitate smooth transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>1992–1994</td>
<td>6,576</td>
<td>UN-led</td>
<td>Mostly successful. Transition to independence was peaceful and democratic. But negative economic growth.</td>
<td>Cooperation of neighboring states is critical to success. Incorporation of insurgent groups into political process is key to democratic transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Slavonia</td>
<td>1995–1998</td>
<td>8,248</td>
<td>UN-led</td>
<td>Successful. Well-resourced operation and clear end state contributed to peaceful and democratic transition.</td>
<td>UN can successfully conduct small peace enforcement missions with support from major powers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>1998–present</td>
<td>15,255</td>
<td>UN-led, parallel UK force in support</td>
<td>Initially unsuccessful, then much improved. Parallel British engagement helped stabilize mission.</td>
<td>Lack of support from major power can undermine UN operations. But even a badly compromised mission can be turned around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor</td>
<td>1999–present</td>
<td>8,084</td>
<td>Australian-led entry followed by UN-led peacekeeping mission</td>
<td>Successful. UN oversaw transition to democracy, peace, and economic growth.</td>
<td>Support of neighboring states is important for security. Local actors should be involved as early as possible in governance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** The UN’s Role in Nation-Building, 2005.
to support its military operations in Iraq. This is more than the United Nations spends to run all 17 of its current peacekeeping missions for a year. This is not to suggest that the United Nations could perform the U.S. mission in Iraq more cheaply, or perform it at all. It is to underline that there are 17 other places where the United States will probably not have to intervene because UN troops are doing so at a tiny fraction of the cost of U.S.-led operations.

**Highly Interdependent**

Despite the United Nations’ significant achievements in the field of nation-building, the organization continues to exhibit weaknesses that decades of experience have yet to overcome. Most UN missions are undermanned and underfunded. UN-led military forces are often sized and deployed on the basis of unrealistic best-case assumptions. Troop quality is uneven and has even gotten worse, as many rich Western nations have followed U.S. practice and become less willing to commit their armed forces to UN operations. Police and civil personnel are always of mixed competence. All components of the mission arrive late; police and civil administrators arrive even more slowly than soldiers.

These same weaknesses have been exhibited in the U.S.-led operation in Iraq. There, it was an American-led stabilization force that was deployed on the basis of unrealistic, best-case assumptions and American troops that arrived in inadequate numbers and had to be progressively reinforced as new, unanticipated challenges emerged. There, it was the quality of the U.S.-led coalition’s military contingents that proved distinctly variable, as has been their willingness to take orders and risks and to accept casualties. There, it was American civil administrators who were late to arrive, of mixed competence, and not available in adequate numbers. These weaknesses thus appear to be endemic to nation-building rather than unique to the United Nations.

Assuming adequate consensus among Security Council members on the purpose for any intervention, the United Nations provides the most suitable institutional framework for most nation-building missions. The UN framework offers a comparatively low cost structure, a comparatively high success rate, and the greatest degree of international legitimacy. Other possible options are likely to be either more expensive (such as coalitions led by the African Union, the Organization of American States, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

The more expensive options are best suited to missions that require forced entry or employ more than 20,000 men, which so far has been the effective upper limit for UN operations. The less capable options are suited to missions where there is a regional but not a global consensus for action or where the United States simply does not care enough to foot 25 percent of the bill.

Although the UN and U.S. styles of nation-building are distinguishable, they are also highly interdependent. It is a rare operation in which both are not involved. Both UN and U.S. nation-building efforts presently stand at near historic highs. The United Nations currently has about 60,000 troops deployed in 17 countries. This is a modest expeditionary commitment in comparison with that of the United States, but it exceeds that of any other nation or combination of nations. Demand for UN-led peacekeeping operations nevertheless far exceeds the available supply, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. American armed forces, the world’s most powerful, also find themselves badly overstretched by the demands of such missions.

A decade ago, in the wake of UN and U.S. setbacks in Somalia and Bosnia, nation-building became a term of opprobrium, leading a significant segment of American opinion to reject the whole concept. Ten years later, nation-building appears ever more clearly as a responsibility that neither the United Nations nor the United States can escape. The United Nations and the United States bring different capabilities to the process. Neither is likely to succeed without the other. Both have much to learn not just from their own experience but also from that of each other.

**Related Reading**


Businesses Need Explicit Policies for Using Data from Access Control Cards

By Edward Balkovich

Ed Balkovich is a senior engineer at RAND. His colleagues Tora Bikson and Gordon Bitko contributed to this article.

Swiping access cards in the workplace is commonplace. Millions of us do it everyday without thinking about it. But what actually happens when we do it? When the card is swiped, a tag inside it is “interrogated,” a determination is made about whether to lock or unlock a door, and a record of the transaction is captured in a database. The process raises the question: What do companies do with the data?

One way to find out is to ask employers. We did just that on a small scale, using a sample of six private-sector companies each with 1,500 employees or more. It turns out that such cards are used for far more than just opening doors. Five of the six companies said they used the data to examine the movements of a specific employee (such as investigating alleged work rule violations) and to perform broader safety and security functions, such as refining building evacuation plans.

Despite these uses, only one of the six companies has an explicit policy governing how the access cards (and the data from them) are used. Moreover, all the companies opt to keep the records indefinitely; only one obtains an external audit of system records; and none felt the policy should be managed and overseen by a corporate officer. Also, in all cases, records are linked to other company databases, mostly to human resources, but also, in one case, to medical records. Finally, none of the companies tells its employees that the data collected are used for more than simply opening doors.

While the policies are troubling, businesses seem to be well within their rights to do what they do. In fact, such policies probably fall within the same domain as email or phone monitoring, which firms are also doing to check up on employees. The difference is visibility. For email or phone monitoring, evidence indicates that firms tend to have explicit policies and that those policies are communicated to employees. For access control records, policies are de facto and pretty much invisible.

Why is this the case? Unlike email or phone monitoring, where the primary intent is to monitor employees’ workplace behavior, access control cards are used to provide security by controlling access to, and egress from, buildings. Given this primary intent, businesses may feel they don’t need to have explicit policies and to tell their employees about them. After all, access cards replaced keys and guards, which never required explicit policies for data use. Unfortunately, though, the cards are used for far more than just controlling access.

As is the case for email and phone monitoring, companies should have explicit data-use policies for access control cards and should communicate those policies to their employees. Without an explicit plan, a business runs the risk of making policy “on the fly” and under pressure—like when a police officer requests access to records as part of an investigation that may or may not be initiated by the company. Moreover, having an explicit policy provides an opportunity to establish limits on the use of data, such as a request for their use as evidence in a divorce proceeding that might seek to establish that a spouse was not where he or she had claimed to be.

Access cards, like email and phone monitoring, represent the continuing loss of “practical obscurity” in the workplace—where anonymous behavior and movements were once nearly guaranteed. While access cards may be here to stay, employers have an obligation to make their de facto policies explicit, and employees have a right to know what those policies are.
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