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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

The Real Educational Crisis is Manufactured Educational Crises Peter Smagorinsky

I recently read a document about the need to improve high school writing instruction so as to prepare students better for the expectations that await them in college. Like just about every story written about education these days, the paper opened with the rhetoric of crisis. The argument goes like this: High school teachers aren't doing their jobs well, because 32% of all high school graduates, according to some studies, are performing on writing tests at rates that do not meet the standards for quality writing at the college level. We therefore need to intervene to improve this horrid rate of success, so that kids can better compete in this global economy.

From there, the authors took their own direction. To them, what we need is more university research on the qualities of good writing, so that university researchers can give high school teachers the tools and information to teach writing better. The authors were university researchers who had just such a package to deliver. Consulting fees available upon request.

Others might take this information in a different direction. The problem, they say, is that there's no competition; what we need is an educational open market where teachers pit their students against those of their colleagues in order to beat them out of whatever merit pay, status, job security, or other rewards are available to the victors.

Others say that individual competition is insufficient; what we need is a broader competitive system, where whole schools, or whole districts compete. Or perhaps what we need is charter schools, which as "Waiting for Superman" demonstrated, are far, far superior to ordinary public schools and should become more widely available.

Vouchers also might solve the problem of inadequate high school writing instruction, since kids going to ghetto schools could use their voucher money to transfer to Phillips Exeter Academy, or perhaps the Choate School, and then go to an Ivy League university.

Since class size doesn't matter, at least to Bill Gates, another solution would be to double class size to 40+ students, which will get rid of the bad writing teachers and concentrate all students in the classrooms of high-performing teachers, for whom doubling the number of essays they read will not produce any problems.

Here's another solution, one I see as quite different from what others see as a crisis of incompetence among our nation's teaching of writing: Read the data properly. If 32% of the

nation's high school graduates are not ready for college writing standards, that means that 68% of them are ready. Let's dig a little further. How many college graduates attend college? According to <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgcec.nr0.htm>, 68% of all high school graduates attend college. Furthermore, recent reports detail recent small increases in overall writing test scores.

Well, rats, there goes the crisis. It appears that writing teachers aren't doing such a terrible job at all, if writing scores are to be believed (and I find evaluating writing produced in the 25-minute time periods provided during assessments to be a dubious practice). In fact, one could reasonably argue that writing teachers are doing exactly what is necessary, and doing so with students who are increasingly diverse, who learn writing conventions through social media and other tools that provide them with habits of abbreviation that teachers must address in their teaching, and whose engagement with texts outside school is much more likely to involve images and sounds than words.

Could school be better? Of course it could, and just about every student, teacher, and administrator I know would agree. But focusing on the wrong problems will make things worse, not better. I see the current wave of "reform" focused on problems that are manufactured, and based on solutions with little to no empirical support. One solution would be for the public to be more wary of what edupreneurs are offering for profit as a way to solve problems that, in many cases, either don't exist at all or exist to a far lesser degree than more complex problems that are harder to sort through and figure out.

Public education is complicated stuff. Let's stop looking for easy fixes based on whims, hunches, rumors, misinformation, and the profit motive.