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Mr. John Stossel
Correspondent 20/20
ABC News
7 WEST 66th Street, New York, NY 10023
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Stossel:

We are writing after viewing your 20/20 special on U.S. public education, "Stupid in America." As two respected educational researchers (the recipients of four American Education Studies Association Critics Choice Awards between the two of us), neither of whom believes the U.S. public educational system is free of significant problems, we strongly object to the simplistic, biased, non-research-based and polemical quality of your report. As individuals committed to the improvement of educational opportunities for all children, but even more so for children from low-income backgrounds, we believe that your report was one-sided and failed to present a comprehensive analysis of the complex issues that it addressed. Some examples:

1. Your reporting on school choice presents as fact that students who receive vouchers are more successful than those left behind in the public schools. Further, you assert that vouchers in Milwaukee have improved the Milwaukee public schools. To support this, you interview Caroline Hoxby, whose research has long supported these positions, and no one else. Why did you not interview John Witte, the original evaluator of the Milwaukee voucher program, whose findings are more nuanced and less clearly supporting the positive effects of vouchers than Hoxby's? Why did you not interview Emily Van Dunk, whose Yale

University Press book on Milwaukee vouchers is far more comprehensive and argues that, given the lack of accountability in the Milwaukee voucher program, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make the kind of claims that Hoxby makes? Why did you fail to interview Kim Metcalf, whose Indiana University studies of the Cleveland voucher program found that there was no significant difference in achievement between voucher students and their public school peers, after controlling for socioeconomic and other background variables? After four years of longitudinal research, Metcalf (2004) provides some cautionary observations, including that operational procedures are crucial, that parents cite safety, academic quality and classroom order as the main reasons for parental choice, that public and private school classrooms are similar and that overall conclusions about voucher effects are elusive. The Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers-Newark (of which Sadovnik is Associate Director) is conducting on-going research on school choice that seeks to transcend the highly polemical and ideological positions on the subject exemplified by your report. Its research reports on school choice and other issues are available at <http://ielp.rutgers.edu/>

2. With respect to charter schools, you correctly illustrate that many are highly successful and some are on par with the best public and independent schools in the U.S. One of us (Sadovnik) has examined North Star Academy Charter School in Newark, NJ (which is featured in Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom's book *No Excuses* along with KIPP Academies) and has seen first-hand its successes and the limited number of families who obtain seats for their children through lotteries. However, why did you omit the fact that there are large numbers of failing charter schools throughout the country? Jason Barr at Rutgers-Newark has compared charter and district-operated public schools in all of New Jersey's low-income Abbott districts. He found that there was little or no overall difference in student achievement and that, on the whole, charters schools are among the highest and lowest-performing schools in the state. Gary Miron at Western Michigan has conducted the most statewide studies of charter schools and his views are balanced and thoughtful. Why was he not interviewed?
3. You dismiss the view that money is essential to school improvement, but cite no evidence other than that some charter schools do better for less. You fail to acknowledge the evidence in New Jersey of the effects of the landmark *Abbott v. Burke* decisions on student achievement in the Abbott districts. Contrary to what the state's voucher proponent E3 (Excellent Education for Everyone) has argued, both NJ student achievement data and NAEP data indicate significant improvements in the Abbott districts, especially at the fourth grade level. While such improvement has not occurred at the same rate at the eighth and eleventh grade levels, and significant problems remain to be dealt with in our urban schools, there is reason for optimism. To recognize both the successes achieved and the work yet to be done hardly makes us apologists for what you term the public school monopoly. You interview Jay Greene, long a voucher supporter and critic of the need for increased school spending. Why did you fail to interview Paul Tractenberg, Founding Director of Rutgers-Newark's Institute on Education Law and Policy or David Sciarra, Director of the Education Law Center in Newark (both of whom have decades experience representing children in NJ's urban districts in *Abbott v. Burke*), or Michael Rebell, former Executive Director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity in NYC (now at Teachers College, Columbia University) about the effects of additional spending, particularly in low-income districts?

4. You compare U.S. high school students in NJ (above-average scorers on NAEP exams you say; in fact, NJ students are among the highest scorers on NAEP) with Belgium high school students and, based on the superior achievement of the latter, argue that U.S. public education is far inferior. You fail to mention, however, which student scores are included in this comparison. In NJ and other states the great majority of our students are in academic high schools; by comparison, in most European countries including Belgium, by high school many students have been tracked into non-academic schools and their test results are not included in international comparisons. That is why high school test comparisons fail to give a true picture and disadvantage the U.S. Fourth and eighth grade NAEP results are better for international comparisons. Nonetheless, you are absolutely correct that, even at those levels, U.S. students do not compare favorably in international comparisons, even with necessary statistical controls. The reasons are not solely found within schools, but are also found in families, communities and in a culture that has historically and continues to be anti-intellectual. Why did you not interview some experts on international comparisons who would have provided a more comprehensive analysis such as David Baker and Gerald LeTendre at Penn State, whose new book *National Differences, Global Similarities: World Culture and the Future of Schooling*, provides a balanced discussion of such international educational issues. Or Gerald Bracey who has long argued in the pages of *Educational Researcher*, an official journal of the American Educational Research Association, of the problems in making the argument you make? Or David Berliner, former Dean of Education at Arizona State University, one of the most respected educational researchers in the U.S. and co-author with Bruce Biddle of *The Manufactured Crisis* (1995), which provides a very different perspective on the crisis in U.S. education than your report does?
5. The individuals you have interviewed are long-time advocates of school choice and vouchers or they are affiliated with the Center for Education Reform, the leading voucher and choice organization in the U.S. Why did you not interview individuals with a more balanced position on school choice such as Henry Levin, Director of the Institute on the Study of School Privatization at Teachers College, Columbia University and one of the leading economists of education in the U.S. or Peter W. Cookson, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Lewis and Clark College, one of the leading sociologists of education in the U.S.? You assert that all other countries have the type of school choice you want: this is simply not true as school choice programs internationally are different. They also have not all had the positive effects your report implies. Why did you not interview Helen Ladd at Duke University and Ted Fiske, former NY Times education writer, whose work on New Zealand does not support your claims? Or Geoffrey Walford at the University of Oxford University and Geoff Whitty, Director of the Institute of Education at the University of London, whose separate works on international school choice also provide results contrary to your claims? Or David Plank at Michigan State whose work on international school choice presents a more objective and complex story? Or Martin Carnoy of Stanford University whose work on the effects of tuition vouchers in Chile does not support the claim that competition necessarily improves education for low-income children?
6. Finally, your sarcastic tone about special education and testing experts in regard to the high school student who could not read was an insult to the teachers and parents of children with special needs. As the parent and stepparent of an adult with profound developmental disabilities, we are acutely aware of the problems parents encounter with having schools meet their children's needs. However, your cynical tone suggested that special education

professionals are useless, and students and their parents are their victims. You use one instance, albeit a serious one, to make this case. Obviously this is simplistic and an insult to all of the many outstanding professionals who have helped our daughter over the years.

The journalistic bias of your report suggests that all of the above questions are rhetorical and that interviewing those with evidence contrary to your conclusions would have muddied the waters and made your critique of U.S. public education less credible. At the very least you should make your viewers aware of your subjective ideological perspective and that there are serious researchers and educational reformers who disagree with your conclusions. Rather than do this, you present Randi Weingarten, who represents an official union position, and teachers defending themselves as the alternative. This is just bad journalism and, given the millions of viewers who watch 20/20, you have done a disservice to those of us who take improving our nation's public schools seriously and devote our lives to it. You end by saying that you hope you have created the context for debate. If you are serious about this, you should invite some of the individuals listed above to debate these issues in a future edition of 20/20.

We do thank you, however, for providing this documentary for use in our education courses at Rutgers and CCNY. We will use it, along with more objective documentaries such as those by John Merrow and Hendrik Smith of PBS, to help our students understand the complexity of educational problems and their solutions. We will use yours to illustrate the polemical and ideological nature of many educational debates and ask our students to research your claims. For pedagogical purposes, a professor could not ask for more; your viewers deserve better.

Sincerely,

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