

Chapter 1

School Reform and Educational Improvement Challenges and Responses

Urban schools enroll one-fourth of American students who represent one-third of all low-income students and 43 percent of minority students.¹ Three-fourths of central city students are African American or Hispanic, and 42 percent are eligible for lunch subsidies. Poor and minority students are the majority in many American cities. Moreover, poverty is concentrated: those who are poor live together, apart from others who are better off, and the concentrated poor are particularly likely to be black. Black children represent 15 percent of the children in the country but make up 63 percent of children in extremely poor neighborhoods (where at least 40 percent of residents are poor) in the seventy-five largest American cities. Just over half of urban students attend schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, while less than one-fourth of students elsewhere do so.

Although city schools face especially challenging students, on average, urban districts spend about 90 percent of what other districts do per pupil. Two-thirds of central city school buildings have structural inadequacies, compared to a little over half in suburban and rural areas. Urban school districts have more difficulty attracting qualified teachers than other districts, and they are more likely to have unfilled positions. One result is that urban students are especially likely to encounter teachers who are not fully licensed. Urban teachers are much more likely than their counterparts to stay away from school. For example, 12 percent of urban eighth graders attend schools where officials consider teacher absenteeism a problem, compared to only 5 percent elsewhere. Urban students often encounter unchallenging curricula. Many classes emphasize low-level material and rote learning. Urban schools have far fewer advanced courses than other schools.

Urban schools are larger, on average, than suburban and rural schools. Physical violence is high and considerably higher than in nonurban schools. In New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Ohio, for instance, 60 to 70 percent of teachers in urban districts characterized physical conflicts as being moderate or serious problems, compared to about 25 percent in other districts. Urban students often miss class. For example, nearly one-third of urban eighth graders attend schools where officials consider their absenteeism a problem, compared to less than one fourth of eighth graders elsewhere.

Students who attend city schools do not do as well on standardized tests as other students. Only about 40 percent of urban students score at the “basic” level on reading, mathematics, and science tests in the U. S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress, compared to about 65 percent of nonurban students. Urban students attending schools where the majority of students are poor do even worse compared to nonurban students in high-poverty schools. Only about 25 to 30 percent of the urban students perform at “basic” levels, compared to twice as many of their counterparts. In a number of states, the “urban effect” is greater. In Maryland, for example, about 10 percent of urban students perform at a “basic” level in eighth-grade mathematics or science, compared to approximately 60 percent of nonurban students.

A simple summary is this: American urban schools are not educating their students, who, by and large, are children of the nation’s poor and racial and ethnic minorities. These conditions help keep many African Americans and Hispanics poor, and they help make poverty hereditary. They make it impossible for American cities to reproduce themselves intellectually.

The consequences are numbingly familiar. Many children who live in the cities do not learn what they must know to be productive, satisfied, well-paid workers. They lack the reading, mathematics, and communication skills necessary for jobs that others value and that bring self-respect. They do not look forward to work, because they do not expect much of it. There is little place for them in the postindustrial service economy, and they know it.

They are unprepared for civic activity. They learn little about current events, and they care little about events beyond their immediate surroundings. They lack the skills for deliberating and making decisions in public meetings or developing community organizations. They learn from their conditions and the lives of the adults around them that the larger forces that move society are unlikely to respond to their efforts. They find it hard to see how voting would move them out of poverty, get them decent housing, or provide schools where they really learn. They do not expect to exercise political power.

These children are even unprepared to become parents, as many will be before they graduate from high school. While most have parents who struggle to raise them well, many do not see their parents as successful models to imitate, have the confidence that they can be good parents, or possess the skills

needed for the constant effort and trying moments of raising children. Poor children, when they become parents, will have to do what their parents could not in order to help their children find better positions than their own.

Of course, there are exceptions—resilient children and families who overcome the obstacles of poverty (Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif 1998; Maton, Greene, Hrabowski, and Greif 2002; Nettles and Pleck 1994). They know and do more than many from more fortunate circumstances. They are inspiring and deserve recognition. And, yet, they are the exceptions.

This is an educational crisis, but it is not just a problem of the schools. The schools cannot be blamed for all of this, nor can they fix it all. For that matter, the urban crisis is not caused by cities, and it too cannot be solved by cities alone. If we look broadly at the field of education, to take note of everything that significantly influences whether children are ready and motivated to learn, whether they are taught well, whether they learn, and whether their learning brings fitting rewards, we see far more than schools. Whether a young child in an inner-city neighborhood grows up well educated depends, for example, on the economy and labor market, the housing market, race relations, the political culture, tax policy, public transportation, the police and the criminal justice system, and medical care and insurance.

To recite this list is not to let schools or families off the hook for children's educational success, but if we consider how these institutions automatically work well for the middle class, not to mention those better off, we glimpse how much must be done to improve educational opportunities for children growing up in the cities. Improving education is not just a matter of reforming schools. That effort alone can only fail, because it defines the problem so that it cannot be solved. Improving education depends on changing these other institutions as well.

What is discouraging about this diagnosis is that so many of the institutions that matter are geographically and politically distant from the cities. School systems alone can do little about them, but defining the challenge in that way is a step toward addressing it: those who govern the schools must make common cause with allies who can offer leverage with other institutions.

This book examines possibilities for action in this larger territory, which we will call the "education field." Any interventions that significantly improve children's educational opportunities, achievements, or rewards will be subsumed under the heading "educational improvement." Educational improvement includes "school reform," a phrase that we will use more or less conventionally to refer to accomplishments in making teaching and learning at school more fruitful. The term does not imply that schools are terrible, nor does it mean that intervention must be dramatic. It does not require that changes "restructure" schools, or that they be "schoolwide," but only that they bring about some improvement of significance.

APPROACHES TO REFORM

Two Functions of School Systems

We can distinguish two, related functions of school systems.² One, which may be called “technical,” includes the activities concerned with teaching and learning. Focused on the classroom, it consists of actions intended to draw on knowledge about teaching, learning, and specific subjects in order to stimulate and enable children to develop their intellectual capacities, to become curious, to master subjects, and to act knowledgeably. We sometimes simplistically characterize this process as the transmission of knowledge, but we should speak of the communication, construction, and reconstruction of knowledge, with attention to the social relations in which this effort takes place. The technical function of schooling is directed toward individual students, who gain the ability to use knowledge.

The general public and organizations in the larger society want assurance that the schools are succeeding in their technical functions, transforming young children into knowledgeable near-adults. Managing relations with these constituents is school systems’ second function, which can be called “institutional.” Because few outsiders see, and fewer understand, the technical work in classrooms, most rely instead on symbolic indications that teachers are teaching and children are learning. In place of direct observation of the process and accomplishments of education, schools offer the public a ritual classification of people, places, and activities in education and then present signs that students move appropriately through the classifications.

To take familiar examples: schools classify grades and levels of instruction, along with discrete subject matters, so that it is conventional to speak of “third-grade mathematics” or “high school English.” Schools also classify students not only by grade but also by abilities, from variations within a normal range to the “gifted and talented” and those with “learning disabilities.” Schools classify students in terms of their apparent interests and aims, from the college bound to those in “general,” “vocational,” “business,” or other tracks. Schools classify teachers in terms of qualifications to teach subjects, grades, and students. Schools certify progress quantitatively in terms of “units” and qualitatively in terms of grades and test scores.

When schools certify their graduates credibly, the larger society is satisfied that teachers have taught students the requisite knowledge. Significantly, while the technical activities of schooling vary from classroom to classroom, the institutional activities are uniform across the nation. What matters with the institutional activities is whether outsiders believe that a school system is organized in such a way as to produce educated graduates,

not—to state the contrast extremely—whether students actually learn anything in classrooms.

Two Approaches to Reform

Technical Approaches and Instruction

Most current proposals for school reform focus on one of these two functions. Some target school systems' technical activities, with an emphasis on introducing new knowledge into the schools. They focus on curriculum and pedagogy, but they include other practices and means of organizing schools or classrooms that may influence teachers' teaching or children's behavior or learning. Because of the specialized understanding of the educational processes required, these proposals usually originate with professional educators, most often in universities.

Examples include the Accelerated Schools that enrich offerings for at-risk youth, the Coalition for Essential Schools' principles for active learning, tightly scripted Direct Instruction in reading, and Success for All's highly structured reading curriculum. Those who take this approach speak of "best practices," programs that appear effective elsewhere that could be implemented with good results locally (e.g., National Diffusion Network 1994). Some researchers add that a good instructional program must be supported by school leadership and a collaborative climate. They characterize schools that succeed in this way as "effective schools" (e.g., Edmonds 1979; Purkey and Smith 1983). Whether focusing on instruction or climate, this group of reformers is interested in "replicating" proven programs.

These proposals aim to improve education by introducing more good knowledge into use. The proposals build on four assumptions. The first is that education is essentially a process by which teachers help students gain knowledge. For many reformers, social relations and classroom milieu, as well as students' family and community ties, matter far less than classroom cognitive conditions. The second assumption is that teachers are interested primarily in putting the best available knowledge to use in teaching their students—and that school systems are organized to encourage and permit teachers to discover and use good knowledge. The third assumption is that virtually any teacher, perhaps with some coaching, can readily make use of new knowledge, implementing it in his or her practice. The fourth assumption, crucial to these proposals, is that there is universally, or at least widely, applicable knowledge that, if teachers adopted it, they could use to teach most, if not all, of their students considerably better than at present.

This approach has produced useful innovations (e.g., Herman et al. 1999), but the clearest lesson of limited evaluation is that context matters. What

works in one classroom or school does not necessarily work elsewhere. These reformers tend to explain their limited success in three ways. First, central system administrations bureaucratically constrain principals and teachers from innovating and implementing reforms. Second, pressures for “accountability” force teachers to abandon reform practices that do not lead to higher test scores. Third, schools lack the resources to implement reforms properly. These explanations carry weight, but they downplay questions about whether programs fit students, whether school staff are invested in a particular model, and whether teachers have the ability to carry out a specific reform.

Institutional Approaches and Structure

In contrast to this focus on the technical activities of classrooms, a second set of reform proposals emphasizes the institutional structure of school systems. They give less specific attention to classrooms and teachers and implicitly trust educators less. By and large, these are the work of people who are not trained educators and who have a limited understanding of teaching and learning; most of these reformers treat classrooms as black boxes. They assume that by manipulating relationships between schools and managers or constituencies they can influence children’s learning or, perhaps the next closest thing, parental and public satisfaction with the schools. That is the essence of the institutional function of schools.

One variant of this approach is managerial, articulated, for example, by those from the corporate sector who talk about “managing school systems better.” They prefer a bureaucratic model of organization, manifested in the addition of responsibilities, lines of accountability, and managers to existing central administrations, with a focus on explicit “production goals,” in the form of test scores. Although some school boards adopt specific instructional models as the prescribed “production process,” others do not, largely because they have little educational expertise. The main assumption of the managerial approach is that principals and teachers already have the knowledge, ability, and resources to educate students, that what they need to do more and better is clear expectations, monitoring, and sanctions. Thus periodic testing accompanies test score goals, and school administrations, often at the state level, threaten to take over or to otherwise punish schools that fail to meet goals.

In contrast to the centralizing impulse in the managerial reforms, another variant of the institutional approach proposes setting schools loose to face myriad parents who would have a “choice” of schools in a “market” (e.g., Chubb and Moe 1990; Henig 1994; Peterson and Hassel 1998; Rasell and Rothstein 1993). Although some managerial reformers may impose instructional programs on schools, the market approach is not concerned with the details of instruction; they are a matter of “consumer satisfaction,” left to parents in choosing schools. The common principle in choice proposals is to

create or tighten connections between schools and parents and to loosen or sever ties between schools and system boards and administrators. Closest to current school arrangements is “public schools of choice,” of which magnet schools are an example, where parents can choose among public schools (Clinchy 2000; Fantini 1973; Meier 1995). Charter schools operate with greater autonomy from system rules (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000; Sarason 1998). Private schools round off the continuum.

The central assumption is that schools that are “accountable” to families through a “market” will educate children well, because the alternative is to lose “customers” and go out of existence. This assumption depends on others. The first is that parents have real choices—not only do they find alternative programs that meet their standards for their children’s education, but also there is room for their children in these programs, and they can afford to send them. This assumption is mingled with a second, that parents have adequate knowledge about particular schools, their children’s learning needs, and education to make reasonable choices about what suits their children. Gaining this knowledge requires that parents have the expertise and time to gather and analyze new information. It depends as well on schools’ revealing sophisticated information about their programs’ successes and failures and students’ performances. These assumptions require a third, that school staff can balance parental preferences with educational standards in a way that allows them to change their schools to respond to new preferences. Fourth, some reformers assume that parents who choose their children’s schools will have incentives and opportunities to involve themselves in the schools to know what the school is doing and to make sure it serves their children. Such involvement depends on parents’ discretionary time and formal education, as well as on teachers’ willingness to open up their classrooms.

Under “market” arrangements, there is no single standard of educational success. Different schools may pursue different goals, and different parents may evaluate the same school in different terms. Although some parents measure schools in terms of test scores, others base their “market choices” on other criteria. The scant research on choice approaches reinforces the research on instructional reforms: context matters. Choice per se does not produce educational improvement for all participating students (Henig 1994). Even so, many parents are happier than when their children were in assigned public schools. That is a measure of the reforms’ success in terms of schools’ institutional functions.

Community Approaches

A third group of reform proposals, which we will call “community approaches,” consists of hybrids. What they have in common is an emphasis on connecting schools and communities and, for the most part, proponents’

grassroots ties. Because they focus on relationships and structure, community approaches might be considered a variant of the institutional approach. They superficially resemble choice proposals in tying schools to families.

However, most community proposals differ from many choice proposals in four ways. First, rather than portraying individual families as the relevant actors, they are concerned with communities, at least communities of parents. Second, rather than considering schooling a “good” that a “consumer” “chooses” in the “market,” this approach regards a school as an institution that is part of a community as a social, cultural, and political entity. One implication is that the relationship entails more commitment of the parties to one another than does a market transaction. Another is that community approaches expect schools not only to educate individual children but also to help develop communities, for example, by attracting families with children and preparing a skilled workforce. Third, most community advocates can be comfortable with the public schools, as long as they are connected to the community. Small, community-based public schools would satisfy proponents of both the community approach and the choice approach (e.g., Bryk et al. 1998; Clinchy 2000; Meier 1995). Fourth, because public school staff may resist community involvement, some community approaches take an oppositional stance toward schools, or at least are wary of them, whereas the choice rhetoric emphasizes compatibility of school and parental interests.

Some community approaches differ from most, if not all, choice proposals in a basic way, by recognizing parents as children’s ongoing teachers, along with such others as youth workers, coaches, and clergy, in addition to professional educators. These reformers are interested in organizing formal and informal teachers to teach children academic, social, cultural, and other knowledge and skills (Honig, Kahne, and McLaughlin 2001).

Further, some community approaches fundamentally differ from institutional approaches generally, as well as technical approaches, by aiming to do more than change schools or family relations with schools; they want to improve community conditions that affect families, children, and schools. They assume that educators can teach more effectively when communities are secure, when families have resources to raise children and prepare them for schooling, and when children can foresee successful adult roles. Advocates of this approach are interested, for example, in providing social, psychological, and financial support for families, helping parents raise children, finding good housing for families, and getting parents employment. This approach can be seen as part of general social reform, with a focus on supporting child development and education.

Community approaches focus on schools’ institutional functions by assuming that parents actively involved with a school will help and push it to operate in ways that give them the confidence that their children are learning.

In addition, some of these reformers emphasize schools' technical functions, assuming that active collaboration between parents and professional educators will help teach more effectively. James Comer's School Development Program, which gives parents active planning and decision-making roles, is a community approach that centers on teaching and learning.

Community approaches share some assumptions of choice approaches. They assume that parents have the time and skill to get the knowledge to make reasonable judgments about school quality, and they assume that schools are willing, or can be persuaded, to inform parents about programs and students. In addition, they assume that parents have the time and skill to take active roles at school—not just volunteering for nonprofessional tasks but also participating in planning and decision making, and even teaching children—and that schools are willing, or can be prodded, to allow parents to do so. Crucially, community approaches assume that parents have the time and skill to organize and persuade school staff to work with them. To draw a clear contrast, choice approaches assume that parents can make informed individual choices, whereas community approaches assume that parents can take knowledgeable, collective action.

When aiming for educational improvement through community change, these approaches make additional assumptions. They assume that parents can be persuaded and helped to improve the ways they raise children. They assume that organized parents can persuade local institutions to join forces with them, to help develop social programs, and to form partnerships with schools. Thus they assume that businesses, churches, and social agencies can be interested in helping families and children or in working with schools. Fundamentally, they assume that parents at home or in alliance with others can have an impact on the conditions that influence children's development and education.

There is no systematic research on such wide-ranging community approaches. However, a "new generation of evidence" shows that parental involvement in children's education is associated with improvements in students' behavior and academic performance (Henderson and Berla 1994; Honig, Kahne, and McLaughlin 2001). Evaluations of child and family programs provide evidence of "social programs that work" (Crane 1998; Schorr 1989, 1997).

A CASE OF THE COMMUNITY APPROACH

This book examines the Southeast Education Task Force, a Baltimore project that takes the community approach to reforming schools and improving children's education. As school reform, the initiative is a hybrid of institutional and technical approaches, whereby parents and community activists have organ-

ized to help neighborhood schools teach their children better. As we will see, parents and community activists find it much easier to establish external relationships with schools and the school system than to influence instruction directly. Moreover, despite skepticism about the validity of test scores, most are willing to accept these institutional markers of success in lieu of more sophisticated, but less accessible, knowledge of children's learning.

At the same time, the project aims to change community conditions to give more support for children's education and growth. The initiative develops resources for parents to raise their children and prepare them for school, and for children to deal with problems that get in the way of learning. The project encourages partnerships between schools and local institutions, not just to assist the schools but also to connect them more closely to the community and to change educators' views of their mission. As we will see, so many constantly changing conditions affect children that even well-planned and executed programs have limited impact on their development.

The Task Force began as a partnership of community activists and university faculty to find ways to improve schools sufficiently to revitalize a declining blue-collar neighborhood. With little precedent, they set out to create a community-based organization that would organize and plan with schools to improve children's education. While teachers and principals tried to improve instruction in school, the Task Force would aid families and improve community conditions.

From the start, they faced two challenges. The first, which we will call "attachment," was whether they could assemble enough community members interested in the schools to form an organization capable of action and, then, whether this group could form working alliances with schools and the system administration. The second challenge, of knowledge, was whether the organization could learn enough about schools and education to plan and implement projects that might realistically improve conditions. They had to prove that community members who were not professional educators could do anything that mattered to improve the schools or to improve children's education. How could they affect the conditions described at the beginning of this chapter?

Part 1 identifies the issues, sets the stage, and introduces the cast of characters. Following this chapter on school reform and educational improvement, chapter 2 presents a conceptual framework for thinking about attachment and knowledge. Chapter 3 focuses on a crucial type of attachment, parental involvement in schools and education, while chapter 4 describes the Baltimore setting and Task Force origins.

Parts 2 through 5 organize the Task Force's history in terms of a sequence of themes. Chapter 5 in part 2 describes how a core group started by conducting research on people and issues before setting up an organization.

Part 3 turns to activities for generating and sustaining participation. Chapter 6 examines efforts to recruit and keep members for the new Task Force, chapter 7 discusses how the Task Force tried to engage the school system, and chapter 8 describes activities to extend community involvement by organizing parents and forming church-school partnerships.

Part 4 explains how the Task Force then turned to action. Chapter 9 describes projects that resulted from early interests in doing something, and chapter 10 examines a sophisticated interorganizational network that influenced Baltimore's Empowerment Zone education initiative.

Part 5 presents the Task Force's return to research to improve action. Chapter 11 looks at how participants learned about education, the school system, and community intervention from their activities and how they used this knowledge to develop an education plan, while chapter 12 describes research projects used for planning with the school system.

Chapter 13 in part 6 discusses the money needed for community action and the implications of financial dependency for a community organization.

Part 7 analyzes tensions between attachment and knowledge in different contexts. Chapter 14 looks at the challenges faced by university-community partnerships, chapter 15 examines the difficulty of connecting communities and schools, and chapter 16 describes the tensions in the roles of individuals who form the personal connections between organizations in networks.

Part 8 draws lessons and conclusions from the case. Chapter 17 discusses the difficulty of evaluating community action and assesses the Task Force, while chapter 18 draws conclusions regarding the potential for community action to reform schools or to improve education.