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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the recent two decades of school reform efforts and focuses on application of the Effective Schools movement's ideas in urban, economically depressed communities. Five common characteristics of effective schools are teacher and other staff who believe that all children can learn; safe, orderly, and work-oriented environments; principals who are instructional leaders; involved parents; and regular monitoring and feedback on academic progress. Transforming these principles into practice requires challenging instruction and demanding teachers. An evaluation of eight highly effective high schools in four states found that common characteristics included: (1) teachers describing their schools as pleasant environments where goals and rules were well articulated; (2) low teacher turnover rates; (3) principals who were instructional leaders; (4) teachers who felt that they had a meaningful role in school decision-making; (5) teachers who felt the support of administrators, parents, and community; (6) students who were positive about the school's learning and social atmosphere; (7) parents who were proud of the school and praised teachers and principals; and (8) community support provided in the form of college scholarships and sponsorship of school activities. The paper concludes that schools in inner-city communities that serve large numbers of non-white children can be as effective as any other school. (Contains 28 references.) (JB)

Occasional Paper #3

Improving Urban Schools in Inner-City Communities

by

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Introduction

Urban school systems across America face many challenges today -- lack of adequate financial support, lack of confidence in the public, and a combination of dissatisfaction and apathy among parents. To address some of these issues, school reform efforts have been developed and implemented in a number of school districts. However, the academic performance of students is still extremely low and, in many instances, teacher morale has declined rather than increased as a result of these initiatives. Of even greater importance is the fact that those students who need the most assistance, many of whom are enrolled in schools with few resources, are not receiving adequate attention from educational leaders.

In an attempt to heighten the public's recognition of schools' increasing desire to become more accountable, emphasis has been placed on the creation of magnet schools and gifted and talented programs, which have the underlying purposes of attracting more academically talented, and also white students, back to public schools. However, the establishment of these types of schools has not increased educational opportunities for the masses of students but instead has widened the segregation gap between students of differing academic abilities, especially those who come from varied socioeconomic strata. If public schools are to effectively serve all children, more attention must be devoted to those youth who live and attend schools in central city areas. These are the schools where resources are most limited, where a sense of hopelessness too often supersedes the possibility that dreams and aspirations can be attained, and where the apathy and dissatisfaction of some professional educators lead to their early departure from the teaching profession. To remedy this situation, changes in curricula, variations in modes of instructional delivery, strategies to boost academic achievement and greater involvement by parents in the education of their children are required. Moreover, this author believes that more schools, regardless of their locations and the student populations which they serve, can be successful; and it is for the reason that this paper is primarily concerned with how schools in urban and inner-city areas can become more effective.

School Inequality in America

In a recently published book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, educator and social activist Jonathan Kozol (1991) describes the startling differences that exist within and between school districts across this country. His review of schools in more than 30 locales describes dilapidated buildings with inadequate plumbing; classrooms that have few textbooks and basic educational supplies; schools without libraries, lunchrooms or even custodians; and educational systems with high student and teacher absenteeism, growing numbers of uncertified teachers, less than satisfactory academic performance by students, and other signs of systems that are in desperate need of repair.

Kozol's primary purpose, however, is not to paint this negative portrait of school facilities, but rather to demonstrate how financially unequal schools truly are today and how racially separate they have become over the last three and one-half decades. Financial inequality is most evident in the disparity of per pupil expenditures between and within school districts. Because these allocations are dependent on municipal and state funding formulas, as well as property tax values, many urban areas provide barely less than half of what suburban districts can on educational instruction. In New York City, for example, per pupil costs in 1989-90 were $7,299 compared to $15,084 in Manhassett, Long Island. In Chicago in 1988-89 those same costs were $5,265 per child compared to $8,823 in a suburban school. Per-pupil costs also vary within and between school districts across the country since, for example, schools serving larger numbers of special education students usually receive more funds for the educational needs of those pupils.

In New Orleans, the largest of 66 school districts in Louisiana, the city school district receives funds through a Minimum Foundation Formula that does not provide any special funding because of its urban population. Moreover, the local millage which is obtained from a small share of property owners does not significantly increase the district's annual budget. Thus, as noted by the local superintendent (Williams, 1992), it should not be surprising that in 1992 only two of the system's 123 school buildings met all health, safety and fire codes; 234 classes were taught in halls, converted closets and

stairwells because of overcrowding, and the system was 2000 desks short; there were only 61 nurses for 80,000 students; and the statewide formula allotted only $27 per student for textbooks, library books, paper, chalk, and other school supplies, textbooks, and instructional materials. Rural schools across the state, as well as nationally, face even greater obstacles with their limited staffs and significantly high numbers of poor children. It is obvious from these examples that separate and unequal schools still predominate almost forty years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* which eliminated educational segregation. Unfortunately the major losers are urban youth who must daily cope with life in desolate areas, surrounded by poverty, crime, and fear.

What is even more depressing is the fact that most politicians, civic leaders and citizens do not believe that this situation can be turned around As Kozol cites in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), an official of the New York City Board of Education responded to a report on school inequality by the Community Service Society (CSS), saying "that there is 'no point in putting further money into some poor districts' because he believed, 'new teachers would not stay there.'" The CSS report echoes the perception of many individuals that "poor districts are beyond help" and sends the message that resources would be "wasted on poor children." Kozol adds: "Children hear and understand this theme—they are poor investments—and behave accordingly. If society's resources would be wasted on their destinies, perhaps their own determination would be wasted too" (p. 99).

There is no question that most schools need more financial support, but more money is not the sole answer to this malaise. Studies of schools that have been identified as "effective" by numerous researchers have indicated that there are critical common factors characterizing those educational institutions which successfully educate children. Strategic plans must be developed now so that some of those characteristics can be replicated in schools in inner-city communities. The remainder of this paper briefly summarizes some of those factors, as well as aspects of "the effective schools movement," so that prescriptions can be applied to local settings. Throughout the following discussion is the important tenet that all children can learn, regardless of their race and irrespective of their socioeconomic status.

The Effective Schools Movement

Over the last twenty-five years, a plethora of research has been conducted in an attempt to identify common characteristics which contribute to the effectiveness of schools. Leading this work since the early 1970s have been Michigan State University researchers Wilbur Brookover and Lawrence Lezotte. Lezotte (1986) has divided the development of this "movement" into four "critical" periods: 1966-76, 1976-1980, 1980-83 and 1983 to the present (Mace-Matluck, 1987). The early period is characterized by the well-known, federally funded Coleman study (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfield & York, 1966) which evaluated the distribution of educational resources by race and the equality of educational opportunities in public schools. The major finding from this group's work was that schools in black and white communities had essentially the same resources available to them, but black students' performance was below that of whites. Coleman and his associates concluded that schools had little impact on children's academic achievement. Mace-Matluck (1987) notes that research conducted by Jencks and his colleagues (1972) corroborated Coleman's findings as he asserted that educational inequities were not caused by inequality of income and social class. These conclusions, in spite of their factual inaccuracy, sparked heated discussions among educators in the late 1960s and early 1970s and led to the development of numerous federally-funded and successful compensatory education programs.

The next period, 1976-80, included several important case studies by Brookover, Lezotte and other associates which identified some of the common characteristics of "effective schools." Some of these studies are discussed in the next section of this paper. The epoch of 1980-1983 in this "effective schools movement" was devoted to the application of some of the research findings to school settings, notably by the late Ronald Edmonds in New York City (1979a; 1979b; 1981). The final period, which began in 1983 and continues to the present day, was stimulated by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the U.S. Department of Education as state and local school systems developed numerous academic reform efforts in response to the National Commission on Excellence in Education's recommendations.

What is an "Effective School?"

Brookover (1985) has described an "effective school" as one "in which essentially all students, regardless of socioeconomic or racial family background, achieve at acceptable levels of mastery" (p. 263). Based upon a variety of studies in different communities (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer & Wisenbaker, 1979; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston & Smith, 1979; Glenn, 1981; Levine & Stark, 1981; Venezky & Winfield, 1979), Brookover was able to identify five common characteristics of effective schools. These are:

1. Teachers and other members of the professional staff believe that all children can learn and they set high expectations and standards of achievement for them. Similarly, students have a high self-concept of academic ability and a low sense of academic futility.

2. Schools must have a safe, orderly and work-oriented learning environment whereby effective school and classroom discipline is established.

3. The principal is the instructional leader who promotes effective instruction and high achievement for all students. Additionally, patterns of rewards are established for both students and the professional staff to promote high achievement.

4. Parents are actively involved in the school.

5. Academic progress is constantly monitored and regular feedback is provided to students.

While Brookover's correlates of "effective schools" seem simplistic, they do provide a framework to address some of the essential ingredients that are needed to make schools more effective. His focus on the school's ideology, its organizational structure, and instructional practices are critical elements to bringing about positive educational change. Even though criticisms exist about the measures which have been used to identify an effective school (i.e., its focus on outcomes-based data and high percentages of academic performers on certain standardized tests), as well as its unequal comparisons of schools and the students who are enrolled there (Sizemore, 1985), the above principles do provide a foundation to develop useful strategies which can improve the success of children in inner-city schools.

Transforming "Effective Schools" Principles into Practice

In order to make schools more effective, academic achievement is indeed the most important factor which must be focused on; but its success is heavily dependent on challenging instruction and demanding teachers. Brookover (1985) clearly emphasizes the latter assertion when he states that the three overarching areas which summarize the common characteristics, namely, ideology, organizational structure, and instructional practice:

> "...are not discreet characteristics. Rather, they are a social system of interacting characteristics. The teachers in schools without these kinds of characteristics are not likely to set the same objectives for all students, to expect all of the students to master the basic objectives, or to provide the kind of instruction that is likely to result in high levels of achievement by all of the students. Likewise, the introduction of a presumable effective instructional program is not likely to produce high levels of performance among students whom the teachers believe are unable to learn well and whom the school has classified as slow and placed in some type of inferior group" (p. 266).

Brookover's claims regarding teacher and student expectations were verified recently in a 1988 study directed by this author on the educational problems of black males in the New Orleans Public School System (Garibaldi, 1988). One of the findings, for example, showed that 60 percent of 4,500 male and female students who were surveyed indicated that their teachers did not push them hard enough and did not set high expectations for them. On the other hand, over half of the teachers did not believe that many of their black male students would go to college. Those results verify the disconcerting belief of some teachers that all children cannot (or do not) want to learn and indicates that some teachers have succumbed to self-fulfilling prophecies. What was of even greater concern was the fact that 60 percent of the teachers in the sample taught in the elementary grades, 70 percent had ten or more years of experience, and 65 percent of them were African-American.

Promoting good study habits and developing learning goals and aspirations in the early grades are extremely important if students are expected to succeed in school. Much national data show that students, especially minority youngsters, regress academically in such essential skills as reading and math at the end of the third grade. More than a perception gap exists, but also a form of "social distance" whereby educators may mistakenly believe that children cannot handle challenging academic work. This issue deserves serious attention in all local communities so that the attitudes of the few, if not the many, who teach children every day can be changed. This author, nevertheless, is a firm believer that most veteran teachers are committed to their work but the daily obstacles of inadequate resources, squalid learning conditions as well as their low pay does little to boost their morale.

A Qualitative Study of Effective High Schools

Much can be learned from well-functioning schools in the nation's school districts. Five years ago, this author published a paper on "effective high schools" based on visits to eight schools in four different states (three urban, four suburban and one rural) for a U.S. Department of Education recognition program in the 1980s (Garibaldi, 1987). The

purpose of this program was to evaluate and publicly recognize schools that were doing "an unusually effective job of educating students." While the schools were quite different, several common characteristics were identified among the group. They included the following:

1. Teachers described their schools as pleasant environments with a relaxed atmosphere and where the goals and rules of the school were well-articulated.

2. Every school had a low teacher turnover rate; the average length of stay for 90 percent of the faculty was 15 years and most had taught at the same school for considerably more than 20 years.

3. Principals were described as instructional leaders, as well as good and sensitive managers. Five of the eight principals had served as teachers at their respective schools and four of them had been counselors. Because they had been at the school as teachers or counselors, the faculty believed that their principals understood their daily problems of teaching and planning and also understood the pressure of handling "difficult" students.

4. While most teachers agreed that there was never enough time for planning, all believed that they had a meaningful role in school decision-making with respect to school policies and the instructional program.

5. The supportive efforts of the administrators, parents and the community also heightened morale among teachers.

6. Students were very positive about the school's learning and social atmosphere and admitted that the competitive nature of the academic requirements tended to create personal pressures and tensions for themselves. Moreover, they considered their relationships with teachers and their principals to be good and friendly.

7. Parents were also quite proud of their schools and often praised the work of the teachers and the principals. Most schools did not have parent-teacher associations but many of them were regular volunteers at school. They were most complimentary of the schools' "early warning system" of monitoring academic progress at the end of each school term, since they believed that it gave their children ample time to improve their grades during each marking period and provided a chance for parents to more closely monitor homework.

8. Community support was provided in the form of college scholarships and sponsorship of school activities.

Even though these common features of effective schools were based on a small sample, much can be learned from schools which have overcome the types of problems experienced by most schools in urban and central city areas. Collaboration among teachers, administrators, students and parents is extremely important to this success. And from that comes community support which is so essential to the public's perception of education accountability. In all of the schools which were visited, the curricula were academically challenging and students clearly understood teachers' expectations for all courses. Some students even acknowledged that they occasionally took "easy" courses but they recognized that the demanding nature of tougher courses would prepare them for their later careers.

In far too many schools across this country, and especially in urban areas, a small percentage of minority children are enrolled in college preparatory courses. Some of this can be attributed to academic tracking patterns in schools which has been verified by numerous researchers (Ogbu, 1978; Oakes, 1985, 1986; Maeroff, 1988, 1990; Irvine, 1985, 1990; Braddock, 1990), but some of this is also attributable to students who are choosing remedial rather than core curriculum courses in high school. Regardless of their academic ability, all students need to keep their options open to attend college or to enter the work force after their graduation. For that reason, it is important that they are encouraged to take core courses in the upper grades.

Conclusion

Schools in inner-city communities which serve large numbers of non-white children can be as effective as any other school. They were effective before schools were integrated, despite the absence of financial and material resources, and they can be again. It is true that society's problems are different from those of half a century ago, but career opportunities for youth at that time were limited compared to what is available today. Thus, widespread institutional problems of crime, poverty and family instability should not be viewed as obstacles but rather as catalysts for improving the educational quality of children who live in inner-city areas. These schools must not only be effectively and efficiently managed, but they must also have established goals and principles by which they operate. In addition to previously cited characteristics of effective schools, the following attributes of success are also important:

1. Clear academic goals;
2. High student expectations;
3. An orderly environment characterized by discipline;
4. Rewards and incentives for students;
5. Regular and frequent monitoring of student success;
6. Opportunities for meaningful student responsibility and participation;
7. Teacher efficacy;
8. Rewards and incentives for teachers;
9. Concentration on academic learning time;
10. Positive school climate;
11. Administrative leadership;
12. Well-articulated curriculum;
13. Evaluation of instructional curriculum; and,
14. Community support and involvement.

Schools in inner-city communities must receive the same type of attention as gifted and talented programs and magnet schools in the nations's 16,000 school districts. Much has been written about the schools in these communities which have been effective and it is important that some of these model efforts are replicated in other places (National Alliance of Black School Educators, 1989). The late Ronald Edmonds did much to demonstrate that this was an attainable goal even in poor communities in New York City and his school reform efforts of the late 1970s and 1980s should not be overlooked as educational leaders develop strategies to raise academic achievement. If some of the principles which have been mentioned in this paper can be adopted and transformed into practice, and assistance obtained from all segments of the educational and political community, as well as from parents and the general public, urban schools can become as successful as magnet and gifted and talented programs. School improvement within major metropolitan districts exclusively on special schools, but reforms must instead be directed to those institutions which serve the masses of youth in the nation's public school systems. Public education is the right of all citizens, and not the privilege of the few.

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