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ISSUE BRIEF

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BELIEVING and ACHIEVING

By Craig D. Jerald

A remarkable legal battle has been brewing in Pinellas County, Florida, during the past several years. In September 2005, a three-judge appeals panel ruled that more than 20,000 African-American students could bring a class action suit against the school district for failing to do enough to close the racial achievement gap.

The lawsuit has prompted a heated debate within the larger community about school accountability. Should schools take responsibility for providing all students with certain kinds of "inputs"—such as curriculum, instruction, and materials? Or should they take responsibility for measurable student "outcomes"—such as assessment results and graduation rates? Can they take responsibility for outcomes if they do not control *other* inputs children receive when they are not in school?

"Some kids come to us behind the eight ball," the attorney for the Pinellas County School Board explained last spring. "We offer an opportunity for a high quality education. We do not offer a guarantee of a high-quality education."[1]

Responsibility for What?

Lawsuits such as this one might be rare, but the debate has been going on for some time. For example, soon after the release of an influential federal study on race and student achievement in 1966, sociologist James Coleman, who led the study, observed that two conflicting views of educational responsibility were at odds in American society.

According to Coleman, the traditional view defined educators' responsibility for student learning as relatively passive. Schools were expected to provide a free, high-quality set of educational services, but "the responsibility for profitable use of those resources lay with the child and his family." However, many had begun to challenge that belief, saying that schools should be responsible for

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1100 17th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036

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outcomes as well, and that "the responsibility to create achievement lies with the educational institution, not the child." Accepting the new view would mean that "the school's responsibility is shifted from increasing and distributing equally *its* 'quality' to increasing the quality of *students'* achievements."[2]

Richard and Rebecca DuFour use curriculum as a lens to help us see these differing views. Some schools take responsibility for the "intended curriculum," the knowledge and skills they want students to learn, by ensuring that teachers have curriculum documents, textbooks, and instructional materials. Other schools also take responsibility for the "enacted curriculum," the content that is actually taught in classrooms. But other schools go further still, taking responsibility not only for the first two but also for the "attained curriculum"—what and how much students actually learn. "A school that is truly committed to learning for all would take steps to address all three levels," write the authors.[3]

The DuFours use analogies to illustrate how schools fall into different camps when it comes to taking responsibility for learning. For example, the teachers at a "Charles Darwin School" would believe that all children can learn but only up to the limits of their abilities. Teachers at a "Pontius Pilate School" would believe they should teach a rigorous curriculum using engaging lessons but wash their hands of responsibility if students do not learn what they try to teach them. However, educators at a "Henry Higgins School"—named for the fictional language professor who wagered he could teach a poor flower girl how to be presentable in high society—would believe it is their responsibility to do whatever it takes to ensure that students learn and to keep working with children until all of them have mastered the curriculum.[4]

Research suggests that choosing sides in the debate is not just an academic or symbolic exercise. The choice can have real consequences for how much students achieve—making the topic important for school improvement efforts.

For example, analyzing data from a nationally representative sample of first graders and their teachers, Urban Institute researcher Laura LoGerfo found that "children with teachers who have a greater sense of responsibility for student outcomes learn more in reading during the 1st grade." In fact, a strong sense of responsibility for outcomes counts as much as a teacher's level of education and years of teaching experience.[5]

In another study, Valerie Lee and Julia Smith analyzed data on nearly 12,000 students and 10,000 teachers across 820 U.S. high schools. "Results were very consistent: achievement gains are significantly higher in schools where teachers take collective responsibility for students' academic success or failure rather than blaming students for their own failure," they found. Moreover, disadvantaged students were more likely to keep up with their peers in schools where teachers had strong collective responsibility for outcomes—leading to smaller achievement gaps over time.[6]

Fortunately, research also suggests that leaders can influence whether teachers adopt a "Henry Higgins" point of view. In her study of the relationship between sense of responsibility and student learning, for example, LoGerfo found that "a teacher's work environment has a strong relationship with her commitment to student learning. Teachers who report that their school's leadership is supportive of their efforts in the classroom have a much greater sense of responsibility."[7]

Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is possible to create a strong sense of responsibility for outcomes even among teachers who start out with exactly the opposite attitude. "When I first arrived at Frankford, the school was very low achieving," recalls Sharon Brittingham, who recently

retired after eight years as principal of the high-poverty elementary school in rural Delaware.[8] Brittingham noted that teachers had low expectations for students and often pointed to home circumstances as a reason for students' low achievement.

Brittingham set out to change that attitude. "If teachers made negative comments about not believing their students were going to be successful, then I bluntly told them to look elsewhere for a job. […] They were not allowed to make excuses, but needed to have a plan to improve any of their weak areas—yes, their weak areas, not the students'," she says.[9] Her efforts paid off. In 2005, all of Frankford's students met the state's reading standards and 95 percent met the mathematics standards. But Brittingham stresses that simply having high expectations for students is not enough: "It is [teachers'] belief in their ability to make the students successful that is the key."[10]

Based on their own research and work in schools, the DuFours concur. "It is not the perception of a staff regarding the ability of their students that is paramount in creating a culture of high expectations. The staff members' perception of their own personal and collective ability to help all students learn is far more critical," they contend. "It was not his confidence in Eliza Doolittle that convinced Higgins he could help her achieve a very high standard; it was his confidence in himself."[11]

The Influence of Perceived Efficacy

That argument has a sound basis in nearly 30 years of research on "efficacy"—teachers' perceptions that they can be effective in helping students learn. In the mid-1970s, a team of RAND Corporation researchers included two questions in an extensive questionnaire being used to study reading programs and interventions in Los Angeles. "It may have been simply a hunch or a whim," recount contemporary researchers Megan Tschannen-Moran, Anita Hoy, and Wayne Hoy, "but they got results, powerful results, and the concept of teacher efficacy was born."[12]

The first question read, "When it comes right down to it, a teacher can't really do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment." The second read, "If I really try hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students." Since then, a large number of studies have confirmed the positive effect of perceived efficacy and student outcomes—in many other school districts and using more sophisticated survey instruments and research methodologies.

Researchers also have worked to unlock how efficacy beliefs actually work, finding that they exert an *indirect* influence on student achievement by virtue of the direct effect they have on teachers' classroom behaviors and attitudes. Reviewing the research on the topic, Tschannen-Moran and Anita Hoy find an impressive list of positive influences stemming from efficacy beliefs:

Teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organization (Allinder, 1994). They also are more open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977; Guskey, 1988; Stein & Wang, 1988). Efficacy beliefs influence teachers' persistence when things do not go smoothly and their resilience in the face of setbacks.

Greater efficacy enables teachers to be less critical of students when they make errors (Ashton & Webb, 1986), to work longer with a student who is struggling (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and to be less inclined to refer a difficult student to special education (Meijer & Foster, 1988; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak & Podell, 1993).[13]

In short, as the DuFours contend, teachers who believe in their own ability to influence student achievement are more likely to take responsibility for the learning of all students—including those who are "harder to teach."

Moreover, during the past 15 years, researchers also have found positive effects for a school-level characteristic called "collective efficacy"—the shared judgment of a school's teachers that the faculty as a whole can execute the actions necessary to produce the positive outcomes for students.

For example, in a study of 47 elementary schools in a large, urban, Midwestern district, Roger Goddard, Wayne Hoy, and Anita Hoy found collective efficacy to be a significant predictor of student achievement in reading and mathematics. In fact, collective efficacy had a greater impact on achievement than did student demographics. "That is," the researchers write, "the negative association between SES [socioeconomic status] and achievement is more than offset by the positive association between collective teacher efficacy and student achievement."[14]

In a more recent study of 96 rural, urban, and suburban high schools, Goddard, LoGerfo, and Wayne Hoy found collective efficacy to be the strongest predictor of student achievement in reading, writing, and social studies—regardless of a range of other variables, including minority enrollment, students' socioeconomic status, school size, and students' prior achievement.[15]

Building Teacher Confidence

Fortunately, those beliefs about individual and collective efficacy are not set in stone when teachers enter the classroom. Research suggests several ways principals and assistance providers can support the development of efficacy beliefs among educators.

Mastery Experiences. Based on social cognitive theory, Albert Bandura suggested that several inputs could lead to greater teacher confidence, particularly "mastery experiences"—teachers' perceptions that they or others like them have been successful in similar tasks.[16] His conjecture has been born out by additional research. In a study of 91 elementary schools in a large Midwestern district, Goddard found that mastery experiences were the biggest predictor of positive feelings of collective efficacy among teachers, beating out even the demographic makeup of the student body (i.e., race and poverty level).[17]

Goddard and the Hoys observe that although providing direct mastery experiences can be difficult, several kinds of activities can help: "Thoughtfully designed staff development activities and action research projects […] might provide efficacy-building mastery experiences."[18] Tschannen-Moran and the Hoys note that carefully supported opportunities to experience mastery are especially important during implementation of new strategies, during which teachers can experience declines in perceived efficacy. "During the implementation of a change," they observe, "giving teachers an opportunity to engage in role playing and microteaching experiences with specific feedback can have a more powerful impact on self-perceptions of teaching competence."[19]

"Vicarious mastery experiences"—in which the positive skill is modeled by someone else—also contribute to efficacy beliefs and are easier to provide. Goddard and the Hoys observe that, "When a model with whom the observer identifies performs well, the efficacy beliefs of the observer are most likely enhanced. Just as teachers' sense of efficacy is enhanced by observing successful models with similar characteristics, […] perceived collective efficacy may also be enhanced by observing successful organizations, especially those that attain similar goals in the face of familiar opportunities and constraints."[20]

Many principals provide such vicarious experiences by giving teachers the opportunity to observe classroom lessons presented by particularly effective peers or by providing articles about, videotapes of, or chances to visit effective schools. A number of websites now allow educators to compare their school's performance with higher performing schools that serve students with similar demographics, offering a relatively quick source of empirical evidence that better outcomes are possible as well as an efficient way to compile lists of schools for possible site visits.

Social Persuasion. Bandura also postulated that perceived efficacy could be reinforced through "social persuasion"—a wide range of inputs including but not limited to formal or informal "pushing and prodding" by colleagues and administrators, messages teachers receive during professional development activities, feedback from superiors, and even conversations in the faculty lounge.

A good example of strong, direct social persuasion comes from the Frankford Elementary example cited earlier. "I told teachers to either believe all students could learn to high levels of achievement, act like they believed it, or find employment elsewhere," says former principal Brittingham. And she combined such talk with other positive inputs, including lots of training and modeling, regular visits to classrooms to monitor and provide feedback on teaching, and opportunities to observe successful peers.[21]

Indeed, a number of other studies have found a strong relationship between a range of professional supports and the feelings of efficacy, including strong leadership, a positive school climate, collegiality, and shared decision making.

Supportive Leadership. In a study of Wisconsin middle schools, for example, Kristine Hipp found that several principal practices were significantly related to teacher's feelings of efficacy. Principals who actively modeled positive behaviors, who recognized and rewarded teachers' accomplishments, and who worked to inspire a sense of group purpose fostered stronger feelings of efficacy among teachers.[22]

Some research suggests that such support can be especially important for novice teachers, who generally experience a decline in sense of efficacy during their first year in the classroom. In a study of teachers in Connecticut's nine largest districts, Mitchell Chester and Barbara Beaudin found that first-year educators did not experience typical declines in perceived efficacy if they received regular observations and feedback from administrators.[23]

Collegiality and Shared Decision Making. Chester and Beaudin also found that first-year teachers did not experience expected declines in efficacy if they worked in collegial environments with more opportunities to learn from and collaborate with colleagues. "The findings of this study confirm the importance of a collegial school culture to new teachers in urban districts," the researchers concluded.[24]

In a related vein, researchers also have found a link between shared decision making (sometimes called "distributed leadership") and teachers' perceptions of collective efficacy. For example, Goddard found that when teachers report having more opportunity to influence schoolwide decisions related to instruction, they tend to have stronger beliefs about the collective ability of the faculty to help all students succeed.[25]

Productive Climate. In a study of 179 teachers randomly selected from 37 New Jersey elementary schools, Wayne Hoy and Anita Woolfolk "found that a healthy school climate—one with a strong academic emphasis and a principal who has influence with superiors and is willing to use it on behalf of teachers—was conducive to the

development of teachers' beliefs that they can influence student learning." The results held up even when researchers took into account a range of other individual and organization characteristics.[26]

Leaders and assistance providers should take care to pay attention to the specific findings of research on promoting efficacy, however, rather than simply assuming that all aspects of "school climate" are equally important. For example, Hoy and Woolfolk's study did *not* find that general teacher morale or warm and friendly relationships were necessarily conducive to feelings of efficacy. "Environments that are warm and supportive interpersonally may make teachers more satisfied with their jobs or less stressed, but they appear to have little effect on a teacher's confidence about reaching difficult students," the researchers note. Rather, it was the instrumental aspects of a positive climate—things that directly helped teachers do their jobs—that made a difference: "Shared goals that emphasize learning […] and help from administrators in solving instructional and management problems" set the stage for greater feelings of personal efficacy.[27]

Finally, school leaders and assistance providers who wish to directly survey teachers on efficacy beliefs can find a number of questionnaires online at **www.coe.ohio-state.edu/ahoy/researchinstruments.htm**. The website, maintained by efficacy researcher Anita Hoy, includes many of the instruments used by prominent researchers in the field, including those used to conduct the studies described earlier.

Conclusion

Coleman believed that the two views of educator responsibility he described were evidence of an evolution in the concept of educational equality, part of a long-term historical shift toward educators assuming responsibility for student outcomes. But the research on teacher efficacy suggests that the evolution will not be easy or automatic. If we want teachers to believe in the ability of all students to learn and to take responsibility for educational outcomes, we must take positive steps to help teachers believe in their *own* abilities as well.

Websites for Identifying Higher Performing Schools

Many organizations now offer interactive websites that allow educators to identify schools that are similar to their own but achieve better outcomes. The following list provides several options.

Just for the Kids: **www.just4kids.org/jftk/index.cfm?st=US&loc=School%20Data**

The Education Trust: **www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/dtm/**

Standard & Poor's: **www.schoolmatters.com/**

Endnotes

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ISSUE BRIEF

This is the seventh in a series of issue briefs to be written for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. These commentaries are meant to help readers think beyond simple compliance with federal law or basic implementation of programs: What unacknowledged challenges must educators and leaders confront to help schools operate more effectively and to sustain improvement over the long run? In what ways does the conventional wisdom about teaching, learning, and school improvement run counter to current research and get in the way of making good decisions? What are the emerging next-generation issues that educators will face next year and five years from now? Readers can visit **www.centerforcsri.org** to obtain other papers in this series and to access additional information on school reform and improvement.

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1100 17th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036

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