Leave No City Behind

England/United States Dialogue on Urban Education Reform

THE URBAN INSTITUTE
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School System Characteristics

United States

47.7 million students in public schools

100,000 schools

14,000 LEAs

England

7.7 million students in public mainstream schools

23,000 schools

150 LEAs

Picture a city school colored by multiple languages and one overriding mandate—to ensure that every child achieves basic literacy. Could be England. Or it might be the United States. Both countries initiated ambitious standards-based education reform to eliminate large gaps between their highest and lowest achievers. England appears to be ahead, having started in 1988 with a national curriculum, tests, and performance tables. The United States' No Child Left Behind Act began rewriting state rules in 2002 with more incentives and punitive measures aimed at school performance. Yet, the United States remains a federation of 50 different school systems—albeit, each one a fertile laboratory for experimentation. The U.K. system mandates common standards and tests across the country, but allows head teachers broad budgetary discretion over such matters as staff size and composition. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, these head teachers can swiftly weed out poor educators. Issues of equity and diversity still haunt both reform efforts, especially in urban areas, where many social problems complicate educators' ability to reach the lowest achieving students.

Viewing the contrasts as opportunity, educators and policymakers from each side of the Atlantic gathered in Philadelphia in mid-October for the second half of a dialogue on urban education. Conference sponsors included the British Embassy, the Department for Education and Skills in London, the London-based Institute for Public Policy Research, Temple University, and the Urban Institute. As talk moved to action, participants planned such follow-up activities as sending a delegation of principals and teachers from Georgia to English schools and creating a New York City school with British educators. With communication channels opened, possibilities seemed endless for comparing and analyzing data on education reforms. Inevitably too, all agreed, the education dialogue should expand to more countries.

English National Curriculum versus the American Federalized Approach

English educators visited a range of Philadelphia public schools, including neighborhood high schools, charter schools, and "partnership" schools run by local universities and community-based organizations. In March, the U.S. education delegation to London visited English schools. Participants from both countries were struck by how the contrasting school structures and funding streams manifested in everything from the role of school principals, called head teachers in the United Kingdom, to school flexibility in resource allocation, personnel decisions, and curriculum.

The 23,000 schools in England work with 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and deliver a national curriculum, which defines the minimum educational entitlement for pupils of compulsory school age (5–16 years). By law, all state-funded schools must provide this curriculum—divided into four key stages, with assessments at the end of each stage. Yet, any school can broaden the curriculum or apply to get certain requirements waived for the whole school or individual students. English schools are equitably funded by the national government. Since 1989, money has been allocated to local authorities based on pupil enrollment, student need, and cost of living. Local dialogue and decisionmaking

then determine the formula for individual school funding. For example, schools can alter their workforce to match their priorities and circumstances.

By contrast, the 100,000 U.S. schools work with 14,000 local school districts spread across 50 states. States control broad curricular decisions, credentialing of educators, means of financing schools, school choice programs, and the basic organization of educational delivery. Local school districts, usually governed by local school boards, retain control of day-to-day operating decisions. While nearly all U.K. school funding comes from national government, only 8 percent of funding for U.S. elementary and secondary education comes from national government, with states providing about 50 percent and localities the remainder. Most federal funds are targeted toward poorer communities where education challenges are the greatest, but almost every school district receives some federal funds. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act gives the federal government a powerful reach across the United States by mandating testing and other evidence of achievement, mandating some school choice and other measures in chronically low-performing schools, and requiring states to take remedial steps in failing schools and school districts.

Ironically, the national curriculum across English schools appears more flexible than the U.S. federalized model. Some participants questioned whether the NCLB mandate that every student in the country be proficient in math and reading by 2014 skews how the state curriculum evolves. For example, the push to improve student performance on tests might limit what is taught. By contrast, English educators felt they had leeway to teach subject matter that might reach more students, including underachievers in the city schools.

English educators were impressed by the experimental nature of the U.S. decentralized education system. "The number one thing that England can learn from the United States is experimentation," said Will Cavendish, a senior advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair's Strategy Unit.

The absence of school principals at the conference also drew considerable comment. While the 22-member English conference delegation included five head teachers, U.S. principals were represented only at the school visits. This observation spurred Leisha Fullick, a director of the Institute of Education at the University of London, to recommend that the United States give principals and heads more authority. U.S. educators agreed that principals deserved a greater sense of ownership for student learning. While head teachers in the United Kingdom continue to teach in the classroom, principals are strictly administrators in the United States.

Devolving budgetary authority to individual schools in England has also given head teachers more stake in schools, including hiring and firing decisions. By contrast, seniority and transfer rules largely determine who teaches, and where, in U.S. schools. One English head teacher, who had observed what she considered inferior teaching practices during her school visit, said briskly, "That teacher wouldn't have lasted in my school."

What Defines an Urban School?

The Philadelphia school visits triggered discussion on what distinguishes urban education from rural education. Concentration in a small geographic area—of ethnicities, races, faiths, and a large fraction of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—is an obvious definition. Concentration, too, of behavior problems among students, lower school performance, and higher teacher turnover also mark urban education in both countries. Such common ailments were a major impetus for bringing the two delegations together. Yet, many participants agreed that urban education also poses unusual opportunities. Most striking, a successful overhaul of a failing city school can transform the surrounding neighborhood. Rejuvenating an urban school district, in fact, can break up debilitating concentrations of poverty, according to some observers.

Several sites visited during the conference illustrated how a school can anchor community revitalization. For example, Nueva Esperanza Academy, a charter school that serves Philadelphia's Latino community, was started four years ago by the Hispanic Community Development Corporation to tackle the high dropout rate among Latino youth. Translated, the school's name is New Hope. Another site visited was the Penn Alexander School in West Philadelphia, a community that includes the University of Pennsylvania. Several high-profile murders and a general decline throughout the neighborhoods had prompted an exodus of university students from the area. Four years ago, a historic partnership fused among University of Pennsylvania, School District of Pennsylvania, and

School System Differences: Locus of Authority

United States—decentralized	England—mixed
Federal system	**National system**
State	Performance standards
Performance standards	Accountability
Accountability	Funding levels
LEA	Facilities standards
Finance	**LEA**
Hiring/firing personnel	Technical assistance
Facilities	**School**
School	Finance—resource allocation
Implementation	Hiring/firing personnel
	Implementation

Paul Vallas

Paul Vallas tells a tale of two cities. Chief Executive Officer for the School District of Philadelphia since 2002, Vallas was previously credited with transforming the Chicago school district—as its CEO—from what was thought of as the country's worst school system into a nationally recognized model for education reform. His present task is to duplicate the mandate for Philadelphia, a city where only about two out of five students finished high school with a diploma.

The second part of the U.S.-U.K. dialogue on urban education took place in Philadelphia for a reason: the city is a case of a troubled school system attempting a turn around. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took control of the School District of Philadelphia in December 2001, declaring it in "financial" and "academic" distress. The state replaced the district's governing body with a five-member School Reform Commission and charged it to enact a reform agenda based on the belief that market forces could introduce competition and jumpstart improvements. An early action was to hire Paul Vallas. His agenda went beyond the state's plan for privatization to include streamlining central office practices, a new school accountability system coupled with a more robust data-management system, a standardized curriculum, increased school safety, and a capital program to upgrade or replace aging facilities.

Everyone's challenge, Vallas told the delegations at the opening of the conference, is "preparing students for an economy we haven't yet lived in." Problems arise when schools can't adjust quickly enough to new labor demands, a new social order, and a pervasive communications system filled with negative imagery.

What do we do about it? "Throw out the Farmer's Almanac," Vallas suggested, and extend school hours and days. Since he took the helm, Philadelphia keeps 100 schools open and call it "summer semester" rather than summer school. More partnering with faith-based organizations could help combat "negative" communications. And, more professional development could instill general excellence, preparing staff to prepare students.

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to build a university-assisted, demonstration public school for pre-kindergarten through eighth grade on the site of the former Divinity School of Philadelphia.

Alan Dyson, professor of education at the University of Manchester, asked whether such exciting schools as Nueva Esperanza and Penn Alexander might divert resources from other needy schools across the city. He used a children's song to illustrate: "There were ten in the bed and the little one said, 'Roll over, roll over.' So they all rolled over and one fell out." In very concentrated areas, he explained, what happens in one school can't be divorced from what happens elsewhere.

Urban education should not always be defined by poverty, said Kathy Cox, state superintendent of schools at the Georgia Department of Education. "In my state, most of the destitute students are in rural areas," she said. Atlanta, the state's largest city, has some exciting school redevelopments and improvements, partly initiated to entice business to stay.

The concept of diversity in the schools also meant different things to participants from the different countries. The English were struck by the racial isolation of schools they visited in Philadelphia. "Where are the white kids?" one head teacher asked. Schools in London tend to be segregated more along economic than racial or ethnic lines, they said, with as many as 300 different languages spoken in some schools. One U.S. expert commented that urban schools tend to be more diverse at the school level in England and more diverse at the district level in the United States.

England Uses Data to Improve Individual and System Learning

English educators appear far more systematic in their approaches to students' learning and policy development. Longitudinal databases are used to track individual students in English schools. Decisions are data-driven. By contrast, the U.S. approach to student learning and policy development has traditionally been more diverse and appears relatively ad hoc, providing a less clear sense of what works.

These differences surfaced as conference participants debated the meaning of the words *instruction* and *pedagogy*, as well as their application. England offers a range of instructional approaches within one classroom, a concept known as "personalised learning." This concept recognizes that the multiple intelligences of pupils require a repertoire of teaching strategies. Personalised learning also fits into the English reform philosophy, which emphasizes that student assessment for learning can drive change. Data, maintaining a careful record of students' response to learning, and dialogue are used to diagnose learning needs. U.S. instruction tends to be more defined by

the curriculum and less by individual student's needs.

U.S. educators also agreed they have much to learn from their English counterparts on systematic policy development. In England, education reform proceeded in stages. In the early years, every teacher took part in mandatory professional development on the nation's literacy and numeracy standards. In later years, after the standards were widely understood, schools received greater flexibility to fine-tune professional development efforts and tailor programs to each school's needs. By contrast, staff training in the U.S. has been more ad hoc and is often the first thing cut in a state or local school district budget crunch. Both the Georgia and Rhode Island superintendents of schools emphasized that U.S. teachers are not being well prepared to teach to the NCLB expectations.

Moving Forward

Many proposals emerged on how to continue this dialogue. They included the following:

- More analytical papers on common practices, such as how to balance standards-based teaching with creativity in the classroom
- Involving more practitioners, such as U.S. school principals
- Sharing ways to capture vibrancy of the "third sector"—potential contributors to education systems that are neither government nor business
- Comparing and analyzing United States/United Kingdom targets and school management
- Comparative work on instructional practices and professional development
- Indicators of effective education systems performance
- Shared databases on student outcomes
- Experimentation within the context of accountability
- Better understanding of the role parents can and should play in the schools
- Ways to improve graduation rates and reengage dropouts
- A survey of students' views of education reform

Vibrancy of U.S. Experimentation and Nonprofit Sector Impresses English Educators

Observing that each state can be an incubator for educational innovations was something the English delegation took away from the conference. Likewise, nothing in the United Kingdom is equivalent to the philanthropic investments that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Annenberg Foundation have made in transforming U.S. schools.

England has only recently launched public-private partnerships—most notably, "city academies," which are publicly funded independent schools that can replace decrepit urban schools with state-of-the-art facilities. Comparable to U.S. charter schools, these academies are run by private sponsors with major capital investment from government, but with recurrent funding set at a level similar to that for other local schools. Academies can vary from what is mandated by the national curriculum. England expects to have two hundred academies in, or close to, operation by 2008.

Yet, some participants questioned whether business or foundations could improve school quality. Many agreed that "real collaboration" could enhance public education. However, educators said they would not welcome any attempt by foundations or business to come in and try to "sort out" school problems.

Recruiting and Retaining Urban Teachers Challenges Both Countries

Many quality teachers either refuse positions at city schools or leave after a year or two. On this, the English and Americans share similar experiences. Urban teaching positions are hard to fill because of housing costs, transportation, and poor school conditions. Teachers leave because of student behavior, limited professional support, cynicism, and workload. Yet, crucial differences also emerged. While several U.S. participants said that city teaching positions were hard to fill because salaries are low, the English delegation insisted that salary was less of an issue because their schools had more flexible pay schedules.

One model U.S. program—Teach for America—has inspired innovative recruiting efforts in both countries. Launched in the late 1980s with a seed grant from Mobil Corporation, Teach for America has committed more than 12,000 people to teach in low-income rural and urban communities for two years. At the conference, Roger Schulman gave a presentation on The New Teacher Project, a U.S. nonprofit organization that partners with school districts and other educational entities to increase the number of teaching applicants. Since 1997, the project has enticed 10,000 new, high-quality teachers to such cities as Atlanta, Baltimore, New York, and Washington, D.C. In England in 2002, private business—with significant government support—initiated Teach First, which recruits teachers directly from colleges.

Recruiting from downsizing professions has also worked. For example, the Troops to Teachers program in the United States brought many good people into the teaching profession from the military throughout the 1980s. This pro-

gram had the bonus of attracting minorities, including African American males, into the classroom. Conference participants had complained that there are not enough quality minority teachers in urban classrooms with their widely diverse students.

Ways to cope with unruly student behavior were also discussed. U.S. participants suggested holding more teacher-parent meetings and having youth groups take new teachers on community walks. An English educator suggested that better student mentoring could improve behavior. "Student voices must be heard. They must be part of the process," she said.

Vocational Education Is Gaining in Both Countries

Neither country has successfully pushed its vocational education system to catch up with the economy and give less bookish students competitive job skills. One alarming statistic is that 49 percent of older students are leaving British schools without the necessary qualifications to pursue further education and training, according to a final report on an overhaul of education for students ages 14–19. The report outlines a five-year plan that would give these students more options for vocational and work-based diplomas. Jane Benham with the Department for Education and Skills said that too many students drop out at age 16 or 17. "Those are the ones we're trying to get at."

Hans Meeder, a deputy assistant secretary of vocational education at the U.S. Department of Education, announced a similar initiative to redefine American high schools as institutions that can offer more occupational training. One U.S. expert asked why schools should offer vocational education since industry already is investing in on-the-job training. She suggested tax incentives for business to hire and train young apprentices. However, Benham insisted that more collaboration is needed—schools and business working together to prepare these less scholarly students for jobs.

Educators Grapple with Implementing Standards-based Reform

Education reform policies underscored every discussion, but toward the end of the conference, participants focused on moving forward with these new expectations. U.S. participants had more general reactions, since their reforms are newer. Kent McGuire, dean of Temple University's college of education, pointed out how NCLB has refocused attention from *what the problems are* in education to *what works* in improving student outcomes. Rhode Island's Superintendent of Schools, Peter McWalters, said that state systems like the one he runs are charged with implementing reform, yet are struggling with testing and with closing the achievement gap. "I'm not blaming NCLB. I'm anchoring myself in it," he said.

The English delegation expressed more specific concerns, including how to meet school-level targets. While they have raised educational standards for the top 50 percent of students, the bottom 50 percent is being left behind. Some rued that there might not be enough analysis to pinpoint the weaknesses.

Both delegations anticipated some difficulty in initiating education policy changes. However, communication channels between front-line educators and policymakers are stronger in England, where head teachers have more authority, so the process may be easier there.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In the end, most agreed that the United States and England are moving on parallel paths in the nearly overwhelming quest to educate every child. Both countries face large achievement gaps in learning despite ambitious reforms. Graduation rates in the United States remain abysmally low for minority students, and England is striving to determine the best ways to keep students in school beyond age 16. Neither country can say definitively why some schools fail while others succeed. Clearly, the British have instituted more systematic policies and data-based feedback to guide new policies. U.S. educators, backed by business and foundations, have taken enormous risks with exciting results. Yet, as Krista Kafer of the Heritage Foundation pointed out, both countries still leave many students behind. Why?

Some answers to the urban high school problems, while long term, require more examination of early childhood investments. The Perry Preschool Study, which followed the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing school, had proved the large return on public investment. Yet, participants pointed to Head Start in the United States and Sure Start in England to say that more research is needed on these early childhood programs. Neither country has shown if the investment pays off later in the lives of these very young students. Children are like bamboo, said Marilyn Eccles from the Manchester Metropolitan University. "Once it's planted, nothing happens to it in the first year. Nothing happens in the second year. Yet, in the fifth year, the bamboo is suddenly 60 feet tall."

The conference conclusion felt like a rousing start. Delegations from both countries sought more joint activity. Peter Housden of the Department for Education and Skills said he appreciated the critical sense U.S. educators had of their own system. "If this is what American education is like, we'd like a lot more of it," he said. Robert Hughes of New Visions for Public Schools offered a greater compliment—he asked the British to open a school in New York City.

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