
BACKGROUND BOOKS

WHY THE SCHOOLS STILL DON'T WORK

For all the nation's earnest intentions and policy gyrations during the last decade, the United States has barely budged out of its deep scholastic hole.

Just wait, the optimists say. Wait for standardized tests to reflect reforms already in place. Or wait for new reforms. Or wait for Washington and the rest of the country to get really serious (i.e. to pile even more billions upon the billions already added to American education). To which remarkably few skeptics respond: What makes anyone believe that things will improve much any time soon, no matter how much more money we spend or how many ways we manipulate school policy? What makes anyone believe, for example, that learning will improve much as long as so many children grow up in fatherless households, or as long as so many Americans have such a weak understanding of the tie between hard work and scholastic success?

Some of the most sobering evidence is often delivered inadvertently by the optimists. Lisbeth B. Schorr, in **Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage and Despair** (Doubleday, 1988), refers to broader social policy, not just education, when she writes that help for children growing up in persistent poverty "may be ineffective as provided by prevailing, rigidly circumscribed programs. But where programs are especially attuned to the distinct needs of high-risk families, these children are being helped from the outside."

She is right—relatively good programs are possible, but their rarity is no accident. The programs she discusses, aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies and other problems, do well only when they are "intensive, comprehensive, and flexible." Their "climate" also must be shaped by "skilled, committed professionals who establish respectful and trusting relationships and respond to the individual needs of those they serve." The problem is, as she concedes, that these clash with the "traditional requirements of professionalism and bureaucracy." Meaning, large organizations—es-

pecially public ones—can't make these programs work.

But even "successful" reforms usually fall short. Recall, for example, one of the most heralded education triumphs of the 1970s and '80s, the remarkable rise in reading scores in East Harlem's District No. 4. Led by deputy superintendent Sy Fliegel, teachers created more than a score of alternative schools, employing a variety of curricular and pedagogical approaches, and allowed parents to choose where to send their children. It was a great achievement, and Fliegel describes it well in **Public Schools By Choice**, edited by Joe Nathan (Meyer Stone Books, 1989). But is a reform that lifts a district only to the middle of the pack in a disastrous school system really that heartening?

Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith make the essential point in "Effective Schools: A Review," in the *Elementary School Journal* (March 1983). They write: "An unusually 'effective' school serving predominantly low-income and minority students may actually have considerably lower achievement than a middle-class white suburban school." Two reasons, they say, are the "pervasive influences of social class on achievement and the possibility that even the 'typical' suburban school has some significant and important advantages over the relatively effective inner-city school." And, lest we forget, even most "good" suburban schools produce mediocre results.

American schools are perfect reflections of American dilemmas and disasters. (For lucid histories, see Diane Ravitch's **Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-80** [Basic, 1983]; and Lawrence A. Cremin's **American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980** [Harper, 1988]) Yet, rarely is educational policy more delusional than when it comes to questions of equality and race—and poverty and fatherless families. Left and Right routinely accuse each other of racist and racialist sins, with both sides overstating the power of secular institutions such as public schools to compensate for the influence of social class,

and to overcome problems that are deeply cultural, behavioral and, in a real sense, spiritual.

There is, for example, much talk about the "feminization of poverty," a problem that sounds like it might be amenable to a check-book cure. But in an absolutely on-target literature review, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe" in *Policy Review*, (Winter 1990), Nicholas Davidson writes: "[P]overty is probably the least destructive aspect of father absence. More serious and longer-lasting, both for the individual and society as a whole, is the role of father absence in producing educational and cognitive deficits, mental illness, drug use, and crime." One example Davidson cites is a 1968 study which compared American College Entrance Examination scores of 295 students from homes without fathers with those of 760 students from two-parent families. The absence of a father had a "dramatic" negative effect on scores, which could not be explained by differences in income. A better term for what afflicts these youngsters is philosopher Michael Novak's: the "masculinization of irresponsibility."

The education debate often excludes the important and dwells on that which is less so. Like money. "There is no strong or systematic relationship between school expenditures and student performance," writes the University of Rochester's Eric A. Hanushek in a review of decades of research, "The Impact of Differential Expenditures on School Performance" in *Educational Researcher* (May 1989).

How often do educational and political leaders face the paralyzing fact that black children frequently do poorly in school because they fear "acting white," as Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu argued in "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of Acting White'" in the *Urban Review* (Vol. 18, No. 3)? Who faces up to the work of psychologist Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, who finds that many Americans just don't have the attitudes needed for educational progress? In studies such as **Contexts of Achievement: A Study of American, Chinese,**

and Japanese Children (Society of Child Development, 1990), with Shin-ying Lee, et al., Japanese and Chinese mothers (the latter in Taiwan) stress the "importance of hard work to a greater degree than American mothers," who tend to believe that innate ability largely determines academic success. As a result, American parents tend not to encourage their children to do homework, attend after-school classes, and seek out tutoring. In turn, even the best American students and schools tend to perform no better than their weakest Asian counterparts. But never mind. President Bush and the nation's governors have vowed that American kids will lead the world in math and science only nine years from now.

Still, it is true that several of the most influential studies of the last decade provide some grounds for optimism. Nothing necessarily prevents public schools from stressing curricular basics, holding students to high standards, maintaining discipline, or working closely with parents—the factors that sociologist James Coleman cites in **High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared** (Basic, 1982) to explain the superiority of Catholic and private schools. Likewise, in the most important education book of 1990, **Politics, Markets, and American Schools** (Brookings, 1990), choice advocates John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe argue persuasively that schools can improve—if and only if they are shaped and governed by market, not political forces. And in this year's most important book, **We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future** (Free Press, 1991), Chester E. Finn, Jr., holds out hope that the curricular and pedagogical flaccidity he has so cogently criticized for a decade can be countered.

But even when these three sagacious works are piled high atop all that is sugary and ordinary, a central burden of proof remains on the optimists. We have yet to demonstrate that real school reform—not just political and bureaucratic reshuffling, but cultural change—is in us as a nation.

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