



Improving Urban Schools: Applying What We Know

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**"There are many ways to fail; the most tragic is to do nothing."
*CitySchools, Spring 1996¹***

The belief that knowledge empowers people and nations — that the health of a democracy hinges upon an educated citizenry — is the foundation upon which many U. S. citizens base their commitment to education in the public schools. Historically, Americans have looked to schools to promote and preserve the democratic principles upon which the nation was founded.

Perhaps paradoxically, schools also have been expected to drive societal change and to respond to national needs resulting from such change. During this century, for example, schools adjusted to demands of the Industrial Age by educating not only those students bound for higher education, but also those bound for work. And, by mid-century, schools became an early venue for the difficult and as-yet unfinished task of eliminating racial barriers to equal opportunity. The challenge for education reformers then and now is to foresee, then shape change, while ensuring excellence and equity in education for all individuals, regardless of their cultures, communities, and circumstances.

Today, however, one group of students in particular is seen as largely dismissed and disregarded by educators: those living in U. S. cities. The target of much public concern and criticism is the urban school, located in communities described as "defunct," where children and their families are "broken," and the situation is seemingly hopeless. Improving the quality of urban schooling becomes increasingly compelling to those who believe in the potential of all individuals. Educators who strive to reach the concomitant goals of excellence and equity must redouble their efforts to create a future in which every child — rich or poor, urban or suburban — has a chance to live a meaningful, productive life.

Improving Urban Schools: Two Challenges

By the year 2000, American schools will enroll more students than ever before, surpassing the "baby boom" years of the 1960s. Many of these students will be from populations traditionally seen as least successful — low-income families, racial and linguistic minorities, urban dwellers. The enrollment growth in schools comes at a time when workplace expectations and requirements for skills and understanding are higher.

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political turmoil, negative attitudes from the public and school staffs, and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. However, urban schools can be significantly improved by providing teachers with (1) access to a relevant knowledge base and (2) sustained, meaningful professional development.

Challenge One: Provide teachers with greater access to the emerging knowledge base on what works in urban settings

Children in the 1990s are racially, ethnically, and linguistically more diverse than a decade ago; this trend will continue. Clearly, educators must respond to their changing needs with new ideas to help them succeed.


For many years, research on students at risk of educational failure was dominated by a "deficiency model" identifying what urban students didn't know and couldn't do and what communities and schools couldn't provide. More recently, a shift has occurred to a "capacity-building model" which focuses on cultural and personal assets that students bring to school. One of these assets is a resilience that allows urban learners to cope with the many stresses in their lives and to reduce their vulnerability to risks in the environment. Some of the most exciting recent research suggests that "resilience," the capacity for successful adaptation, can be fostered by educators.²

Linda Darling-Hammond observes that as recently as ten years ago, the idea that teacher knowledge was critical for educational

improvement had limited acceptance.³ In fact, continuing a tradition begun at the turn of the 20th century, government policy makers searched for ways to make education “teacher-proof” with legislation and regulations prescribing what educators should say and do. But rules and regulations cannot transform schools, the author asserts, and educators working in partnership with parents and communities effect real change. Darling-Hammond writes, “We must put greater knowledge directly into the hands of teachers and seek accountability that will focus attention on ‘doing the right things’ rather than on ‘doing things right.’”⁴

To enhance the effectiveness of teachers, schools must provide them with access to the growing knowledge base about techniques and practices that best reach and serve the urban learner. This knowledge base is created from past and current research, practice, and other literature, and encourages educators to use results to push educational reform. The focus is on improved student learning and achievement as the guide to the visions, mission, and objectives of each school and district. Research conducted in real-life urban settings warns us that traditional school models are inadequate for coping with the developmental needs of today’s urban youth. Urban educators need a thorough understanding of children from diverse backgrounds and an ability to discern fads from those programs that produce results. Some of the most compelling research tells the stories of real educators who are finding innovative solutions to enduring educational problems.

Challenge Two: Provide in-depth, classroom-driven teacher training and sustained, meaningful professional development



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Access to solid research is not enough, however. Despite documented progress made in understanding the urban learner and the urban context, access to this knowledge is not always strategically used to guide program improvements. Use of research results to encourage school improvement occurs haphazardly because teachers are too seldom given the opportunity to develop deep personal understanding and the special skills needed to ensure that urban learners can achieve.

Professional development for teachers should be focused on goals that lead to improved student achievement. This is best accomplished when teachers participate in deciding the content of professional development, depending heavily on analysis of student work as the center for discussion and collaboration among other educators. Therefore, a key component

to professional development must be the opportunity to discuss and debate with peers the experience of moving toward educational change. Teachers must be afforded time to work collaboratively and reflectively to solve problems within their own classroom contexts.

Research has also shown that building the capacity of teachers to change classroom practice depends on the capacities of the organization — the collective knowledge of all colleagues, the networks to which they belong, and the extent to which their school supports their learning as well as that of students. The research on organizational context is changing our view of professional development to one based on collaboration, grounded in a common school-wide vision for what we want for students. Establishing a school environment and educational context that supports teachers and students — one that offers a vision and the time to engage in continuous improvement — has the greatest likelihood of achieving the goal of improved student success.

Observation of International Systems

Most urban education studies carried on outside the United States have been conducted in developed nations. As with U. S. investigations, these studies have tended to center on so-called “marginalized” groups, particularly those of minority ethnic populations.⁵ However, despite diverse histories, cultures, and social forces, challenges facing urban settings around the world appear to be remarkably similar; therefore, there is much to learn by observing and studying the educational systems of other countries. Ours is not the only nation considered to be “at risk” nor are other educational systems immune to the criticism of parents, governments, and the popular press. As the examples below suggest, there is a perceived universal need for education reform and professional development for teachers.

Australia

In Australia, inequality between segments of the population is a well-documented feature of all its cities. Three “sorting processes” are said to be at work within the Australian urban system: “residential segregation on social class and ethnicity lines, the unequal location of selective schools, and academic selection within schools themselves.”⁶

Australia is a land of immigrants; in its cities, as much as two-thirds of the population growth in the post-war years has been due to immigration of Italians, Greeks, Maltese, Lebanese, Turks, Indo-Chinese, and Yugoslavs. This steady growth has begun to exhaust the funds available for new physical and social infrastructures and for inner-city renewal.

In addition to the diverse needs of immigrant populations, Australia struggles with the needs of urban aboriginal children. As the “indigenous people,” they were seen to be distinct from ethnic, minority or immigrant populations, yet were not recognized by

Australian education departments as having their own unique needs. Until the 1960s, the governmental policy for aboriginal children was one of assimilation. Now, the focus has been shifted to helping aboriginal people maintain an aboriginal identity. A major obstacle, however, is that they speak a non-standard English and are often placed in remedial classes where they tend to stay for their entire school careers. Few aboriginal students finish high school and even fewer develop skills that allow them to obtain gainful work. Thus, aboriginal unemployment is five to six times higher than that of the general Australian population. These statistics are strikingly similar to unemployment figures among African Americans and Hispanics in the United States.

Australian educators see a critical need for thoughtful research on aboriginal populations and the higher-education community and professional associations seem willing to respond. There are, however, few aboriginal people with the necessary skills and

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knowledge to understand and interpret the information gained by researchers. It may be necessary for non-aboriginal people to undertake research in collaboration with aboriginal co-researchers so they may acquire skills to be used in further studies.

Australian schools are not organized under one overall system; their curriculum and policy matters cause them to function more as instruments of differentiation than unification. Evidence of "social area disadvantages" has caused the Australian government to redirect government programming towards what it terms "positive discrimination." By most accounts,

however, these governmental policies have not effectively addressed the problems and indeed, in some cases, seem to have aggravated them.

England

While some educators in England are arguing that their urban reforms should mirror those in the United States, some Americans are looking with envy at the structure provided by the English national curriculum. While in England, each school is locally managed by its own governing body and makes its own budget and staffing decisions, the U.S. remains in the early stages of school-based management. And while in the U.S., we debate the virtues and pitfalls of choice and charter schools, in England, mandated attendance zones no longer exist; students can select schools outside of their neighborhoods, and schools can opt out, go it alone,

and become "grant-maintained" schools. While England tries to improve student learning and meet the needs of "disaffected students" by implementing a national curriculum and national testing, the United States is struggling with the development of standards and eschewing norm-referenced, nationally standardized tests in favor of portfolios and performances that have been used for some time in English classrooms.

One difference that a national curriculum and national testing brings to English schools is the annual publication of "league tables"

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in every major newspaper. The tables compare test results of every school in the country for various subject areas. The publication of these tables has a devastating effect on educators' morale because achievement concerns are played out regularly in the popular press and the political arena.

Some English educators describe the national curriculum as "tolling the death knell" for high-

quality education. They say self-paced learning, innovative teaching, and learner involvement dissolve when league tables are published — what is tested is what gets taught. Other English educators, however, note that the individualized, *laissez-faire*, self-paced approaches of the past had to change to keep pace with the needs of the future.

Adding to the challenge in England is the historically unchangeable system of social class that has a devastating effect on the aspirations of young people in the lower class. These students are overwhelmingly white, believe that social mobility is nearly impossible, and do not aspire to attend college as do relatively greater numbers of Americans.

English and American schools alike face increasingly diverse student populations where multicultural sensitivity and language differences present a daily challenge. The United States appears to have made greater strides in dealing with this area. Teacher training, affirmative action, and data and research on ethnic and racial needs are relatively new to the English scene. Like American schools, English schools suffer from a lack of educators from minority backgrounds who serve as role models for students.

As might be expected, the head teacher in England and the principal in the United States play the preeminent role in determining the urban school's climate or vision. In England, however, head teachers do not sever their connections to the classroom and continue to teach at least a few classes. Thus, there is less room for the "us-versus-them" attitude that is sometimes seen in the United States and there tends to be a greater inclination to focus on matters of curriculum and pedagogy as the subjects of informal conversation in English schools.

Canton (Guangzhou City), China

Although limited literature exists on urban education in socialist countries or the Eastern world, the differences between capitalistic and socialistic contexts appear to be significant because of the extent of state intervention and control of urban development that occurs in socialistic societies. Overall, Chinese cities have been influenced by city-planning principles which standardize housing and reduce urban-rural differences. This more homogeneous situation is, however, changing as capitalistic processes are introduced into the society.

In China, another difference is how inner cities are defined. Chinese cities are truly old districts where conditions may be poor, but where residents are both socially and economically more heterogeneous. A reason for this is that the Chinese are reluctant to move away from where they have habitually resided and city families often have lived in the same location for a very long time, regardless of current social status.

In response to a need for educational reform, China has instituted compulsory education and expanded teacher-training opportunities. Primary education was universalized in the mid-1980s; by the early 1990s, enrollment rates at the junior secondary level were raised to 98 percent.

Singapore

Singapore is almost entirely an urban city-state, but because of its history, geography, and ideology, it does not manifest typical "urban attributes." Less than three percent of the island is deemed to be open space and thus, Singapore has no rural areas. Residents of Singapore construct their entire lives around urban living and in many respects, Singapore has become a model urban environment.

In 1959, Singapore underwent a transition from British colonial status to self-government and since that time has developed a strong currency, a thriving economy, and a variety of compulsory social plans that address everything from saving to health care to housing. Singapore's controlled, docile environment embraces modernity and Western influence; generally, Singaporeans lead relatively affluent, efficient, and structured lives. Ironically, there are some who believe that the chief threats to Singapore are its great success and its well-educated citizenry.

As a country with few natural resources, its focus is on human-resource development and thus, few institutions in Singapore have received as much sustained attention as education. Schools have been viewed as instruments to ensure economic development, maintain social stability, and develop national identity. Outside influences are combated by programs of mass education, national service, and school curricula designed to build a Singaporean identity. The school system is competitive, exam-oriented, and hierarchical; children are channeled throughout their school careers according to their multiple language skills, natural ability, and future job roles.

The pragmatic nature of education in Singapore constrains research and scholarship; educational policy is not widely discussed. Most educational research is initiated by the Ministry of Education or the National University; most research is conducted on

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bilingualism, religious education, and streaming. Furthermore, much research focuses on practical, non-controversial, school-based problems; there is limited action research. Learners are typically considered to be a "constant;" thus, curriculum content tends to attract greater attention.⁸

Professional Development in International Locations

In response to calls for educational reform, most European and Asian countries are extending both preservice and inservice education requirements for teachers. Five-year programs of teacher preparation and intensive internships are becoming the norm around the world.⁹

- In Luxembourg, for example, teacher preparation is a seven-year process that extends beyond the baccalaureate degree to professional, on-the-job training that blends pedagogical learning with extensive supervised practice teaching.¹⁰

- In Japan, teachers systematically engage in formal research groups. Journal articles by teachers who study classroom practice outnumber by a third those of university educational researchers. Other teachers form voluntary study groups that meet outside of school time.

Professional-development activities in Japan often serve dual roles of enhancing individual competence and fostering group identity. The distinction between personal and professional life is more blurred in Japanese schools than it is in the American setting. Beginning teachers in Japan receive a minimum of 20 days of inservice training during their first year on the job. In contrast, inservice training for beginning teachers in the United States varies from state to state and district to district, which seldom exceeds four or five days.

The Urban Research Agenda: What's Needed?

If a critical challenge is providing access to a knowledge base of what works in urban school settings, then establishing a proactive research agenda focused on the needs and interests of urban

educators and urban learners is an important next step. This is an area where higher education, professional associations, and governmental agencies can work collaboratively to coordinate efforts. In an upcoming publication to be released in late 1996 by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Information, future research directions are identified that are especially relevant to work in the urban setting and can guide the efforts of schools, universities, and professional organizations.

For example, while we know that family-income levels affect student achievement, it is unclear how and why these influences occur. Research is needed on how instructional factors, school resources, peer and other community influences, as well as family risk factors, affect school performance — singly or in combination.

Efforts to understand student "resilience" have produced promising results. Programs and practices in schools, classrooms, and communities that promote resilient characteristics in children must be developed and tested.

Because so little is known about a father's influence on children's learning and development, research is needed on the role

fathers play in student achievement and how other family and community members can fill that role when fathers are absent.

After a decade or more of developing various family-involvement models, there is a need to evaluate what works in which situations. Well-understood models that build effective school-family partnerships with culturally diverse families, as well as families with children in upper grades, are especially needed.

Reliable information on the effects of educational- and community-linked support services for families on student achievement is meager, but emerging. What is known tends to be positive, but there is a need to clearly identify and evaluate which aspects of these services are most critical, how their staffs can be trained to work across professions, how school policies can best support such initiatives, and how such programs can be culturally and developmentally appropriate.

Productive research must focus on how to coordinate the efforts of educators, health-service providers, and community members.

There is a need to focus on a "whole child" approach to learning and development; we need to know what works best for given children under given circumstances, from birth through adolescence.

Numerous studies show that school safety is a major concern for parents, students, teachers, and community members alike. Various school-based programs (e.g. conflict-resolution training) and

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disciplinary management elements (e.g. school uniforms, metal detectors, school guards) have been tried, but evidence of their effectiveness is slim. Information is needed on which approaches work in particular situations and how they can be replicated under a wider range of conditions.

What Else Can Be Done?

Besides supporting a proactive urban-education research agenda, schools, universities, communities, parents, professional associations, and others interested in the future of urban learners can help to transform the current atmosphere of criticism and despair about the future of urban schools to one of hopefulness and support by actively endorsing these statements:

- *Promote the Belief that All Children Can Learn*

While it is difficult for educators to influence the amount of violence in the urban community or affect other factors in the environment, they can foster change — in the schools, the teachers, the goals, and the attitudes.

- *Promote a Commitment to Foster Learning*

Studies over the last decade repeatedly find that student achievement increases for underserved students when they are placed in environments with better resources, more challenging curriculum, and better teachers.¹¹ Schools in urban settings require access to knowledge and the opportunity to apply what is known.

- *Invest in Teaching as a Key Strategy to Reform*

We need to invest in stronger preparation and professional development for teachers, while granting educators greater autonomy. Rather than bemoan the fact that the teaching population is aging, we should instead see this as an opportunity to transform the quality of teacher preparation. Statistics show that as many as half of the teachers in the classroom in the year 2005 will be hired over the next decade. Improving teacher preparation now can make the greatest single difference in student achievement in the future.

- *Look for Ways to Build Bridges*

Education has experienced at least three waves of reform in the past 15 years. What makes the current reform efforts different from past changes is the focus on inclusiveness and collaboration. Virtually every element of public and private society sits at today's education table. A major challenge is to persuade a variety of people to work together to make the most of these partnerships while sustaining focus on what is essential: student success.

Examples of success abound in community coalitions where representatives of neighborhoods, schools, and business unite with parents to deal with community violence, develop pride in the community, and support partnerships between schools and community organizations.

Parental support is a critical link; connecting families with schools is not easy, but there are encouraging signs that the connections can be made stronger. And schools play the key role in strengthening these connections because of their ongoing relationships with students.

- *Learn From and With International Neighbors*

While similarity among nations is remarkable, problems have surfaced for different reasons and have been resolved through different approaches. Much can be learned through the sharing of research and practical experience among the world's educators. American education has been shaped through international linkages in untold ways. By studying other countries, U. S. educators can affirm as well as challenge their philosophies and practices.

- *Consider Ways to Personalize the Teacher-Student Relationship*

It is not uncommon in Germany, Japan, and Switzerland for teachers to cover multiple subjects, counsel students, and teach the same students over several years. Where similar arrangements have been tried in the United States, student achievement was often significantly higher because teachers knew their students well, both academically and personally.¹² Improving urban education ultimately involves effective, long-term relationships between educators, students, and families. The essence of teaching and learning is found in the day-to-day exchange between teacher and student.

Improving Urban Schools: Applying What We Know

Current efforts at urban school reform are likely to succeed to the extent that they are built on a firm foundation of teaching knowledge and skill and are sustained by a commitment to structural rather than symbolic change. Partnerships among schools, families, and key community stakeholders provide a means of building the leadership capacity necessary to release the creative talents and wisdom of neighborhoods and their residents.

So much of what educators continue to support and practice is based primarily on tradition, and not the results of solid research; contradicting evidence is largely ignored. New knowledge and known research findings are applied slowly and unevenly into practice. If, however, U. S. educators are to succeed in the urban

school, they must focus their attention on eliminating the discrepancies between "state of the art" and "state of practice."

Increasingly, the U. S. courts are holding schools accountable for knowing what is "state of the art" and for implementing it. Courts and legislators are beginning to mandate reforms in education, thus compelling educators to both define and declare a knowledge base and then to ensure its dissemination and use. Vigorous efforts to provide access to "what we know works" in urban settings, coupled with sustained and intensive professional development for teachers, are the most critical next steps to answering education's critics — and, more importantly, ensuring excellence and equity of education for all students.

Notes

- ¹ *City Schools*. 2 (1) (spring 1996), 9.
- ² U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1996.
- ³ Linda Darling-Hammond, "The Quiet Revolution: Rethinking Teacher Development," *Educational Leadership*. 53 (6): 5 (1996).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁵ Nelly Stromquist, ed., *Education in Urban Areas: Cross-National Dimensions*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 83-104.
- ⁶ Richard Teese, "A Social Geography of Educational Outcomes in Melbourne," in *Urban Education*. eds. D. Coulby, C. Jones, D. Harris (London: Kogan Page, 1992), 139-150.
- ⁷ Stromquist, 83-104.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 131-150.
- ⁹ Darling-Hammond, "Quiet Revolution," 8.
- ¹⁰ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *The Training of Teachers* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1990).
- ¹¹ Linda Darling-Hammond, "Education for Democracy."
- ¹² Darling-Hammond, "Quiet Revolution," 9.

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