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Schools Alone are Insufficient: A Response to Edmonds

Ralph Scott and Herbert J. Walberg

Schools must provide quality instruction to poor children, but the home and the individual student are also important factors.

Ronald Edmonds wants to promote school changes that produce the greatest learning benefits for poor and minority children who are likely to fail in school and become vulnerable, dependent adults.¹ We support this goal. Edmonds contends that some schools and some teachers do a better job than others and that many educational inputs analyzed by economists and sociologists such as school size, teacher salaries and experience, teacher race, per-pupil expenditure, and school facilities are not strong determinants of student performance. He also recognizes that the family contributes to the shaping of a student's character, personality, and intelligence. We concur.

A Parting of the Ways

Not only do we support the goal and these contentions, but we believe that it is now possible to

identify three sets of factors that are strongly and consistently productive of academic learning: student ability and motivation, amount and quality of instruction as well as the social-psychological morale of the classroom group, and the educationally stimulating qualities of the home environment (Walberg, in press). The student as an individual, the school, and the home are like a three-legged stool: it is as strong as its weakest leg; strengthening the stronger legs is far less productive than strengthening the weakest.² Therefore, we must part company from Edmonds and others to the extent that they single out the schools alone for improvement.

¹ Ronald Edmonds graciously shared two of his more lengthy unpublished research papers with us, which permitted us to discuss the research that is the basis for his present, necessarily condensed, paper.

² This is not to rule out such factors as the community, the mass media, and—particularly for adolescents—the peer group in having some effect on learning.

Edmonds discusses several studies of effective schools including his own investigations. Again, we wish to go further; and, indeed, one of us with two colleagues has tabulated and summarized the quantitative facts from 24 major systematic and comprehensive reviews of factors productive of academic learning that have been published in the past decade (Walberg, Shiller, and Haertel, in press). These reviews cover hundreds of educational, psychological, and sociological studies on hundreds of thousands of school children and college students in the United States and other countries. The tabulations provide indications of the specific aspects of the student, the school, and the home that are most productive to change to bring about greater learning. Some of Edmonds' results coincide with the conclusions of the reviews. We are inclined to be skeptical of those that do not, since the evidence he assembles is highly limited even in his two lengthy papers, which come to more than 100 pages. Moreover, even his own evidence, apparently selected to prove that educators are chiefly to blame for low achievement reveals, as documented below, the important influence of home background on school learning, as more than 95 percent of investigations of this question show.

Edmonds claims: "Repudiation of the social science notion that family background is the principle

cause of pupil acquisition of basic school skills is probably prerequisite to successful reform of public schooling for the children of the poor." He asserts that the emphasis on home influence and learning would not only absolve educators of their responsibility to be instructionally effective, but place unfairly the burden for learning on parents. These are *non sequiturs*. To affirm a role of home in learning should neither reduce our appreciation of good teaching, nor limit the determination of school staff to teach effectively. Edmonds' claim is wrong and could impair collaboration between home and school to aid learning.

There are major problems in the schools; but many American families are also in severe economic, financial, and social straits. Among many studies that could be cited, Lash and Sigal (1975) examined the lives of New York City's children and arrived at the alarming conclusion that healthy, achievement-oriented youth are becoming an "endangered species" in our urban centers. Their report cites the sharply rising proportion of youngsters born to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, and the 350 percent increase in juvenile arrests since 1960. In 1974, more than a quarter of the city's children were born out of wedlock compared with one in sixteen in 1955. It hardly

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seems possible that such family changes have no consequence for school learning.

Citing More Research

How many effective schools, Edmonds asks, would the reader have to see before being persuaded of the educability of poor children in schools? If the answer is more than one, he asserts, then the reader has personal reasons for preferring to believe that student performance derives from family background instead of school inputs. Again, we repeat, there are three legs to the stool. Evidence of effective teaching in one of America's thousands of schools scarcely justifies ignoring research that indicates that, for many vulnerable youth, the best hope lies in strategies which seek to change the home or promote home-school-student alliances. This includes (a) Burton White's (1975) evidence that, for many three-year-old children, a delay of six months or more in language and problem solving skills indicates the unlikelihood of a successful education; (b) Benjamin Bloom's (1964) inquiries into the preschool learning; (c) Geneva Haertel and Harriet Talmadge's (1979) examination of school and home-related factors that found only one of 25 instructional practices, "corrective instruction," significantly related to achievement—however, 13 significant correlations were obtained between achievement and home environment factors; and (d) the Home Start reports (Scott, 1974 and 1979).

Much of Edmonds' case for school-based learning depends on the Detroit and Equal Educational Opportunity Survey (EEOS) reanalysis studies that he conducted. In Detroit's inner-city schools, he sought to determine whether there was evidence of strong differences in teaching quality; in other words, whether there were effective and ineffective schools. A positive finding, he assumed, would reveal that schools alone can effectively teach children whose learning is relatively unsupported by home conditions. He then established procedures that were guaranteed to assure the finding of such schools: "An effective school among the 20 was defined as being at or above the city average grade equivalent in math and reading. An ineffective school was defined as below the city average." There are obvious advantages to this statistical approach; for practically any variable, it is possible to secure individual or group means and then identify individuals or groups that fall above and below the average. Predictably, in some schools, performance fell above and below the average. However, this finding scarcely warrants the assumption that some of the schools were indeed outstandingly effective or ineffective, or that home influences do not significantly influence student learning.



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The Duffield-Bunche Comparison

To pursue the investigation into teaching effectiveness, comparisons were drawn concerning only two of the 20 Detroit schools, Duffield and Bunche. Edmonds considered the similarity of social characteristics of the two pupil populations (schools) coupled with wide achievement differences as sufficient basis for concluding that pupil family background neither causes nor precludes school effectiveness. But no data were obtained on students' kindergarten or first grade IQ's. Moreover, in one of his papers, Edmonds discounted as irrelevant to student achievement some of the same variables employed in matching Duffield and Bunche, such as class size and years of teacher experience.

At best, the Duffield-Bunche comparison comes off poorly, and the reader is left to speculate about presumed similarities and differences of other "effective" and "ineffective" schools, as well as the comparability of the social indices. Actually, since the pupils were in grades three through six, the proportion of between-school achievement is quite slight and might be reduced still further if sampling error is considered in the selection of eight pupils per classroom school. Duffield pupils averaged not quite four months above the city average in reading and math, whereas the mean for Bunche students was three months below the city average in reading and 1.5 months below the city average in math. Achievement differences of this magnitude might be traced to interschool differences that hardly seem matched: at Duffield there was less mobility (30 percent vs. 42 percent); fewer pupils overage in grades three-six (22 percent vs. 51 percent); more experienced teachers and presumably greater staff stability (14 years vs. nine years); and a lower proportion of students qualifying for state compensatory education (50 percent vs. 57 percent).

In his reanalysis of EEOS data, co-authored with Frederickson, Edmonds stratified pupils by their race and responses to nine questionnaire items asking if their family had a television set; telephone; record player, hi-fi, or stereo; refrigerator; dictionary; en-

cyclopedia; automobile; vacuum cleaner; and newspaper. Having tabulated responses to the home-item questionnaire, Edmonds and Fredericksen calculated the mean verbal score for each subgroup of pupils, and ranked schools on the basis of mean verbal performance of pupils in each subgroup; these rankings were conducted for all EEOS pupils in the Northeast and, in a somewhat more refined substudy, for students in schools designated as "effective" and "ineffective." The resulting data reveal that even the nine relatively gross home items are consistently related to test scores. Both black and white pupils with more home items achieved higher test scores. Thus Edmonds' own analysis contradicts his main point.

We share Edmonds' interest in promoting more effective schools and his belief that the quality of teaching declines if educators assume that home background factors foredoom poor children to unsuccessful classroom performance. On the other hand, educators alone are insufficient to increase learning productivity dramatically, and they need the cooperation of parents and students themselves.

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