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December 1982

Volume 40

Number 3

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ISSN 0013-1784

The New Catechism for School Effectiveness

Ronald Edmonds is one of a small group of researchers and activists bringing new hope and determination to urban schools. His methods are sensible enough: find schools where poor and minority students learn especially well, see how the schools are different, and help other schools be more like them. It's not that easy, of course. Skeptics immediately question Edmond's concept of "effectiveness" which, like those of most other process-product researchers, depends solely on test scores. Further, he ignores everything but the relative proportion of lower and middle class students who score satisfactorily on those tests, so he leaves out many factors others would call signs of effectiveness. (He calls them "excellence.")

Edmonds' formulation of the characteristics of effective schools is becoming the new catechism of urban school improvement. Principals, he says, immerse themselves in the instructional program. Staff members have a strong sense of purpose, maintain an orderly climate, convey high expectations, and carefully monitor student progress.

These qualities are sufficiently broad and self-evident to be generally acceptable, but Edmonds goes further. Based on research and personal experience, he associates effectiveness with practices many educators think unwise: uniform systemwide curriculum, fixed promotion standards, a required "college-prep" program for every student.

His views are compatible with the prevailing "back-to" trend. A friend in Chicago called me exultantly about a year ago to report that the Chicago schools had abandoned their nongraded program for grade-level promotion standards. He was sure the change would stimulate better achievement—and maybe it will—but to those for whom individual differences and self-concept remain important considerations, automatic retention seems a questionable solution.

It isn't necessary to agree with Ronald Edmonds in every detail to admire what he and others are accomplishing. In essence, his message is that poor and minority children *can* learn and *will* learn if adults believe in them. Organization theorists recognize in that credo an echo of Douglas McGregor's well-known *Theory Y*.

Successfully educating hard-to-teach students takes much more than faith, of course, but expectations—of students, parents, and teachers—is the right place to begin.

To his credit Edmonds insists he supports any arrangement that gets results; he asks only that schools modify their practices if they are not getting results. A reasonable challenge, and teachers and administrators in many cities are responding.

Besides a report from Edmonds and an interview with him, this issue has descriptions of school improvement programs in several cities, including Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. Other articles elaborate on what is known about effective schools.

For example, Thomas Lasley and William Wayson report on the Phi Delta Kappa study of schools with good discipline, and Joseph Murphy examines the particulars of "academic press."

In a thoughtful synthesis of the effectiveness research, Stewart Purkey and Marshall Smith show that the studies are not as uniform in their definitions and assumptions as they might seem—a point reinforced by Joe D'Amico—but they conclude that the findings are persuasive nonetheless.

Proof of the program is in the testing, and the evidence suggests that Milwaukee and other cities are beginning to break the familiar pattern of defeat. School improvement apparently works—and that's good news for all of us. □

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