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At-Risk Students: What Teachers and Principals Can Do

Dynamic teachers and principals have gone past the slogans of reform to achieve outstanding results with at-risk students, and their pioneering work points to promising directions for others.

You want to know what is happening in big city classrooms? Ask a teacher, talk to an assistant principal, visit a school and listen to students. Whatever you do, don't be fooled by the buzzwords from today's policymakers: *school-site management, high academic standards, core curriculum, restructured schools, teacher-run schools,* and the like. The buzzwords give a skewed picture of what occurs daily in classrooms; real school improvement has yet to penetrate most urban schools.

The truth is that recent state reforms have largely bypassed millions of students in urban schools across the nation (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1988, Committee for Economic Development 1987, and Ford Foundation, 1987). I said "largely." There are, of course, numerous efforts under way. The above reports note instances of gifted teachers' and principals' producing results that are outstanding in any situation but mind-boggling in the face of daily conditions in at-risk schools (Corcoran, Walker, and White 1988). Turnaround schools, where staffs have converted educational disasters into schools where parents clamor for entry, do exist. Teachers like Garfield High's Jaime Escalante and Rabun Gap's Eliot Wigginton inspire and educate their students year after year. Administrators like Harlem's Deborah Meier and Los Angeles' George McKenna help teachers put forth their best again and again. Such successes are reported, then amplified like an echo in a cavern. But in numbers, they are a faint sound in the Grand Canyon of hundreds of thousands of classrooms and millions of students' lives.

I say this not to disparage these successes or the intentions of the reformers; I say this only to point out that recent reforms aimed at school and classroom improvement sailed over urban schools. Furthermore, I distinguish between slogans and the gritty realities facing teachers daily. Policymakers and headline writers frequently assume that changes in school governance, district boundaries, curriculum, or decision-making authority automatically lead to classroom changes in urban schools. Not so. The historical record unforgivingly documents such flawed assumptions in the stale buzzwords of earlier decades: *decentralization, teacher-proof curriculum, merit pay, individualized instruction,* and so on. We must tell policymakers that we know they cannot mandate or direct what matters in schools and classrooms.

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After spending a quarter-century in classrooms and schools, I have reached a few conclusions, my operating assumptions.

- The future of urban schools is the primary issue facing the nation's educational system. If the system is left as it is, the social and individual costs of inadequate schooling will severely corrode the social fabric of the nation.
- The students in these schools, like students everywhere, bring strengths to

their classrooms and dream dreams of academic success.

- There are teachers and principals who not only want to improve what occurs in their schools but have done so in the face of massive obstacles.
- As grim as some of the working conditions are, as complicated and tough as the childrens' lives are, there is a slim but significant margin of constructive change available to teachers and principals who are determined to stretch the minds and fashion the character of low-income, ethnic, and language-minority children.

To practitioners who share these assumptions, I ask two questions: (1) Is there sufficient knowledge available to make fundamental changes in a classroom and school? (2) What can principals and teachers do that will improve what children experience in urban schools?

Is Sufficient Knowledge Available?

Yes, it is. Drawing on practitioner wisdom accumulated through experience and on research findings, we have sufficient knowledge to make changes in schools and classrooms. Some of our practitioner wisdom is captured in the work of gifted principals and teachers who simply know what has to be done and do it. Some of our knowledge appears in syntheses of research such as the U.S. Department of Education's booklet *Schools That Work: Educating Disadvantaged Children*.

We know about the necessary conditions that have to be in place for improvement to occur. We know about the importance of a school culture where both children and adults share common values about respect, intellectual achievement, and caring for one another. We know that key decisions in curriculum, instruction, and school organization need to occur at the school site with the substantial participation of the entire staff.

But no pat formulas to grow effective schools yet exist. Knowing how to put together the right combination of people, things, and ideas to create a productive setting that supports at-risk students and the adults that work with them remains just out of our reach so far. It is the difference between having all the parts of a car lying around and knowing exactly how to put them together to make the car run. We know the necessary parts of an effective school, but we lack the know-how to put them together in just the right order. Still, knowing what the right pieces are is a solid advance (Purkey and Smith 1983).

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How, Then, Can Principals and Teachers Improve Urban Schools?

By *improve*, I mean *create* schools and classrooms that build attachment in students toward completing school, increase the students' desire to learn, build self-esteem, and enhance academic performance. Let me take up the features of programs that have appeared in the literature and that coincide with practitioner wisdom about what works with at-risk students in urban schools (Comer 1980, Leinhardt and Bickel 1987).

1. *Size*. Successful schools and programs enroll as few as 50 students but seldom more than a few hundred. This smallness helps to foster enduring relationships among adults and students; in these programs, everyone knows everyone else, at least to some extent. Also, the potential for students to participate in activities is greater in small programs. Further, a class size of 15-20 students per teacher permits a level of personalizing instruction unavailable in more crowded settings. In secondary schools these programs can be housed as schools-within-a-school or separated from the main building. For example, Bret Harte Intermediate School in Los Angeles, Orr High School in Chicago, and Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx adopted "houses" and similar arrangements to combat largeness and anonymity (Carnegie 1988).

2. *Staff*. Teachers often *choose* to work in these programs and classes, thus making a commitment to at-risk students in their decisions to volunteer. When this kind of commitment is wedded to personal and cultural knowledge about these pupils and a willingness to experiment with methods and techniques, these like-minded teachers develop into a spirited professional cadre who enjoy working together. Principals of these programs endorse classroom changes and provide tangible and emotional support. Further, district officials, the superintendent, and the school board actively nourish such endeavors and provide resources to help the program accomplish its purposes. Chambers Academy, a small public school in New York City, has 11 teachers who spend at least three hours a week with small groups of students in advisory sessions in addition to teaching two or more courses to the very same students (Carnegie 1988).

3. *Flexibility*. Because the program is small and the purpose is to rescue kids from what appears to be a grim future, teachers and principals usually employ varied nontraditional approaches. There is seldom any ability grouping. Few, if any, distinctions are made between students other than, perhaps, age. Tests are used to figure out what kind of match is needed between the student and the difficulty level of materials and between the student and teacher methods. In effect, these successful programs reflect the concept of continuous progress or nongradedness. Passing and failing are not public displays where some students move ahead and others stay behind; mastery and achievement become personal benchmarks along a trail toward larger goals.

Time is restructured into schedules quite different from regular school: secondary teachers frequently spend

unusual amounts of time each day with students; team teaching is common for larger chunks of the school day. One teacher may work with a group of students not for a semester or even a year, but for two or even three years; the same high school teacher may teach three subjects. In-school learning is frequently mixed with out-of-school work or other tasks. Finally, these programs often coordinate an array of social services that the students need. The teacher, adviser, or special staff make linkages with social services, and the pressing needs of each student are dealt with by people who know the child (Lotto 1982, Wehlage 1983).

4. *School As Community*. These programs avoid the conventional model of school, where the teacher's primary concern is academic achievement, where students remain anonymous or emotionally distant from the teacher, and where rewards and penalties dominate the relationship between teacher and students. Rather, these small, flexible programs have in common a model of a community, an extended family where achievement is important and so is caring for one another. Building a sense of belonging to a group—in effect, a supportive environment—is consciously sought as a means of increasing self-esteem and achievement. Of course, the community model exists in regular schools, especially in small elementary schools or on high school athletic teams, clubs, bands, and drill teams; programs for at-risk students work hard to cultivate this community spirit and group cohesion so crucial to their success (Comer 1980).

Options for Instruction

When we move from matters of organization and climate to instruction, there are at least three directions teachers can consider. First, the literature on teacher effectiveness links certain teaching practices to test score gains. The pedagogy called *direct instruction* or *active teaching*, for example, claims that if teachers of at-risk students use these practices in teaching reading and math at certain elementary grades, achievement test scores will increase. This model of teaching has frequently been folded into efforts aimed at building effective schools (Brophy and Good 1986).

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Direct instruction has a fairly large body of research evidence to support its use of very specific teaching tactics for certain skills in elementary classrooms; it seems to fit at-risk students, and it particularly fits the inclinations of teachers familiar with the characteristics of such children.

However, critics of direct instruction have pointed out its deficits in content, its emphasis on routine work that proves tedious, its emphasis on test scores as the only measure of learning, its low expectations for teaching reasoning and critical thinking at the elementary level, and its inapplicability to secondary school subjects. Yet this approach, harnessed to the folk wisdom of veteran teachers, suggests that familiar techniques of managing a class, introducing and explaining material, will have some payoff in higher test scores—if that is the goal.

Second, there are instructional approaches that build on the strengths that children bring to school, instructional strategies that make linkages with life experiences of students and exploit a growing knowledge about active learning and the importance of student involvement in developing higher-order thinking skills. Such ways of teaching at-risk children (for example, whole language programs) further develop children's store of language, connect abstract ideas with children's background, and move back and forth between student experiences and school concepts (Au 1980, Heath 1983, Banks 1987).

Third, there is a growing body of evidence that mixed ability and multiage groupings within and across classrooms have positive effects on student motivation and learning. Cooperative learning approaches that target culturally different children have demonstrated an array of positive outcomes including test score gains. By contrast, pullout programs or within-class grouping by ethnicity or aptitude often have unintended negative effects on students' learning (Leinhardt and Bickel 1987, Slavin 1983, Cohen 1986, Kennedy et al. 1986).

What these three alternatives mean for classroom teachers is that they can choose among them or blend them into their own individual repertoires. Teachers making these choices also need to know the cultural backgrounds of their students, show skill in connecting subject matter to student experiences, and construct classroom activities in which students participate actively in acquiring what is to be learned.

Keen Satisfactions

Are the resulting schools or programs very different from the familiar ones where silence, mixed with reprimands, worksheets, and order, dominates the school day? Indeed, they are. Does this mean more work for principals and teachers? Indeed, it does. Will this produce keen satisfactions from seeing growth in students? Indeed, it will. The rewards are intensely personal and sharply felt; they last a lifetime.

There is, then, a window of opportunity open to teachers and principals who can still gather their courage, wits, and energy to improve the lives of at-risk children. But the work must be accomplished by teachers and ad-

ministrators. We cannot look to policies, regulations, and slogans to do the job.□

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Is There Equity in Educational Reform?

Early evidence indicates that, contrary to what many educators fear, current efforts to raise standards are having a positive effect on at-risk students.

A number of thoughtful scholars believe that the reform movement of the 1980s has ignored the needs of minority and disadvantaged students. They fear it will, therefore, exacerbate differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students; legitimize school structures and practices that harm low-functioning students, such as tracking; and compel at-risk students to drop out of school at accelerating rates.

I contend, on the contrary, that the reforms may indeed have a positive influence in promoting educational equity. First, the integrated approach to serving low-SES students that is embedded in current reform initiatives augurs well for increased equity. Trying to improve equity by superimposing discrete programs onto schools has not been a particularly successful strategy in the past. Current reform initiatives—which are designed for *all* students, align needed special services with core curriculum and instructional activities, and aim to create schools that function as "organic wholes"—offer more promise than did our previous efforts to promote equity.

Second, the basic themes of the current movement also bode well for improved equity. One such theme, "the emergence of concerns for educational productivity" [outcome focus] (Boyd and Hartman in press), has for the first time prevented the inequitable achievement gains of at-risk students from being explained away. This concern for productivity offers as much promise as anything to date to ensure continued efforts to increase equity. Another theme, "tightening organizational linkages," (e.g., defining goals, raising standards, and so forth) emphasizes what we have known for some time: loosely coupled educational systems put at-risk children at a disadvantage. As linkages are tightened, it becomes increasingly difficult to hide or to