

Sponsored by
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Directed by
William Julius Wilson
Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

The Urban Seminar Series
ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

Creating Change in Urban Public Education



Education was a main topic of debate during the 2000 presidential election, and newly elected President George W.

Bush introduced an education reform plan during his first week in office. But there are many unanswered questions regarding how best to reform our school systems. President Bush's education plan, for example, relies heavily on student testing to determine a school system's effectiveness. Early iterations of the plan included a voucher program intended to enable low- and middle-income public school students to attend private schools. *But what does research and experience tell us about these reform measures? Are they effective? Do they achieve positive outcomes and sustainable changes in our school districts? Are other reform measures equally or more effective?*

These are the types of questions that participants at the seminar, *Creating Change in Urban Public Education*, considered at length. Discussion at the seminar focused on identifying what is known about various approaches to education reform. The strategies discussed and analyzed at the seminar included: 1) systemic reform, which focuses on accountability measures—often in the form of student-testing—to transform schools; 2) market-based reforms, which assume that competition arising from consumer choice will improve schools; and 3) comprehensive reform at both the individual school and entire school system levels.

Research Findings and Recommendations

Four research papers were commissioned for the seminar: one concentrated on accountability measures, another on market-based reforms, and two focused on comprehensive approaches to school reform and school system reform. This report summarizes some of the notable findings and recommendations from those papers, as well as some general conclusions gleaned from subsequent seminar discussions.

The seminar, "Creating Change in Urban Public Education," part of the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety, was held December 7-8, 2000 at Harvard University. The seminar featured four presentations of commissioned papers on issues related to public education reform. For more information please visit our website at www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty.

Systemic Reforms: Making Schools Accountable for Student Outcomes

High-stakes exams have adversely affected vulnerable students and have not always improved instruction. Many states have introduced revised standards for student achievement and new assessments to test students' knowledge. Such standards and assessments are intended to make schools more accountable for student outcomes. Their appeal stems from the fact that they purport to give parents and the general tax-paying public an understanding of how well a given school or district is performing. Test scores are viewed as indicators of schools' ability to educate youth. *But have student standards and tests actually served to improve schools?* Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, who presented a paper at the seminar, concluded that high-stakes, norm-referenced tests used primarily to retain students have not improved overall school success or the educational performance of low-achievers (1).

In her paper, Dr. Darling-Hammond noted that, "States and districts that have relied primarily on test-based accountability emphasizing rewards and sanctions for students and teachers have often produced greater failure rather than greater success for their most educationally vulnerable students" (1). Empirical evidence from various school districts indicates that the use of high-stakes standardized tests to determine whether a student will be promoted or will graduate or whether a school will receive certain resources have "narrowed the curriculum" and pushed instruction toward lower-order cognitive skills. Such tests have also created incentives for schools to move low-scorers into special education, hold them back a grade, or encourage these students to drop out so that schools' average scores improve. These actions assume that students are solely at fault for low test scores, failing to take into account the quality of teaching, instructional materials, or school environment that may have contributed to students' low scores. As a consequence, they often increase grade retention and dropout rates without improving the quality of teaching or of student learning.

Successful efforts to make schools accountable focus on quality of instruction, curriculum, assessments, and on school design. Some school districts have used reform strategies to substantially improve student performance and learning and create "genuine" accountability for parents and students (1). At the seminar, Dr. Darling-Hammond argued that rather than relying primarily on testing tied to student sanctions, successful districts (such as New York City's District #2; New Haven, California; and statewide and city efforts in Connecticut) focused on "the improvement of teaching guided by rigorous teaching standards" (1). Based on the significantly improved student achievement *and* graduation rates in the districts offered as examples, the author suggested that accountability reforms should focus on the following: 1) enhancing the professional development of

teachers and the quality of teaching; 2) using state, district, and school performance assessments to provide diagnostic information about student needs and rich information to schools to guide improvements in curriculum and teaching; 3) ensuring that targeted support services such as tutoring, extended-day programs, and homework support are available to students; and 4) redesigning schools, including the creation of smaller school units and schools that allow teams of teachers to work with fewer students for longer periods of time, so that students' needs can be better met.

As a discussant of this session, Dr. Thomas Payzant, Superintendent of Boston public schools, lamented the fact that there is a dearth of research on the quality and effectiveness of professional development programs for teachers. Seminar participants noted that this lack of evidence makes it difficult to argue for the funds to support such efforts. Participants also wondered about the supply of qualified teachers. Improving the quality of teaching requires that instructors receive adequate preparation through teacher training programs and that schools enforce teaching standards in their employment practices. Lastly, seminar participants supported the notion of redesigning schools into smaller units. However, some participants noted that professional development must then focus on retraining teachers who aren't used to working in these smaller units once high schools are structurally reorganized.

Market-Based Reforms: Expanding Choice in Education

Large-scale, market-based reforms alone will not solve the problems of distressed urban schools. Proponents of market-based education reforms—such as public school choice, charter schools, and voucher programs—argue that expanding school choice will force schools to compete for students and, by necessity, improve. But at the seminar, Dr. Helen Ladd of Duke University argued that such reforms will not improve the most troubled schools and could well exacerbate their problems and reduce the quality of education for the students they serve (2). Hence, additional actions would be needed to counter the negative effects of market based reforms on such schools.

To support this conclusion, Dr. Ladd relied heavily on evidence from Chile and New Zealand. In contrast to the United States, where market-based reform efforts have been relatively recent and limited in size, both these countries have had extensive experience with large-scale market based reforms (2). Evidence from these countries shows that choice and competition may lead to some positive improvements in schools that serve children who perform in the middle to upper ranges on achievement tests.

However, the picture is much less positive for the schools that serve poor and minority students largely because families tend to use the mix of students in the school as a proxy for school quality. After New Zealand implemented a program of

parental choice in 1991, the schools with the most affluent and advantaged students quickly became oversubscribed, while the schools serving disadvantaged students were perceived to be lower quality and struggled to enroll students. As a result, while the most sought after schools were able to select from a wide array of pupils, the least favored institutions ended up with the most troubled students. Thus, the major flaw in the economic argument for school choice and competition is that the playing field is not level. Public schools serving large proportions of minority or economically disadvantaged students are at a competitive disadvantage when forced to compete with wealthier public and private schools, and they end up with even greater educational challenges.

In addition to the limitations to market-oriented solutions identified by Dr. Ladd in her paper, Dr. Pedro Noguera of Harvard University argued that it is also important to recognize that in inner-city communities the free market is not particularly effective at delivering other vital services (i.e. food, housing, etc.). This is not because a demand for these services does not exist, but because private suppliers of these kinds of goods and services do not typically respond to market demands in inner-city neighborhoods in the same way they respond in more affluent communities. Historically, government intervention has been necessary. This basic understanding is important because there is little evidence that private suppliers of educational services are prepared or willing to replace public schools in serving low-income families in the inner city.

Nonetheless, there are some legitimate arguments for market-oriented reforms, such as more parental choice on the demand side and more operational flexibility for schools on the supply side. For example, more freedom for parents—especially for low-income parents who currently have the least choice—to choose schools that best match the needs of their children is a compelling argument in favor of market-oriented reforms. The policy question then becomes: *How can policy makers constrain the additional choice and flexibility in ways that promote the public interest?* With respect to parental choice, the author argued that the goal should be to balance parental choices against community interests in the assignment of students to public schools and to assure fair access of all children to charter schools or private schools by requiring admission by lottery. On the supply side, the author emphasized the need for effective accountability mechanisms to assure that schools are operating in the public interest and that schools receiving public funding not be empowered to select their students.

The author highlighted a final set of reforms that often are excluded from discussions of market-based reforms. She argued that using salary incentives to induce higher quality teachers to teach in the lowest performing schools could potentially be much more helpful for low-performing students than reforms designed to increase competition.

Several seminar participants acknowledged that there are benefits to market-based reform measures, including the creation of new, smaller schools in poor communities. But participants also noted that new schools aren't necessarily better schools, and more choice may not necessarily mean that poor families will have access to better schools. Dr. Noguera posed an overarching question to guide this discussion: How do we ensure that the most troubled students have access to high-quality educational opportunities? These students, who are often the most in need of educational intervention, also are the most likely to be refused admission to many schools because of their troubled histories. Many participants thought that larger subsidies to schools that serve the most needy youngsters would be a useful first step.

Comprehensive Reform of Schools and School Systems

An expanded Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, in conjunction with systemic reform measures, can positively impact distressed urban schools. In 1997, Congress created the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) Program, which provided grants of at least \$50,000 per year for up to three years to support the adoption of proven, comprehensive school reform models. To date, the program has awarded grants to more than 1,800 schools. In a paper presented at the seminar, Dr. Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University suggested that increased federal Title I funding for an expanded CSRD program, in combination with state standards and accountability mechanisms already in place in most states, could dramatically improve urban public schools (3).

To support this recommendation, Dr. Slavin presented an overview and analysis of several studies which have concluded that *Success For All*, the most widely disseminated and possibly the most extensively evaluated CSRD program, was effective for elementary schools (the only grade levels to which the program currently is targeted). *Success For All* is a school-wide program for students in grades pre-K to 6 that focuses on developing reading skills designed by Dr. Slavin and current *Success For All* President Dr. Nancy A. Madden. The program utilizes specially trained tutors, family support teams, and classroom facilitators who work with teachers, and has reached more than one million children. According to the paper, a multi-site, replicated experiment comparing the reading abilities of *Success For All* students to matched control groups found statistically positive effects at every grade level for grades 1-5. A follow-up study found that similar positive effects for the full sample of students continued into grades 6 and 7.

The author presented the results of three studies, demonstrating that *Success For All* schools in Memphis, New York City, and Texas achieved significant gains in test scores on standardized state tests. In addition, several studies have shown that the program can be adapted successfully for students who are learning to speak English, and for special education students. Dr. Slavin concluded that "research-based, comprehensive reform could be the salvation of millions of children in Title I schools" (3).

During this session Dr. Richard Weissbourd of Harvard University underscored the need to engage parents more fully in any reform initiatives under consideration by a school district. Dr. Weissbourd called attention to the impact of parental depression on youth achievement as one of the multiple barriers that prevent greater parental involvement, especially among poor parents. He noted the inordinately high rates of depression among the poor, which have been reported in the research literature. Data suggest that approximately 40-70 percent of low-income parents—depending in part on how depression is defined—suffer from some form of depression. Depressed parents often are unable to actively engage in critical tasks that promote children's reading and cognitive development. These include activities such as helping a child with homework or engaging a child in rich conversation or reading to a child. Participants observed that some schools have been successfully employing home visiting programs, and that such initiatives may prove useful in uncovering ways to help parents become more actively involved in their children's education.

School system reform requires hybrid strategies that combine multiple approaches. According to Dr. Paul Hill of the University of Washington, the efforts of several large cities in recent years to improve schools through school system takeovers have failed due to deficits in the strategies and implementations employed by local, state, or federal authorities (4). Dr. Hill maintained that only a few of the mayors and state government officials who have taken control of school systems in major cities have thought through all of the changes that must occur before a chronically distressed school system can begin to operate at a consistently high standard. He argued that several individual reform strategies—including standard setting, teacher development, school design, decentralization, charter schools, school contracting, and vouchers—possess merit but none is sufficient on its own to transform a foundering school system. Instead, these and other reform measures must be combined into composite strategies that address the myriad problems affecting troubled school systems.

Dr. Hill stated that integrated approaches must have three components: 1) incentives for school performance; 2) ways of increasing school capabilities; and 3) opportunities for school staff to change how they serve students. School performance incentives might include allowing families to choose from among a number of public schools in the city, thus promoting competition among schools, creating new opportunities for high-performing teachers and administrators, and allowing individual teachers and principals to negotiate salary and work assignments with schools. Investments in school capacity might involve a guarantee to schools of minimum allotment of funds; creation of new institutions to provide assistance, advice, and teacher training; and the establishment of a venture capital fund to foster the formation of new non-profit and university-based assistance organizations.

Opportunities for school change might include supervision via performance agreements rather than rules, allowing schools more discretion over how they spend their money, and giving schools more autonomy over organizational and staffing issues.

The paper argued that a successful reform strategy should encompass all three essential elements. Dr. Hill concluded by noting that education reform efforts in many cities have been derailed by political resistance, strikes, fiscal crises, and scandals. Implementation problems could be minimized, according to Dr. Hill, by the creation of a civic reform oversight group to provide long-term leadership throughout the reform process.

Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers; Deborah Meier, principal of the Mission Hill School; and Michele Cahill, senior program officer of Carnegie Corporation of New York served as the discussants for this panel, infusing the discussion with perspectives from their practical experience. During this session, seminar participants discussed dropout prevention and cautioned scholars that much of the research in this area focuses on deficits in the family, school, and the students themselves. The discussion concluded with a general recommendation that school reform measures must also take an asset-based approach, which seeks to build on resources already available in communities. This approach emphasizes the important role that all youth service providers play in ensuring the continued healthy development of children, and proposes a comprehensive solution which is predicated on the collective efforts of each entity working together to guarantee success.

General Conclusions

The following general conclusions regarding education reform emerged during the course of the seminar discussion:

Motivate a community to initiate reform by learning from best practices. Communities seeking to improve their schools should explore existing reform efforts and learn from best practices. It is important that stakeholders—such as school board members, school administrators, teachers, parents, and community officials—see for themselves that school reforms can be successfully undertaken, that seemingly intractable problems can be resolved, and that reforms can result in positive outcomes.

Avoid the “one size fits all” approach. Several exemplary models exist that can inform the efforts of reformers. However, success is based on developing strategies that address the specific problems that a district is experiencing. Solutions need to account for the obstacles that hinder the achievement of their pupils, but must also draw on community assets.

Involve multiple stakeholders or collaborative approaches. To increase the likelihood of precipitating improvements in the lives of children, schools need to be supported in their efforts by other community-wide programs that impact youth. By providing a compendium of services to youth and their parents, the successes of individual agencies is increased by the efforts of all providers working in tandem.

Reform must include mentoring opportunities for teachers. Several of the papers presented at the seminar pointed out that high-quality teaching can be ensured through expanded opportunities for experienced faculty to mentor new teachers.

Salary incentives should be used to attract high quality teachers to low income, minority communities. A researcher indicated that salary incentives present a useful solution to attracting high-quality teachers to teach in the lowest performing schools in low income, minority communities.

References

The following papers were commissioned for and presented at the seminar:

1. “Transforming Urban Public Schools: The Role of Standards and Accountability” by Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford University.
2. “Market-Based Reforms in Urban Education” by Helen Ladd, Duke University.
3. “Success for All and Comprehensive School Reform: Evidence-Based Policies for Urban Education” by Robert Slavin, Johns Hopkins University.
4. “Good Schools for Big-City Children” by Paul Hill, University of Washington.

The **Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety** brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who have a common interest in improving the health and well being of urban children. The series of six semiannual seminars is sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and directed by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The seminars highlight the latest research on selected topics related to children's health and safety, and are designed to complement RWJF's Urban Health Initiative.

The mission of the Urban Health Initiative (UHI) is to improve the health and safety of children and youth. Local campaigns in Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond participate in the UHI. Each campaign seeks to change the major systems that serve children in order to improve youth health and safety statistics throughout the entire city or metropolitan area. The UHI National Program Office is located at the University of Washington and is headed by former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer.

Core group participants include the following:

Advisory Panel Members

Melissa Berman, President and CEO, The Philanthropic Collaborative; Douglas Besharov, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; Geoffrey Canada, President, Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families; Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Professor and Chair, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University; Ronald Ferguson, Lecturer in Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government and Senior Research Associate at the Wiener Center for Social Policy; Robert Granger, Senior Vice President, William T. Grant Foundation; George Latimer, Distinguished Professor of Urban Studies, Macalester College and Former Mayor of St. Paul; Nicholas Lemann, Staff Writer, The New Yorker; Sara McLanahan, Professor, Department of Sociology and Public Affairs and Director of the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University; Lawrence M. Mead, Professor, Department of Politics, New York University; Melvin Oliver, Vice President, Asset Building and Community Development, Ford Foundation; Manuel Pastor, Jr., Professor and Chair, Latin American and Latino Studies Department, University of California at Santa Cruz; Robert J. Sampson, Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago; Kurt Schmoke, Partner, Law Firm of Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering and Former Mayor of Baltimore; Marta Tienda, Director, Office of Population Research, Princeton University; Beth Weitzman, Associate Professor of Health Policy & Management, Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University; Barry Zuckerman, Chairman, Department of Pediatrics, Boston University

Urban Health Initiative

Julie Cooper, Research Director; Cynthia Curreri, Deputy Director; Charles Royer, National Program Director, Urban Health Initiative and Senior Lecturer, University of Washington

Site Directors

Grenae Dudley, Executive Director, Youth Connection; Hathaway Ferebee, Executive Director, Baltimore Safe and Sound; Laura Pinkney, Executive Director, Safe Passages; Naomi Post-Street, Executive Director, Philadelphia Safe and Sound; Veronica Templeton, Executive Director, Youth Matters

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Ruby Hearn, Senior Vice President; Paul Jellinek, Vice President; James Knickman, Vice President; Katherine Kraft, Program Officer; Paul Tarini, Communications Officer

Harvard University

Susan Chang, Research Associate; Pamela Joshi, Research Associate; James Quane, Associate Director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, Kennedy School of Government; William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University

Professor and Director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, Kennedy School of Government

For more information on the Urban Seminar Series, please visit our website at www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty. For more information on the Urban Health Initiative, please visit its website at www.urbanhealth.org.

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone: 617.496.4514
Fax: 617.495.5834

www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty