

Sure-Fire School Reform

You can solve a problem by throwing money at it.

The most urgent crisis in U.S. public education is one that no one wants to deal with. Our proposed "reforms"—restructured schools, vouchers, national standards and national testing—tinker at the margins. These reforms appeal because they don't cost a lot of money. However, they do not respond to the real problem: the serious underfunding of our low-income urban and rural schools.

In Sweden, per-pupil expenditures in low-income schools are two to three times higher than in affluent schools. These ratios are also quite common in the United States—only here, rich children are the winners.

Up until now, we have chosen not to make the needed investment in low-income communities. Under the circumstances, policy makers should be realistic about what can and cannot be accomplished by rhetoric about world-class standards, accountability or choice. Setting vague and unrealistic goals, or constructing additional tests, does not substitute for high-quality education. We will not produce better schools—no matter what peripheral reforms are implemented—unless we address the huge disparities in per-pupil expenditures between affluent and poor school districts.

Indeed, increased pressure to measure performance is likely to have the same result as in England: testing on a massive scale, recently brought to a halt by the "rebellion" of teachers, principals and parents. A focus on test scores adds enormously to bureaucracy and paperwork, proliferates an environment of rote learning and further discourages the best teachers from teaching in the poorest communities. It does not improve education. It tells us only what we already know—the effects of inadequate resources and poverty on the learning experience.

We have not responded to the financial problems in low-income schools primarily because we are saddled with myths that have diminished political support for increased funding in our poorest schools. The first myth holds that low-income children actually receive, because of perceived federal largess, more educational funding than do more affluent youngsters. This myth amounts to little more than a denial of reality: The fact is there are vast differences in education expenditures across districts and schools *even after the addition of federal funds*. Federal programs do not provide anything close to the level of funding needed to compensate for the large inequalities in expenditures between low-income and more affluent school districts.

For example, the 100 poorest districts in Texas spend an average of just under \$3,000 per student. The 100 wealthiest districts, however, spend about \$7,200 per student. In Illinois, school districts spend between roughly \$2,400 and \$8,300 per student. A judge in a school finance case put it this way: "If money is inadequate to improve education, the residents of poor districts should at least have an equal opportunity to be disappointed by its failure."

Those disparities make a real difference in the services provided to schoolchildren. Low-income schools are less likely to offer preschool child-development programs, are more likely to stuff additional children into individual classrooms, are sorely deficient in counseling and social services and are less likely to have as many teachers with advanced degrees or to offer as full a curriculum. The physical facilities are in abysmal decay. Increased testing requirements won't help.

The second myth holds that we cannot solve the problem by "throwing money" at it. That is true only if one assumes that offering poor children the opportunities routinely available to their more affluent peers is the same as throwing money at a problem. Teacher expertise and experience, class size, better science laboratories and decent facilities do matter. If they don't, rich school districts haven't heard the message.

The third myth is that federal education programs do not work. Yet national evaluations of Chapter 1, the largest federal elementary and secondary education program, show that participating students do make gains in basic skills. Moreover, despite the public rhetoric about American education, there is no evidence that student achievement has declined in the past generation. Our



students' educational accomplishments equal and in many cases surpass those of students in previous years. With respect to minority children, prime targets for Chapter 1, the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows significant gains in both reading and mathematics.

The forthcoming reauthorization of Chapter 1 provides an opportunity to increase resources in low-income schools. While the program currently benefits selected groups of children, particularly by providing remedial instruction, it has almost no impact on the overall quality of schools in poor communities. This is because Chapter 1, as currently funded, has not kept up with the requirements either in poor inner-city or in rural schools, and because the funds are too widely dispersed. Indeed, Chapter 1 funds go to almost half of the elementary schools in the country with as few as 10 percent poor children. That's the political reality. But it does not have to be that way.

Chapter 1 should be reformulated to play a far more significant role by increasing and concentrating funding for the nation's lowest-income schools. The program would then have the potential to go beyond remedial instruction for relatively few students and, instead, provide comprehensive improvements in the overall quality of education in our poorest communities.

If we focus attention on proposals that promise everything except resources, low-income schools will again be the losers. The children in these schools need an equal chance. And they need it not tomorrow, after the nation's economic growth has been restored. They need it today so that, when the economy does turn around, a new generation of low-income youngsters will not—yet again—be shut out.

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