

As part of a Heinz Endowments-funded consulting contract with the Pittsburgh Public Schools, education scholar Pedro Noguera, right, participated this winter in the "We Promise" African American Male Summit organized by the city district and the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship organization. Noguera joined district and community leaders such as School Superintendent Linda Lane, below left, in encouraging male students to get the most out of their classes so that they are academically eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program.

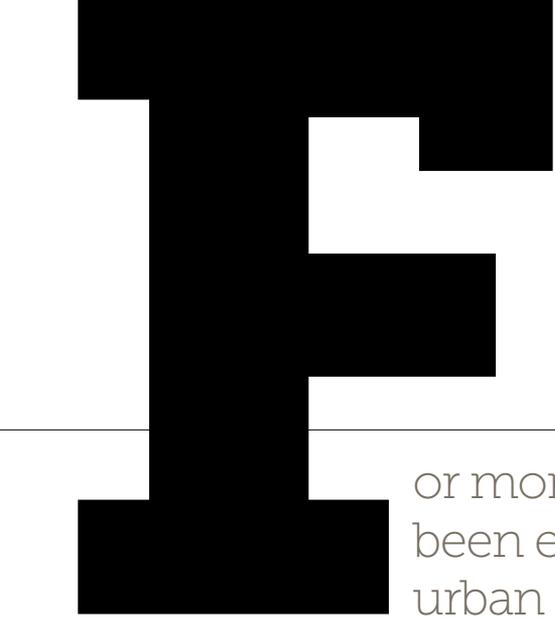


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IS URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION A LOST CAUSE?





or more than 30 years, the United States has been engaged in a relentless effort to reform its urban public schools. Despite this work, dropout rates remain high—more than 50 percent in several cities—test scores remain low, and, according to the U.S. Department of Education, thousands of schools are in a state of perpetual failure and dysfunction.

So how is it that these policies have failed to produce a greater degree of success?

This is a complex question and there are no simple answers, but clearly something is wrong with the way we have been approaching reform. In the 1960s and 1970s—the period when the greatest progress was achieved in closing gaps in performance between students from different racial and socioeconomic groups—much of the work of school reform focused on desegregation and anti-poverty efforts. School busing, Head Start, magnet schools, the Elementary and Secondary School Act, and a variety of academic programs financed by Title I were all aimed at addressing the legacy of racial segregation and the deliberate funding of schools serving African Americans and other minorities.

A 2010 study by Barton and Coley titled “Why Aren’t We Making More Progress?” revealed that these efforts were producing steady progress in raising achievement levels. The authors found that by countering the pernicious effects of racial segregation and concentrated poverty in inner-city communities, schools were in a better position to address the academic and social needs of children. For supporters of these initiatives, the hope was that they would eventually make it possible for education to serve as a means to break the cycle of poverty. School reform was, in effect, a central component of the nation’s strategy to expand equality.

However, by the 1990s, much of the progress came to a halt as the nation’s reform focus changed. Instead of addressing the effects of poverty, education policy increasingly stressed altering curriculum, such as promoting phonics over whole language, changing structure by advocating for smaller schools, improving instruction and expanding access to technology. With the adoption of No Child Left Behind in 2001, standards and accountability with an accompanying emphasis on high-stakes testing became the central focus of education policy and reform. The assumption guiding these efforts was that improved academic outcomes could be obtained by applying greater pressure on schools and requiring greater accountability. This meant less emphasis would be placed on addressing the social and economic needs of poor children and of the communities where the most disadvantaged schools were located.

As a result of this change in focus, there has been relatively little progress in improving school performance or student outcomes over the last two decades, despite the investment of vast sums of public and private funds in educational reform. Rather than producing clear evidence of change, the reforms implemented over the last 30 years have not succeeded in bringing

about sustainable improvements in the most disadvantaged schools. But misguided federal policies are not the only obstacles to progress. In some city districts, political conflicts among school board members and between district leadership and teachers have halted reform plans. And often, there is little public will for change. In most urban districts, most residents have no personal connection to the public school system other than as taxpayers.

In an exhaustive study of many of the reforms carried out in Chicago during the years that Education Secretary Arne Duncan was chief education officer, sociologist Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the University of Chicago found that unless elements such as effective leadership, strong parent–community ties, teacher effectiveness, and a student-centered learning environment were present, sustained school improvement did not occur. They also found that in schools where poverty was most heavily concentrated, the reforms failed because students faced so many other challenges. Their findings provide further evidence that the approach our nation has taken to improve public education has been deeply flawed.

The reform landscape sketched out from recent experience and research offers a bleak view. But there is cause for hope. Despite the magnitude of the challenges, public school districts in our cities can be significantly improved. In my work with the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University, I have seen examples of sustained education success in schools serving ethnically and economically diverse students in urban settings.

Maryland’s Montgomery County Public School system, for example, has made significant progress in its decade-long effort to eliminate racial disparities in student achievement. The district changed policies such as those governing enrollment in Advanced Placement courses. Now, students can self-select rather than

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relying solely on teacher recommendations. District officials provided diversity training for staff and reached out to community leaders and groups to help expand efforts to recruit black, Hispanic and Asian teachers and administrators. They reduced class size in schools serving the poorest children and developed special programs for African American and Hispanic students who needed additional academic help. Finally, the district adopted a marketing campaign that was tailored to students—explaining what the achievement gap meant in their lives and encouraging them to apply themselves on standardized tests. Among the returns on these investments have been several important educational gains. The district has experienced the largest increase in black and Hispanic students’ access and success in AP classes in the nation, and it has improved reading performance in early grades.

Similarly, the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas, and the Long Beach Unified School District in California have been hailed for their across-the-board increases in student achievement, including standardized test performance, over several years. Both districts have developed sophisticated systems for analyzing student performance data that allow them to effectively respond to student needs. They also have invested heavily in teacher and principal training, including coaching and mentoring. In Ysleta, where racial and economic achievement gaps have been steadily narrowing at all school levels for the past five years, officials highlight their district’s culture of collaboration established by requiring teachers to work together in teams to ensure they are pursuing students’ best interests. Long Beach has been recognized internationally as a successful school system that receives an abundance of community and parental support because of its effective communication with the public.

For nearly a year, I have been working closely with educators and community leaders in Pittsburgh to figure out how to apply the lessons we have obtained from other successful schools and districts to address the challenges confronting local public schools. In the fall, Superintendent Linda Lane released the Equity Plan that has real potential to reduce the racial achievement gap, improve school performance and otherwise further educational equity. There are, of course, obstacles that will make implementation of the plan difficult. Among the most challenging are declining student enrollment and the anticipated budget shortfalls the district will face in the years ahead. Both problems occur while concerns continue about middle-class white and black students leaving the public school system, if not the city itself. However, the road map that has been outlined in the plan takes into account both the impact of poverty on learning and the need for changes within the classroom. If implemented with fidelity by the school board and administration, I think there is a strong chance that it will lead to genuine success.

The Pittsburgh Equity Plan recommends several measures similar to those used in other districts noted for student success. To help boost achievement among African American students, the plan calls for teachers to receive ongoing training on how to build strong relationships with students so that they can teach effectively across race and class differences. It also includes strategies for bringing culturally relevant learning materials into the classroom and providing training to teachers on how to use these materials to enhance learning for all students. The plan recognizes the impact of the city's history of racial discrimination, including residential segregation, and addresses it by requiring schools to receive assistance in developing partnerships with parents and community organizations. In this way, all parties—parents, teachers, administrators, students and community residents—are working together to support black student achievement.

Professional development and coaching also are a top priority in the Equity Plan, with an emphasis on tailoring the training to meet teacher needs. This will require administrators at the school and district level to be more collaborative and responsive to their staff. Part of what had been missing from the district's previous efforts to improve teacher effectiveness was an acknowledgment that the needs of teachers vary. Support must be tailored to help each individual improve. While some teachers require help in

instruction, others are not as strong in content knowledge as they need to be. Still others experience difficulty in building positive relationships with students, especially those from different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Researchers have grown increasingly aware that if reform efforts ignore school culture—attitudes, norms, values and relationships and the overall ethos of a school—any improvements rarely last. In the next five years, the Pittsburgh Public Schools will attempt to pay greater attention to key school culture indicators such as student discipline; teacher morale; teacher expectations; and the quality of relationships between parents and teachers, students and teachers, and administrators and personnel. If the effort to transform school culture is successful, we can expect to see school environments that are conducive to great teaching and learning in the years ahead.

With support from The Heinz Endowments, the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education has been working closely with district staff to establish an improvement strategy at two high schools with a history of difficulty: Perry and Westinghouse. The goal is to put in place systems and practices that can support improvement and sustain change at Perry and Westinghouse, and then apply what we have learned at other schools in the district.

We are looking closely at the data, and we will know fairly soon if our efforts are yielding results. We are pragmatic about the difficulty involved but optimistic about our chances for success. In contrast to the national policy debate, we are not arguing over whether to focus on poverty or school change. We are doing both, and we are working closely with community-based organizations such as the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh and the Homewood Children's Village to provide additional support to the schools.

Based upon years of experience in urban school districts throughout the country, I believe that chances for success are high in Pittsburgh because we are starting from a position of strength. There is a large number of high-performing schools in the district, and there is strong, stable leadership in place. Only time will tell if the city's stakeholders—parents, educators, elected officials and members of the broader community—are willing to stay focused on the work to create the schools Pittsburgh's children deserve. *h*