

INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For nearly two decades numerous prominent critics have pronounced American public education broken. The debate over the state of the nation's public schools has been joined by business leaders, teacher unions, and think tanks from all points on the political spectrum. The chorus of criticism has produced a curious disconnect between Americans' perception of their local schools and their assessment of the nation's schools as a whole. Of more than 1,100 respondents to a new Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, for instance, just over half told surveyors that they would give the nation's schools a grade of 'C', even though an identical number – 51% – gave their own local schools A's and B's.¹

The contention that the public education system has failed in turn has prompted a wide variety of reform proposals. Some, such as educational vouchers, would radically reorganize the system's governance. Others, such as universal early childhood education, may demand equal or even greater changes in the educational system's design and structure, while retaining the central feature of the system that has served public education for more than a century: the common school. Still other reform proposals are far more measured in their scope. Amid the welter of ideas put forth it is often far from clear how to best improve what is not working well without subverting the many successes of American public education.

In the last decade especially, reforms have tended to be justified as necessary to improve the academic achievement of children living in poverty. Moreover, the widespread and intense scrutiny of public school performance has increased the pressure on legislatures to act quickly, even as it has made it more important than ever for them to

carefully weigh the benefits and costs of competing reform proposals. Unfortunately, the research evidence available to policy makers is often non-existent, incomplete, or appears to be contradictory. School reform is, therefore, frequently debated in an environment that is long on emotion and short on hard data. Furthermore, the data supporting proposals to reform public education varies enormously in its quality. It ranges from carefully conducted and rigorously reviewed research to ideologically oriented commentary. Often there are few indicators for policy makers to distinguish one from the other.

In order to clarify what we know about effective public schools, the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University invited a group of distinguished education scholars to review the research on a series of education reform topics.

The following literature reviews are the result. Some reviews focus on specific proposals that are proffered for making public schools more effective. Others examine core components or practices in our public schools in order to evaluate the impact of those components and practices on student achievement. In each case, the reviewers examined the research on the topic at hand with a particular eye toward its findings with regard to student achievement, especially that of children living in poverty.

Institutions, People, and Money

These 13 reviews can be grouped into three broad clusters. The first group examines schools as institutions and their structures. It includes reports on the efficacy of early education programs; the movements to reduce class size and to create smaller schools; alternatives in structuring the school day and year; variations in how students

may be grouped; and the role that schools have played in the past and might play in the future in their larger communities and in involving parents in their children's education.

The second group of reviews focuses on the teachers who deliver public education. They examine research on teacher characteristics and instructional behaviors; the role of teacher unions as obstacles or assets to educational improvement; proposals to quantify the value that teachers add to the educational process and thereby assess teacher performance; and on the effectiveness of current approaches to professional development of teachers, and how those approaches might be improved.

The final review is a comprehensive look at various proposals to supplant all or part of the traditional public education system with institutions from outside that system. Those include vouchers that citizens might use to gain entry to private schools instead of their local public schools; charter schools, which present themselves as alternatives to public schools that have been released from some of the requirements and regulations under which public schools operate; and proposals to contract the management of public schools out to private, for-profit companies.

The Varying Quality of Research

It should be no surprise to the informed reader that, from one topic to the next, the quality of available research varies greatly. Some topics, such as class-size reduction, have been the subject of rigorous and well-controlled experiments that have undergone the intense scrutiny of peer review and stood up to the test. Other topics, such as private school vouchers, have produced much in the way of strong opinions but very little well-founded research to support the conclusions drawn by their staunchest advocates.

Notwithstanding such limitations, each review represents the best information available to us on the topic at hand. Each presents evidence for the effectiveness – or the ineffectiveness – of certain reform proposals. Several include calls for additional research where our knowledge is too scanty to draw well-reasoned conclusions. And where the reviewers are able to uncover reforms that do work, they have presented evidence as well for how we can make each reform as effective as possible.

Many of these reviews point to reforms that can be achieved with only modest investments, or indeed simply a reallocation of additional resources. Others offer a warning worth heeding about proposals that seem certain to waste funds. For the most promising reforms, however, a common theme emerges: Money does matter. The reforms that offer the greatest promise, reforms supported by solid scientific research, cannot be advanced merely by working smarter. They require a deeper investment than we are currently making in the nation's school systems.

Spending: Essential, but Not Sufficient

Yet, as one review after another suggests, simply spending more money is not sufficient, and is no guarantee of success. Rather, any enrichment of resources must be husbanded carefully and spent thoughtfully, with due consideration given to what works and what doesn't in the pursuit of each reform strategy.

There is good news, here, however: the research evidence strongly identifies those investments that promise the highest return. There is more good news as well. Support for committing additional resources, when that commitment is made thoughtfully and with a sound basis in action, may run deeper than many might assume. Fully 65% of Americans polled for the *Washington Post* and ABC News in the spring of 2000 advocated increased

federal spending on schools.² Two-thirds of those responding to a 1998 Gallup Poll for Phi Delta Kappa said they would be willing to pay more in taxes to improve the quality of the nation's inner-city schools.³ The most recent Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll shows support for reforming the existing public education system increasing and interest in radical reforms such as vouchers fading. Seventy-one percent of respondents, for example, said they favored public school reforms over measures, such as private school vouchers, that would seek to supplant the public schools.⁴

Taken together, the chapters that follow constitute a comprehensive resource guide on the state of education reform and research into reform. Among the many reforms examined are those that have demonstrated their effectiveness beyond all reasonable doubt. Others, although they may have won widespread attention and praise, have already demonstrated through research to be at best far more limited than their promoters have warranted, or at worst, completely ineffectual. Still others have not lived up to claims made on their behalf, and require much more research before they can be considered worthy of endorsement.

These reports, then, offer to policy-makers and citizens a road map for making public schools more effective, and to scholars an agenda for further research. It is our hope that they will sort out for all of us a clearer understanding of what works, and what we still need to know.

REFERENCES

- 1 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 23 May – 6 June 2001, <<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0109gal.htm>>.
- 2 Washington Post/ABC News poll, 30 March – 2 April 2000, <<http://www.pollingreport.com/educatio.htm>>.
- 3 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, 5 June – 23 June 1998, <<http://www.pollingreport.com/educatio.htm>>.
- 4 *Op. Cit.*, Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 23 May – 6 June 2001.