

STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATIONAL REFORMS: PROGRESS, BUT ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN MOMENTUM?

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*A Public Laboratory Dewey Barely Imagined*¹ is a masterful article that places standards-based educational reform (“SBR”) in historical context. The authors are cautiously optimistic that SBR will be more successful than desegregation policies and school finance reforms were in improving the education provided to children of color and children from low-income families. At the same time the authors recognize that the success of SBR is by no means assured. They describe the changes required of schools, particularly urban and rural schools. They show that the policy instruments available to promote change in schools, while more powerful than previous generations of reformers had imagined, are more like large kitchen knives in the hands of enthusiastic-but-green medical students than scalpels in the hands of well-trained, experienced surgeons. The patient, public education, is ill, and the consequences of doing nothing are dire. However, it is not obvious that the medical student can learn to use the available tools fast enough to save the patient.

A critical reason improvements in American schooling are needed is that the U.S. economy is changing so rapidly. Earnings inequality in the United States has increased tremendously over the last twenty years, and quantity and quality of education affect the life chances of American children more than they did in the past. One illustration of this is the recent history of the earnings gap between black and white male workers. After closing over the period 1955–1975, the gap has grown again over the last quarter century.² This has happened even though the gap between the academic skills of 17-year-old black students and those of white students continued to close after 1975. The explanation is that each point in the remaining skills gap translates into a larger difference in earnings than was the case thirty years ago.³

I comment on the Liebman and Sabel (L-S) article from two perspectives: as an economist concerned with getting the incentives right, and as someone who has worked closely over the last two years with the Boston Public Schools.

As the L-S article documents, elements of standards-based education

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1. James Liebman & Charles Sabel, *A Public Laboratory Dewey Barely Imagined: The Emerging Model of School Governance and Legal Reform*, 28 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 183 (2003).

2. AMITABH CHANDRA, IS THE CONVERGENCE IN THE RACIAL WAGE GAP ILLUSORY? 12–14 (Nat’l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 9476, 2003).

3. Richard Murnane et al., *The Growing Importance of Cognitive Skills in Wage Determination*, 72 REV. OF ECON. & STAT. 251, 263–64 (1995).

reforms include setting performance standards that all students at particular grade levels should meet, administering tests that measure student performance, and establishing a system of rewards and/or penalties. Common incentives for educators include financial rewards to schools deemed to be making adequate progress toward performance goals and career disruption and possible job loss for teachers and administrators in schools deemed not to have made adequate progress.

A growing number of studies show how difficult it is to get the incentives right. For example, one study of the reward system in North Carolina documents that it is much more difficult for schools serving large percentages of disadvantaged children to meet the criteria for a financial reward than it is for schools serving primarily middle-class children. As a result, the incentive system discourages teachers and administrators from working in schools serving high percentages of disadvantaged children.⁴

Another study shows that the Florida SBR system creates incentives for schools to classify low-income and previously low-performing students as disabled and therefore ineligible to be counted in the assessment of the school's performance. While these responses, which were most pronounced in schools struggling to meet performance standards, improved schools' measured performance, they did so without improving the education of students in greatest need.⁵

Yet another study showed that in accountability systems that rank the performance of schools on the basis of the test score gains of students from individual racial/ethnic groups, small amounts of measurement error (inevitable in any testing system) result in dramatic changes in rankings, moving schools from the list of adequately performing ones to the list of low-performing schools or vice versa. The net effect is to discourage educators from making the concerted efforts year after year that are necessary to improve student achievement. Another effect is to discourage educators from working in small schools serving many racial/ethnic groups because it is in these schools that luck plays the greatest role in determining performance rankings.⁶

These examples illustrate the difficulty of designing accountability systems that provide incentives for teachers and administrators to work in schools serving the most needy children and to work on improving the skills of all children. Only accountability systems that reliably identify and reward good instruction will allow schools to attract and retain skilled teachers committed to educating all children well and to working together to provide consistently high-quality

4. Helen F. Ladd & Randall P. Walsh, *Implementing Value-Added Measures of School Effectiveness: Getting the Incentives Right*, 21 *ECON. OF EDUC. REV.* 1, 13 (2002).

5. See DAVID N. FIGLIO & LAWRENCE S. GETZLER, *ACCOUNTABILITY, ABILITY AND DISABILITY: GAMING THE SYSTEM* 11–14 (Nat'l. Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 9307, 2002).

6. THOMAS J. KANE & DOUGLAS O. STAIGER, *IMPROVING SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES* 32, 33 (Nat'l. Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 9307, 2002).

instruction. Most states have a long way to go in getting the incentives right.

A second perspective on SBR comes from my work with the Boston Public Schools, a system focused on improving the education of its 63,000 students, most of whom are children of color from low-income families. To a significant extent, Boston provides a good test case for SBR. The district has a talented superintendent who understands that instructional improvement and instructional coherence and consistency are the keys to improved student learning. Boston has a teachers' union president who, while an effective advocate for the financial interests of his members, also understands that improvement in instruction is critical to the long-term interests of Boston's teachers. Massachusetts' mathematics and English language arts ("ELA") standards receive high marks in comparison with those of other states. The state has invested heavily in a system of student assessments that are quite well aligned with the math and ELA standards.⁷

Under the leadership of Superintendent Thomas Payzant, Boston has invested heavily in curricular reform and in professional development aimed at improving instruction in literacy and mathematics. Most elementary schools have devised schedules that allow teachers at each grade level to meet weekly to plan and improve instruction. A growing number of high schools have created schedules that assign small groups of teachers to teach core subjects to the same group of students and that allow these teachers to meet weekly to plan instruction and to discuss students' work. Most teachers see these weekly meetings as essential to providing students in every class with consistently high quality instruction.

These investments are bearing fruit. In 1998, 57 percent of tenth-graders failed the MCAS English Language Arts exam. The comparable figure for 2002 is 36 percent. The analogous numbers for the tenth-grade MCAS math exam are 75 percent failure in 1998 and 52 percent in 2002.⁸ Improvements in MCAS performance at the elementary school grades are also striking and may be more meaningful because the gains do not reflect the change in motivation to do well on the tenth grade MCAS that occurred in 2001, the first year that tenth-graders were required to pass the exams in order to obtain a high school diploma.⁹

Despite the significant progress, Boston is far from the goal of providing a consistently high-quality education to all students. As of October 2002, 44 percent of the class of 2003—more than 1600 students—had failed to pass both parts of the MCAS exam after taking it three times. Unless the rules change, most of these students will not receive high school diplomas.¹⁰

7. ACHIEVE, INC., *MEASURING UP: A REPORT ON EDUCATION STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS FOR MASSACHUSETTS* 21, 28 (2001).

8. MASS. DEP'T. OF EDUC., *MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM (MCAS) CHARTS FOR BOSTON*, at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/mcas.asp?district=035&districtname=Boston&school=&schoolname=> (last visited Nov. 18, 2003).

9. *Id.*

10. OFFICE OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION, *BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CLASS OF*

Even among elementary school children whose formal education has been totally in schools working on instructional improvements, progress has been slow. In 2002, 45 percent of fourth-graders failed to achieve passing scores on the MCAS math exam.¹¹ This is an improvement from the 57 percent failure rate in 1998, but also reflects the difficulty of radically improving instruction.

Under the best of circumstances, meeting the performance goals specified by the state and more recently by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation¹² is an enormous challenge. However, these are not the best of circumstances in Boston or in most other urban districts. Revenue shortfalls at the state and local level are forcing dramatic budgetary cutbacks. Eliminating money for substitute teachers and for teachers of specialty subjects like music, art, and physical education has been necessary. Ironically, these cutbacks jeopardize instructional improvement in math and literacy because they make impossible the scheduling that allows grade level and subject-specific teams of teachers to meet regularly during the school day to plan instruction and examine student work.

The time I have spent over the last two years in a few Boston schools has shown me that standards-based educational reforms can result in the consistently high-quality instruction that urban children need to reach high learning standards. However, watching the frustrations of the faculties of other Boston schools in which teachers have worked very hard but students' MCAS scores have not risen much leaves me extremely cautious. My sense is that teachers will not be able to sustain their efforts and administrators will not be able to find new teachers prepared to take up the work unless real progress is evident. Getting the incentives right is part of the challenge. Providing the capacity for improvement is another. For the sake of the nation's children, I hope that the cautious optimism of Liebman and Sabel's article proves warranted.

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11. MASS. DEP'T. OF EDUC., *supra* note 8.

12. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425.