

De'Shawn Wright, a former Booker education adviser and partner at the Newark Charter School Fund. "That's the priority and where we are going to focus the majority of our efforts."

**B**ooker has undoubtedly observed with interest the public relations snafus that have plagued school reform efforts in New York and Washington under mayors Mike Bloomberg (with the Cathie Black fiasco) and Adrian Fenty (erstwhile patron of lightning rod Michelle Rhee). He knows he needs to tread carefully around community affection for and investment in even low-performing schools. To that end, he has chosen to use the first \$1 million of the Zuckerberg matching grant to create the Partnership for Education in Newark (PENewark), a coalition of community groups that will conduct a two-month survey of as many Newarkers as possible, asking them how they would spend the Zuckerberg funds. The group is harvesting e-mail addresses, airing TV commercials, making T-shirts and organizing focus groups. But Wright says it will ultimately be up to Newark's incoming superintendent of schools—likely to be named in January by Christie, with input from Booker—to define the education reform agenda moving forward. The new superintendent must be a "coalition builder," Wright says, "somebody who is willing to hear from the community and can demonstrate that the community's voice has been heard, even if his or her final determination is not always 100 percent aligned with those views expressed."

Williams, of the Abbott Leadership Institute, is skeptical of PENewark's outreach efforts, which are led by two New

York City consulting firms with ties to the Bloomberg administration, Tusk Strategies and SKDKnickerbocker, which also represents Rhee. "Those of us who've been in the community and involved in this whole question of school reform for years, not just months, I think we already know what people want," Williams says. "They want a good school, a safe school. They want to feel welcome in that school as parents, and they want a teacher who knows what he or she is doing and is culturally sensitive. I don't think you're going to find too much variation on that theme. So what are you going to do with that information once it comes in?"

A newly formed coalition of parents, teachers and civil rights activists called the Coalition for Effective Newark Public Schools is undertaking its own survey. Teams of volunteers are visiting every school in the district, asking principals and assistant principals how quickly maintenance repairs are performed, whether students have enough textbooks and other supplies, whether teachers are teaching outside their areas of expertise and whether there are enough social workers. It's a more practical, nuts-and-bolts effort, designed to get neighborhood schools the basic help they need in a climate of budget cuts and political hostility to public institutions.

Whatever happens to the Zuckerberg money, Lenore Furman, the Abington Avenue kindergarten teacher, hopes she won't have to buy her own classroom supplies anymore. "I spend an infinite amount of my own money," she sighs. "Whatever impact the donation has, I'm always hoping people are making decisions that directly impact learning and instruction." ■

## Beyond Silver Bullets

The problems facing American education demand solutions, not slogans.

by PEDRO NOGUERA AND RANDI WEINGARTEN

**S**ome of today's leading school "reformers" claim that the primary cause of the ills affecting American education is a glut of bad teachers, and that the unions that represent them are the major obstacles to progress. How does this viewpoint square with what is happening in our schools?

Consider New Haven, Denver and Newark. All three are large urban districts that are creating partnerships with teachers and their unions that will serve as a framework for a new era of school reform. In Newark, the teachers union signed an agreement that will make



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it possible for six high-needs schools in the city to operate on a longer school day. In Denver and New Haven, teachers unions are working out agreements with school administrators that place great emphasis on providing support to teachers and working collaboratively with them to raise student achievement. The key to such agreements is flexibility in work schedules, teacher assignments and evaluation. In all three districts, qualitative and quantitative measures of academic performance will be used to evaluate teachers and to make decisions about pay and placement.

The agreements demonstrate that when district leaders are open to working with teachers and their unions, progress can be made toward improving public schools. This may come as a surprise to those convinced that such fruitful collaboration is impossible. A manifesto by Joel Klein (outgoing schools chancellor of New York City) and Michelle Rhee (formerly of Washington), published in the *Washington Post* in October,

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said, “The glacial process for removing an incompetent teacher...has left our school districts impotent and, worse, has robbed millions of children of a real future.” Similarly, articles in *Newsweek* and *Time* have singled out teachers unions as the scourge of public schools. The movie *Waiting for Superman* even suggested that it is because of teachers unions that American students lag behind their peers in other countries.

A close look reveals a much more complicated picture. Concerns about the state of public education are not unwarranted, but there is no evidence that the presence of unions impedes academic success in American schools. Consider this: in states like Massachusetts and Minnesota, where public schools are heavily unionized, students earn the highest scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the standardized exam known as the nation’s report card. In contrast, students in states such as Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas, which have few if any teachers union members and virtually no union contracts, have the lowest NAEP scores. What’s more, in almost all the nations

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that outperform the United States in education, teachers are unionized and teaching is a respected profession.

One can reject the idea that unions are the cause of the problems that beset schools and still know that public schools need significant reform. Signs of trouble are pervasive and impossible to ignore: high dropout rates in most major cities, a decline in the percentage of students enrolling in college and a steady decrease in academic performance in math and science, particularly when our students are compared with students in other wealthy nations. However, to bring about the necessary changes, we must treat unions as partners rather than adversaries in the reform effort.

When one looks closely at the policies the United States has pursued over the past ten years to improve public education it is easy to understand why there has not been greater progress. Despite the promises, fads of the day and splashy slogans, we continue to leave millions of children behind. Rewarding a few states for agreeing to adopt measures the administration regards as essential to reform has convinced the public that we have embarked on a race to the top, when we have not. Policy-makers continue to pursue silver-bullet solutions, such as small schools, high-stakes testing and performance pay for teachers—some of which have no evidence of their effectiveness—while ignoring the more substantive issues that have much more influence over the quality of education. What we should be focused on are basic issues: How do we ensure that all teachers are well trained in content and pedagogy, and are able to develop relationships with an increasingly diverse array of students? How do we make sure

that school leaders have the skills and resources to keep our schools safe and to maintain conditions for good teaching and learning? What do we do to motivate students not merely to pass tests but to become life-long learners who seek out knowledge and information long after the tests are over? How do we make sure that parents do their part to support their children and reinforce the importance of education at home? These have always been the most critical issues confronting American education, but increasingly they are ignored in favor of the faddish reforms pursued by our policy-makers.

As we scan the education landscape it is clear that challenges abound in a variety of schools, but the most acute are in schools located in urban and rural communities where poverty is concentrated. In too many cases, poor children attend schools that are unable to meet their academic needs. In some cases this may be because of low expectations or professional incompetence, but generally this is not the only issue. The most recent PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) sources that compare the performance of students in sixty-five nations in reading, math and science show the United States slipping further behind a number of less wealthy nations. In the top-performing countries, teachers are well prepared, supported and respected; there is shared accountability; they have a common curriculum; and they create conditions for student success. And the countries that outperform the United States are closing achievement gaps among groups of students—by focusing on what students need to succeed and allocating resources accordingly. Not surprisingly, the United States performed poorly on this measure.

As a nation, we have largely abandoned the effort to create schools that are integrated in terms of race and class. Our policy-makers rarely acknowledge that the social isolation of the poor is even a problem, despite the frequent proclamation that “education is the civil rights issue of the twenty-first century.” Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation points out that “95 percent of education reform is about trying to make high-poverty schools work.” We pursue this goal even though we have a long history and a vast body of research to show that most reforms enacted in our public schools have failed to achieve it.

In many of the most disadvantaged schools, the non-academic needs of poor students—for health, housing and a variety of social supports—are often unmet. Invariably, when the basic needs of children are ignored, the task of educating them is much more challenging. Acknowledging that poverty and related social issues can make the job of educating children more difficult does not mean we believe that poor children are incapable of achieving at high levels. There are many examples of excellent schools that serve poor children. There are also a number of poor children who have been able to use education to overcome obstacles related to poverty and who have accomplished great things. But to ignore the fact that the effects of poverty pose formidable obstacles to academic achievement and healthy development is worse than naïve; it shows blatant disregard for the enormous challenges that poor children and their families face.

Many schools have found ways to create the conditions

whereby poor children can excel. Some of these high-performing, high-poverty schools are traditional public schools staffed by teachers who belong to unions—like PS 126 in New York City and Frazier Elementary School in Chicago, where children excel on most measures of learning, even though they are poor. There are also a small but significant number of school districts—like Montgomery County, Maryland; Gwinnett, Georgia, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina—where disparities in achievement among students of different race and class backgrounds have been

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reduced substantially. The success of these schools serves as proof that under the right conditions children of all backgrounds, even the most disadvantaged, can achieve.

In light of such evidence, the debate we should be having is about why this success isn't being replicated on a much larger scale. We should be strategizing over how districts and state education departments can provide more effective support to schools that exhibit signs of chronic failure rather than prescribing untested turnaround remedies. We have been drawn into a debate over whether unions are obstacles to change, and in some communities we have become consumed by protracted battles over whether to release the names of teachers with their students' test scores, while large numbers of schools continue to founder.

What we should be doing is trying to find ways to ensure that low-income children have access to quality early-childhood education, because a vast body of research has shown that providing support during infancy can have long-term benefits to a child's intellectual development. We should be doing all we can to provide additional resources to poor schools to extend learning opportunities during the summer and after school, and we should be doing everything we can to ensure that children receive an enriched education where creativity, higher-order thinking and problem-solving ability are nurtured.

Rather than focusing on strategies to alleviate or at least mitigate the effects of poverty, our policy-makers remain fixated on the idea that schools can be improved simply by raising academic standards and applying more pressure. Former Assistant Education Secretary Diane Ravitch has characterized the current debate over the future of education as a new ideological orthodoxy. Without a shred of evidence to back their claims, a new batch of so-called reformers and their allies in the media have asserted that charter schools are superior to traditional public schools (the research shows some are, but most aren't), that mayoral control is an inherently better form of governance than locally elected school boards and that ending tenure for teachers and evaluating them based on student test scores are the most powerful instruments that could be used to improve instruction and hold teachers accountable. The "reformers"

have doggedly stuck to these claims even when evidence has countered their assertions, and they have disparaged those who challenge them as "defenders of the status quo."

A steady stream of news articles, documentaries and television reports have succeeded in keeping education near the top of the policy agenda, when it would have been so easy for other issues (the economy, healthcare, war, etc.) to take up all the available air space. However, the increased attention is a mixed blessing. It has enabled some schools to attract additional resources—like Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation to Newark Public Schools, Goldman Sachs's \$20 million donation to the Harlem Children's Zone and the growing number of wealthy individuals who have chosen to give large sums of money to schools (especially charter schools) across the country—but those who have dedicated their lives to educating children, namely teachers, have been marginalized and even silenced. Increasingly, the direction of education is being determined by CEOs, politicians and hedge-fund managers, while parents and communities are treated as little more than consumers, and teachers as disposable workers.

If public education is to serve as a vital national resource in the twenty-first century, one that can meet the needs of an increasingly globalized economy and a diverse population, changes in policy and practice are needed. This is true in poor communities where failure rates are high and in middle-class suburban areas where too many schools are simply mediocre. In addition to adopting standards, we must find ways to ensure that the curriculum stimulates critical thinking and inspires students to set ambitious goals for themselves. We must use technology to provide students access to cutting-edge information and to facilitate a more personalized approach to learning. We must also be willing to transform the nature of teachers' work so that the primary professionals charged with educating our nation's youth are prepared to make crucial decisions to meet the learning needs of children every day. Teachers must be included as partners and collaborators in reform. Instead of being regarded as pawns who can be manipulated by know-it-all managers and "experts" who conceive and implement reforms without ever setting foot in a classroom, teachers must be acknowledged as crucial front-line actors whose knowledge and skill will determine whether progress will be made.

A central focus of reform efforts must be on systemic and sustainable strategies for improving the quality of instruction all students receive. We recommend that the following ideas be considered in the lively debate over the future of American education:

- 1.) Teaching is a combination of art and skill that can take years to master. For this reason we must ensure that new teachers learn their craft through solid training, mentoring and extended induction programs. There must also be a commitment to provide continuing education for all teachers, just as we do for professionals in other sectors where the nature of the work is constantly changing.



2.) The tenure process can be made more rigorous by including evidence of teacher effectiveness based on multiple measures of student learning.

3.) The process for removing teachers who are ineffective must be expedited through agreements with union locals. We must ensure due process in the evaluation of teachers so that the decision to remove a teacher is not arbitrary; but once a determination has been made, the teacher should be promptly removed and replaced. The American Federation of Teachers has proposed ways of fixing the broken evaluation system so it becomes a mechanism to improve instruction, as well as assess how teachers and schools are doing in a fair and comprehensive way. More than fifty districts and their union partners across the country have already begun implementing this new use of teacher evaluation.

4.) We must focus on improving conditions for teaching and learning by keeping class size low, especially for the most disadvantaged students, and providing supplemental support (tutors, mentors and intervention specialists) for children who require more assistance.

5.) We must address disparities in funding between schools and districts, to ensure that all children have access to the resources that maximize their opportunity to learn.

6.) A coherent curriculum that is aligned with state or national standards should be provided in all schools. Such a curriculum should be designed to promote higher-order thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving and opportunities for children to see how knowledge can be applied in the real world.

7.) Whenever practical, teachers should be involved in decision-making processes related to the focus and content of the curriculum, the design of academic programs and the organization and structure of the school day.

**T**here are undoubtedly lots of other ideas that should be considered as we contemplate how to revitalize our schools, but we hope that these can serve as the starting point for a substantive and constructive debate. Any such effort must engage parents as partners in the educational process and enlist the broad public and key social institutions (including foundations, hospitals, churches and nonprofits). Only through such partnerships can children be assured access to social workers, psychologists, healthcare, mentors and the other forms of social and emotional support that are known to be vital to healthy development.

Most important, we must take steps to ensure that the “public” remains part of public education. This includes building transparency into the way schools are financed and managed, and engaging in open discussion and debate about what it will take to ensure that all students receive the education they need and deserve.

Ultimately, progress will be made when all actors—including politicians, reformers, policy-makers, unions, parents and teachers—stop pointing fingers and begin accepting responsibility for their respective roles in the educational process. The record shows that constructive—as opposed to antagonistic and polarizing—approaches to reform are what lead to success in public schools. ■

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