

The Possible Dream *A Nation of Proficient Schoolchildren*

Harvard Graduate School of Education
July 1, 2004

Ed.
magazine

by Cara Feinberg



Jeff Howard
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"Raise your hand if you know a classroom like this one," Jeff Howard asks the groups of educators in his seminars. He calls it his Room 206 story.

"206 is a fifth-grade classroom in a school across the street from the worst housing project in town. Most kids come in knowing nothing and come from families who know even less. In 205 and 207, the kids wreak havoc; lessons give way to power struggles, homework is a joke. But Room 206 is different. It's quiet. The kids are behaving, learning, and achieving proficiency on state exams. Anyone know a classroom like this?"

In every group, no matter how small, at least one person raises a hand. "Okay, then," says Howard. "That means that it can be done." His eyes flash with excitement. Challenge is his element, and he's

knocking on its door. He lets the audience stew a bit longer. Then he makes his move.

"If it can be done, then we have to ask ourselves the question: is it moral for the rest of us *not* to do it?" Invariably, the room bursts into conversation. Some nod in agreement. Others clench their fists. This is the first day of a Jeff Howard "Efficacy Seminar." And there are three more days to go.

Howard does not care if his ideas shock you; in fact, he hopes that they will. That is what it takes, he says, to get Americans to examine their deeply entrenched belief that "some kids have got it academically and some simply don't." A social psychologist, Howard has spent over three decades studying human behavior and how cultural beliefs can affect individual achievement, particularly for children of color and economically disadvantaged youth. "Once you convey to children—whether consciously or not—that they are too 'dumb' to learn, they will almost always prove you right," he explains.

For Howard, this theory found its genesis in his own experience. As an undergraduate at Harvard College in the 1960s, he saw the bulk of his white and Asian classmates scurrying off to study after dinner, while he and his African-American classmates often chatted and joked with each other until the dining hall closed. Nobody was flunking out, but many of his fellow black students were sliding by with C-plus averages. "I thought to myself,

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why have we withdrawn our effort? Why are we dead last, academically?"

In the spring of 1969, a headlining study that labeled African Americans "genetically inferior" propelled him toward an answer. "It was if we had been lined up and a single spear had been forced through our hearts," said Howard. "It was devastating." Watching the way his fellow black students reacted—by withdrawing further from their studies—he realized that the *idea* of inferiority was a critical force in causing it.

Howard was onto something important. If this behavior occurred at Harvard University, where students already value achievement, he thought, the situation could only be worse outside its gates. Instead of heading to law school after graduation as he had planned, Howard enrolled in the Harvard Graduate School of Education for a joint program with the Medical School in clinical and social psychology. It was there that he developed the idea of an "Efficacy Seminar"—a class that teaches people that effective effort, rather than innate ability, drives development. If students saw themselves improving through hard work—defying the sentence of "inferiority"—they would be more inclined to commit to their studies, he reasoned. It was a simple, positive cycle. And it would begin when people confronted their core beliefs about intelligence.

Ideas Translated into Action

Thirty years later, in a brightly colored library in a public elementary school in Milton, Massachusetts, Howard greets a group of fifteen teachers gathered for their third day of Efficacy training—an intensive, four-day seminar that he and his staff of twelve have spent the last two decades developing. "This cohort has already established that it can be done—all their kids can learn," says Howard. "Now, our job is to show them *how*."

As the founder and president of the Efficacy Institute, a Waltham, Massachusetts-based nonprofit educational training and consulting company, Howard basks in the challenge of changing minds. Since he launched the Institute in 1985, he and his staff have trained over 30,000 educators in more than 50 school districts across the country. Their mission: to build the belief that virtually *all* children—if they commit sustained, effective effort—are capable of learning at high levels.

"We have taken what '206' does in her classroom and translated it into a specific, teachable process," says Howard. "We're looking at how she achieves success in her classroom."

Pamela A. Mason, Ed.D.'75, the principal of the Tucker Elementary School in Milton, initially recommended the Efficacy Institute to her district after they received their 2003 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment (MCAS) scores. "The numbers were certainly not as high as we had hoped," she said in an interview in her office, closing the door—and her eyes—to savor a rare moment of tranquility. "In analyzing the data, we found huge discrepancies among different racial and gender groups. This was of great concern to us."

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Mason had long admired Howard's work and felt strongly that her dedicated staff needed to hear Efficacy's message. "Our teachers could not have been working any harder," she said. "They have created all sorts of interventions—afterschool programs, summer programs—everything we could possibly imagine. But the scores weren't going up, and the gaps just got larger. We needed a new approach."

What she saw in Efficacy was not an overt prescription, but a practical framework for staff-wide improvements. Mason herself had been trained by Efficacy many years earlier in the Newton, Massachusetts, public school system. In particular, she had been impressed by the Institute's 'Self Directed Improvement System,' or SDIS, a unique plan for guiding schools through the challenge of educating all children.

SDIS is organized around a clear target—proficiency—and consists of three operational steps: Data, Feedback, and Strategy. During the training seminar, teachers try out the process using real data from other Efficacy schools around the country. Participants are grouped by grade level, where, as a team, they must decide what constitutes proficiency for each subject they teach. These might be a combination of state mandates, textbook recommendations, and their own individual expectations. Once they have determined their target, teachers share their goals with students, so they, too, know what they have to accomplish.

"It is the same concept as a videogame," Howard explains. "In an arcade, every kid comes in knowing exactly what the target is, be it getting the gold, or taking the castle. In our case, it's mastering long division or writing an essay." To Howard, these games are "feedback delivery devices" that tell kids that, when they make a mistake, they must develop a new strategy and try again. He wants teachers and their students to view the natural difficulties they face in the learning process the same way—as feedback, not failure.

After teachers provide feedback, they continue to administer closely aligned assessments to measure students' achievement against the target. The assessments may come in a variety of forms, from standardized tests, to essays, to portfolio projects, depending on the teachers' preferences. But they are of no use if teachers do not meet regularly to analyze the results and determine new strategies for attaining proficiency. Teachers must share lesson plans, problem-solving approaches, and class work, adapting the most successful strategies for their own students' individual needs. Then they must meet with their students, so that each child knows the kind of effort that is required—and, most importantly, that teachers believe they can reach the goal.

Banishing the Idea of Fixed Intelligence

Efficacy's message may sound very simple, particularly for professionals already dedicated to helping children learn. But for the thousands of teachers, administrators, and parents Howard works with every year, the message behind his message can be unsettling, even offensive. "The first session was a bit shocking," said Robyn MacNeil, a middle-school Spanish teacher in the Milton Public School system in Massachusetts. "At first, people felt they were being told they were unprofessional and that kids had no responsibility for their own poor performance. That's hard to hear when you work so hard all the time, and, sometimes, children still fail, no matter what you do."

Howard is sympathetic to teachers' hard work and the fact that some inherit students who have lagged behind grade level for years. That is why some teachers look at these children, then look at the state standards, and simply say it can't be done. With compassion, they lower their expectations. "Who in the world wants to

demoralize kids?" he says. And that is where the problem takes flight.

Lowering standards creates its own drastic effects, says Janine Bempechat, Ed.D.'86, author of *Against the Odds: How "At-Risk" Kids Exceed Expectations* and a senior researcher at Brown University. "The truth is, when we lower standards to eliminate some of the struggle, kids lose a lot of opportunities to become resilient," she says. Instead of learning to strategize in the face of hardship, their repertoire for problem solving becomes restricted. "As a result," Bempechat says, "they become much more likely to fall apart when they encounter new challenges." Inevitably, these children become ineffective learners.

Extensive research in the last two decades has all but banished the idea of fixed intelligence and the notion that certain groups of children intrinsically cannot achieve. Nonetheless, Bempechat says, these ideas persist in our collective cultural psyche. A new wave of research, she explains, is revealing the toll this faulty belief takes on children.

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One study at Columbia University took two groups of college students and asked them to act as teachers. In the first group, subjects were told that intelligence was fixed and innate; the second was told that intelligence could be cultivated. "What we saw bowled us over," said Carol Dweck, the Ransford Professor of Psychology at Columbia. "The fixed intelligence group really humored their underachievers, complimenting them as much as possible to make them feel good." But the teachers with the malleable intelligence mindset did something quite different. Instead of praising the children at every turn, Dweck found that teachers started meeting with the students, trying to diagnose what went wrong. "They felt it was worth thinking up every possible way to help that child improve."

It Isn't Efficacious Unless It's Working

For subscribers to the Efficacy paradigm, "effective effort" has significantly improved performance. In 1998, the superintendent of Washington, D.C. public schools, Arlene Ackerman, Ed.D.'01—now the San Francisco Unified School District Superintendent—brought Efficacy into three low-performing D.C. elementary schools. Each was deeply troubled, and all three had a history of low standardized test scores. Seventy-eight percent of their students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Yet, within two years, Ackerman saw students' reading and math scores rise significantly on the Stanford 9 exam. Remarkably, the greatest gains appeared among the lowest-performing students: In the three Efficacy schools, the low achievers climbed from 0 percent to 28 percent proficiency, while their counterparts in other area schools rose only to 8 percent.

This is not surprising, says Kati Haycock, the executive director of the Education Trust in Washington, D.C. Though critics of high-stakes testing and state-mandated standards often rail against the programmed alignment of curriculum to standards, approaches like Efficacy provide myriad benefits for children at risk. "In well-to-do communities, learning is in the oxygen. If teachers are not methodical, it doesn't make much of a difference—kids will get support elsewhere," she says. "But poorer children who do little academic learning outside of the classroom need teachers who are systematic in teaching critical skills. Otherwise, it's simply not going to happen."

Having witnessed the change in her own school district, Ackerman agrees. "Efficacy gave educators and students a common language that allowed us to discuss and plan for our goals," she said. Though Ackerman is

careful not to call the process a panacea, she is adamant that those strategies deeply affected achievement in her district. "Data is critical, and it should drive educational practice," she says. "If you don't know what your kids know, how can you design lessons to improve achievement?"

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Yet, despite Efficacy's successes in D.C. and other cities across the nation, few districts have been able to implement the Institute's strategies on a widespread, long-term basis. Because the approach requires ongoing support from administrators and continual buy-in from teachers, a turnover in leadership often topples the framework Efficacy builds.

When Ackerman left Washington, D.C., for San Francisco, for instance, the ball dropped with Efficacy. Without top-down support, teachers eventually stopped formally meeting together to align their work, they no longer relied on regular grade-wide assessments, and they eventually returned to working in isolation. Recently, a teacher in D.C. discovered all their old assessments stuffed into a closet. Ackerman, who plans to remain in San Francisco, hopes to bring Efficacy to her district within the next few years. "For systemic change to take place," she says, "the district needs stable leadership; I learned that the

hard way."

Launching Efficacy District-wide

In Palm Beach, Florida, district officials are taking measures to ensure Efficacy outlives the current administration. Among the largest, most diverse districts in the country, Palm Beach encompasses both enormous wealth and the poverty of sugar cane field laborers. In the late 1990s, the district, like many others across the country, floundered under the new state standards for achievement. Six schools were placed on the Critically Low-Performing School List, while 19 others were classified as "almost low-performing."

"We knew we had to do something," said Alison Adler, the Chief of Safety and Learning Environment for Palm Beach County School District. "Without major changes, the future looked bleak."

Adler brought Efficacy into three pilot elementary schools in 2000. Within two years, test scores began to rise. By 2001, one of the pilot schools jumped from a C to an A in the state's letter-grade system, a school evaluation based on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores. Another rose from a C to a B by 2002. A third, a new school that was ungraded, began five years ago with scores that would have earned it an F. This year, it earned enough points to reach a B.

Officials were so impressed with the results that they expanded Efficacy's efforts. Last year, Palm Beach brought Howard's group into four more schools; this year, they jumped to 39. In two years, they plan to be district-wide in 165 schools, reaching 168,000 students.

Success, however, is not just about standardized test results, Adler says. It is about what actually happens in the classroom. "Teaching styles have completely changed," she explains. "Five years ago, no one had heard of a 'data-based' approach. Now it is second nature."

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A case in point is Carol Gruber's first-grade classroom at Seminole Trails Elementary School, one of the original three Efficacy pilot schools in Palm Beach. Every year, during the first week of school, Gruber gives her first-graders a second-grade test in math and reading. This requires a lot of reassuring and, sometimes, drying of tears.

"I make sure to tell them it's not about how smart they are," she says. "It's about what I've taught them." Gruber starts by asking her kids, "Have we learned any of these concepts yet?" The first-graders all shake their heads and begin to relax. "This test will tell you—and me—where we need to work hard," she continues. "By the year's end, you will know this. We will work together to make sure of it."

Gruber's students, along with all the other first-grade classes, will take this test three more times over the course of the year. Their teachers will help them track their progress, both individually, on private charts for their eyes only, and anonymously, as a class on a chart for all to see. "This way, students can see themselves learning and improving," explains Gruber, "and, as teachers, we can see the areas that still need work."

These days, Adler and Rose Backhus, the project's coordinator, spend their time guaranteeing that those efforts receive proper support. Backhus was trained and certified by Efficacy so she, in turn, could continue to train others. In addition, Palm Beach hired 26 full-time facilitators to run the teacher-team meetings in schools.

This is what it takes to effect change in a school system, Adler says. "Six-year-olds can't get there unless teachers tell them they can." Teachers can't get there if principals don't give them support. Principals can't get there if the district isn't behind them. "And no one," she adds, "gets anywhere if the framework isn't constantly maintained."

Palm Beach's commitment and burgeoning success are only beginning steps for Howard. His goal? To achieve such widespread impact that the whole country notices. "Proficiency for us, will be getting at least three *entire* districts—50 to 200 schools each—into the high or very-high category of proficiency with inner-city kids. Nothing less." Already, they have made great strides in Palm Beach, Milwaukee, and Tacoma, Washington.

"We hold ourselves to the same standards we require of our teachers and kids," says Howard. "If we don't get results, we're not proficient, no matter how well-intentioned we are."

About the Article

A version of this article originally appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of [*Ed.*](#), the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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