

Still at Risk: The Causes and Costs of Failure to Educate Poor and Minority Children for the Twenty-First Century

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At the turn of the millennium there is a large group of Americans I call “those left behind.” It is a population segment that comprises more than half of the African American population, as well as other minority and poor people. These are the people who are not equipped to take full advantage of opportunities afforded by the fifty years of successful social activism that culminated in the *Brown* decision of 1954 and the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Education is, of course, the way out for the historically disadvantaged; the foundation for constructive employment, self-respect, and full citizenship. As such, the disadvantaged were a major focus of *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report that focused the nation’s attention on the general deficiencies of our education program. I remember being excited by the publication of the report, pleased to see it so widely discussed, and generally happy with its contents. The report’s simple opening statement resonated with my own experience: “Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.” But successful as it was in establishing education reform as a national priority, *A Nation at*

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Risk has not proven to be the catalyst for the changes many of us hoped for, especially in the cities. There is little evidence that the reform movement invigorated by its publication has made much of a difference after twenty years of effort. And a close reading, twenty years later, of the assumptions and recommendations regarding the disadvantaged in the report is surprising—and disappointing.

The clearest evidence of the continuing failure of public education, especially among minority children, is offered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is a test administered to random samples of children in each of the fifty states by the U.S. Department of Education. In four administrations of the all-important reading portion of the NAEP between 1992 and 2000, the number of African American fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency increased from 9 percent to 12 percent—meaning that in 2000, fully 88 percent failed to achieve the level of reading capability required to fully decode the increasingly complex material they will encounter in their textbooks.¹ Sixty-three percent scored in the lowest category, “below basic”—an improvement of only four percentage points since 1992. For Hispanics, the situation is almost as dismal: although the number at or above proficiency held steady at 16 percent, the percentage of students in the lowest category increased from 56 percent in 1992 to 58 percent in 2000. Scores for white children are substantially higher but still nothing to crow about: the number at or above proficiency increased from 35 percent to 40 percent in the same period, while those “below basic” dropped from 29 percent to 27 percent. (It is worth noting that six out of ten white fourth graders, the children of the most privileged population group in the United States, were reading below proficiency as the twenty-first century began.) But it is in our urban centers where the problems of public education are most acute, the most pervasive, and where the highest percentage of children are most at risk. Bad public schools destroy the only hope for those left behind. Twenty years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, we had a right to expect something better.

A Nation at Risk was both a ringing indictment of the failures of American education and a call to action. It ignited a vigorous school reform movement, generously funded by the philanthropic community and led by some of our most highly regarded education thinkers. That movement has generated twenty years of conferences, collaborations,

models of improvement, new reading and math programs, research-based instructional strategies, and innumerable schoolwide, clusterwide, and districtwide improvement initiatives. Some of these have shown real promise, achieving, in isolated cases, real improvement. But these successes have been spotty, unreliable, and often short lived. The NAEP results tell the tale starkly: there is very little to show for all the activity and the money spent. The movement has simply failed to generate, or catalyze, real improvement in the educational outcomes of most American children. Why? More broadly, why does the wealthiest, strongest, and most vital nation in the world continue to fare so poorly at so central and future-defining a function as education? I believe the report, the reform movement it spawned, and U.S. society in general have failed to live up to improvements we had a right to expect for reasons we can specify: they all share a set of beliefs, and a basic approach to education predicated on them, that are fundamentally congruent with those of the ineffectual educational establishment so roundly criticized in 1983.

In my twenty-five years of engagement with public school educators, I have come to believe that two critical problems lie at the heart of our ongoing failures, and, I will argue, these are evident in the fabric of *A Nation at Risk*. First, there is a widespread culture of disbelief in the learning capacities of many of our children, especially children of color and the economically disadvantaged. Most educators, along with other Americans, have been socialized to believe that intelligence is innate, fixed at birth, and unequally distributed: “Some have it and some don’t.” Confronted with the undeniable problems and underdeveloped academic skills of many of the children of the poor in our cities, people assume that the deficits they see are caused by low intelligence.² Attributing poor skills to low ability leads naturally to the low expectations for future performance so clearly evident in so many classrooms—and to the tenacity with which they are held. These are low expectations with *cause*. And lack of belief in the intelligence of poor and minority children is an equal opportunity affliction; in my experience, the proportion of teachers of color who suffer from it is nearly as great as the proportion of whites.

Expressions of this disbelief take many forms, from the brutal remark of a teacher one of my colleagues encountered—“If you want better outcomes from the classrooms in this school, send us better kids”—to the more subtle statement I have heard over and over from serious, compas-

sionate educators—"All children can learn (up to the level of their abilities)." The parenthetical second clause of this sentence, of course, negates the optimism of the first. It is a nicer way to say what the speaker really means: "What children can learn depends on the level of their abilities—and we all know those vary." Disbelief in children's capacities absolves educators (and parents) from responsibility for educating them to high standards. It creates a contagious sense of helplessness and futility among adults that easily transfers to children themselves, who quickly learn a fatalistic lack of confidence in their own abilities. And it disables the drive for professional development in many educators.

Second, and almost unbelievably, educators lack a clear consensus about the fundamental objectives of their enterprise. There is no agreement that we can bring all children up to a reasonable standard, with learning objectives aligned with the requirements of successful living in the twenty-first century. For decades, many teachers have actively resisted being pinned down to such objectives, often citing the difficulty of the conditions under which they work and the huge variation of learning capacities and previous exposure in the children they teach as obstacles to any single, aggressive standard. High standards also represent a basis for adult accountability, and there is a vocal group of educators—probably a minority but quite influential—who believe that many children are beset with disabling personal or family problems that should exempt their teachers from any responsibility for what and whether they learn. Any attempt to embrace aggressive learning objectives thus arouses suspicion; clear outcome measures strengthen the position of those who want to evaluate teachers by the learning outcomes of their students—a level of accountability many educators reject out of hand.

These two failures are closely related. It is logical for people who don't believe their students can achieve high standards to resist being held accountable for such achievement. And the easiest way to avoid accountability (without publicly admitting that you don't believe in your students) is to resist any attempt to define clear standards in the first place. As a result, we have in career educators the only professionals who share no clear, passionately held goals for which they are prepared to be held accountable—by the public or within their own councils. Disbelief and resistance to standards are two sides of the same disabling disorder, and both, I am afraid, are also clearly in evidence in *A Nation at Risk*.

The 1983 report was a creature of its time and of a culture that is still very much with us. Reading it through the lens of the two issues I have just described helps explain why its publication has triggered so little improvement in public education. In the section of the report entitled “Excellence in Education,” for example, there is a strong, and to my mind rather strange, juxtaposition between the goals of excellence and equity:

We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elitism on the other.

This passage seems to turn on the assumption that in a diverse society a commitment to excellence will work at cross purposes to equity, unless the balance is carefully managed. If we put too much emphasis on the drive for equity, we will be left with mediocrity. (Now, why should this be?) Reversing the priorities leads to “undemocratic elitism”—presumably because those with higher “aspirations and abilities” will far outpace the masses less endowed with those traits. What are we really saying here? Is there an underlying assumption that populations in a diverse society vary in their capacities to achieve excellence? If so, it will be difficult to achieve equity for the less able without compromising the potential for excellence among those with higher ability. In their next paragraph, the authors work to resolve this dilemma:

Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities.

The problem is to be solved by establishing as our mission “to develop the talents of all to their fullest.” We do that by expecting them and assisting them “to work to the limits of their capabilities.” This could be

mistaken for an enlightened, liberal flexibility—a standard for each child based upon his or her own characteristics and potential. I take it to be a corruption of the principle of uniform high standards for all children, substituting what might be called case-based standards, where we encourage our students, in their diversity, to “make the most of *their* talents and abilities” (emphasis mine). This is an abdication, a resort to relative standards, motivated by lack of belief in the capacities of many of our kids. It is tantamount to no clear standards at all. The authors of *A Nation at Risk* are mired in disbelief, and as a result they are unable to advocate high standards for all children. In this, they share the defining assumptions and attitudes of the educators who operate the public school systems they rightly declared to be putting the nation at risk.

But how can any system achieve excellence without embracing clear, aggressive standards and learning objectives for all children based on them? Clear objectives represent a target, the basis of ongoing assessment, analysis, and corrective action—for students as well as their teachers. Without this clarity, people have no direction and no way of evaluating how they are doing. But proper objectives must be aggressive, too; they must specify learning outcomes, for *all* children, that are aligned to the requirements for success in the 21st-century economy. Otherwise, what is the point? What do we really accomplish when we set lower targets for some kids based on negative judgments about their “aspirations and abilities,” that, even if achieved, hold no prospect for achieving the levels of proficiency required to live well and work productively? What possible value does such an education have, for them or for society? No education program can succeed without clear standards and objectives, aligned to the requirements of living and working, that are broadly understood and widely accepted. Indeed, without such objectives it is impossible even to define “success.”

A Nation at Risk did not redress this problem. Quite the contrary: it implicitly endorsed a regime of relative standards and a sliding scale of expectations, based on (often negative) judgments of ability, that have bedeviled everyone trying to get educators to actually teach kids to the standards they will need to function in our world. This may seem a harsh interpretation of a venerated document. I must confess to asking myself, “am I reading too much into this?” This passage from the “Recommendations” section of the report seals the case:

We must emphasize that the variety of student aspirations, abilities, and preparation requires that appropriate content be available to satisfy diverse needs. Attention must be directed to both the nature of the content available and to the needs of particular learners. The most gifted students, for example, may need a curriculum enriched and accelerated beyond even the needs of other students of high ability. Similarly, educationally disadvantaged students may require special curriculum materials, smaller classes, or individual tutoring to help them master the material presented. Nevertheless, there remains a common expectation: We must demand the best effort and performance from all students, whether they are gifted or less able, affluent or disadvantaged, whether destined for college, the farm, or industry.

In other words, “all students can learn (up to the level of their abilities),” and they should be supplied with curriculum and instruction (and presumably “flexible” learning outcome standards) aligned to our judgments about them. With due respect to the constructive intentions of the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, this is not the basis for transforming the schools of our urban centers or of demonstrating the value of public education in the twenty-first century. To be fair, I have no way of knowing if they have changed their minds in the intervening years; whether they have or not, the belief system that underlies their 1983 rhetoric, and the approach to standards and expectations based on it, still prevail in American education—to the detriment of us all.

After years of frustration with the inability to improve our schools, the plot has thickened, or, perhaps, broadened. Ineffective schools in poor and minority communities have now become a large factor in the ongoing struggle over the role of government in education. The painful evidence of long-term decline of public education in our cities, experienced first hand by more than one generation of students and parents, has now given real impetus to the “school choice” and voucher movements, putting public education itself at risk.

Although public education has long been supported by a large majority of Americans as an essential, unquestioned element of democracy, the support has never been unanimous. Those of a political orientation hostile to any extensive role for government in our lives have always regarded free public education with a deep skepticism. The movement for “school choice” reflects this attitude. School choice is not the invention

of late twentieth-century conservatives; its basic tenets were articulated nearly 150 years ago. In 1859 John Stuart Mill constructed, in “On Liberty,” his famous treatise on “the limits of government interference,” a template for the case against public or state-controlled education that echoes strongly across eras (and across the Atlantic). First he tells us why we ought to be suspicious:

A general State education is a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mold in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body. An education established and controlled by the State should exist, if it exist at all, as one among many competing experiments, carried on for the purpose of example and stimulus to keep the others up to a certain standard of excellence.

Public schools are to be limited to a role of exemplar, lest they become tools for despots. For Mill, it is the alternatives, the “competing experiments,” that ought to carry the weight of educating the mass of citizens to perform functional roles in society. What are the practical implications of this? How would such a system to be financed? Mill provided a simple, practical framework for sustaining a system of schools operating outside government control:

[I]n general, if the country contains a sufficient number of persons qualified to provide education under government auspices, the same persons would be able and willing to give an equally good education on the voluntary principle, under the assurance of remuneration afforded by a law rendering education compulsory, combined with State aid to those unable to defray the expense.

Although a free market “voluntary principle” is the philosophical driver of this approach, “remuneration” is to be assured by a compulsory education law that ensures a steady flow of customers, in conjunction with “State aid” to the poor to ensure that they come with cash in hand. If all of this sounds familiar, it should. Mill’s formulation of a system of privately controlled (but publicly subsidized) schools represents a blueprint for the educational choice movement of today, with charter schools and pilot schools freed of the authority and constraints of the

school bureaucracy but still funded by public school budgets, and private schools, parochial schools, and education for-profit enterprises all to be funded by vouchers.

If this conservative vision has not, so far, to be fully realized, it is because suspicion of government has not proved a strong enough motive in the United States to roll back the commitment to public education. Too many mainstream Americans benefited from public schools and hoped for the same for their children. But a real opening for the conservative vision has been provided by the failures of urban education: people are prone to become agitated, and much more open to “competing experiments,” when confronted with the spectacle of too many kids who can’t read or write. The realities of bad public schools in the inner cities and educators with stubbornly low expectations for their students have stimulated a hunger for alternative answers. The leaders of the school choice movement have been quick to respond. The primary venue for school choice, at least for now, seems to be urban centers with poor and minority populations, with a special focus on winning the hearts and minds of disappointed, angry parents desperate to save their kids from lives on the margins of society. It is fertile ground for anyone trying to sell wholesale change.

The strategic thrust into the inner cities has met with some real success. Voucher programs are well established in Milwaukee and Cleveland, and other urban centers are ripe for such programs as well. In its 1999 National Opinion Poll of Education, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that 60 percent of African Americans supported vouchers, compared with only 48 percent in 1996 (this compares with 53 percent of the “general population”—presumably whites—in support).³ The 1999 plurality of supporters breaks down by subgroup in interesting ways:

Among blacks, two-thirds of baby boomers and more than 70 percent of those younger than 35 years supported school vouchers, while a small plurality (49 to 44 percent) of those between 51 and 64 years supported vouchers, and a plurality (49 to 42 percent) of black seniors opposed them. Black Christian conservatives (68 percent in favor), persons from the lowest-income households (72 percent) and the highest-income households (71 percent), and persons from households with children (71 percent) were the black subgroups that were most favorable to vouchers.

In other words, when it comes to vouchers in the black community, those with the greatest personal stake in education—the 35-and-under group of childrearing age—along with those with the greatest financial need (and no doubt the worst schools) were the strongest supporters. In the latest (2000) survey from the Joint Center, the numbers rose even higher, with fully 75 percent of blacks under thirty-five years old supporting vouchers, compared to 60 percent of whites.⁴

Historically, the inferior education of poor and minority children was of little interest outside the communities in which they grew up because the social problems that resulted could be largely contained within the boundaries of those communities. That is no longer the case. Inner-city minority communities are now in play as highly strategic elements in an epic, long-term ideological struggle for control and definition of schooling in the United States. It is a struggle with very high stakes; according to the Department of Education, the United States spent \$375 billion on K–12 public education in 2000–2001, and the prospect of diversion of even a tiny fraction of that sum into private hands is a powerful economic incentive.⁵ Among the many ramifications of continuing failure to adequately prepare poor and minority children for the rigors of a global economy and society will be the erosion of an essential base of support for public education itself. Those convinced that public schools are a pillar of democracy can no longer afford to look the other way.

Why are the problems of education in our big cities, filled as they are with black and Hispanic children, so intractable? Why are the expectations of educators, after twenty years of school reform, still so low? Where (beyond the surge in support for vouchers) is the outrage? The “we’re not gonna take this anymore” mobilization among parents? And where is the community leadership? And whatever has become of the school reform movement?

It is time we face up to some realities. After twenty years and billions of dollars spent, it is clear that school reform has not succeeded. As a nation, we remain ineffectual in the face of a problem that will consign an important segment of the population to, at best, the sidelines of the twenty-first century. And there is something else, something darker: the failure to educate so many minority children is rooted in a pernicious interaction between American beliefs about the distribution of intelligence and attitudes about race.

Black and brown children do poorly because we don't really expect better from them. This has everything to do with widely held, but politely repressed, attitudes about race. The burden of the notion that, when it comes to intelligence, "some have it and some don't" simply weighs harder on some kinds of people than others. African Americans in particular have long lived under the cloud of what I have elsewhere called "the rumor of inferiority"; the idea, baldly stated, that on average, black folk (and perhaps some other people of color) are *genetically* intellectually inferior to other populations.⁶ This is a very old rationale for injustice, an original justification for slavery. It is still periodically aired in quasi-academic tomes, and has thoroughly infiltrated the consciousness of most Americans, including African Americans themselves.⁷ The resulting general doubts about the capacities of most black children on the one hand and self-doubt on the other paralyze us all. Parents who should be angry and determined remain apathetic and passive; educators become cynical, prone to blame their own failures to teach on the limitations of their students, and resistant to change; school reformers, so optimistic at the start and full of good intentions, become demoralized and leave the field. The lack of progress we have made is testament to the power of destructive ideas to cripple our capacity for corrective action. Meanwhile, the multigenerational slow-motion train wreck continues. If this goes on much longer, you will have to count me among the advocates of "competing experiments," and perhaps vouchers to support them.

But not yet. I have spent the last twenty years in search of answers and, working with my colleagues at the Efficacy Institute, have made some promising discoveries that give me hope. There are individual classrooms in every community where teachers achieve wonderful results with children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Most and sometimes all of their students achieve proficiency—a very high standard of academic achievement—every year. In my speaking engagements with educators around the country I routinely ask how many know such a teacher; invariably one-third to one-half raise their hands and assure me that these are real people they could name. Working and talking with these individuals has been rewarding. We have found that there are unmistakable, replicable patterns in their beliefs and practices: they establish aggressive learning-outcome objectives for every subject

they teach, and they communicate these as targets to their students; they believe *all* their students can achieve the targeted outcomes by the end of the school year, and they regularly and credibly communicate that belief. Confident in their own capacities to shape effective learning environments, they use the data from a regular schedule of assessments to drive ongoing adjustments in the curriculum they use and the instructional strategies they employ. The late Ron Edmonds, whose ideas have become gospel for many serious educators around the country, once said something to the effect that “We already have all the knowledge we need to teach our kids. We just don’t use it.” That we have the knowledge is certainly true, proven every day by these effective teachers. The question then becomes, “How do we make more people use it?” That is, how do we move it to scale?

Before I share my own answer to this question, I feel obliged to tell you what I think it is *not*. Professional incompetence has been widely viewed among school reformers as a leading cause of the failure of American schools. On a superficial level, this may be true; incompetent teachers rarely teach well. So for twenty years much of the energy and money of school reform went into an attempt to fix poor schools through teacher retraining and certification schemes. But the phenomenon of twenty-year veterans who have only rudimentary subject knowledge, use obviously ineffective instructional strategies, and seem not to care that most of their students don’t learn much is better understood as a symptom of a much deeper problem—the sense of helplessness and futility of educators who don’t believe their students have the intellectual capacity to learn. These people are neither stupid nor lazy; they are creatures of their culture, and, confronted with poorly prepared kids, they have the dispirited response typical of those indoctrinated with American beliefs about the distribution of intelligence: “What good will better instructional strategies do with kids like these?” Lack of professional competence *is* a real issue, with obvious consequences; but an exclusive or even primary focus on it takes us off the scent. It is the sense of hopelessness about the prospects of moving inner-city kids to standards that undermines the drive to become truly proficient at teaching, not the other way around. People who don’t believe in their students literally knit and read newspapers when they are forced to attend staff development programs about the latest, greatest, research-based instructional

approaches (which they routinely refer to as “flavors of the month,” and then never use).

If not teacher retraining, what? Here is a simple, three-part prescription for what is required to reach scale—that is, achieve effective schools and school systems—building on what we have learned from our own work and from individual effective teachers.

First, we must build consensus on the mission of education. What exactly are we trying to achieve? Educators need clear targets that define success if they are to have any hope of being successful. I believe the appropriate mission for classrooms, whole schools, and school systems is *proficiency* for all students, in each subject, and at every grade level. Proficiency can be simply defined: it is the demonstration, for each subject, of possession of the appropriate *knowledge* and the *application skills* to use that knowledge in new and novel situations. This is an aggressive standard, the level of learning traditionally expected only of the “gifted and talented” in our schools. It moves considerably beyond rote memorization into the deeper realm of understanding required to actually employ knowledge to solve problems in the real world. It can also be measured. Well-designed tests can assess both knowledge and application skill—proficiency—and tell us where children are relative to the target.⁸

I must confess I am not confident that, left to their own devices, educators will adopt such an aggressive standard for all children. They have too often fought high standards and public expressions of doubt that many of our kids, especially poor and minority kids in the cities, can achieve at this level. But it is not up to educators alone to decide the mission or the standards for our children. Organized pressure from the outside is a critical element in the necessary transformation of our schools. The communities that pay for public education should organize “campaigns for proficiency,” where they take the lead in determining what the standard ought to be and establish criteria for accountability for educators, who are, after all, public servants. Proficiency represents a uniform standard for all children and for the system as a whole. It is a target worthy of the actual capabilities our children, and it is aligned with the levels of knowledge and skills they will need to function in the twenty-first century.

Second, we must build belief that the mission can be accomplished. The confidence to set aggressive standards for all children only comes

with the belief that they are capable of learning at this level. Acceptance of the adult accountability that will inevitably accompany clear standards is also based on confidence—in this case, confidence that adults are capable of teaching at this level. In neither case can such confidence be taken for granted. People raised in the “some have it, some don’t” belief system will need to have their current understanding about the distribution of intelligence challenged and replaced by one that allows the possibility that virtually all normal kids have the intellectual capacity to achieve proficiency.⁹

Recent research shows that intelligence is not the rigid, static entity it was once believed to be. IQ scores for people of all ages have risen by about three points a decade during most of the twentieth century.¹⁰ It has also been discovered that the longer people attend school, the higher, on average, their IQs. Interestingly, IQs have been rising for preschool children, too.¹¹ Better nutrition is a possible cause, but it is likely that the escalating complexities and challenges of participation in our society and economy are the most important drivers of our growing abilities.

This has critical implications for education. The most important determinant of intellectual capacity and school success is not fixed ability; it is engagement in challenging activity. *Effective effort*—which we define as effort based on tenacious engagement with a task, close attention to feedback that indicates what we must work on to improve, and continual adjustments in strategy based on that feedback—controls learning capacity. Intelligence is not a fixed asset one either has or doesn’t have; children can “get smart,” literally become more intelligent—if, and only if, they commit sustained effective effort at challenging new tasks. Adults who know how to engage children’s effort at learning tasks can move them to proficiency. Extensive evidence supports the link between effective effort and the development of new capacities, including the highest levels of expertise and mastery in such creative, competitive activities as chess and music.¹²

This is an entirely different way of thinking about intellectual capacity and the only one I know of that will support a general commitment to proficiency. It is a belief system implicitly embraced by the great teachers who routinely move the most disadvantaged kids to the highest standards. Their successes can be used as persuasive evidence that children really can “get smart,” become proficient, in the hands of a skilled educator who believes in them. People who understand that intelligence

can be developed stop resisting high standards for all children, and spend their energy instead learning new instructional approaches to get them there.

Exposing educators to a new belief system about intelligence, and getting them to adopt it, will take leadership. Superintendents, principals, and opinion leaders among the teacher corps in each school must open themselves to the evidence that children can “get smart” (including the readily available evidence of local teachers who prove it by moving disadvantaged kids to proficiency). Most important, they must validate the truth of this idea in their own lives and experiences and approach others with the authenticity that comes only from personal conviction. We can transfer the “get smart” belief system to all the adults in a school system (and through them, to children) if leaders have the courage to embrace the idea themselves, and the will to learn the new leadership proficiencies required to expand the mindsets of teachers, parents, and children.

Third, we must teach people to use assessment data to drive changes in strategy. American educators have traditionally used student performance data, especially data from standardized tests, to make (often negative) judgments about children’s learning capacities. In the last few years the public has turned the tables, using school and classroom performance data to make (often negative) judgments about teacher competency. These tendencies have stimulated a powerful aversion to data and resistance to its analysis. But effective, constructive use of data is an essential tool that teachers and parents can use, immediately, to realign resources, policies, and practices to move children to proficiency.

Proficiency is, by its nature, eminently measurable. That means we can use assessment tools to generate data about how our kids are doing at any given time—who is reaching the standard, who is falling short, and by how much. Useful data in a well-constructed proficiency test takes the form of detailed feedback explaining why the child got the score he or she did, and what she or he must work on to improve. An intense focus on this feedback is critical because it literally tells us what we must do to get better results in the future. It is the direct guide to corrective strategies.

For effective educators, feedback from assessments shapes curriculum and instructional strategy.¹³ Curriculum is properly understood as much more than “the textbook”; it is the range of tools, including textbooks, plus a wide array of additional instructional materials and exploratory

activities that educators use to transfer knowledge to learners. In an effective classroom the curriculum is neither static nor ordained by the central office; it is constantly adjusted, based on feedback, to meet the needs of a particular student or group of students in the march to proficiency.¹⁴ The same requirement for flexibility applies to instructional strategies. The instructional approaches a good teacher uses are never set in concrete; they depend entirely on what *these* students need, *this* year, to move them to proficiency. In my experience, educators who have learned to use data are never at a loss about what to do, nor do they sit around waiting for marching orders from the central office. They are responsive and proactive. They use data to discover what their students need, then use the “knowledge base of teaching”—the compendium of documented strategies available to them—and their own inventiveness to meet the challenges.¹⁵ These are *professional* teachers, proficient in their craft.

Ironically, the change we all want in American education requires that we—parents, leaders, and everyone with a stake in the future—demonstrate faith in the capacities of our educators to learn. We must set a high standard for them. We must expect that they will move our children to proficiency and demonstrate to us that they can do what other professionals do when confronted with problems and challenges—diagnose what is wrong and find (or invent) corrective strategies to overcome all obstacles. They will be motivated to do so if they are confronted (and supported) by communities that won’t take no for an answer to the demand for high standards for all kids. And it will help a lot if we stop undercutting their initiative and inventiveness by spoon-feeding them what I have heard referred to as “teacher-proof,” by-the-numbers curricula and instructional approaches developed by experts.

Can it really be that simple? I regularly hear respectable people argue that everything is terribly complicated, that the issues are so complex that they defy solution. The opposite is true. Effective organizations in every domain of activity, all over the world, employ fundamentally simple approaches, no matter how complex they look from the outside. These always involve clear objectives understood by everyone and considered mandatory, strong belief among the rank and file about their own capacities to achieve these objectives, and simple operating schemes that people can quickly learn and eventually master to solve problems

and overcome obstacles. The details of particular operations and functions within an organization may be numerous and complex, but the core strategy is always simple.

This principle translates to the world of public education. We will get things right in American schools, starting in our urban centers, when we decide to hold ourselves accountable for moving all children to meet an aggressive standard, like proficiency; when we learn to believe in their capacities and our own; and when we assume a fully professional posture of defining our own strategies for improvement.