

Introduction

Since beginning work on *It's Being Done*,¹ published in 2007, I have been to dozens of high performing and rapidly improving schools that serve large percentages of students of color and students from low-income families. Over the years I have shared what I think are important lessons about how these “unexpected,” highly functional schools operate. But by the time I had completed my last book, *Schools That Succeed*,² I began to explore the district role in school success and in school failure. I realized that you can fix schools all you want; if the districts within which they reside are dysfunctional, the schools will not stay fixed.

I came to this realization after seeing highly functional schools serving children of color and children from low-income homes deteriorate when their principals were replaced by new ones who did not continue the systems and culture that had made the schools successful. Watching them fall apart has driven home to me the importance of school principals. But it also points to the fact that schools are not perpetual motion machines. They are affected by district leaders who are responsible for the hiring and placement of principals. I have noticed that when district leaders understand the need for continuity, and when they support the right kind of new school leaders with strong systems, then schools can continue to improve, even if they sometimes dip for a time. But when district leaders don't understand those things, the schools fall apart.

The question then arises: What do successful districts look like? How do the leaders in them think about improvement and school leadership? What do they do differently? That is the subject of this book.

Expanding my lens from schools to districts does not in any way negate the importance of schools. Rather, it is a recognition that schools live within complex ecosystems that affect them in any number of ways, from finances to personnel procedures.

In some ways, we are at a crossroads. Many of the big “reforms,” driven by big ideas and big philanthropic dollars, have failed or stalled. The resulting disappointment feeds a larger narrative that public schools are hopelessly defective and incapable of improvement. This, in turn, has nourished a determined political attempt to undermine all democratic public institutions as inherently corrupt and unworthy of tax dollars.

This book will demonstrate that there are educational leaders whose knowledge and skill in running districts can be exposed and shared, to use the language of British education researcher Mel Ainscow.³ They are not perfect leaders running perfect districts. But they have solved some of the problems that other districts around the country face, and the lessons they have learned should be studied for the wisdom they contain.

ACHIEVEMENT, EQUITY, AND DEMOCRACY

The good news contained in this book is that educators out there know how to make public schools better—a lot better. By systematically exposing their expertise, we can learn how to help all schools get better. The question is not whether we *can* but whether we *will*.

But before we even get to that, I feel the need to state something. It is so obvious, and yet sometimes gets lost in all the debates swirling around public schools that it bears saying: We established schools to help kids get smarter.

Kids aren’t born knowing a whole lot, and it is the rare family that can teach them everything they need to know. Every society has had ways to impart knowledge and skill to children, but until the modern era few have ever considered it necessary to teach any but a small few more than the basics.

For most of human history, advanced knowledge was reserved for priests and the sons of rulers, who were taught privately or in small academies dedicated to teaching them their history, their culture, and the principles of governing.

With the founding of the United States came the revolutionary notion of ending the rule of inherited aristocracy, and a more democratic idea of education came into being. For ordinary people to be able to weigh in on the important issues of the day they needed to know quite a bit about history, geography, and science. And they needed familiarity with the literature and art that help us make sense of the human condition and provide us with a common set of metaphors and allegories to illuminate our discourse.

Skeptics who believed most children incapable of learning more than the minimum required for survival were countered by those with a more optimistic view of the capacity of humans to learn. Local communities set up schools both to prepare educated citizens who could wield democratic power wisely and to ensure that our nation had the benefit of talent that previous societies had neglected. Instead of laboring on farms and in mills and factories, more children over time learned to read, write, and cipher, unleashing enormous economic, intellectual, and cultural energy. Every expansion of education saw a greater expansion in our economy and world power, from the initial establishment of grammar schools to the expansion of high schools, land-grant colleges, and the passage of the GI Bill. For the first time in human history, vast numbers of ordinary people with no connections to wealth and power had the opportunity to make their way unimpeded by the obstacles of class, in large part because of the nation's commitment to public education.

Except, of course, the United States has never had an unalloyed commitment to democracy—which means it has never been committed to the education of *all* children, most particularly African American children, who were forbidden from learning to read in much of the pre-Civil War South.

The tension between Americans who believe in a democracy where ordinary people have a say in how they are governed and those who don't has played itself out in endless permutations. And public schools have been key battlefields.

The starkest example comes from the Reconstruction period. One of the first things African Americans in the South did when they were free to act politically after the Civil War was to establish public schools

for all children. And when the antidemocratic counterrevolution set in after Reconstruction, one of the first things white Southern aristocrats did was to defund those schools. To make their point even clearer, they burned many schools to the ground and murdered teachers and principals. They knew that schools make kids smarter, and that smarter people are in a stronger position to demand equality and wield power; not only were they unwilling to share power with African American people and Native people, but also with poor white people. Well-funded schools threatened white oligarchs' power, so they did away with them and continued to send their own children to private academies or educate them at home with tutors.

Since then we've had many battles between pro- and antidemocracy forces.

One of the key victories for democracy was the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It enforced the constitutional right of every adult citizen to vote and thus be part of helping shape local, state, and federal policies. That step toward democracy was accompanied by a national commitment to ensuring that all children receive a quality education, no matter who they were or where they lived. The concrete expression of this commitment was the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the first part of which (Title I) sent a huge chunk of money to schools with students living in poverty. For the first time in American history, every child would have access to a quality school with sufficient staffing, books, and materials. Finally, the promise of equality and democracy seemed real.

But here we come to one of the paradoxes of modern American education.

The twentieth-century president arguably most committed to democracy inadvertently undermined public education.

This takes a little bit of telling.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, who pushed, pulled, and pressured Congress into passing the Voting Rights Act and the ESEA, as well as other pro-democracy laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, had been a teacher early in his adulthood. He saw firsthand the corrosive effect of segregation, which had consigned the Mexican American children

he taught to schools with few books and inadequate facilities. Johnson was determined to ensure that all children, no matter what their background, had good schools.

And he knew children in those schools would rise to the challenge—because he knew schools make kids smarter.

But he also knew it would be helpful to have intellectual support for his position. So he commissioned a report from a social scientist who compiled a vast quantity of information about American schools, their funding, and their outcomes. Johnson had assumed the data would show that poor children and children of color on average had inadequate schools, and that when they had access to adequate schools they learned as much as white middle-class children.

James Coleman did indeed find that on average poor children and African American children had much less access to books, laboratories, teachers, and other markers of adequate schools. But he found something that shocked not only Johnson but the education world as well. When he controlled for funding and staffing and numbers of books and the other things he could quantify, Coleman found that poor children and children of color didn't achieve at the same level, on average, as white middle-class children.⁴ Achievement was more highly correlated with children's backgrounds than with the school characteristics he studied. This was not what Johnson had wanted to hear. He had wanted to hear that schools made kids smarter, and Coleman hadn't found that.

Something often missed in discussions of the Coleman report is that Coleman noted that some schools seemed to have more of an effect than others, particularly for African American children. But this was a tentative finding requiring more research and received little notice.

Another thing often missed was that the measures Coleman used were crudely quantitative and didn't capture anything about curriculum or instruction—or what we would call school quality. He was working with the data he had, not all the data required. And the data he had couldn't answer the question *why* achievement was correlated with student background.

Johnson understood how devastating the Coleman report might be to his pro-democracy agenda and tried to bury it by releasing it on the

Friday of the Fourth of July weekend. His subterfuge didn't work. Over the subsequent decades, the Coleman report went on to become one of the most—if not *the* most—influential pieces of social science ever published. It has launched thousands of spin-off studies demonstrating the correlation between poverty, ethnicity, and low academic achievement, and it remains the cornerstone piece of research assigned to future teachers and principals.

The effects have been devastating. Among other things, the Coleman report and its successors have provided a rationale to those who were looking to oppose adequate schooling for all children. It doesn't matter, they say, how good schools are; kids come in with whatever smarts they have—due to nature or nurture or both—and schools can't make them smarter.

Those who believe in democracy have continued to push for better-funded schools, particularly for children of color and children from low-income families. But they are continually faced with the argument that children of color and children born into poverty are already so damaged there is little schools can do to educate them. For a couple of decades at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the argument that African American children are incapable of high achievement became socially unacceptable and was replaced with semi-polite euphemisms about family culture rather than direct language about race. But the racist argument that, on average, African American children are intellectually deficient—the lie told to justify slavery, segregation, and oligarchy—was kept alive in those years by pseudo-intellectuals like Charles Murray.⁵ In recent years that lie has roared back, predictably accompanied by the antidemocratic efforts to restrict voting in ways that especially disenfranchise African Americans, immigrants, and people with low incomes. As in the post-Reconstruction period, antidemocratic efforts and the movement to underfund and undermine public schools have gone hand in hand.

Meanwhile, despite notable success stories, public schools have failed at scale to break the correlation that Coleman found between achievement and socioeconomic status.⁶

The social scientist who is probably closest to being Coleman's intellectual heir is Sean Reardon, Professor of Poverty and Inequality at

Stanford University. Instead of looking only at individual schools, he looks at school districts. He and a team of researchers spent upwards of four years putting just about all school districts onto a common scale that allows for a comparison between districts based on the socioeconomics of the students in the districts and their academic achievement. And, similar to Coleman's finding more than fifty years ago, Reardon has found that poverty and low achievement are tightly correlated: as the percentage of poor students in a district increases, academic achievement tends to decrease. There are exceptions, but that is the general tendency.

In the fifty years between Coleman and Reardon, of course, we've seen endless numbers of "reforms" aimed at breaking that correlation: comprehensive school reform, school consolidation, small schools, teacher evaluations, test-based accountability, charter schools, vouchers, personalized learning, and many—many—more. Despite the churn, on average the socioeconomic background of children still closely correlates with their academic achievement no matter how you measure it—test scores, graduation rates, college-going, or whatever measure you want to use.

That does not mean that there have been no successes. Quite the contrary. High school graduation and college attendance are at the highest level ever among all groups. And in terms of academic achievement, 9- and 13-year-olds improved in reading and math considerably throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with African American and Hispanic students improving the most.⁷ Closing the test-score gap with white children seemed within sight until 1988, when progress stopped—right around the time school integration efforts also stalled. Gap-narrowing progress picked back up in the first decade of the twenty-first century, after which it stalled again.

Still, despite those periods of progress, it sometimes seems as if the correlation between socioeconomic status of children and academic achievement is tethered by some kind of law.

The question, of course, is why?

Coleman and Reardon's huge data sets can't answer that question.

To answer it, it is long past time to resurrect another line of research which has been largely ignored by huge sections of the education world.

BUILDING ON EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS RESEARCH

Sir Michael Rutter is probably the foremost child psychiatrist in the world, best known for work he has done on autism and with Romanian orphans after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before he was world famous, he became curious about Coleman's observation that some schools seemed to have more of an effect than others.

The problem he had—the problem everyone who wants to figure out the effect of schools has—is that it is hard to account for student background. Take two schools that both score at about the national average on an assessment. They might seem to be about the same in terms of their effect. But if the first school only enrolls students who have previously scored in the top tenth of achievement, then you might reasonably conclude it is a terrible school. If the second only enrolls students who are in the lowest tenth, you might conclude that it's a fabulous school that teaches a whole lot.

Rutter did something clever to address the problem of student background. He took advantage of the fact that there had been a previous study of thousands of elementary school children in London that had gathered enormous amounts of information, including the children's fathers' job status, their academic records, their school discipline records, and teacher observations. For the most part those children went on to one of twelve London high schools in a dismal and depressed part of London.⁸

Rutter and his team of researchers followed the students when they entered high school, controlling for all the background factors. They found that the children's academic achievement largely depended on which of those twelve schools the children attended. "The results carry the strong implication that schools can do much to foster good behavior and attainments, and that even in disadvantaged areas, schools can be a force for good."⁹

Rutter and his team wrote *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, taking the title from the fact that children are in school for roughly fifteen thousand hours over their school careers. They not only established that schools make a difference—in other words, they said schools can make kids

smarter—but also did case studies of those schools that were most effective in raising student achievement, characteristics that added up to what Rutter called “school ethos.”

Fifteen Thousand Hours was a careful study and, like all careful studies, was bolstered with a lot of qualifications, making it difficult to find a description of school ethos that doesn’t last for pages. But in 2002 Rutter revisited the work he had done as a younger man. In his essay he summarized what the original report had said:

The overall school organization or management features that stand out include good leadership that provides strategic vision, staff participation with a shared vision and goals, appropriate rewards for collegial collaborative working, attendance to staff needs and rewards, and effective home-school partnership.¹⁰

None of those things are weird or contrary to what most people in education would think sensible today. But they also don’t constitute a recipe for what to do. Professional knowledge and skill are required to understand their implications and put them into practice.

Roughly at the same time Rutter was doing his research, Ronald Edmonds was also thinking about the question Coleman raised: Do some schools break the correlation between family background and achievement, and can we use their successes to learn how to make all schools more effective?

Edmonds had been an educator who—among other things—was assistant superintendent for the state of Michigan and senior assistant of instruction in New York City. He afterward served as director of Harvard’s Center for Urban Studies and as an assistant professor at Michigan State University’s school of teacher education.

He reanalyzed Coleman’s data and identified schools in Michigan where poor children and Black children performed at least as well as middle-class and white children, calling them “effective schools” and then studied them to see what made them different.

In an article in *Educational Leadership*, he wrote: “What effective schools share is a climate in which it is incumbent on all personnel to be

instructionally effective for all pupils. That is not, of course, a very profound insight, but it does define the proper lines of research inquiry.”

When he spelled it out, his list overlapped quite a bit with Rutter’s:

- They have strong administrative leadership without which the disparate elements of good schooling can neither be brought together nor kept together;
- Schools that are instructionally effective for poor children have a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum but efficacious levels of achievement;
- The school’s atmosphere is orderly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand;
- Effective schools get that way partly by making it clear that pupil acquisition of basic school skills takes precedence over all other school activities;
- When necessary, school energy and resources can be diverted from other business in furtherance of the fundamental objectives; and
- There must be some means by which pupil progress can be frequently monitored. These may be as traditional as classroom testing on the day’s lesson or as advanced as criterion-referenced systemwide standardized measures. The point is that some means must exist in the school by which the principal and the teachers remain constantly aware of pupil progress in relationship to instructional objectives.”

Edmonds died young, at the age of forty-eight. Although several people tried to continue his Effective Schools work, their efforts eventually petered out in the world of education consultancy, where they had significant effects on individual educators but less of an effect on the field as a whole.

In a 1982 interview Edmonds summed up his research approach as, “First you identify schools that produce the outcomes you’re interested

in. Then you watch them and try to figure out what makes them different from ineffective schools.”¹²

This is such an obvious way to proceed that it seems almost self-evident. And yet, since Rutter and Edmonds, little education research has been conducted in this way. Most educational research has fallen into two categories: correlational studies à la Coleman’s and Reardon’s, and studies of individual practices or programs. Both kinds of research are helpful and necessary. Correlations help us keep the big picture in mind, and studies on individual programs and practices can help educators distinguish the helpful from the snake oil and discover new ways to approach problems.

But if anything is clear from the history of education it is that correlational studies don’t explain why some kids don’t seem to get smarter, and no single program or practice seems to make a difference. Which is to say that most educational research in the US doesn’t really help schools make kids smarter, but rather describes and catalogues school failure.¹³

That said, there are exceptions. Perhaps the biggest exception is the UChicago Consortium on School Research. The Consortium was founded by Penny Sebring and Anthony Bryk, who crossed paths at Harvard with Ronald Edmonds, and whose approach to research was deeply influenced by him.

I tell the story of the Consortium in chapter 2, but essentially Consortium researchers spent twenty years studying schools in Chicago that improved and schools that didn’t improve. In 2010, the Consortium published its landmark book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, which concluded that, “School organization drives improvement, and individual initiatives are unlikely to work in isolation.”¹⁴

This might seem like a modest return on so much effort, but the implications are enormous, and they challenge what the education world has been focused on for so many years: individual programs and practices. Instead, it puts the emphasis on organizational structures and systems that work together to make kids smarter.

The UChicago Consortium researchers said that if even three of “five essentials” were in place at a high level, and if one of these was effective

leadership, then schools were *ten times more likely to improve* than if they weren't in place. This was a huge finding.

What were those elements?

- Effective leaders
- Collaborative teachers
- Involved families
- Supportive environments
- Ambitious instruction

It is easy to see how the Consortium's findings dovetail nicely with Rutter's and Edmonds's. Their findings still weren't a recipe for school improvement, but they provided a bit more solid footing than educators had had before.

In response, Chicago Public Schools shifted ground. Signs went up all over the district office saying that schools were the unit of change and principals were the leaders of that change.

CPS began rating schools based on the five essentials and used surveys designed by the Consortium to gather the data. The district began focusing on ensuring that schools had principals who knew how to build school cultures where collaborative teams of teachers provided ambitious instruction and built good relationships with students and families. That's a tall order, but slowly Chicago began preparing the right kinds of principals and getting them in the right jobs.

Lots more went on in Chicago, some of which is detailed in chapter 2, but the big picture is that over three decades, the district improved. Fourth and eighth graders in Chicago now achieve at levels above many other cities and right around the national average. That is quite something for a district that was once dysfunctional enough that in 1987 then-US Secretary of Education William Bennett called it the "worst" district in the country—"an educational disaster, a complete meltdown."¹⁵

Many other cities have undergone massive "reform" efforts without anywhere near the improvement that Chicago schools have seen.

Serious educators pay close attention to UChicago Consortium, and several cities have recently started up their own partnerships with

universities in an attempt to replicate its role in Chicago, but for the most part the Consortium’s work—and the work of Chicago Public Schools as a whole—flies under the radar.

One other major piece of research is worth noting here because it falls into this same line, and that is a study by scholars at the University of Washington and University of Minnesota who studied 180 schools across eight states and six years and concluded, “We have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.”¹⁶

This echoed what Edmonds had said in 1982, saying that recognizing the importance of principals was “not a theory, but a discovery.”¹⁷

All of which is to say that the failure of many of the reform efforts of the last few decades have helped feed the Coleman-derived narrative that schools can’t really help kids get smarter. And, just as President Johnson seems to have feared, that has in turn fueled arguments by anti-democratic forces who are determined to starve the schools of resources in state after state. The arguments they make are not that all that different from when the white oligarchy of the South reversed the advances of Reconstruction. Schools can’t make children of color and children living in poverty smarter, so why send tax money down a rat hole?

However, the Rutter-Edmonds-Leithwood–UChicago Consortium research tradition demonstrates something quite different: the knowledge of how to structure schools that make kids smarter exists. Given the right conditions, that knowledge can be exposed and learned from so that more schools can help more kids get smarter.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book presents the stories of five districts of widely different types—to explore the common themes among them and enable others to learn from their examples. It builds on and extends work I have done on a podcast, *ExtraOrdinary Districts*, for The Education Trust. As with the school profiles I have written, I highlight high performing and rapidly improving districts that serve students of color and students living in low-income homes who perform at high levels. Each one in some way breaks the correlation between students’ background and achievement.

These are, to be sure, outlier districts. To find them, I have used a combination of Reardon's pathbreaking analyses of achievement by district and publicly available state data.

In many ways, what I have seen in each of these districts mirrors what Rutter and Edmonds found in schools decades ago, and what the UChicago Consortium continues to find in schools now.

But with school districts as the subject, the lens widens a bit. As John Daniel, superintendent of Cottonwood district in Oklahoma, says, a school district is like "a large amoeba that moves and has interlocking parts."

This book will try to describe some of those interlocking parts. It is not meant to be a guide to district administration. It is, rather, a journey through some of the nation's districts that have solved some of the problems faced by districts around the country—with insights from superintendents, principals, teachers, staff members, students, and parents.

Such a message can only really be understood within a larger political context. The belief in the capacity of schools to make kids smarter is part and parcel with a belief in the capacity of ordinary citizens to be able to govern themselves and the even more fundamental belief that all Americans are bound together equally in a common destiny.

In other words, the ideas of democracy and public schools are inextricably linked. That's hardly a new insight; Horace Mann and John Dewey both wrote eloquently on the subject, and every African American parent who put themselves and their children in grave danger in order to secure an education and their place in a democracy understood this in every sinew of their being. But right now, when antidemocratic forces have gained enormous political strength, it seems important to once again point out that democracy and public schools share a common fate. Weaken one and the other will wither.

This book is the story of people who have spent their lives and careers strengthening both.