



## INTRODUCTION



One of the big questions facing American education is “Can it be done?” Can schools help all children learn to high levels, even poor children and children of color? Is it even possible for schools to help children who face the substantial obstacles of poverty and discrimination to learn to read, write, compute, and generally become educated citizens?

As a longtime reporter and columnist writing about schools and education, I knew the answer was “yes,” but I knew it as an article of faith rather than as actual knowledge. I had never actually seen such a school. I had seen glimmers of hope in the fifth-grade classroom of Linda Eberhart, where African American boys and girls from a very poor area of Baltimore met state math standards at higher rates than in any other school in the state. I had seen hope in the extraordinary kindergarten class of Lorraine Gandy, who could boast without fear of contradiction that in thirty years she had taught just about every one of her students to read. I had also seen hope in a couple of schools that were committed to educating every child. But a whole school where the average poor child or child of color could walk in from the neighborhood and be pretty sure he or she would learn to read and do math and otherwise succeed academically? That I had never seen.

Instead, I had seen standard suburban schools where middle-class and wealthy white children—particularly the girls—seem to do well, but where the poor, African American, and Latino children—particularly the boys—do terribly. My husband and I sent our own children to such schools, in fact. (The principal of our middle school used to say, publicly, “Thank goodness for our white girls—they really carry us.”)

I had also seen schools where just about all the kids were white and middle- or upper-middle-class. Those schools flew past all the markers that schools have been judged by in the past. The elementary schools had high average state

test scores, and the high schools had high average SAT scores and boasted dozens of kids accepted to Ivy League colleges. But even in those schools I had seen tedious classes and heard many horror stories of bad instruction from disillusioned parents and alienated students.

I had also seen what I call “crummy poor-kid schools”—that is, the inadequate schools that too many poor children must attend—which gave me the same edgy feeling that I’ve felt in jails, as if something terrible could happen at any time. In one such school I encountered dull and dulling classrooms, filled with worksheets and entertainment movies shown on televisions, and I saw a young, unsure administrator holding off a crowd of unruly teenagers in a lunchroom with a yardstick.

I had talked with teachers in crummy schools who told me, with great condescension, “These kids aren’t like *your* children,” meaning that most of the children they taught couldn’t be expected to learn as much as white, middle-class children of college graduates. They would often add that advising their students to go to college was a waste of time.

Instead of dedicating themselves to making sure that all children learned to high standards, it seemed that the schools I saw simply sorted their children into different categories, each with their own educational opportunities. The “high” kids were offered what passed for a real education, although with reliance on the parents to provide a lot of the teaching; the “middle” kids were given some aspects of a real education; and the “low” kids were babysat until they were old enough to leave school. In crummy poor-kid schools, just about all the children were considered “low.” The lucky few were skimmed off into magnet schools or other special programs.

I knew that I hadn’t seen the full spectrum of what American education offered, but my optimism was based more on a hope than on actual knowledge. I had difficulty letting go of the notion that our public schools are places that offer all children the chance to become educated, places where, if children work hard, they can gain access to all the opportunities our country has to offer.

The folks at The Education Trust have not given up on that notion, either. The Education Trust is a national education organization that for years has identified schools where poor children and children of color do better than their peers in other schools. But The Education Trust had only identified those schools through their data; they had never explained how what they call “Dispelling the Myth” schools have such dramatically different results from other schools. In late 2004, The Education Trust joined with four other organizations—Business Roundtable, Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, National Center for Educational Accountability, and National Council of La Raza—to

form “The Achievement Alliance,” and they hired me to visit such schools and describe the kinds of things they do.

Since then, with money donated from Bristol-Myers Squibb, Caterpillar, Contran Corp., EMC, Intel, Prudential, State Farm, and Texas Instruments, The Achievement Alliance has given me the opportunity to visit schools that share the American idea that schools exist to ensure that all children learn. At these schools, just about all children meet or exceed state standards or are rapidly moving toward that goal. At these schools many, if not most, of the children are poor, and many, if not most, are children of color. Some of these schools are in neighborhoods that many middle-class parents would never consider allowing their children to set foot in. Some would say these schools could never be expected to teach their students to high standards. And yet the teachers and principals in these schools are demonstrating that, by carefully organizing their time and resources, they can make sure that their students learn to “read, write, and cipher,” as one old-fashioned educator said to me—and much, much more.

These schools are not just good schools for poor children and children of color—they are good schools for any child. Most of them are far enough along in their improvement process that I fervently wish my children could have attended them. Some still have a way to go to get to that level, but they are headed in that direction.

The two years I spent visiting schools were a revelation in a lot of ways. I began this project not knowing at all what I would find. I was identifying schools solely on the basis of their student achievement test scores, and for all I knew (and feared), I would find the soul-deadening test-prep factories that we are told characterize high-poverty and high-minority schools that do well on state assessments. Perhaps, I worried, I would find schools where the teachers and principals are worn to a frazzle, burnt-out and bitter with all the expectations that have been placed on their shoulders. Or even worse, maybe I would find schools where the teachers were robotic automatons robbed of all their creativity.

I found none of that. Instead I found dedicated, energetic, skilled professionals who talk about the needs of children and who care deeply about whether all their students have access to the kinds of knowledge and opportunities that most middle-class white children take for granted. That means they care about and include in their teaching art and music and physical fitness and field trips and science and history and all the things that some people say must be cut out of schools in order to focus on the reading and math skills tested in state assessments. That doesn’t mean that the people in the schools I have visited don’t

care deeply about reading and math and about doing well on state assessments, but they know that it is a mistake to “narrow the curriculum” and “teach to the test”—two of the epithets that are floating around the education world.

And, happily, I found teachers and principals who love their jobs. They work hard, and some work long hours. They may occasionally be tempted to move to schools where it might be easier to teach. But they stay on the job because, as one teacher said to me, “We’re successful. And we’re like family.” Many are bolstered by the idea that they are engaged in important work—work that, if enough people paid attention, could improve the teaching profession and to some extent the nation itself. But stunningly, their work has gone almost unnoticed. Here are schools that are doing what some people insist cannot be done, and yet they are pretty much unknown to the public.

Early on in this project I was talking with a very thoughtful principal, Mary Russo, who has led great improvement in her school, Richard J. Murphy K–8 School in Boston. I said that many people think that schools cannot help children who are damaged by poverty and discrimination catch up to their more privileged peers. “They say it can’t be done,” I said. She replied simply, “It’s being done.” I spent the next two years proving her point and then stole her words as the title of this book.

I would like to invite readers to join me on a journey through the schools I have visited. I begin in chapter 1 by explaining how and why it is possible to find schools that are successful and how schools were selected for visits. Then, in chapters 2–16, I present the stories of the schools in the order I visited and wrote about them (many of the stories originally appeared on the website of The Achievement Alliance, <http://www.achievementalliance.org>). Wherever new data have been published since I first wrote about the schools, I include that information in the charts and the Postscript section, along with any other changes that may have occurred in the school. Finally, I conclude with a chapter in which I describe the characteristics that I found to be common among all the schools.

The schools described in this book are among the most exciting ones in the country, but I make no claims that I have done more than just scrape the surface. There are many more great and rapidly improving schools in the United States. There is also much more to learn and write about these schools than is in this book. All I have done is try to put a little flesh on the bare bones of quantitative data, to give readers some idea of what it is the people in these schools are doing and how they are doing it. I hope this brief glimpse is enough to demonstrate that the important work of educating all children is within our grasp.

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