Haberman Encyclopedia

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URBAN EDUCATION: THE STATE OF URBAN SCHOOLING AT THE START OF THE 21ST CENTURY

URBAN EDUCATION: DEFINITIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

The dictionary meaning of urban is simply " a term pertaining to a city or town." In everyday parlance the term is used frequently to distinguish it from the terms rural, small town, suburban or ex-urban.

These objective size/density definitions however do not convey the range of meanings intended or received when the term is most commonly used. Perceptions of urban areas differ widely. Rooted in the early history of this country and illustrated in the writings of Alexander Hamilton is a vision of urban as fostering freedoms. This perception defines cities as places of refuge and opportunity and is a vision widely accepted in most other countries. (Meyer, 1957) Also rooted in America's history and illustrated in the writings of Thomas Jefferson is the opposing perception of urban as dysfunctional and the cause of many societal problems. (Malone, 1948) In American parlance "God's country" is used to refer to rural areas or nature preserves not cities.

During the first half of the 20th century urban areas were viewed by many as economically dynamic, attracting and employing migrant populations from small towns, rural areas and abroad. During the second half of the 20th century however the term urban became a pejorative code word for the problems caused by the large numbers of poor and minorities who live in cities. Such negative perceptions of urban profoundly affect education and shape the nature of urban schooling.

URBAN EDUCATION: STUDENTS AND STRUCTURE

Unlike most other countries where education is a federal or national function schooling in America is a decentralized one. States are the legally responsible entities but local districts are generally perceived as the accountable units of administration. There were approximately 53 million American children entering public and private schools in the fall of the year 2000. Thirty five percent are members of minority groups. One in five comes from immigrant households. Nearly one-fifth live in poverty. (Education Week, Sept.27, 2000) Eleven states account for more than half of the children in poverty: California, Texas, New York, Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina and Georgia. All these students are overseen by more than 15,000 local districts with almost 90,000 schools. (Cuban, 2001) The 120 largest school districts, generally defined as the urban ones, serve 11 million students most of whom are of color or in poverty. (Education Commission of the States, 1997).

Since 1962 the achievement gap between disadvantaged populations and more affluent ones has widened. At one extreme urban school districts graduate half or fewer of their students. (Arbanas, 2001) At the other extreme 11% of American students are now among the top 10 percent of world achievers. "If you're in the top economic quarter

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of the population, your children have a 76% chance of getting through college and graduating by age 24…If you're in the bottom quarter, however, the figure is 4 %." (Loeb, 1999) White students' achievement in reading, math and science ranks 2nd, 7th and 4th when compared with students worldwide. Black and Hispanic students however rank 26, 27th and 27th on these basic skills. (Bracey, 2002)   Such data describe but do not explain the causes of such wide disparities among educational outcomes. The following section describes some of the challenges which, taken together, help to explain the failure of urban school districts. A final section describes many of the characteristics of successful urban schools.

URBAN EDUCATION: SPECIAL CHALLENGES

Highly Politicized School Boards. Board politics in major urban school districts often impede judicious decision-making (Ortiz, 1991) Two practices are particularly dysfunctional. First, in an effort to better represent diverse constituencies, citywide board seats have given way to narrowly drawn district seats. Board members elected from such districts may find it difficult to support policies and budgets aimed at the good of the total district when doing so is viewed negatively by parents, citizens and educators in their own neighborhood schools. Second, board members too frequently try to micromanage large, complicated school organizations thereby abrogating the leadership and accountability of their own superintendent. Finally, it is not unusual for narrow majorities on boards to change after a board election and for a superintendent to find his/her initiatives no longer supported and even have his/her contract bought out. Superintendent Turnover. The average years of service for an urban superintendent are 2 and 1/3yrs. (Urban Indicator, 2000). As a result a new superintendent may function more as a temporary employee of a school board than as the educational leader of the district and the community. Administrators and teachers are reluctant to throw themselves into new initiatives that are not likely to remain in place long enough to show any results. Constituencies (governments, businesses, church groups, foundations, universities, etc.) with whom the superintendent must interact may take a wait and see attitude rather than become active partners in the new superintendent's initiatives. Principals as Managers and Leaders. The size and complexity of most urban schools inevitably lead to a focus on the principal as the manager or CEO of a major business enterprise. This emphasis has led to a transformation of the traditional principal role as an instructional leader. (Haberman, 2001) Few urban districts dismiss principals because of low student achievement unless the achievement falls low enough for the school to be taken over by the state or district and be reconstituted. In practice the typical urban principal who is transferred or coaxed into retirement is one that has "lost control of the building." The district's stated system of accountability may place student learning as the highest priority but the real basis for defining urban principals as "failing" is not because they have been unable to demonstrate increasing student achievement

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but because they have been unable to maintain a custodial institution. The fact that most urban principals spend the preponderance of their time and energy on management issues demonstrates that they fully understand this reality. (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000)

Government Oversight. Local and state government officials involve themselves more and more in educational policies that impact urban districts. This politicization of education produces an endless stream of regulations and funding mechanisms, which encourage or penalize the efforts of local urban districts. Like an overmedicated patient the treatments frequently counteract one another or have unintended negative consequences.

Central Office Bureaucracies. In rural, small town and suburban districts, classroom teachers comprise 80% or more of the school district's employees. In the 120 largest urban districts the number of employees other than teachers is approaching a ratio of almost 2:1; that is, for every classroom teacher there are almost two others employed in the district ostensibly to perform services which would help these teachers. (Knott & Miller, 1987) The effect of this distortion is frequently a proliferation of procedures, regulations, interruptions and paperwork that impedes rather than facilitates student learning. Many teachers leaving urban districts cite paperwork and bureaucratic over regulation as among the most debilitating conditions they face.

The self-serving nature of the district bureaucracy frequently impedes initiatives, which would decentralize decision making and transfer power to individual school staffs. (McClafferty, 2000) Historically centralized systems are reluctant to change. Prodded by parents, community and business leaders, urban districts are gradually allowing more decentralized decision making at the school level. In response to bureaucratic rigidities choices are proliferating within public systems. Examples include open enrollment plans, magnet and specialty schools, schools-within-schools, alternative schools, and public choice and charter schools. Urban parents also have increased options outside the public systems through private school voucher programs but these efforts account for less than one percent of enrollment in urban districts. (Hill, 1999)

School Staff Accountability. As public school options increase so do calls for accountability. The most frequently tried accountability efforts in the last century have been attempts at merit pay for teachers based on student achievement test scores. Many of these trials have been funded by private foundations and several have been supported initially by local teachers unions. Thus far, however, there have been no successful models for holding either principals or teachers accountable based on achievement scores. (Ross, 1994) In some cases superintendents have clauses in their contracts stating that their tenure or salaries are dependent on improvements in student achievement. In some districts school principals' annual evaluations and contract extensions are now tied to improving student achievement. Currently, many states have adopted systems for declaring particular schools (or districts) as failing if a given

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number of the school's students are below a minimum level of achievement. In these cases the state may mandate that a failing school be reconstituted and may grant the local district the authority to re-staff the school with a new principal and teaching staff. (Crosby, 1999) The staff of a failing school is typically permitted to transfer to other schools in the district. This means that while an urban school district is being held accountable based on achievement data the individual staff members are not. Furthermore the concept of accountability is non-existent for curriculum specialists, hiring officials, or those who appoint principals, psychologists, safety aides or other school staff.

Teacher Shortages. The public clearly understand the importance of well-prepared teachers: 82% believe that the "recruitment and retention of better teachers is the most important measure for improving public schools, more effective than investing in computers or smaller class size." (Education Commission of the States, 2000) In the next decade there may be as many as 1 million new teachers hired because of turnover, retirement and the fact that the typical teaching career has shortened to approximately 11 years. (Langdon & Vesper, 2000) If the school age population continues to increase, another million teachers may be needed. While all districts face occasional selected shortages of special education teachers, bilingual teachers, math or science teachers, the major impact of the current and continuing teacher shortage falls on the urban school districts. These are the teaching positions that many traditionally prepared teachers are unwilling to take. This problem is confounded by the fact that many urban districts must lay off teachers to make up for budget deficits in a given year while they are simultaneously recruiting teachers to remedy their chronic shortages. (Reid, 2002)

In the states that prepare a majority of the teachers in traditional university based programs more than half of those who graduate and are certified never take teaching positions. (Schug, 1997) " One third of new teachers leave the profession within five years." (Education Commission of the States, 2000) The typical teacher education graduate is a 22-year-old white female, monolingual with little work or life experience. She will teach within fifty miles of where she herself attended school. The profile of teachers who succeed and stay in urban school districts differs in important respects. (Sprinthall, 1996) While they are still predominantly women, they are over 30 years of age, attended urban schools themselves, completed a bachelor's degree in college but not necessarily in education, worked at other full-time jobs and are parents themselves. This successful pool also contains a substantially higher number of individuals who are African American, Latino and male. Typically, the teacher educators who serve as faculty in traditional university-based teacher preparation programs have had little or no teaching experience in urban school districts while those mentoring teachers in alternative licensure programs typically come from long, successful careers as teachers in urban districts.

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State Licensure Laws. While traditional teacher preparation programs seek to attract more young people into the teaching profession, past experience suggests that many of these graduates will not seek employment in large urban school districts where most of the new hires will be needed. (Schug 1997) To assist in meeting this urban district need, new kinds of recruiting and training programs are being established to attract older, more experienced and more diverse candidates into the teaching profession. States differ widely in their response to these new programs. “Conventional wisdom holds that the key to attracting better teachers is to regulate entry into the classroom ever more tightly…” while others argue that “the surest route to quality is to widen the entryway, deregulate the processes, and hold people accountable for their results…” (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1999) Forty-three states have passed alternative licensure laws which permit the hiring of college graduates who were not trained in traditional programs of teacher preparation. But licensure requirements vary greatly across the states and implementation of new approaches is often controversial even though an increasing number of urban districts now “grow their own” teachers using alternative training programs. (Feistritzer, 1993)

Funding for Districts and Classrooms. Students in urban school districts often have substantially less annual per student support than they need. The level of support in urban districts, however, generally exceeds the per pupil expenditures in small towns and rural areas. Many argue, therefore, that in total there is no shortage of funds for urban schools especially when categorical aids and grants are considered. The overall problem of inadequate funding is often exacerbated after the urban school district receives its funds and distributes the monies from the central office levels to the individual schools. Too often too many funds are expended to maintain central office functions leaving too little to cover the direct costs of instruction and equipment in specific school buildings. In addition, many urban districts are characterized by buildings that are outmoded, even unsafe, creating conditions which make learning problematic. New York City, for example, has over 150 buildings still heated by coal.

Projectitis. New school board members and superintendents often believe they must set their personal stamps on the district through new initiatives. It is common for urban districts to claim they are aware of and experimenting with the latest curricula in reading, math, science, etc. (Schuttloffel, 2000). In addition, administrators are pressured to try out new programs against drugs, violence, gangs, smoking, sex, etc. This proliferation of programs and projects results in so many new initiatives being tried simultaneously it is not possible to know which initiative caused what results. Furthermore, not enough time is devoted to the program to give it sufficient time to demonstrate intended results. The problem is compounded by the fact that many of these new initiatives are not systematically or carefully evaluated. Veteran teachers, when confronted with the latest initiative from the school board or administration, typically become passive resistors. “This too shall pass.” The constant claims of

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experts, school boards and superintendents that their latest initiative will transform their schools is frequently stonewalled by the very people who must be the heart of the effort for it to succeed. (Van Dunk, 1999)

Narrowing Curriculum and Lowering Expectations. As presented in state and local district philosophy and mission statements the list of what the American people generally expect from their public schools is impressive. A typical list is likely to include the following goals for students: basic skills; motivated life long learners; positive self concept; humane, democratic values; active citizens; success in higher education and in the world of work; effective functioning in a culturally diverse society and a global economy; technological competence; development of individual talents; maintenance of physical and emotional health; appreciation and participation in the arts. In many suburban and small town schools the parents, community and professional school educators maintain a broad general vision about the goals that 13 years of full time schooling is supposed to accomplish. But in the urban districts serving culturally diverse students in poverty these broad missions are frequently narrowed down to “getting a job and staying out of jail.” (Russell, 1986)

Narrowing down the curriculum is particularly evident among the burgeoning populations of students labeled as special or exceptional. The urban districts have disproportionately large and wildly accelerating numbers of students labeled with some form of disability. In urban districts the numbers of special students currently range from 6% to 20% of the student body. This means that exceptional education may account for between 20 and 35% of a total urban district’s budget. Well intentioned but sometimes misapplied state and federal initiatives for special education students encourage the labeling of increasing numbers of students as learning disabled, cognitively disabled or having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. (Breggin & Breggin, 1994) It is not uncommon for many urban teachers who do not have in depth knowledge of child development to perceive undesirable behavior as abnormal rather than as a temporary stage or as student responses to poor teaching. Thus it is common in urban middle schools to find many students doing well academically who have been labeled as disabled in primary grades and who will carry these labels throughout the remainder of their school careers. Teacher expectations are likely to be very modest for such children; testing may be waived. Some low-income parents may be enticed to agree to have their children labeled exceptional because of financial grants. Recent efforts at inclusion for exceptional students in regular classrooms are aimed at breaking the cycle of low expectations and isolation. In urban districts, however, inclusion mandates are most frequently followed in the primary grades but seldom at the high school level. (Cohen, 2001) The disproportionate number of children of color, particularly males, labeled exceptional further exacerbates this problem.

12. Achievement and Testing. There are four curricula operating in schools. The first is the broadest. It is the written mission of the school district. The second curriculum is

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what the teachers actually teach. The third operative curriculum is what the students actually learn which is considerably less than what the district claims or what the teachers teach. The fourth curriculum is what is tested for and this is the narrowest of the four. The tested for curriculum frequently supports the narrowing and lowering of expectations. (D'Amico, 1985) As total school and district programs are evaluated by norm referenced tests the accountability of teachers and principals is also narrowed and lowered to the kinds of learning that can be readily tested. Recognition of this problem has led to a new emphasis on standards-led testing or performance assessment closely linked to curriculum in place of the norm reference testing that compares student's performance to that of others. Done carefully, such assessment measures the performance of successive cohorts of students against an annual rate of improvement (local or state) that is sufficient to achieve whatever curriculum goals have been set. (Education Commission of the States , 1997) For the most part, aligning the goals, curriculum, instruction and testing is yet to be accomplished.

After decades of ignoring low student scores in urban schools or explaining them away as predictable because of family income, national attention has shifted to the numerous and widespread examples of individual urban schools in which students' scores are being raised and increasing numbers of low income children are reaching grade level achievement. Educators at all levels are being called upon to focus time, thought and resources on the poorest performing schools and the persistent cultural and racial gaps between high and low performing students.

13. Research on Urban School Practices. The research literature in teaching, learning and best practice is robust. We know how children learn, best practices for teachers and what makes specific urban schools successful. (Ascher & Flaxman, 1985) The problem is that schools, even failing schools in urban districts which we would expect would be more amenable to change, are resistant institutions shaped by history, culture and their economic support systems. Schools reflect not only general American norms and values but also their local cultures. In recent years the plethora of federal and state laws and local administrative mandates is testimony to the fact that education is also a flourishing political activity. It seems clear that schools reflect culture more than research, or even logic and theory. (Hunt Jr., 1996) Schools reflect and maintain a multiplicity of social norms contradicted by research based knowledge regarding best practice. It is ironic that those seeking to transform failed urban school districts are frequently expected to prove beforehand that their advocacies are research based while those who stonewall change rely on a rationale of laws, funding mechanisms, school organization and practices which reflect culture and tradition, unsupported by a research knowledge base.

One example lies in what has been described as the pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991). Teaching in many urban schools consists of ritualized teacher acts, which seldom engage students in meaningful learning that is connected to their lives. Such

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teaching includes giving directions and information; making assignments; monitoring seatwork; testing and grading; settling disputes and punishing noncompliance. While such activities are part of teaching, the research literature is clear that more is needed if schools are to reach diverse groups of students with widely varied backgrounds, interests and experiences. (Smith, 1979) Allowing these limited teaching practices to become the typical ones in the urban districts serving diverse student populations of low income students not only dumbs down the content of the curriculum but also narrows the pedagogy by which it is offered. It is a process in which the student is treated in a disrespectful manner—as if she/he is incapable of appreciating or responding to the genuine teaching of important knowledge.

Taken together, these formidable urban challenges demand the best of educational practices if children are to succeed. While there are no fully successful urban districts every district has individual schools which are effective. Indeed there are examples of outstanding schools in some of the poorest performing urban districts. This anomaly of how individual schools can be successful in the midst of chaos and failure has been sufficiently documented to enable us to state with some certainty the characteristics that account for their effectiveness.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL URBAN PROGRAMS

The correlates of the effective school literature are as follows: a clearly stated mission; a safe climate for learning; high expectations for students, teachers and administrators; high student time on task; administrators who are instructional leaders; frequent monitoring of student progress; and positive home-school relations. (Taylor, 2002) These and other necessary conditions are demonstrated in urban schools in the following ways: First, such schools have outstanding principals who serve as leaders rather than building managers. These individuals are instructional leaders with a deep understanding of the teaching and learning process. They also know, appreciate and respect the cultures of the ethnic/racial groups the school serves. (Mitchell, 2000)

Second, there is a critical mass of star teachers or teachers on their way to becoming stars. These are individuals who believe the students and their families are the clients. They believe that student effort rather than ability accounts for success in school and their teaching reflects their ability to generate student effort. These teachers not only know the content of what they teach as well as best practice, but also have effective relationship skills that connect them with students. The ideology and behaviors of star teachers has been well documented. (Haberman, 1995) While there are numerous exceptions star urban teachers tend to be people who are more mature with more varied life experience than college youth. They are often people of color who have

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attended urban schools themselves. Many have experienced poverty first hand. It is also increasingly likely that they did not go through traditional teacher training.

Third, effective urban schools have a vision of the school's mission commonly held by students, the entire staff, parents, caregivers and the community. There is a unity of purpose that grows out of everyone who is involved with the school believing, sharing and contributing to this common vision.

Fourth, there is a deep and growing knowledge of how computers and information systems can be used in classrooms and for all school activities. The students and staff are connected to the full resources of the Internet and to the latest instructional programs and not engaged in merely drill and kill activities using a computer.

Fifth, parents are involved in integral ways in the life of the school and not merely as homework tutors or disciplinarians. Parents have a strong voice in all aspects of the school's decision-making processes. They are regarded as resources able to inform school policy and curriculum.

Sixth, the curriculum is aligned with achievement tests. There is also a closed loop so that the results of testing inform and guide curriculum revisions as well as what teachers teach everyday. Student evaluation includes more than norm referenced tests and places great emphasis on the systematic use of students' work samples and work products. While achievement tests are important the teachers offer a broad curriculum and do not narrow or dumb it down to prepare for the tests. The acquisition of important knowledge for all students, including those with special needs, is maintained as the school priority.

Seventh, the curriculum is sensitive to issues of equity and social justice. What the teachers plan to teach on any given day can be set aside as students and teachers consider issues that arise in the school. "Problems" are not generally seen as intrusions on the curriculum but are dealt with as opportunities to make learning relevant. The students learn that school is not preparation for living later but rather learning to deal with issues and challenges now.

Eighth, there are frequent celebrations of student achievements. These take the form of student accomplishments in all areas which then culminate in exhibits, publications, performances and displays for other students, parents and the community. The climate and schedule of the building clearly manifest student learning and accomplishment.

Ninth, the faculty and staff are themselves a community of learners. Teachers and administrators design annual educational plans to develop further as people and as professionals. Such plans include team and cooperative activities to help teachers combat isolation. Professional development occurs during the workday as well as during non-school periods. It provides "opportunities to build meaningful partnerships with parents, businesses, educational and cultural institutions to create exciting new learning experiences." (Renyi, 1996)

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Tenth, the school provides a healthy, safe environment for learning. The staff is expert at deescalating rather than escalating student behavior problems. There are few suspensions and expulsions. Every effort is made to continue student learning during a suspension period. (Hyman & Snook, (2000)

Finally, successful urban schools frequently find ways to extend the time children spend with knowledgeable, caring adults through preschool, extended day, weekend and summer school programs, often working as partners with their communities.

At the beginning of the 21st century the greatest challenge to every major urban school system is to create and replicate these effective conditions, already practiced in specific school buildings, throughout the district as a whole.

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