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Impossible Goals for Schools

From “Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right” by Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder, (Teachers College Press, 2008) pages 70-71

Impossible Goals for Schools

Inadequate schools are only one reason disadvantaged children perform poorly. They come to school under stress from high-crime neighborhoods and economically insecure households. Their low-cost day care tends to park them before televisions, rather than provide opportunities for developmentally appropriate play. They switch schools more often because of inadequate housing and rents rising faster than parents' wages. They have greater health problems, some (like lead poisoning or iron-deficiency anemia) directly depressing cognitive ability, and some (like asthma and vision difficulties) causing more absenteeism or inattentiveness. Their household include fewer college-educated adults to provide more sophisticated intellectual environments, and their parents are less likely to expect academic success.* Nearly 15% of the black-white score gap can be traced to differences in housing mobility, and 25% to differences in child and maternal health.**

Yet contemporary test-based accountability policies that establish the goal of all students being proficient require that school improvement alone – higher expectations, better teachers, improved curriculum, and more testing – should raise all children to high levels of achievement, poised for college and professional success. Natural human variability would still distinguish children, but these distinctions would have nothing to do with family disadvantage. If true, there really would be no reason for progressive housing or health and economic policies. The nation's social and economic problems would take care of themselves, by the next generation.

Teachers of children who come to school hungry, scared, abused, or ill consider this absurd. But increasingly, in our test-based accountability environment, pronouncements of politicians and some educational leaders intimidate teachers from acknowledging the obvious. Instead, teachers are expected to repeat the mantra “all children can learn,” a truth carrying the false implication that the level to which children learn has nothing to do with their starting points. Policy makers and school administrators warn teachers that any mention of children's socioeconomic disadvantages only “makes excuses” for teachers' own poor performance.

Of course, there are better and worse schools and better and worse teachers. And of course, some disadvantaged children excel more than others. But our federal and state test-based accountability policies, anchored to the demand for a single standard of proficiency for all students, regardless of background, have turned these obvious truths into the fantasy that teachers can wipe out socioeconomic differences among children simply by trying harder.

Denouncing schools as the chief cause of American inequality – in academic achievement, thus in the labor market, and thus in life generally – stimulates cynicism among teachers who are expected to act on a theory they know to be false. Many dedicated and talented teachers are abandoning education;

they may have achieved exceptional results with disadvantaged children but, with state and federal proficiency bars set so impossibly high, even these teachers are labeled failures.

Continuation of the rhetoric of test-based accountability will also erode support for public education. Under pressure, educators now publicly vow they can eliminate achievement gaps, but they will inevitably fall short. When these educators then fail to fulfill the impossible expectations they themselves have endorsed, the reasonable conclusion can only be that they and their colleagues in public education are hopelessly incompetent.

*** Discussed at length in Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Teachers College Press, 2004); see also Susan B. Neuman, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Education Programs that Break the Cycle of Poverty* (Praeger, 2008); and Susan B Neuman, “Education Should Lift All Children” (Detroit Free Press, July 31, 2008).**

**** For an estimate of the effect of mobility, see Eric Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven Rivkin, “Disruption versus Tiebout*** Improvement: The Costs and Benefits of Switching Schools” (*Journal of Public Education*, 2004, 88(9-10): 1721-46). For an estimate of the effect of child and maternal health, see Janet Currie, “Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness” (*The Future of Children*, 2005m 15(1): 117-38)**

***** A technical economic model that I [GFB] have never heard of before. Here is the beginning of the Wikipedia entry: *The Tiebout model, also known as Tiebout sorting, Tiebout migration, or Tiebout hypothesis, is a positive political theory model first described by economist Charles Tiebout in his article “A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures” (1956). The essence of the model is that there is in fact a non-political solution to the free rider problem in local governance.***