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COMMENTARY

'It's Being Done'

By Karin Chenoweth

One of the big questions facing American education is, "Can it be done?" Is it possible for schools to help all children—even those considered "difficult to teach"—learn to read, write, compute, and generally become educated citizens?

By now it has become almost a truism that high-poverty, high-minority schools are low-achieving, and that even in diverse schools most poor children and children of color are doomed to low achievement. An entire industry has grown up to reassure teachers and administrators that the dismal results they get are the only results that could be expected, and that only the misguided would demand anything different.



—Brian Jensen

But that isn't the end of the story. About two years ago, I spoke to a very accomplished principal, Mary Russo, of the K-8 Richard T. Murphy School in Boston, and we discussed the fact that many people say it is impossible for schools to help the kinds of students who attend her school to achieve. I said, "They say it can't be done."

She replied simply, "It's being done."

I have spent the last two years visiting schools, and I can now say unequivocally that she was right. It is possible to find schools all over the country that don't listen to those who say what they are doing is impossible. Instead, they teach their students—including their children of poverty and children of color—to high levels.

Take, for example, Frankford Elementary School, in Frankford, Del. Deep in the heart of Delaware's chicken country, many of the school's parents work in the poultry industry or in service jobs in the nearby beach communities. About three-quarters of the students meet the qualifications for the federal free and reduced-price meal program, and the student body is almost evenly divided among African-American, white, and Latino students, most of the latter being very recent immigrants from Mexico. Frankford Elementary consistently posts numbers such as 95

percent and even 100 percent of its students meeting state standards in reading and math, and science and social studies aren't far behind. At Frankford, African-American students consistently outscore the average for all Delaware students. The same is true for its neighboring school, East Millsboro Elementary, which, if anything, posts even higher scores than Frankford.

Both schools have a commitment to helping each student achieve at high levels, and their teachers and administrators spend a lot of time making sure that instruction is organized in such a way that every student can be successful. They consider that their job. The way longtime Principal Gary Brittingham of East Millsboro puts it, "If you can predict who is going to have some difficulty, we in this business should figure out some way to help that child."

The same kind of workmanlike philosophy animates many educators around the country, some of whom have posted enormous successes. Unfortunately, most of those successes have gone unnoticed and unrecognized by the larger education community. Take, for example, Philadelphia's M. Hall Stanton Elementary School, where 99 percent of the students are African-American, and the same percentage are from low-income families. Once one of the city's lowest-performing schools, Stanton was the subject of a heartbreaking documentary, "I Am a Promise," in the early 1990s. Its principal, Barbara Adderley, could easily spend her time feeling overwhelmed by the dysfunction of the North Philadelphia neighborhood in which the school sits, a neighborhood where her students sometimes have to dodge bullets to come to school. Instead, she says: "It's not about feeling sorry for kids. It's about making sure that they understand what it is they're expected to do."

She and the teachers at Stanton have thought deeply about what their students need to know and be able to do, and have organized instruction in such a way that every student who needs help gets it. Today a higher percentage of Stanton students meets state math and reading standards than Pennsylvania students as a whole. Stanton is about to up the ante on itself by offering the International Baccalaureate primary-years program, a rigorous curriculum recognized around the world.

Another example of a school that doesn't buy the argument that its kids won't be able to succeed academically is Capitol View Elementary School in Atlanta, where 95 percent of the students are African-American, and most of them are from low-income families. Every single 5th grader at Capitol View met state reading and math standards in 2006, and almost half exceeded standards in math.

"Kids will meet the standards you expect of them," says Trennis Harvey, the school's assistant principal. "Society in general has bought into the idea that demographics have something to do with the ability to learn. If you're poor, you may not have access to trips to Paris, but you can still learn."

At Lincoln Elementary in Mount Vernon, N.Y., a school that has a very diverse student body (more than half its students are low-income, and almost half are African-American, with the rest evenly divided between white and Latino), just about every child who has been tested

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has met state reading and math standards for several years running. And in 2005, every 4th grade child met state science standards, 94 percent of them at the highest level possible. Here, too, the principal and teachers have thought deeply about what children need to know and be able to do, and how to make sure they learn it. They are well aware of the stakes involved for their students. "We can't give up on a generation of children," Principal George Albano says.

Although it is easier to find elementary schools that have posted these kinds of successes, it is possible to find secondary schools as well. Take, for example, Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, N.Y., a working-class suburb in Nassau County on Long Island. Located just blocks east of the Queens border, Elmont has an enrollment that is 75 percent black; the rest of the students are roughly divided between Latino and Asian. Every single senior met the state's graduation requirements last year, and a majority earned the Regents diploma. In fact, Elmont is fast closing in on its more privileged neighbors in helping students earn Advanced Regents diplomas. "We push our kids to excel," says teacher Alicia Calabrese. "When you believe they can do that, they rise to the challenge."

Similarly, at University Park High School in Worcester, Mass., where 70 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, only one student has ever failed to pass the state's high school graduation test as a 10th grader—and teachers expect her to do fine when she is retested this year, after additional help.

The story is the same in California's Imperial Valley at Imperial High School, where more than two-thirds of the students are Latino. Every senior required to pass the high school graduation exam last year passed it; and every year for the past five years, more students have met or exceeded state standards than the previous year. Imperial High isn't yet near 100 percent proficiency, but it rivals many schools where most of the students are white and middle-class. In just five years, it has gone from being a high school in the bottom third of the state to being in the top third.

These and other similar schools I visited are exciting places to be. They have a relentless focus on improving instruction, but they never forget that their primary goal is to help children prepare for their futures. As a result, they are kind schools, schools where children and teachers alike are respectful and cheerful. Students in these schools read books and love to discuss them. They are not test-prep automatons. In fact, most of these schools do little test preparation, other than making sure the students understand the tests' content and are familiar with the form they take. And in none of the schools have I heard anything approaching the bitter and dispiriting conversation that dominates so many schools where students are not achieving at high levels: an endless variation on the theme "if we only had better kids, we'd be a better school."

I have started thinking of the folks in these "It's Being Done" schools as comparable in some ways to the Wright brothers, who proved once and for all that manned flight was possible. Once Orville and Wilbur Wright demonstrated how to answer the challenges of

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gravity and drag, getting from their experimental biplane in Kitty Hawk to the Boeing 747 no longer posed a theoretical challenge but an engineering one. In the same way, schools that are beating the demographic odds demonstrate that the job of educating kids—even kids traditionally considered “hard to teach”—to high levels of achievement is theoretically possible.

The theoretical challenges these schools have overcome include the ideas that poverty and discrimination are insuperable barriers to academic achievement; that today’s kids are so damaged by television, video games, and hip-hop music that they are impervious to books and scholarship; that good, qualified teachers simply won’t work in difficult circumstances; that the existing teachers and principals are incapable of improvement.

Theoretical arguments pile up, seemingly insurmountable, to explain why schools can’t expect high achievement from their children of poverty and children of color.

Except that the “It’s Being Done” schools prove them wrong. When you overcome drag and gravity with enough thrust and lift, you get flight; when you overcome poverty and discrimination with enough thoughtful instruction, careful organization, and what can only be recognized as the kind of pigheaded optimism displayed by the Wright brothers, you get learning.

The schools I have chronicled are not perfect, any more than the Wright brothers’ creation was a perfect airplane. But these schools have tackled the theoretical challenges one by one and proven that they can be conquered.

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