What Really Matters in American Education

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS, DEMOCRACY, AND FREE ENTERPRISE

Quality public schools are the foundation of a democracy and a free enterprise economic system. The public school concept is fundamentally American: most of the fifty U.S. states have a provision in their state constitution for free, public education. These statutes reflect a commitment to the idea that all children, regardless of their academic readiness, race, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, or special education needs, have equal access to a quality K-12 education, and a chance to develop to their maximum potential. State constitutions describe this most essential purpose as:

> "A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools." (Texas)

> "The General Assembly shall provide for a system of free public elementary and secondary schools for all children of school age throughout the Commonwealth, and shall seek to ensure that an educational program of high quality is established and continually maintained." (Virginia)

> "It is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person...The legislature shall provide a basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools." (Montana)

Therein lies the power of the American system of education — it is truly *public*. The "common school" — the concept upon which our public school system was built — teaches children important lessons about both the commonality and diversity of American culture. These lessons are conveyed not only through what is taught in the classroom, but by the very experience of attending school with a diverse mix of students. The common school has made quality public education and hard work the open door to American success and good citizenship and the American way to achievement and freedom.

VOUCHERS THREATEN THE FUNDAMENTAL MISSION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Using public tax dollars for private school vouchers fundamentally undermines 200 years of public education in America. As Neil Postman has suggested in his book The End of Education, "...public education does not serve the public. It creates the public. And in creating the right kind of public, the schools contribute toward strengthening the spiritual basis of the American Creed. That is how Jefferson understood it, how Horace Mann understood it, how John Dewey understood it." Private school vouchers strike at this ideal because they would:

- **Divert attention from the need to improve the public schools.** Providing private school vouchers for a few children will not help to improve the quality of education for most of America's children. Expanded choice in public schools through magnet schools and charter schools, coupled with a focus on the basics, increased parent involvement, improved teaching, and high standards for achievement and discipline, can do far more to improve the education of all children than private school vouchers for a few. The purpose of any school improvement idea should be to invite effective innovation in more schools, particularly those schools that are lagging behind.

- **Add to the public cost of education.** A voucher system would substantially increase the public cost of education by providing public funds to pay private school tuition for children who are already enrolled in private schools. If a voucher program open to all students were implemented today, it would cost American taxpayers over $15 billion to pay the tuitions of the 5 million students already enrolled in private schools.[1] This enormous cost would drain resources from public schools at the same time that billions of dollars are needed just to accommodate the 1.9 million additional students projected to be enrolled in public schools in 2007[2] [NCES, The Condition of Education, 1997].

- **Reduce accountability.** Vouchers could create a situation at the elementary/secondary school level analogous to that at the postsecondary level; in the last four years, 700 for-profit schools in our nation's higher education system were removed from the federal loan program by the U.S. Department of Education because of their misuse of federal tax dollars. Private schools operate outside of the scope of public authority, and therefore have no public accountability for providing a quality education to all students.

- **Force private and parochial schools to become less private and less parochial.** If a systemwide voucher program were adopted, the influx of public dollars into these unregulated schools would result in increased pressure for greater public scrutiny and accountability for these public expenditures. Quality private and parochial schools are valuable parts of the educational variety in our democracy, and these pressures would ultimately interfere with their unique missions and curricula.

- **Possibly violate State and U.S. Constitutions.** Using public tax dollars to pay tuition at religious schools could violate the constitutional separation of church and state. Indeed, publicly funded voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland have been legally challenged for their inclusion of religious schools in their programs, as judges in both Wisconsin and Ohio have ruled that the participation of religious schools violates federal and state constitutional provisions barring government aid to religious institutions. Voucher program advocates in both states have consistently appealed these decisions to higher courts, but no court has yet to overturn this basic ruling.

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[1] Based on average private school tuition of $3,116 in 1993-94.

[2] Estimated total additional costs in 2007 (in constant 1995-96 dollars).

Expanding the options available to students and families is a worthy goal, as long as this is not done in a way that undermines a quality education for all children. But private school vouchers are too small, too costly, and too divisive to have any potential for improving the public school system.

IMPACT OF VOUCHERS ON SCHOOLING

A voucher program which served a substantial number of public school students would suffer from serious implementation problems related to private schools' capacity and mission, and would violate basic principles of equity and a quality education for all students. Specifically:

- **Private schools have little capacity to absorb a substantial number of additional students.** According to a California study, less than 1 percent of public school students in that state could expect to find spaces in existing private schools. [Corwin and Dianda, "What Can We Really Expect from Large-Scale Voucher Programs," Phi Delta Kappan, 1993] The study found that most private schools that were interested in participating in a voucher program were already operating at 85 percent or more of their capacity. Although some private schools might be created or expanded, a voucher system would do little or nothing to address the needs for educating the 89 percent of students in public schools (46.5 million students).

- **Most private schools are religious in nature, and few are likely to give up their religious mission in order to overcome constitutional barriers to receiving public funds.** Religious schools account for 79 percent of all private schools and 85 percent of private school students. A recent survey found that most associations of religious schools believe their schools would not participate in a voucher program if they were required to permit exemptions from religious instruction for students transferring from public schools [Muraskin et al., Barriers, Benefits, and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools: Preliminary Report 1997]. In addition, government officials should not be expected to choose which private and religious schools merit taxpayer support. For a religiously diverse country like the U.S., this is a road to onerous problems.

- **Private schools could select the best and the brightest students.** As Representative Bill Goodling (Pennsylvania), then ranking minority member of the Education and Labor Committee, said in 1991, "If you have 500 students in a school and 250 of them are the 'thousand points of light' and decide to go to a school of choice, that leaves 250 fallen angels behind." [Congressional Quarterly, 1991, p. 379] Research shows that private school vouchers do skim more advantaged students — those whose parents have more education, higher expectations for their children, and higher incomes. This finding holds even for programs where vouchers are restricted to low-income families. For example:

  — In San Antonio, mothers of low-income voucher students were three times more likely to have had some college education than mothers of comparable public school students (55 percent vs. 19 percent). [Martinez, V., et al. (1995). "The Consequences of School Choice: Who Leaves and Who Stays in the Inner City," Social Science Quarterly, September.]

  — In England, researchers found that parents who expressed preferences for schools outside their immediate neighborhood tended to be more highly educated and have

> more prestigious occupations than those who expressed a preference for their neighborhood school. Moreover, in the most competitive areas, "schools are more likely to choose students than students are to choose schools." [Stearns, School Reform: Lessons from England, 1996]

When a school is failing, providing an escape hatch for a few students will do nothing to improve the quality of education for the majority of students who remain in that school. Indeed, vouchers could hasten the deterioration of the public school system by creating a two-tier educational system in which the motivated, pro-active families and students — those who have the potential to make the school system better — would attend private schools and the less involved families and students would attend the public schools. Instead of giving a few students a way out, we need to give all students a way up by improving the quality of all schools.

IMPACT OF CHOICE AND SCHOOL TYPE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In addition to the negative effects of a voucher program on schooling, there are also basic, unanswered questions about the benefits of vouchers and the comparative advantage of private schools for student learning. A growing research base enables us to examine the impact of choice and school type on student achievement. Although they come from different perspectives and may arrive at different conclusions, these studies do share some common themes:

- Evaluations of existing voucher programs provide no conclusive evidence of the benefit of these programs for student achievement, while public school choice programs show promise for raising academic proficiency; and

- Differences in student achievement can often be explained by coursetaking and high standards.

Descriptions of studies that support these themes follow.

Impact of Private and Public School Choice Programs on Student Achievement

Research on the impact of existing private school voucher programs has not demonstrated substantial achievement benefits for these programs. In fact, most differences between performance in public and private schools can be explained by the family background of the students (i.e., family income, parents' educational attainment). [Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared, 1982] Even when studies control for these factors, they probably still overstate achievement differences because they usually cannot control for "self-selection bias" — the fact that parents and students who choose to attend schools other than their neighborhood school may have higher motivation and place a higher priority on education than similar families who do not exercise choice.

Three separate evaluations of the longest-running publicly-funded voucher program (in Milwaukee) found vastly different results. The first evaluation found voucher students' achievement *did not* improve significantly from their previous achievement in public schools [Witte et al., Fourth-Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, 1994], but a second evaluation of the same data *did* find

evidence that the Milwaukee voucher program had a substantial positive impact on the achievement of students who remained in the program for 3-4 years [Greene, Peterson, and Du, "The Effectiveness of School Choice in Milwaukee: A Secondary Analysis of Data from the Program's Evaluation," 1996] This second analysis, however, has serious methodological flaws, including the attrition of 85-95 percent of voucher students in the two years in which significant results were found, and a failure to account for student family background and prior achievement. Yet a third analysis [Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," 1997] repeated Greene, et al.'s analysis, and found that voucher recipients *did* significantly outperform non-enrolled voucher program applicants and a random sample of Milwaukee public school students in math, but *did not* in reading. These conflicting results provide more of a lesson in the art of statistics than in the effectiveness of voucher programs. The one clear implication of these studies is that the impact of voucher programs on student achievement remains unproven.

In Cleveland, the voucher program has only been in existence since the Fall of 1996, and no systematic research on the impact of the program on student achievement is yet available. The Ohio Department of Education is currently sponsoring an Indiana University evaluation of third-graders in the Cleveland voucher program, and a first-year report is expected in late September of this year. However, a recent, well-publicized Harvard press release on the achievement gains of Cleveland voucher students has been touted as evidence of the benefits of voucher programs. [Harvard University, "Gains in Test Scores in the Cleveland Voucher Program Found," 1997] This analysis, conducted by Paul Peterson and funded by the Olin Foundation, claims that students enrolled in two schools in the Cleveland program have realized "moderately large" gains in reading and "even more substantial" gains in math. However, even this analysis concedes that these academic results are mixed, with language scores declining by 5 percentage points overall, and declining by 19 percent among first graders. More importantly, this analysis is in no way a representation of the effectiveness of the Cleveland voucher program, as it is based on only 15 percent of participating students who are enrolled in uniquely operated, resource-intensive schools, and it suffers from severe methodological problems.[3]

Lastly, a Hudson Institute study [Weinschrott and Kilgore, "Educational Choice Charitable Trust: An Experiment in School Choice," 1996] of the privately-funded voucher program in Indianapolis found that the voucher students performed "as well as [public school] students in the earlier grades and seem to be doing better in the middle-school grades." However, this appears to be an overly generous characterization of their data, which showed that the voucher students' average test scores were below those of public school students in grade 2, about the same in grades 3 and 6, and higher only in grade 8.

An analysis of 1991 International Assessment of Educational Progress data in 16 industrialized nations provides international evidence showing that private schools do not have

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[3] Among the problems with the Peterson analysis are: (1) it does not compare the gains of these voucher students to their counterparts in the Cleveland public schools; (2) it does not control for the family background or prior achievement of the voucher students; (3) it is based on the results of an old, invalid form of the California Achievement Test; (4) it lumps together results for students in grades K through 3, suggesting that differences among grades are being masked; and (5) the researchers tested the voucher students within the same school year (fall and spring), an approach that has been widely rejected by test experts as producing artificially positive achievement gains.

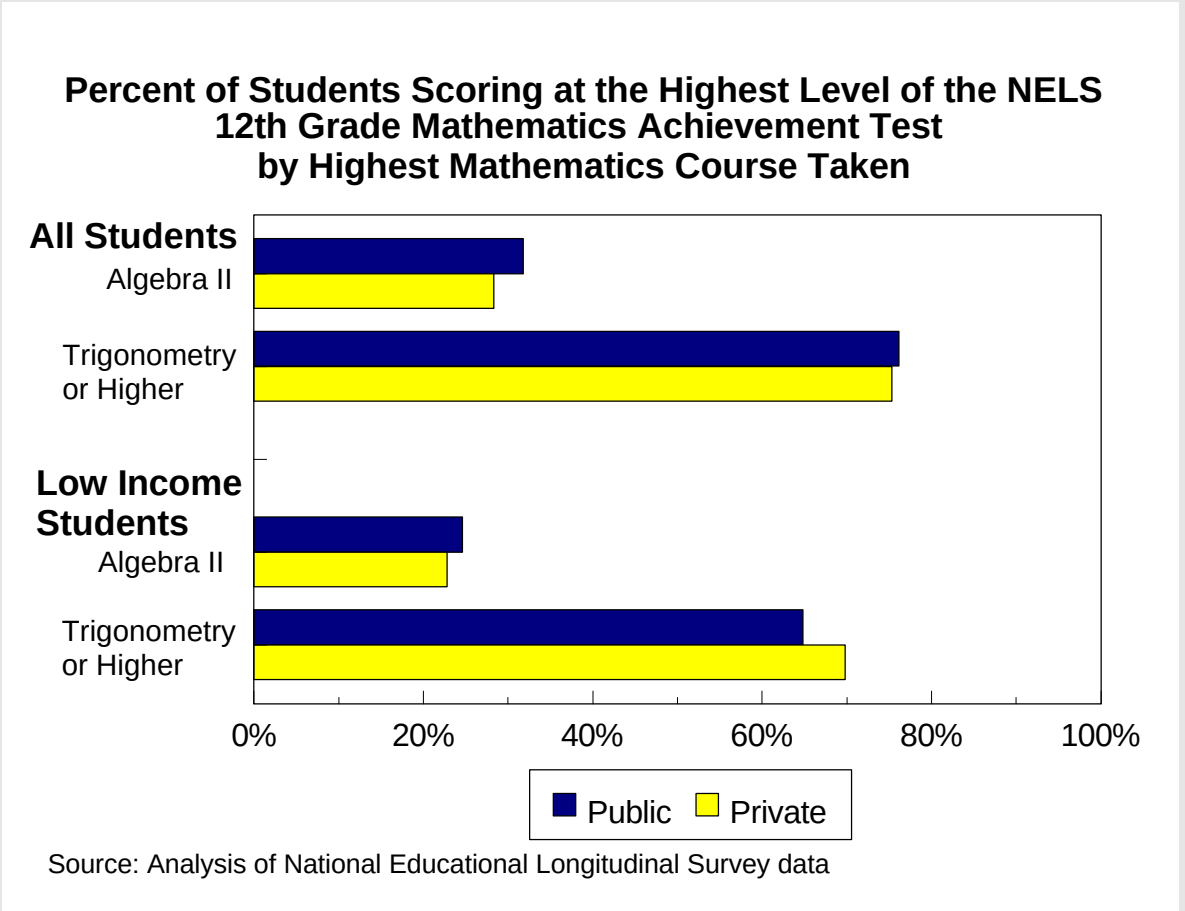
significantly higher student achievement than public schools after controlling for student background. [Bishop, "Nerd Harassment, Incentives, School Priorities and Learning," 1996] This study found that, after controlling for family background, independent schools did not have higher math and science achievement (for 13-year-olds) than public schools and religiously-controlled schools had significantly lower achievement levels. In Canada, where there is no constitutional prohibition against public subsidies of religious schools and 20 percent of the schools are religiously controlled, students at religious schools scored 3.9 to 4.5 points lower on science and math tests than public school students.

Some research indicates that public schools of choice show as large a benefit (if not larger) than private schools in producing better student achievement. For example, a recent analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey [Gamoran, "Student Achievement in Public Magnet, Public Comprehensive, and Private City High Schools," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1996] found that magnet schools were more effective than comprehensive public high schools at raising the proficiency of students in science, reading, and social studies, while secular private schools did not offer any advantage, after controlling for pre-existing differences among students.

Impact of Coursetaking and Standards on Student Achievement

The choice of courses taken has been shown to have a direct connection to student achievement. As Figure 1 depicts, an analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) data suggests that the mathematics courses students take in high school are more important for achievement that the type of high school attended. While recognizing that a great deal of diversity exists among public and private schools, it is useful to note that when coursetaking patterns are accounted for, the mathematics achievement of students in both categories of school is very similar. Public and private school students who had taken the same mathematics courses were almost equally likely to score at the highest achievement level on the NELS twelfth-grade mathematics achievement test. This was also true for low-income public and private school students. Additionally, among both public and private school students of all incomes, students who had taken more rigorous mathematics courses were much more likely to score at the highest achievement level.

Figure 1.



A growing body of evidence demonstrates that public school reform efforts like challenging standards and rigorous coursetaking can improve achievement for the majority of students who are in the public schools. States and local communities that have set more challenging standards are seeing substantial gains in student achievement. For example:

- Kentucky's comprehensive school reforms continue to result in substantial improvement in school performance. More than 92 percent of Kentucky's schools posted achievement gains in 1995-96. Fifty percent of schools in the state met or exceeded their performance goals. These schools are distributed across all grade levels, throughout every geographic region in the state, and in poor as well as wealthy communities. Elementary schools performed well above expectations, as they exceeded their statewide performance goal by 27 percent. [Kentucky Department of Education Press Release, October 1996]

- In New York City, tougher graduation requirements are spurring thousands more high

school students to take and pass college-preparatory mathematics and science courses. The number of Hispanic and black students who passed the science test more than doubled from the previous year [New York Times, 5/9/95]. Entering freshmen at the City University of New York are the best prepared academically in two decades [New York Times, 12/10/95]. Grade schools in the city continue a four-year rise in test scores [New York Times, 6/21/96].

FUNDAMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS ARE NEEDED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The evidence provided above illuminates that our nation has made progress, but we still have a long way to go. This is particularly true in high-poverty school systems across the country. We recognize the legitimate problems in our nation's schools — especially in urban areas where voucher programs are often proposed. We are committed to focusing on turning around troubled schools and undertaking comprehensive educational reform that creates and sustains safe and high-performing schools. There are no silver bullets to improving schools and improving student learning, and that is why President Clinton emphasizes the need to focus on many vehicles for educational improvement in his "Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century."

Promoting student performance starts with a focus on the basics, safety, discipline, and parent involvement. Sustained improvement must be based on what works, and supported by parents, educators and the larger community. Research suggests that student achievement can best be improved by supporting a comprehensive set of district and school level reforms. [See, for example, Newmann and Wehlage, "Successful School Restructuring: A Report to the Public and Educators by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools," 1995; Lein, Johnson, and Ragland, Successful Texas Schoolwide Programs: Research Study Results, 1996] These reforms include:

- **Safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools.** A prerequisite to comprehensive, enduring school reform which promotes student performance is ensuring that our children have a safe, strong, and drug-free learning environment. Providing such an environment requires a focus on strong discipline in the schools and zero tolerance for drugs.

- **A clear focus on improving learning and mastering the basics.** Effective schools are organized around a clear focus on educational excellence and equity for all students and have an academic orientation that challenges all students to master basic and advanced skills in reading, math, and other core subjects. The goal of learning is captured in the curriculum and the very atmosphere of the school. Time, resources, and energies center on enabling all students to achieve higher levels of performance.

- **Parent involvement and public commitment to improving schools.** Thirty years of research show that greater family involvement in children's learning is a critical link to achieving a high quality education and a safe, disciplined learning environment for every student. [U.S. Department of Education, Strong Families, Strong Schools, 1994] Districts and schools must reach out to parents and community members to develop a shared commitment to excellence and equity for all students and to work in partnership toward that goal.

- **High academic standards and rigorous coursetaking.** Probably the most effective educational choice that parents and students can make is to choose to take more challenging academic courses. Taking tougher courses is one factor that produces substantial gains in student achievement. Making challenging curriculum and engaging instruction available to all students must be schools' central mission.

- **Sustained and intensive professional development for teachers.** In order for students' performance to improve, teachers must be able to teach to higher standards. They must know the content of the curriculum and the best strategies for engaging students in learning more challenging content. Professional development can be supported formally through intensive training and also more informally through teachers working together on common classroom concerns and learning from each other.

- **Buildings and technology suited for learning.** Children cannot learn to high standards in schools that are literally falling down. Environments where children learn best are schools that are safe and modern, more spacious and technologically equipped, and that can be used not only during the school day but after school and during the summer, as well.

- **Reinforcement through after-school and summer programs.** Research shows that students in quality after-school programs (lower student to staff ratios, age-appropriate activities, academic and enrichment activities) demonstrate higher academic achievement and have better attitudes towards school than children left alone or under the care of siblings. [Posner and Vandell, 1994] Moreover, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, youth are most at risk of getting in trouble or being victims between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., after the regular school day.

- **Greater school autonomy and accountability.** Greater school autonomy when coupled with performance accountability also can contribute to conditions that make optimal learning possible. Unreasonable regulations can produce a compliance mentality in which no one takes ownership or is personally responsible. If teachers are to act as professionals and not as automatons, they need to be given responsibility for making professional decisions regarding classroom practice and school policy. Holding our students to high standards requires that adults take responsibility for improving student performance.

- **Expansion of public school choice options.** Public charter schools, magnet schools and open enrollment policies offer real alternatives to students and parents while maintaining the kind of accountability that is crucial to ensuring a quality education.

In some cases, drastic actions are needed to improve chronically troubled schools. For example, in San Francisco, failing schools have been "reconstituted." The district has shut down these schools and reopened them with new administrators, teachers, and programs.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL INDICATORS SUGGEST REFORMS ARE BEGINNING TO WORK

Trends in Improvement Nationwide

U.S. education is improving on many measures of student learning, especially in critical areas on which schools, communities, states, and this nation have focused sustained effort. A wide variety of national indicators are showing substantial gains, both short-term and long-term:

- **Students are taking more rigorous subjects and courses.** The proportion of high school graduates taking the core courses recommended in *A Nation At Risk* (4 years of English, 3 years of social studies, 3 years of science, 3 years of math) increased to 52 percent by 1994, up from 14 percent in 1982 and 40 percent in 1990. Similarly, the percentage of graduates taking biology, chemistry, and physics has doubled, rising from 11 percent in 1982 to 19 percent in 1990 and 21 percent in 1994. [NCES, High School Transcript Study, various years]

  Similarly, participation in advanced placement (AP) courses has also increased, and the number of AP exams that scored at 3 or above has tripled since 1982. The number of AP examinations that received a passing score rose from 131,871 in 1982 to 523,321 in 1996. [College Board, AP Program: National Summary, various years]

- **The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown long-term gains in student achievement in mathematics and science**, areas that have been the focus of national attention. Average performance in mathematics and science has improved since the late 1970s and early 1980s for all three age groups tested and in every quartile. The improvement in math achievement was equivalent to at least one grade level. NAEP scores in reading and writing showed small, inconsistent changes and were stable overall. The achievement gap between white and minority students narrowed substantially over the period, although improvement has stalled since the late 1980's. [NCES, NAEP 1996 Trends in Academic Progress, 1997]

- **College admissions tests have shown increases in average scores even as the numbers and diversity of test-takers are increasing.** On the ACT, the national composite score increased to 21.0 in 1997 (from 20.6 in 1992) — the fourth year in the last five that the national average has increased. [ACT, Composite Averages by State, 1997] ACT president Richard L. Ferguson attributed the increase in scores to more students, especially females and minorities, taking higher-level courses in English, math, social studies, and science. [ACT, "Trend of Increases in ACT College Entrance Scores Continues," 1997] On the SAT, combined verbal and math scores increased 19 points from 1982 to 1997 (and increased by 15 points from 1992 to 1997) and the average mathematics score is at its highest level in 26 years.[4] [College Board, College Bound Seniors National Report, 1997]

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[4] This figure is not affected by the College Board's recent "re-centering" of SAT scores because previous scores have been adjusted for equivalence with 1997 scores.

- **Dropout rates show similar improvements, particularly for minority students.** From 1982 to 1995, the dropout rate for persons 16-24 years old fell from 13.9 percent to 12.0 percent and has been relatively flat throughout the 1990's.[5] For blacks, the dropout rate fell from 18.4 percent in 1982 to 12.1 percent in 1995 — a 34 percent decrease. For whites, the rate fell from 11.4 to 8.6 percent over the same period — a 25 percent decrease. [NCES, Digest of Education Statistics, 1996]

Exemplary Efforts at Comprehensive School Reforms in Urban Districts

Across the nation, states and communities are implementing comprehensive reforms focused on enabling students to meet challenging standards, and student achievement is improving as a result. These districts reach out to teachers, principals, parents, and community members in developing a shared commitment to excellence and equity for all students and cultivating these partnerships. Their mission statements reflect in plain language the real-world concerns of parents, employers, and other citizens. Beyond that, they dedicate themselves to making that mission a reality through careful planning, efficient and equitable management of resources, and the development and recognition of instructional leaders throughout the school system. Examples of this process can be found in San Antonio, Memphis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, New York City's Community District 2, and Chicago:

- **San Antonio** Independent School District underwent a major organizational restructuring aimed at placing maximum emphasis on instructional needs, giving more direct support to schools in matters of instruction and curriculum, streamlining decisionmaking, and strengthening intradistrict communication and collaboration. The district implemented site-based decision-making (as mandated by the state) during the 1994-95 school year by incorporating it with its broader strategic plan. Each school has an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) composed of school staff, parents, and community residents, who receive annual training provided by the district. A ten-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation supports professional development and technology for teachers, as well as promoting community involvement through monthly public town hall meetings and a community newsletter. In 1996, the district entered into a partnership with the New American Schools Design Corporation (NASDC), and half of the district's schools have committed to a whole school design through NASDC. Student achievement on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) has shown significant gains; from 1995 to 1996, the percentage of students passing the TAAS rising from 33 percent to 41 percent for 4th-graders and from 31 percent to 36 percent for 10th graders. Math skills showed even greater improvement, with the percentage of students passing the math portion of the TAAS rising from 42 percent to 55 percent for 4th-graders and from 35 percent to 42 percent for 10th graders.

- **Memphis** adopted in 1993 a comprehensive school reform plan designed to raise student achievement that includes setting higher standards for all students, implementing site-

[5] The dropout rate is defined as the percent of 16-24 year-olds who have not completed high school and were not enrolled in school that year.

based decisionmaking and models of school reform to support students in meeting the standards, and creating a new belief system within the school system. The district developed content standards in seven core curricular areas that reflected the Lifelong Learning Standards adopted by the community and disseminated guides to show what instruction and curriculum that reflects these standards should look like in classrooms. All Memphis schools now have site-based decisionmaking councils composed of equal numbers of teachers and parents to set school policy and allocate school budgets. In addition, since 1995, about half of all schools have adopted a "break-the-mold" reform model, including several of the models developed by the New American Schools Development Corporation. In 1996, the district opened its new Teaching and Learning Academy, which coordinates professional development opportunities for all teachers in the district. The Academy offers workshops in all major areas of school reform including leadership, core content, performance assessment, and uses of technology.

- **Milwaukee's** experience in raising students' math performance to challenging standards provides a remarkable example of systemwide improvement. The impetus came out of community embarrassment over its math assessment and a requirement that students pass the assessment to graduate. While Equity 2000 provided a focus for the effort, support came from higher standards, professional development of teachers, special assistance for students who failed the test, parental involvement, and feedback on results. There has been a substantial increase in enrollment in algebra and more advanced math courses; ninth-graders' enrollment in Algebra I rose from 33 percent of all students in 1990 to 100 percent today, while the number of tenth-grade students taking geometry or more advanced math increased from 24 to 57 percent. The percent of students passing algebra has remained essentially unchanged, at about 56 percent, despite the expansion of algebra enrollment from a select group to all students.

- **Cincinnati** has injected accountability for both administrators and students into the educational system. School district administrators' pay raises are now linked to job performance. The policy change replaced automatic cost-of-living adjustments and salary rates with new criteria, including: performance on staff development, management, and community involvement; students' scores on standardized tests and on the state's graduation test; and graduation, promotion, passing, and dropout rates. At the student level, promotion is now based on specific standards that define what students must know and be able to do. The standards are designed to prepare students to pass a ninth-grade proficiency test. Cincinnati also reorganized its school system in 1991, cutting the central office staff — mostly mid-level managers — by 70 percent, in order to direct a greater share of its resources to the school and classroom levels.

- **New York City's Community District 2** is a model for local districts seeking to improve instruction in fundamental ways. Serving an extremely diverse population from the Upper East Side to Chinatown, the district implements a corresponding diversity in its approaches to teaching and learning. This particular district illustrates the powerful, participatory role that a local district can play in instructional improvement. Every decision made by the district takes instructional improvement into account. It is a group effort and a long-term commitment based on high expectations, clear objectives, and

shared expertise. The concrete strategies revolve around the idea that professional development is not a series of programs per se but rather an ongoing opportunity to build and bridge skills. Strategies include: a Professional Development Laboratory in which visiting teachers observe and practice with a resident teacher for three weeks while their classrooms are taught by a teacher who has also gone through the Laboratory; extensive use of visits across classrooms and schools by teachers and principals; and a core of consultants hired by the districts and available to the schools for one-on-one and small group assistance. With these strategies in hand, the district has a direct impact on improving its schools: on the 1996 assessment, District 2 ranked second in the city in math scores.

- **Chicago** is ensuring that promotion to the next grade reflects students' learning the content to enable them to succeed. In August 1996, the Chicago School Reform Board adopted a rigorous student promotion policy that requires underachieving students in grades three, six, eight, and nine to complete a summer school program before being promoted to the next grade. The policy sets performance standards based on test scores for third-, sixth-, eighth-, and ninth-graders. Students who score more than one year below their grade level (one-and-a-half years for sixth-graders) on the standardized tests, or who fail reading or math, must successfully complete a six- or seven-week Summer Bridge program. All ninth-graders who miss more than 20 days of school or fail to earn the required 4.5 core credits are also required to attend the summer-school programs. Students who fail the summer programs are held back. Results show that over 80 percent of Chicago students were able to meet the promotion criteria; many would not have done so without the intensive summer instruction provided through the Bridge program.

These large, urban districts face some of the most complex educational issues in the nation, yet their students are beginning to benefit from sustained school improvement efforts. We are committed to continue working for high standards of discipline and achievement and a means to assess student performance in meeting them, safe schools, technology in the classroom, quality teachers, and increased access to college. When we focus sustained effort and careful investments on critical education issues at school, neighborhood, community, and national levels, students progress and so does our nation.

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