Panel Discussion

Improving Urban Public Schools: Suggestions for Teacher Union Leaders

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For three related reasons, I focus my comments on the challenge of improving the quality of education that urban public schools provide. First, the quantity and quality of education American children receive today has a much larger impact on their earnings prospects than was the case for American children 40 years ago. Second, minority children and children from low-income families have both lower cognitive skills and lower educational attainments than do white children and children from middle-class families. Third, 42 percent of individuals living in poverty in the United States live in central cities, and 40 percent of minority children attend school in one of the nation's largest 50 school districts.

In an earlier session of this conference, one participant asked the panelists what advice they would give to an audience of union leaders representing teachers from urban public schools. In response to that question, I offer seven suggestions. Following my explanations of those suggestions, I conclude with slightly different versions that I believe serve as relevant advice to local and state educational policymakers.

Suggestion One: Improve Student Outcomes or See the End of Public Schools as We Have Known Them

Since the passage of the first charter school legislation in Minnesota in 1991, the number of charter schools in the United States has increased to 2,400, enrolling more than 500,000 students. In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that allocating public funds to pay for educational

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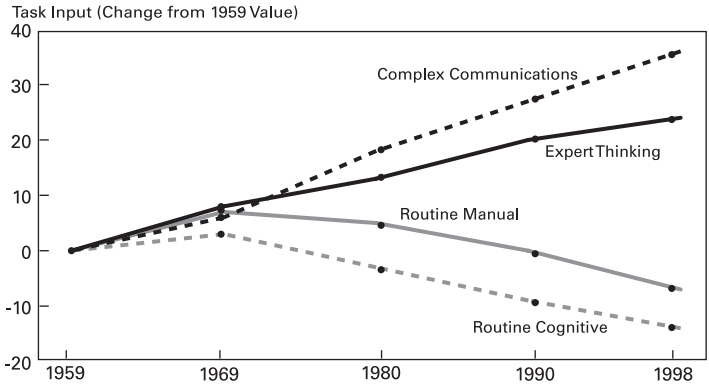
Figure 1
Economy-Wide Measures of Routine and Non-Routine Task Input, 1959 to 1998



Note: Vertical axis refers to percentile position of decade median of industry task input in overall 1959–98 distribution.
Source: Revised from Autor, Levy, and Murnane (2001).

vouchers that low-income students in Cleveland use to pay for education in Catholic schools does not violate the U.S. Constitution. These are just two indications of changes in the political climate of the country in regard to publicly funded education. Unless urban public schools become more effective in educating children, the number of charter schools and voucher programs will increase, drawing students, money, and political power away from conventional public schools, and ending the promise of public schools as we have known it.

As representatives of the people who do the teaching in American public schools, teacher unions need to be involved in the design and implementation of improvement strategies. This is a necessary condition for the improvement of urban schools. At the same time, even the Herculean efforts of teachers cannot by themselves improve urban schools. Teachers must have the resources to do their jobs within an organizational structure that supports and demands excellence.

Suggestion Two: Insist on Meaningful Measures of Student Outcomes

Changes in the American economy over the last 30 years have dramatically altered the type of work Americans do and the skills they need to earn a decent living. As illustrated in Figure 1, there has been a

dramatic decline in the proportion of the workforce engaged in routine cognitive tasks (for example, filing, bookkeeping) and an increase in the proportions engaged in activities that MIT economists David Autor and Frank Levy and I call expert thinking and complex communications. These changes are relevant to the design of the tests used to measure the skills of American students. If tests measure solely reading comprehension and the ability to do computations, these are the skills that will be emphasized in instruction. They are not the skills Americans need to earn a good living. Good teachers know this. A consequence is that the nation's ability to attract and retain effective teachers will require, among other things, that the tests used to measure student outcomes are worth teaching to.

The following writing prompt was part of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam, which was administered to 10th graders in April 2002 (the test high school students in the state must pass in order to receive a high school diploma):

> In literature as in life, people struggle with principles or beliefs they hold. From a work of literature you have read in or out of school, select a character who struggles with his or her own principles or beliefs. In a well-developed composition, identify that character and explain how that character's inner struggle is important to the work of literature.

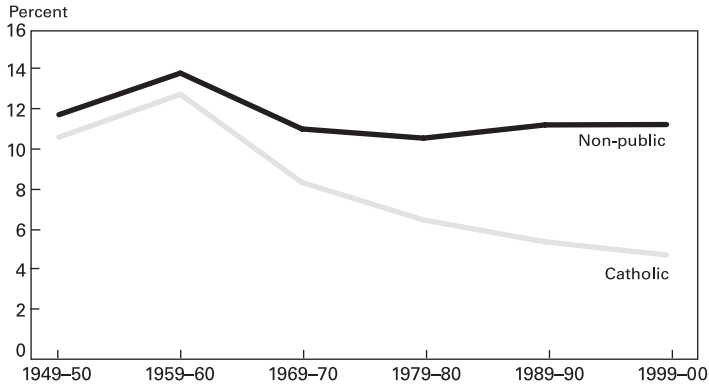
In my view, the state's investment in a rich, open-ended assessment system for measuring student skills is a step in the right direction toward the goal of improving education in the state.

Suggestion Three: Demand a Level Playing Field with Charter and Voucher Schools

Increasingly, public schools are being judged against the performances of charter schools and voucher-supported private schools in educating students. For this to be a fair competition, the different types of schools should play by the same rules. Critical rules concern obligations to serve students with disabilities, students whose first language is not English, disruptive students, and mobile students. These students are relatively expensive to serve, and schools will volunteer to serve their share of such students only if they receive adequate compensation for doing so. If schools are unwilling to serve these groups of students, this is *per se* evidence that relative student funding levels are not set appropriately.

It is important to keep in mind that there is extraordinary uncertainty about the effectiveness of today's non-public schools, especially in educating urban children. More than 99 percent of the quantitative evidence documenting the relative effectiveness of private schools con-

Figure 2
Share of U.S. School Enrollment by Control of Institution



Source: Compiled by the author from U.S. Department of Education (1983, Table 2.1; 2001, Table 10; 2002, Tables 3 and 59), U.S. Census Bureau (1989, Series H412-432 and H535-544), and data provided by the National Catholic Educational Association.

cerns solely Catholic schools. The reason this matters is that Catholic schools serve a declining proportion of American students attending non-public schools. In 1960, Catholic schools served more than 90 percent of the students in non-public schools. The comparable percentage today is less than 45 percent (see Figure 2).

Suggestion Four: Learn from Pilot Schools about How to Obtain Resources and Flexibility

Following the passage of the 1993 educational reform legislation that authorized the first charter schools in Massachusetts, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) negotiated the creation of pilot schools in Boston. The teachers in these interesting public schools are BTU members who have agreed to waive certain elements of their contract regarding work rules. Currently Boston has 12 pilot schools. These schools receive lump-sum payments from the school district based on their student enrollments and have considerable flexibility in using their resources to design and carry out instructional programs. While they may use resources to buy services from the school district, they are not obligated to do so. The success of the pilot schools in attracting talented teachers and in developing interesting instructional programs suggests a promising strategy for developing schools staffed by teacher union members that can create innovative programs for educating urban children.

Suggestion Five: Demand the Tools and the Time to Learn from Student Assessments

One of the strengths of the MCAS is that all questions that affect student scores are made public shortly after the tests are administered. Moreover, school faculties receive information on the performance of every child on every test score item. This creates the potential to learn a great deal from the assessment results about the skill deficiencies of individual students, about the weaknesses of instruction in particular schools and classrooms, and about how well schools are working in general. In fact, I would argue that the opportunities for learning about how well schools are working are at least as great as the strategies W. Edwards Deming advocated businesses adopt to learn about the effectiveness of their production processes.

Unfortunately, relatively few schools learn much from MCAS results. One reason is the delay in providing results to schools; a second is a lack of tools for analyzing the results efficiently; a third is a lack of training on how to do potentially powerful analyses; and a fourth is a lack of time in the school day to learn from the assessment results. If teachers are to be responsible for improving student achievement, their representatives should demand the tools and the time in the work schedule to learn from these potentially valuable assessment results.

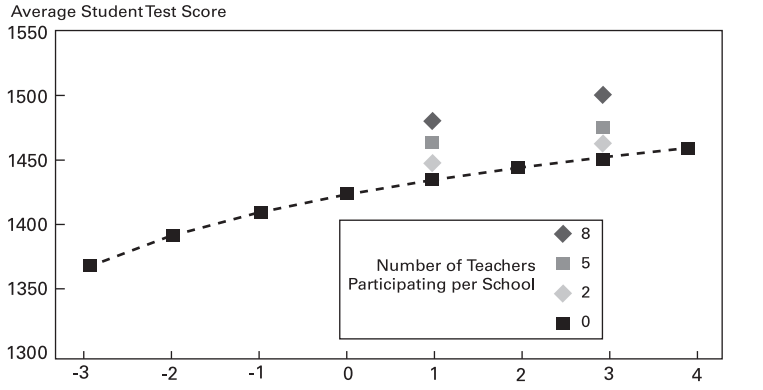
Suggestion Six: Make Professional Development Work

Success in preparing urban students to pass demanding high-stakes exit exams like the MCAS requires changes in how teachers teach. Professional development is the term used among educators for the training aimed at improving how teachers teach and what students learn. Unfortunately, most professional development has little or no impact on how teachers teach.

In recent years, our understanding of which components of professional development improve instruction has increased. We now know that effective professional development must focus on teaching particular curriculums, must include opportunities for teachers to increase subject matter mastery, must include teachers observing and commenting on each others' teaching, and must be an ongoing part of teachers' work.

Recent evidence from Texas shows that professional development that includes these components can lead to better instruction and improved student achievement (Holcombe 2002). As documented in a well-designed evaluation and shown in Figure 3, participation in a state-sponsored Algebra Institute led to improved student achievement. A related finding demonstrates that the more teachers in a school participated in the training, the greater the impact on students' achieve-

Figure 3
Relationship Between Algebra Teachers' Participation in Professional Development and Average Student Score



Source: Holcombe (2002).

ment. This evidence is important because it documents that professional development can make a difference to student achievement.

Suggestion Seven: Show the Way on Summer Learning

Recent evidence documents a pattern that many educators have suspected for a long time—namely, that the cognitive skills of low-income children fall compared to those of middle-class children over the summer months. This suggests that developing rich summer learning opportunities may be a powerful way to increase the cognitive skills of low-income children. It may make sense for teacher unions to lead the way (perhaps in conjunction with local foundations) in designing summer programs and in funding independent evaluations of their effectiveness.

Policy Advice for Improving Urban Schools

While the above comments are aimed at teacher union leaders, they have direct implications for advice to local and state policymakers. In particular, for these policymakers, the seven points listed above can be recast as follows:

1. Retain a single-minded focus on improving student achievement; build constituencies among business groups and community groups supporting this unwavering focus.

2. Invest in developing well-defined content standards and in developing student assessments that are tightly aligned with standards.
3. Create a level playing field on which public schools compete with charter and voucher schools.
4. Provide every school with the resources and flexibility needed to succeed (schools serving difficult-to-educate children need significantly more resources).
5. Provide all schools with tools, training, and time to learn from student assessments.
6. Create conditions that facilitate improvements in instruction; monitor progress in student achievement closely and intervene when progress is not forthcoming.
7. Develop, implement, and evaluate programs to provide summer learning to low-income children.

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