

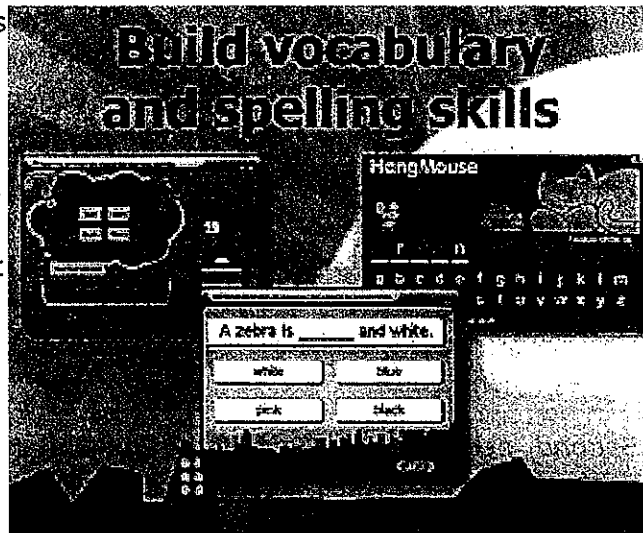
Why Attention Will Return to Non-School Factors

By Jeffrey R. Henig and S. Paul Reville

The seventh in a seven-part series

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When thinking about their own families, parents take it as a given that nonschool factors—good health, good food, emotional well-being, safety, stability, enrichment activities, positive peer influences, parental encouragement, and guidance—affect whether their children will thrive. When studying patterns of educational achievement, analysts take it as a given that socioeconomic status, concentrations of poverty, and school and residential mobility are dominating predictors that must be statistically controlled for before one can accurately register weaker and less reliable effects of teachers and schools. That there are exceptions to the rule—that children and schools in poor neighborhoods succeed against all odds—does not gainsay the core reality that the odds are steep.



But in polite education reform circles, drawing attention to community and other nonschool factors is met with impatience, resigned shrugs, or a weary rolling of the eyes. Sure, these things matter, is the general attitude, but they are so big, powerful, and deeply ingrained that to even acknowledge their import is to risk losing focus on things like accountability, standards, tenure reform—policy levers we know how to manipulate. Attention to nonschool factors is feared as an excuse to let bad schools and teachers off the hook. It seems to be a call for a vast increase in spending in an era in which retrenchment is the order of the day.

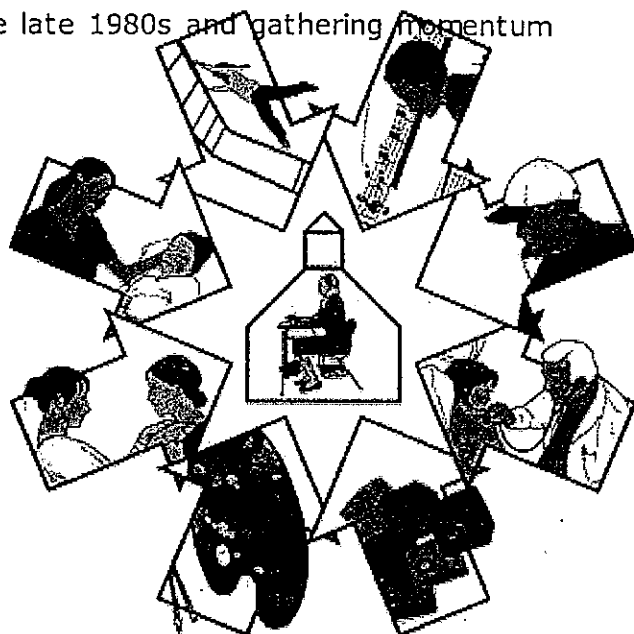
Our vision of the future of education reform is simple: American schools won't achieve their goal of "all students at proficiency" unless they attend to nonschool factors. Though the nation is now in partial denial about this, we project that this will change—not because of sudden prosperity and deep public-sector pockets, nor because of a broad shift in public sentiment that activates new moral commitments to the ideal of educating other people's children, but as an outgrowth of the same hard-nosed, pragmatic, evidence-based orientation that for the moment is supporting the unlikely claim that schools can do it alone.

Here's a clipped and incomplete explanation of how and why we think a broader, less conventional conception of education will emerge as the common-sense framing for school and social reform:

First, a growing focus on outcomes and evidence will reveal the limitations of the schools-only approach. School-focused reformers proclaim that addressing education by tackling tough social problems has been tried and proved wanting. The heyday of progressive efforts at social reform ran roughly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Contemporary reformers characterize these efforts as failures because gains then, while dramatic in terms of educational access and attainment, were disappointing in terms of achievement; the pumped-up vision of radical equalization did not pan out.

But the no-excuses accountability approaches, born in the late 1980s and gathering momentum since, have had a longer time in the field and similarly have come up short when it comes to simultaneously ratcheting up achievement levels and substantially shaving achievement gaps.

Take Massachusetts, for example: In the nation's leading education achievement state, the performance gaps associated with income have remained consistent throughout the education reform era. Consider results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The reading gap between low-income and other 4th graders was 27 points in 1998 (203 to 230, respectively); 11 years later, both groups of students had made substantial gains ... and the gap between the two groups was 28 points (215 to 243). The story in math and for both the reading and math tests at grade 8 is the same: substantial improvements for both groups combined with absolutely no narrowing of the achievement gap.



—Steve Braden

Second, attention to the bottom line and return on investment (which have been myopically measured within bureaucratically delimited parameters) will be expanded to capture critical spillovers among schools, social service agencies, health care, and other policy venues. When schools do what they are supposed to do—and what the public historically has asked them to do—payoffs are not limited to school performance; they include an array of human- and social-capital outcomes that help communities and the nation compete in a global economy, handle the stresses of multiculturalism, eliminate the costly social byproducts of poverty, and build a more informed citizenry. The causal arrow runs in the other direction as well: When housing programs encourage residential stability and diverse neighborhoods, some of the payoffs come in schools and tests, as empirically shown in a recent Century Foundation analysis of Montgomery County, Md.'s, inclusionary housing program. When public-health initiatives reduce community levels of diabetes, asthma, lead-paint exposure, and obesity, attendance rates increase, and evidence shows that school attendance has a strong relationship to student gains. But when these cross-sector effects are left out of cost-benefit analyses, the so-called bottom line can easily underestimate the return on public investments.

Third, major shifts in information technology and education-governance institutions will facilitate this broader-base framing and analysis. As *Education Week*

About This Series

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The Futures of School Reform

A **working group** on the "Futures of School Reform," organized by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and led by Robert B. Schwartz and Jal D. Mehta of Harvard and Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, includes more than two dozen researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from around the country. The group is seeking to engage a wider audience in an "urgent" conversation—one that it hopes can advance the national dialogue on improving public education for all children. The working group has received convening support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

Education Week is running a seven-part series of Commentary essays expressing visions of members of the "Futures" group. The series, which concludes in the May 25 issue, is accompanied by a blog, *The Futures of School Reform*, written by the

reported on Feb. 23 of this year, in **"States Make Swift Progress on Student-Data Technology,"** the Data Quality Campaign has determined that all states and the District of Columbia have put into place systems with

unique student-identification codes that link information from various agencies through the years—student-level data on enrollment, demographics, and participation in specific programs; the ability to match student test data from one year to the next to calculate growth in achievement; and the ability to track individual students who graduate or drop out of school each year.

Responsibility for education, at the same time, has been migrating out of the highly localized, single-purpose school districts that once determined policy, moving vertically up the ladder of federalism to include state and national government, and horizontally away from special-purpose units (like school boards) to general-purpose government (like mayors, governors, city councils, and state legislatures). Trade-offs and spillovers across policy domains are more visible in these general-purpose arenas, and the levers for addressing them more readily in reach. Traditional school boards might sense that school-based clinics or midnight basketball would create conditions more conducive to teaching, but mayors and councils are better positioned to get health departments, park and recreation departments, and principals into the same room.

Massachusetts makes the case that change is in the offing. The state has established a Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet, chaired by the secretary of education and the secretary of health and human services and including several other major divisions of state government. It is charged with finding ways of integrating social services and supports so that children come to school ready to learn. The Readiness Cabinet is now focusing on chronically underperforming schools. A new 2010 state law calls for each of these schools to have a significant health and social services component to their turnaround plans.

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Although this is still just a concept, state officials foresee the development of a child portfolio, analogous to a medical record. This would follow each child and document interventions, including education, health, and social-service strategies, that have been attempted with the child and his or her family. This equivalent of a running medical record would begin to make it possible to address questions of what works over a broader range of possible interventions than those involving teachers, curriculum, and the organization of schools. Without such critical child-development data, we're flying blind.

But the early returns in Massachusetts make it clear that it is not enough to get people talking together. One of us, Paul Reville, has taken part in great Readiness Cabinet meetings, where those around the table express and genuinely share all their good intentions, but then everyone goes back into bureaucratic silos where that energy gets rechanneled, distracted, or otherwise tamped down. In order to get people to buy the theory, it's important both to build capacity and to demonstrate that the strategy works.

The universe of things we might want to do to improve society is so large that people are afraid to open the door. We need to discipline our focus, attend to feasibility, and embark on a process that combines reform experimentation with careful monitoring of near-term progress. A key step is identifying criteria for indicators and benchmarks that government at all levels can begin to track in earnest. We close by proposing three:

First, social interventions and outcomes measured should have a close link to schools (e.g., study the causes and consequences of low attendance rates, rather than broad indicators of community

health). *Second*, indicators need to be quantifiable, with commitments to collect and maintain them over the long term. *Third*, while it is good to have a long-term vision in mind, we need to develop benchmark indicators that can provide near-term feedback on whether we are making progress.

We're not there yet. Our scenario for the future of school reform will require a new conception of education as encompassing a broader idea of child development. Then we must invest in new data systems to drive performance management and research. Only then will we have the strategies and tools that can transform our dream of high achievement and educational equity into reality.

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