It Takes More Than Schools to Close the Achievement Gap

The debate about school voucher programs has been hotly debated for many years. One might question: Is this a debate about providing the best education for the nation's children, or about partisan politics, or about the ability of a parent to choose whatever method and place of education is best for one's own children? It is critical that the issue be decided for the sake of improving both the individual child's educational and social opportunities, as well as in furtherance of the overall level of the nation's scholastic achievement, and it is crucial that funding decisions be made not for political reasons, but for the purpose of providing enhanced opportunities for a child's advancement.

In a study prepared for the U.S. Department of Education in 2003 (AIR), The American Institutes for Research, an independent, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research on important social issues and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of health, education, and workforce productivity, concludes that "U.S. students in 4th and 8th grade perform consistently below most of their peers around the world and continue that trend into high school."

In a particularly well-presented and balanced article which appeared in the August 9th, 2006, edition of the New York Times, education reporter Diana Jean Schemo cited research which concluded that the main cause of the achievement gaps between students who come from economically deprived backgrounds and those from more affluent ones was not so much due to the quality of the schools they attended but in the backgrounds and resources of students' families.

Support for that contention came from a number of sources, including the AIR study (ibid), which reported that children in private schools generally did no better than comparable students at public schools on national tests of math and reading. Ms. Schemo also cited a Congressional study undertaken in 1966 by Prof. James S. Coleman that sought to determine why schoolchildren in minority neighborhoods performed at far lower levels than children in white areas. To the surprise of many, his landmark study concluded that although the quality of schools in minority neighborhoods mattered, the main cause of the achievement gap was in the backgrounds and resources of families.

The findings raised very compelling questions, writes Ms. Schemo: “What if the impediments to learning run so deep that they cannot be addressed by any particular kind of school or any set of in-school reforms? What if schools are not the answer?” Coleman’s report to Congress, titled "Equality of Educational Opportunity", fueled debate about "school effects" that has extended into present day arguments over school voucher programs. Both sides of the issue have used the findings to fuel their own interests, to paraphrase Ms. Schemo’s article, in that conservatives have used the report to say that the quality of schools does not matter, so why bother offering more than the bare necessities? Others, including some educators, used them essentially to write off children who were harder to educate.

Contrary to the findings of Coleman, however, Schemo’s article discusses how The No Child Left Behind law, enacted in 2002, took a different stand on this issue, holding a school alone responsible if the students — whatever social, economic, physical or intellectual handicaps they bring to their classrooms — fail to make sufficient progress every year. The law, one instance in which President Bush and Congressional Democrats worked together, rests on the premise that schools alone make the crucial difference.

But in support of the notion that children's lives outside of school can either nurture, or choke what progress poor children do make academically, Schemo writes that a growing body of research suggests that while schools can make a difference for individual students, Johns Hopkins University sociologists Doris Entwisle and Karl Alexander found that contrary to expectations, children in poverty did largely make a year of progress for each year in school. However, the students from less affluent neighborhoods fell behind when school was not in session. "The long summer break is especially hard for disadvantaged children," Professor Alexander said. "Some school is good, and more is better." Professor Alexander's conclusion, wrote Schemo, was that "Family really is important, and it's very hard for schools to offset or compensate fully for family disadvantage."

In furtherance of the contention that non-school factors greatly influence a child's progress, the article quotes Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan group, as saying: "The evidence is pretty clear that the better their housing, the better kids do on tests."

As well, in his 2004 book, "Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap," Richard Rothstein, a former education writer for the New York Times, argues that reforms aimed at education alone are doomed to come up short, unless they are tied to changes in economic and social policies to lessen the gaps children face outside the classroom. "I would never say public schools can't do better," Mr. Rothstein said. "I'd say they can't do much better," unless lawmakers address the social ills caused by poverty.

Ms. Schemo, in conclusion, writes that a $100 million school voucher bill sponsored by Republicans gives vouchers a prominent place in next year's debate over renewing No Child Left

Behind. But other voices are likely to call for a sense of responsibility for improving children's academic success that does not begin and end at the schoolhouse door. Rather, as Mr. Jennings contends, "It can't just be a burden on the schools to do away with social inequality, it has to be a burden on all of us."

The article is a fair, impartial and thought-provoking presentation. It provides a rich blend of historical study on the issues that, according to the writer's sources, fundamentally influence a child's ability to attain academic success, and that factors such as the home environment may have an even greater role than do the schools. As well, the article presents information about current and proposed initiatives undertaken by the government in its attempts to equalize educational opportunities, although Ms. Schemo presents opinions that the efficacy of such attempts is disputable. Because of the excellent manner in which Ms. Schemo composed her article, this paper's author was motivated to undertake a renewed interest in factors that may have a profound impact on the direction of this nation's educational system.

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