



Poor Schools or Poor Kids?

To some, fixing education means taking on poverty and health care

Since the run-up to the 2008 election, the Democratic Party has been home to two prominent and very different reform wings. One, spearheaded by the group Democrats for Education Reform and notable school-district chiefs like New York's Joel Klein and Washington, D.C.'s Michelle Rhee, is the Education Equality Project (EEP). The other, A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA), is a coalition of education scholars and Democratic thinkers, including Duke University's Helen Ladd, former president of Columbia University's Teachers College Arthur Levine, and New York University professor Pedro Noguera.

The Education Equality Project champions accountability, pay reform, and school choice, while the Broader, Bolder coalition insists we must attend to health care, preschool, and parenting skills if students are to succeed in school. The Obama administration must negotiate this split in pursuing education reform; indeed, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was the only individual to serve as a founding member of both groups.

In this forum, president of Democrats for Education Reform Joe Williams speaks for the Education Equality Project and Pedro Noguera offers the Broader, Bolder perspective on improving K-12 schooling, the early record of the Obama administration, and the challenges that lie ahead.

Education Next: What principles unify the signers of the coalition [Education Equality Project or A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education]? Can you explain the key reforms the coalition is calling for?

Pedro Noguera: The basic principle underlying the Broader, Bolder Approach to school reform is that efforts to raise student achievement cannot ignore the unmet social needs of children, particularly those related

to concentrated poverty—inadequate health, housing, and nutrition. These conditions have a tremendous impact upon child development and learning.

Poverty does not cause academic failure, but it is a factor that profoundly influences the character of schools and student performance, in at least three broad and inter-related ways: 1) in most cases, considerably less money is spent on the education of poor children. Per-pupil spending has bearing on the quality of facilities, the availability of



Joe Williams



Pedro Noguera

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learning materials, and the ability of schools to attract and retain highly qualified personnel. While high levels of funding do not guarantee that children will receive a quality education, money matters, and many of the most acclaimed charter schools spend more per pupil than public schools, even though they generally serve fewer high-need students (i.e., special education or English language learners); 2) the unmet, nonacademic needs of children (social, emotional, and psychological) often have an impact on learning; 3) schools serving large numbers of poor children typically lack the resources and expertise to respond to their academic and social needs.

This does not mean that poor children cannot learn or that until we eliminate poverty and related social issues we will not be able to educate all children in this country. There are schools across the country—some are charter, some are private, and many are traditional public—that have shown us that it is possible for poor children to achieve at high levels when we respond to their needs and create conditions that are conducive to learning. However, the fact that a small number of schools have experienced a degree of success does not mean that we can simply blame other schools for their failures or ignore what is happening to children outside of school. Many, though not all, schools that succeed with poor children devise strategies to mitigate the effects of poverty with site-based social services and extended learning opportunities.

BBA advocates providing universal access to health care for children, quality early-childhood education, and expanded access to extended learning opportunities, after school and during the summer. While these measures alone will not guarantee higher student achievement or large-scale school improvement, they are essential for creating a context in which other education reforms can be effective.

Joe Williams: The Education Equality Project is a coalition of leaders (from education, civil rights, government, public policy, and business) who believe that what happens inside schools (and in the politics

surrounding schooling) plays a tremendous role in shaping the achievement gap that exists in this country between the haves and the have-nots. The focus for reform, therefore, should be on what happens between teachers and students. That isn't meant to be glib; we keep finding ourselves debating that key distinction with people who argue that the external forces in a child's life represent obstacles too large for even great schools to overcome. While we are very sympathetic to the obstacles that impoverished children face to their physical, emotional, and educational development, and support policies to address these deficiencies, we believe that when conditions outside of the classroom are less than stellar, it is even more important that we get the schooling piece right.

One of the beliefs that has tied together the signatories of EEP thus far is a commitment to eliminating the racial and ethnic achievement gap in this country. This is not just an education issue, but a civil rights issue. If we neglect the education needs of our children, we are depriving them of the kinds of opportunities that the American dream can offer.

The EEP has called for an effective teacher for every child (paying teachers as professionals, giving them the tools and training to do their work effectively, and making tough decisions about ineffective teachers); empowering parents by allowing them to choose the best schools for their children; holding grown-ups at all levels accountable for the education of our children; and, very important, having enough strength in our convictions to stand up to anyone who seeks to preserve a failed system.

EN: *Is it fair to expect all students to meet a uniform performance baseline? Is it reasonable to hold schools and educators responsible for ensuring that students meet that bar?*

JW: Yes, these expectations are fair and reasonable. The key is making sure that schools and educators have the tools to provide students with the kind of education

they need to clear the bar, including resources, the ability to build teams of excellent educators, and enough flexibility at the school level to adjust the length of the school day and year (among other things). This will likely require both additional resources and smarter use of education budgets around the country. Newark mayor Cory Booker often talks about the fact that we allow time spent on education to be the constant, while achievement is the variable. We need the flexibility to flip that notion so that time is the variable and achievement is the constant.

PN: Setting high academic standards for schools and students to meet is important but relatively easy to do. The harder and more important task is to adopt and implement standards that create optimal conditions for learning. This means ensuring that all children, regardless of where they live, have access to high-quality schools. This is what government policy must strive to achieve. We have quality standards for airports, highways, food, drugs, and water, but no state has adopted standards for learning environments, and many poor children attend under-resourced, inferior schools.

In fact, the most troubled schools typically serve students with the greatest needs. These schools cannot solve problems related to inequality and poverty without additional support. Yet this is essentially what No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and most education reforms that preceded it have expected. Almost eight years after the enactment of NCLB, high dropout rates and low achievement are still pervasive throughout this country, particularly in schools where poor children are concentrated.

EN: *Do you think the administration's actions thus far on school choice and charter schooling have been too aggressive or not aggressive enough?*

PN: School choice is an idea that should be supported in principle. It is good for parents to have a variety of schools from which to choose because not all children have the same needs or interests. The

greater challenge is ensuring that there are many high-quality schools to choose from and ensuring that choice does not contribute to further segregation in schools. Unfortunately, in many communities that have enacted choice plans, well-organized and informed parents do their best to gain access to the better schools, and invariably, others are left out. Racial segregation in schools has increased in the last 20 years, and poor children have become concentrated in the worst schools. Furthermore, in most choice systems it's not parents but schools that really do the choosing. The better schools are often able to screen out needy students and limit enrollment. Because of high demand, they can be selective about whom they choose. This often occurs even in charter schools that use lotteries to determine admission but set criteria that are difficult for low-income parents to meet. Those who are not chosen by the superior schools invariably end up in lower-quality public schools with fewer resources.

Many, but not all, charter schools have demonstrated considerable success in educating poor children. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has expressed his support for charter schools, even though in several states, such as Texas and Arizona, the charter schools are often no better, and in some cases are worse, than the public schools. As a trustee of the State University of New York, I am proud to say that the charter schools we authorize consistently outperform similar schools in the communities where they are located. If such quality-control measures can be adopted in other communities, charter schools should be supported as a means to increase the supply of good schools available to poor children.

JW: Choice, in and of itself, won't bring about the kind of systemic change that we need. But it is difficult to imagine how we can drive that systemic change without choice playing a role. The administration's actions to limit the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship (K–12 vouchers), for example, were perplexing, if only because the actions were accompanied by empty rhetoric about

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doing what is best for children. How do we look at low-income families with a straight face and tell them they can't send their children to better schools because it isn't the right policy to pursue for the broader system? We need to be doing everything we can to reform the larger system, but by all means, let's help those families who need good schools now. All of that said, President Obama and education secretary Arne Duncan have provided tremendous cover for the public charter-school movement and have helped shift the focus toward identifying those schools that are doing an outstanding job of educating students and giving them the green light to bring their models to scale.

I have never believed that a voucher or a charter can teach a child to read or do math at exceptionally high levels. That stuff happens in great schools, and vouchers and charter school lotteries offer access to those schools for families who can't afford to live in affluent neighborhoods or send their children to effective private schools. The key is ensuring that they have an abundance of great schools from which to choose. The public charter-school movement, in addressing both the supply and demand sides of this equation, has emerged as the most promising development in the broader attempt to save public education. The question is whether the charter movement will provide the political spark needed to fundamentally transform our public schools.

EN: Is basing pay on teacher performance essential to school improvement? Is it possible to craft a merit-pay plan that the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) will endorse? Are teachers unions and existing collective-bargaining agreements an impediment to school quality?

JW: I think we have gotten way too far ahead in this discussion. We are talking about merit pay and performance pay in school systems that recognize neither merit

nor performance. Teachers unions are understandably squeamish about this topic because today's testing regimens were not created to serve this purpose. Until people feel confident in the tests that we are using, it will be difficult to build compensation systems on them.

This is an issue we can't afford to ignore, however. The unions set out to create a standard of fairness for all teachers. The end result, in many cases, is a system that doesn't allow itself to view great teachers any differently than it does mediocre teachers. Evaluations rate teachers as merely "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory." As long as excellence is irrelevant in our schools, we will continue to be stuck in this holding pattern. Wouldn't it be something if we could strive for systems filled with "excellent" teachers, where excellence actually means something? We're going to need a lot of help from the NEA and AFT in getting there, since they are holding the keys right now.

PN: Addressing the effectiveness of teachers must be an essential part of education reform in this country. However, judging teachers and awarding bonuses simply on the basis of test scores is problematic. We have already witnessed a large number of schools that have adopted scripted curricula and a narrow focus on test preparation as one way to raise test scores. This tendency will undoubtedly increase if teachers are evaluated exclusively on that basis. Such an approach is likely to discourage good teachers from working in high-need schools and to widen the gap between poor and affluent students. A narrow focus on raising test scores is also likely to deny poor students access to an enriched curriculum that encourages the development of higher-order thinking skills.

It makes more sense to devise incentives, including increased pay, to attract teachers with a track record of effectiveness, to high-need schools and classrooms. Such teachers can be identified through systematic evaluations carried out by principals and peers. If we could combine such a strategy with lower class

sizes and extended learning opportunities after school, we could see major gains for struggling students.

In many cities, unions have resisted giving districts greater flexibility in how teachers are assigned, and in too many cases they have made it difficult to remove teachers who are ineffective and inept. Since it seems likely that teachers unions will be around for many years to come, it would be wise to find ways to collaborate with them to devise peer review programs like those that have shown promise in districts such as Toledo, Ohio, and Rochester, New York. In these districts, ineffective teachers are removed in greater numbers than in districts that rely on principal evaluation. Districts should also be encouraged to use the negotiation process to push for greater flexibility in how teachers are assigned to schools.

EN: The president has touted the \$5 billion for preschool in the stimulus bill. How can we be confident that the money will fund difference-making programs?

PN: Most of the nations that outperform the United States in educational outcomes provide universal access to quality preschool. Research in child development has shown that the learning that occurs during infancy establishes a foundation for learning throughout life. It is cost effective and in our national interest to expand access to quality early-childhood education for all children.

We know two important things about early childhood education: 1) children who have access to quality programs generally outperform children who do not, and 2) the benefits of quality preschool can be further enhanced if quality of education is maintained in the K–12 system. The situation is similar for elementary schools. Throughout the country we have seen a growing number of successful primary schools and increases in test scores. However, these gains often are not sustained in middle school. This should not be used as a justification to question the value of elementary school nor should similar logic

be used to limit expansion of early childhood education.

JW: If high-quality pre-K isn't such a good idea, why are rich people in my neighborhood running around thinking that the Earth will implode (and their kid won't get into Harvard someday) if they don't get a slot in the most sought-after preschool programs? Providing access to high-quality preschool opportunities to the have-nots is an important part of the overall reform effort, as long as those programs successfully help students prepare for the world that awaits them in kindergarten and beyond.

Critics note that finding "high-quality" early-childhood programs, just like finding high-quality K–12 schools, is where the proposition gets iffy. My organization, Democrats for Education Reform, has been pushing to extend state charter-school laws so that charter schools can offer pre-K while being held accountable for their results. Connecting pre-K to early childhood programs that run through 3rd grade would close the gap that exists between what is taught in pre-K and what students need to be able to do in the later grades.

This is about making sure that all students are starting off on as close to a level playing field as possible, whether or not they can afford to make a \$100,000 contribution to get a leg up on preschool enrollment.

EN: The Broader, Bolder Approach has made the case that school reform must attend to the "physical health, character, social development, and non-academic skills" of students. Should schools and educators be tasked with this? At what point can or should we start to hold educators responsible for student outcomes?

JW: Students clearly have needs that extend beyond merely learning to read and do math. In the most successful schools serving low-income students, we see a wide range of child development activities, including sports, dance, art, chess, and citizenship enrichment activities. The notion that these activities are distractions from

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academic instruction assumes this is an either/or proposition. The best schools out there today seem to nail both.

This is where issues like better use of time come into play. Many educators decided long ago (seemingly correctly) that it is not possible to meet the complex needs of their students with a school day that ends at 3 p.m. This is particularly true for students who are two and three years behind where they are supposed to be academically.

PN: It is impossible and undesirable to separate academic performance from physical health, character development, and a variety of nonacademic skills. Sick and unhealthy children generally don't do as well in school as healthy ones, and children who have trouble getting along with others typically don't do very well either. From their very beginning, public schools have been charged with preparing children for work and citizenship, and such preparation has never focused solely upon academic skills.

To educate the "whole child," schools must provide students with an enriched education that includes art, music, physical education, and character development in addition to the core subjects. The fact that skills in these areas cannot be easily assessed should not trouble us since most middle-class and affluent children receive such an education already and typically no one asks for evidence that such an approach has an impact on their test scores.

The highest-performing schools never focus exclusively on student achievement. In fact, what typically distinguishes the best schools from the others is the culture—shared expectations, values, norms, and beliefs—that permeate the school environment.

EN: *The president has suggested that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, especially the \$5 billion in "innovation" education funds, provides an opportunity to "transform" schooling. What are a couple of developments that give you cause for*

optimism or pessimism? How will we know in a few years if these education funds were spent wisely?

PN: While many public schools, especially in urban areas, are in dire need of reform, I am concerned that there is a lack of clarity about why past reforms have failed and insufficient understanding about the direction change must take if we are to obtain better results. Why do we still have dropout rates of 50 percent and higher in several cities eight years after the enactment of No Child Left Behind, and why are so many schools still foundering after substantial investments of public and private funds on reform? Several studies have shown that reforms have failed because we have ignored the nonacademic needs of children, because we have ignored school culture, because we have not evaluated reforms and insisted upon accountability, and because we have been too quick to pursue fads and gimmicks (small schools, technology, testing) while ignoring more substantive issues that support teaching and learning.

More funding is needed in many districts to address the lack of resources, but given the recession, we will need to rely upon better coordination between schools, nonprofits, and local government to respond to student needs. And money alone will not solve the problems facing America's schools. We need a new vision and a new approach. A Broader, Bolder Approach offers part of the way forward. This must be combined with strategies that improve the quality of teaching and increase the accountability and responsiveness of schools to the communities they serve.

JW: The president and Secretary Duncan seem to have figured out that the leverage that comes from insisting that \$5 billion be attached to innovation is tremendous. Even before a single dime was disbursed from the "Race to the Top" fund, we saw state legislatures take actions to support things like charter school expansion: Massachusetts, Illinois, Indiana, Tennessee, and Rhode Island were not exactly lining up to help

charter schools until Duncan made clear that it would impact these states' applications for federal funding. For a state like Tennessee, which risked losing \$100 million in Duncan's discretionary spending, the conversation quickly changed. A charter-school expansion bill that had been declared dead and tagged by the political coroners came back to life before our very eyes.

The challenge will come when it is time to convert the leverage Duncan has discovered into ongoing federal appropriations. This will launch a dramatic transformation of the role of the federal government in education. This is where we should be optimistic.

Politically, Duncan and Obama are going to need to tell good stories about what has been unleashed here through the stimulus package. If successful school operators like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First can get help (financially and legislatively) in bringing their models to scale, and if successful education programs can be brought to more and more students, there will be a compelling story to tell. Public education will be on its way to saving itself.

EN: What does BBA's proposed accountability system look like? How does it differ from NCLB?

PN: The BBA proposal for accountability emphasizes qualitative and quantitative evaluations of schools. That is, rather than relying exclusively on test scores to judge schools, BBA calls for the creation of an inspectorate, similar to that used in other countries with high-performing education systems, that is comprised of experienced educators, policymakers and scholars, to evaluate schools and make recommendations about how they might be improved. Such an approach could be used to provide schools with detailed feedback on how to make better use of resources and employ strategies that will enable them to become more successful in raising achievement and overcoming obstacles to learning.

Under NCLB, schools are judged largely

on the basis of test scores, and many schools have figured out that the system can be gamed simply by targeting groups of students with intensive test preparation. Schools that are faced with greater challenges are simply labeled "failing" and targeted with threats and humiliation. The underlying assumption is that the educators are lazy and that pressure can be used to force them to improve. Accountability is essential if we are going to bring about school improvement on a larger scale, but it must be accompanied by real assistance and support.

In some cases, shutting down failing schools, as Secretary Duncan has suggested, may be necessary, but we must acknowledge ahead of time that the number of failing schools is simply too great for this to be the only strategy that we use. It is more constructive and effective to find out why a school has failed and to work with educators and local stakeholders to address the causes.

EN: In the context of EEP's proposed reforms, how will an expanded federal role make a significant difference? How should new federal funds be distributed?

JW: An expanded federal role will allow our entire nation to cut through some of the political fog that has prevented good, sound ideas about how to change our schools from getting the go-ahead to proceed as part of a major systemic reform strategy. This is about using the tremendous leverage of the federal government to force some really blunt conversations at the state and district level, the kinds of conversations that make people uncomfortable and often lead to political paralysis. We have this tendency, if policy conversations make people feel uncomfortable, to sweep important issues under the rug. This is one of the reasons so little has actually changed despite waves and waves of reforms. We have an opportunity to change that dynamic, but only if President Obama holds firm on his commitment to bring change to public education. ❖

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