

INTRODUCTION

This is a story about what happens when a state education department partners with city school districts in an attempt to close the achievement gap between poor, minority city students and their counterparts in the predominantly white and more affluent suburban districts. It is a story set in New Jersey, but the lessons apply in any American city that has concentrations of poor children in failing school districts. The pedagogical puzzles that must be solved in Gary or El Paso vary not at all from those in Camden or Elizabeth. What sets New Jersey apart is the generous level of court-mandated funding available, and the fact that preschool in the state begins at age three.

New Jersey's experience presents a test to determine if more money produces better results. A preliminary look at the results of the state's efforts suggests an unsurprising conclusion: when additional funds are concentrated on supporting and enhancing teachers' efforts to assess the needs of their students and tailor their instruction to those needs, dramatically better results are possible. If no coherent plan for improved classroom instruction is implemented, more money makes no difference, and can, instead, produce confusion and declining performance.

New Jersey has demonstrated remarkable success in improving children's educational attainment. For example, only in Massachusetts did fourth graders score higher than those in New Jersey, a much more diverse state, on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) reading test.¹ Between the 2005 and 2007 tests, New Jersey fourth grade scores improved by eight scale points overall, and those of African Americans went up by twelve and those of Latinos increased by eight. New Jersey was the only state in which scores in all ethnic categories improved over 2005.² It is the contention of this book that New Jersey's fairly dramatic improvement is a product of a focused effort by many of New Jersey's poorest school districts to introduce effective early literacy practices.³

Politicians, scholars, business leaders, educators, and advocates for one point of view or another have conducted a largely fruitless debate for four decades about the achievement gap. Mostly, it has been a discussion among people who have very little appreciation for what it means to face a class of twenty-five eight-year-olds six hours a day for 180 days a year. The policy debates produce a seemingly endless list of proposed solutions that are irrelevant to the conditions and opportunities in that second grade classroom.

The obvious truth is that the transactions between millions of poor minority children and thousands of teachers are not working. In 2007, 54 percent of black and 51 percent of Latino students nationally scored below "basic" on the NAEP fourth grade reading test, while only 14 percent of black students and 17 percent of Latinos were "proficient" or "advanced proficient" (compared to 42 percent for white students).⁴ We must focus on how to change what takes place in the classrooms of these students. This is not an issue that can be solved simply by new policy—the assumption all along has been that schools must teach children how to read—it is an issue of will and practice.

The story in New Jersey assumes that most agree on the initial causes of the achievement gap—social class and early-life language acquisition. A five-year-old from a lower-class family starts kindergarten without enough vocabulary and general knowledge to be ready to begin reading and writing in first grade. Most schools do not know how to close this kindergarten gap and, if they do not, most of their kindergarten "graduates" will never be strong readers. At least that is the record of the last forty years or so.

A second assumption is that the students who are not confident readers by the end of third grade—certainly by fourth grade—are pretty much doomed. When schools relied on dumbed-down textbooks, poor minority students struggled; but the introduction of new, tougher

academic standards only exacerbates an already discouraging achievement gap. The 2007 NAEP eighth grade reading test showed that nationwide, while 38 percent of white students were proficient or advanced proficient, only 12 percent of black and 14 percent of Latinos were.⁵

So this is a story that concentrates on children from age three through third grade. For poor minority children who go to school with other poor minority children (and most do), their best opportunity to use education to move into the middle class pretty much ends at age nine. As troubling as that may seem, educators know how to do the work to improve these students' prospects. "Effective schools" were discovered forty years ago; now we have "effective districts." This story will show that poor, racially isolated districts such as Elizabeth, Orange, Perth Amboy, Vineland, and Union City can sustain dramatic improvements in the literacy of young students, and continue those gains into the middle grades. This progress is something that has not been demonstrated on such a wide scale elsewhere.

The rapid chronology by which young students learn to read and write gives this discussion its sense of urgency. State and nationwide policy debates about improving the quality of classroom teachers or principals are important, but it is not fair to ask parents of today's second graders to wait for these arguments to be resolved before their children are properly educated. We know enough right now about what works in individual classrooms, and we have the evidence that we can accomplish much with the teachers and principals already in place in urban schools. The obligation to tackle classroom practices is a moral obligation, since we are playing with the futures of millions of innocent children.

The obstacles to changing classroom practice are no different in New Jersey than in city school districts in other states, and nothing very new is required to overcome them. We know what to do: *start early*, *focus on pedagogy* and *show systematic curiosity* about why students struggle, and then *adjust instruction* to meet their individual needs. It looks simple, but is hardly simple to do. It requires changing the work of educators. The culture of education is not conducive to such change, but it can be done. That's the story.

