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New From The Century Foundation:

BACK TO THE FUTURE IN EDUCATION REFORM:

NEW BOOK ON NEW JERSEY'S EFFORTS TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP SHOWS THAT MONEY MATTERS – BUT SO DO WELL-SUPPORTED TEACHERS AND A COHERENT PLAN

16 January 2009, NYC —With the No Child Left Behind Act up for renewal, education reform is among the many areas the Obama administration will need to address. As the president and his team consider policies and funding to improve academic success for all students, a new book from The Century Foundation about New Jersey's efforts to close the achievement gap offers lessons about how – and how not – to improve public education .

In Plain Sight: Simple, Difficult Lessons from New Jersey's Expensive Effort to Close the Achievement Gap explores what happened when the state education department partnered with city school districts in an attempt to close the achievement gap between poor, minority students in urban districts and their counterparts in the predominantly white and more affluent suburban districts. The program, created as a result of the landmark New Jersey Supreme Court case *Abbott v. Burke*, provided generous funding to improve educational outcomes in poor districts. The focused effort by many of the state's poorest school districts on closing the achievement gap by introducing effective early literacy practices, rather than relying on packaged programs and curricula tied to preparing for the achievement tests, led to a fairly dramatic improvement in the state's test scores. Only in Massachusetts did fourth graders score higher than those in more diverse New Jersey on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test.

The lessons from New Jersey apply in any American city that has concentrations of poor children in failing school districts. When attention is focused 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. However, if no coherent plan for improved classroom instruction is implemented, more money makes no difference.

In Plain Sight was written by Gordon MacInnes, a fellow at The Century Foundation and lecturer at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, who has devoted four decades to government service and leadership on issues related to education, poverty, and urban living. He served from 2002 to April 2007 as assistant commissioner for Abbott implementation for the New Jersey Department of Education, where he oversaw a division that was created to coordinate the implementation of *Abbott v. Burke*, the nation's most prescriptive and sweeping state supreme court ruling on school funding for the state's poorest cities. He was also elected to the New Jersey General Assembly and Senate, where he served on the education committee. MacInnes provides a frank and comprehensive examination of those districts where poor, minority

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students have demonstrated continued academic improvement. Based on lessons from New Jersey, he offers recommendations for policies and practices that will narrow the achievement gap and improve the academic prospects for all. These include:

- Academic achievement trumps other important objectives.
- The state, and the district, must set forth a clear set of ambitious academic goals by grade level and content.
- Priority must go to teaching primary grade students to read and write English well.
- The district must keep track of the progress that each student is making in meeting academic goals.
- When a student falls behind, there must be a system for rescuing him or her, which includes spending whatever additional time is required to bring that student up to par. The expense for such attention must take precedence over other spending demands.
- Teachers must be treated as front-line professionals and provided continuous support in their efforts to improve their student's academic results.
- The process and set of practices must never end. Effective instruction involves constant adjustment, checks on how the adjusted instruction is working, and then (usually) readjustments.
- As students become literate in language and mathematics, the next step is to make school an engaging, fascinating experience. That means using diverse instructional materials that cut across content areas, and projects that showcase the wonder of learning.

MacInnes concludes that the most important lesson from New Jersey is that the restoration of teaching as the primary activity of schools, and the return of respect for the professionalism of those who oversee and teach in those schools are the essential ingredients for improving educational prospects for all children. He suggests that in difficult economic times, these simple, straight-forward prescriptions must command scarce resources in states and school districts. However, he believes that the results in New Jersey show that it's an investment worth making.

Gordon MacInnes, also is the author of *Wrong for All the Right Reasons: How White Liberals Have Been Undone by Race* (NYU Press, 1996), and "Kids Who Pick the Wrong Parents and Other Victims of Voucher Schemes" (A Twentieth Century Fund/Century Foundation white paper, 1999). He is available for interviews about *In Plain Sight*, and other education reform issues. For more information or for a press copy of the book, contact Christy Hicks at hicks@tcf.org or 212-452-7723.

**In Plain Sight: Simple, Difficult Lessons from New Jersey's Expensive
Effort to Close the Achievement Gap**

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