

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Issue Brief

WHAT EDUCATORS SHOULD LEARN FROM *ER*

BY GORDON A. MACINNES

INTRODUCTION

Educators could learn a thing or two from the craft of medicine, even medicine practiced on television. Doctors on the popular television series *ER*, for example, are not surprised to learn that mortality rates are higher at County General Hospital than at Pleasant Valley Community Hospital. Doctors at County see a lot more drug abusers, gunshot victims, obese diabetics, alcoholics, and the homeless, not to mention heart attacks, strokes, and concussions. Pleasant Valley might see more lawn mower and hockey injuries, to go along with heart and cancer problems. Its patients arrive in better overall health, have regular check-ups, and better insurance coverage. These factors make a difference—a huge difference—in outcomes between the two hospitals.

It is easy to see how the characteristics of the patient population plays a huge role in determining results. Yet policymakers and commentators tend to ignore the parallels between large, public, urban hospitals and their counterparts in the field of education: large, public, urban high schools. Little allowance is made for the make-up of the high school student body or the “pre-existing” conditions that make a Chicago high school very different from, say, the esteemed New Trier high school in nearby Winnetka. Instead, many of the big Chicago schools have been labeled as “dropout factories” and ordered to reform. The break-up of big city schools into “small learning communities” has created a new industry, driven by consultants and foundation incentives. The Obama administration now expects states and districts to turn around the lowest-performing, bottom 5 percent of their schools, which in the case of high schools means those with drop-out rates of 50 percent or more.

At the same time, the Obama administration is pushing for higher, more rigorous and more coherent academic standards, with particular emphasis on secondary schools. The short-term effect of tougher standards will be a wider achievement gap between poor and affluent students, more frustration among urban high school teachers and students, and even higher drop-out rates. While the goal of higher and more rigorous standards is a sensible one, it will make the concurrent task of reforming the lowest-performing schools even more challenging.

REFORMERS SHOULD NOT IGNORE HIGH SCHOOLS, BUT THEY CANNOT BE THE ENGINES OF “TRANSFORMATIONAL” REFORM

If the purpose of P–12 education is to prepare graduates to master a university education, then it is foolhardy to focus greatest attention on ninth graders. *High school reform, especially when accompanied by billions in new federal funding, deflects the efforts of school districts from addressing problems that can be solved to those that cannot.*

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Specifically, ninth graders who start high school reading at the sixth-grade level cannot simultaneously be brought up to grade level in reading and writing while mastering the content of a rigorous pre-collegiate curriculum. There is a reason that no reform on a large scale that begins with high school has succeeded in achieving the desired academic results.

One of the two thousand dropout factories across the nation is Newark's Central High School. I select it to give concreteness to the discussion of current policy priorities, but I could have chosen any of a score of city high schools in New Jersey. In fact, Central has advantages that are not commonly found in other low-performing high schools: it is relatively small (about 800 students), well funded, enjoys a brand new facility, and has already implemented the concept of small learning communities.

A CASE IN POINT: CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

Central High School sits in one of New Jersey's poorest neighborhoods in one of the nation's poorest cities. The student body at this "dropout factory" is comprised of "factory seconds": students who did not get into magnet schools, private schools, "exam" high schools, or charter schools. In the 2007–08 school year, 70 percent of all Newark students were eligible for free or reduced meals, but 96.4 percent of Central's students taking the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) were. Yet, the percentage of eighth graders eligible for free or reduced meals in Central's feeder schools taking the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) three years earlier was 80.5 percent, suggesting that the students who went to an alternate high school were relatively better off economically.

Because New Jersey's data system does not yet enable researchers to track the grade, school, and performance of individual students over time, we have no way of determining which of the 2005 eighth graders taking the GEPA ended up at Central. The fall-off is significant, from 364 eighth graders enrolled in feeder schools in 2005 to only 195 eleventh graders at Central three years later. A fair assumption is that most of the "missing" students could be found either at one of Newark's four selective "exam" high schools, or at no school. Even before this "creaming," however, the academic performance is scarily low: 64.3 percent could not pass the GEPA literacy exam, and 82.1 could not pass math!

Remember County General Hospital's concentrated dose of gunshots and drug addicts? Well, Central High School receives the educational equivalent: ninth graders who read at the fifth- or sixth-grade level and can perform only simple arithmetic, if that. No one should be surprised that only 41 percent of Central's eleventh graders were found proficient in English, and only 22 percent proficient in math; or that just 31.2 percent of Central's seniors graduated by demonstrating mastery of the state's academic standards.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan thinks that Central has a *management problem* that can be solved by turning it over to a private firm, closing it down, "reconstituting" it with a new principal and faculty, or providing a new "culture" of intensive teacher development, data use, and increased learning time. The secretary can choose one of four models to re-structure Central, but he cannot identify any program that has worked in similar schools over time that produced significantly improved academic results.

IF MANDATES, CHANGES IN GOVERNANCE, AND EXTENDED TEACHING TIME WILL NOT WORK AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, WHAT WILL?

Nothing will work quickly or easily. Education is a cumulative process—a truism that is widely accepted, yet rarely noted. Kids who cannot sound out consonants cannot write a credible essay contrasting Jefferson with Hamilton on the role of the central government. Yet, that is what federal educators seem expect in the current call for reform. Their enthusiasm for "transformational" change is diverting attention from what works.

When children from poor families are concentrated in schools, there are steps that have proved to work in improving educational results. Educators should:

- Start at age three or four with an intensive, high-quality preschool that concentrates on building the language, vocabularies, and general knowledge of students.
- Follow this with four years of intensive early literacy in kindergarten through the third grade. Spend whatever time is required to bring struggling kids up to speed, including before and after school time with their teachers (not with packaged, commercial programs).
- Work with teachers so that they have lots of information about how their students are doing in meeting very high expectations and how teachers can maximize their time conducting individualized instruction (usually in small groups).
- Adjust instruction to reflect new information on student performance and what works for each student.
- Give teachers time to work with one another and with coaches or content specialists in their schools and classrooms, not at formal, “drive-by” presentations in the high school gym.

These steps are not a guess or a hope, they are steps that have been taken in the few urban places where the overwhelming majority of poor kids are succeeding: reading and writing at grade level by third grade and, then, going on to do as well as their suburban peers in the middle grades. This is what happens in Union City, New Jersey, and Montgomery County, Maryland. These are not small programs, but district-wide efforts to make learning interesting and joyful to teachers and students. The measure of success for these efforts is this: third graders must be strong readers and writers of English.

County General’s ER staff can do little to halt gang violence, drug use, homelessness, or obesity. Nor can the faculty at Central High intervene with preschool or primary grade students to make them literate. But, the Newark public schools can. They have the money to do it, and the programs in place. If they do not concentrate and do the hard work required, Central High School will do no better by its students in 2020 than it did in 1980, or last year.

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