

Excerpted from

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Fifty years ago, Glass (1968) wrote about “Educational Piltdown Men.” As you may recall, the “Piltdown Man” was an archaeological hoax where someone planted bones over 100 years ago in England. Glass warned that similar hoaxes are found in educational research and gave examples where some sleuthing uncovered the truth. Thanks to a few muckrakers, watchdogs, and whistleblowers, several Educational Piltdown Men have been revealed since then (e.g., Baeder, 2011; Kirschner & de Bruyckere, 2017; Lilienfeld, Marshall, Todd, & Shane, 2015).

In this chapter, we continue this muckraking effort in identifying several more K-12 Piltdown Men. How did we get into this unpleasant business? We (DR and RB) met about ten years ago. RB, as a private retired citizen, had been emailing education faculty members at various universities, asking them if they knew of any research that demonstrated effectiveness of educational reform efforts. The email message went something like this:

I ask all of you to read “Overhauling Nebraska's Educational System.” Like nearly all of America's school “reform” proposals adopted during the last five decades, these are overwhelmingly foolish. Unfortunately, they are also very popular among a large majority of the elected and appointed politicians of both political parties.

When it comes to these proposals, you and your colleagues have something in common: silence, uniform and appalling. There is an irrational belief abroad that K-12 teachers should be expected to educate poorly-raised children as effectively as they nearly always educate well-raised children. Consider the approximately 35,000 impoverished students out of the total of about 50,000 students who attend Omaha Public Schools (OPS). According to the results of the 2011-12 NeSA test results, about half of those 35,000 impoverished children perform at-or-above the state's proficiency standards in math and reading. Consider what separates the roughly 18,000 impoverished OPS students who succeed academically from the similar number of equally impoverished OPS students who fail. Same schools. Same classrooms. Same books. Same classmates. Same curricula. Same teachers. Same assignments. Same tests. Same poverty. *Different home life*. The fact is that, overwhelmingly, the teachers who consistently educate well-raised children are the very same teachers who consistently fail to educate badly-raised children.

If the cause of the consistent academic failure of children could be found inside schools, we would certainly have found it by now. After all, the politicians and the reformers have been looking there for at least 5 decades. They have looked in vain. Children who show up at school ready to learn are relatively easy to teach. Those who show up hungry, afraid, etc. are not easy to teach. More than 91% of each childhood is spent someplace other than school. Failing students do not need better teachers or better schools. They need better childhoods.

Your continuing failure to speak out in defense of what you all know to be true seems to be downright Niemöllerian. Can any of you doubt that - after the “reformers” are done with the K-12 teachers – they will be coming for you? You all have a moral and professional obligation to your students, your alumni, your institutions, your profession and yourselves to speak the truth loudly and often.

About 99% either ignored the email or replied asking RB to stop emailing. DR was one of the few who replied, admittedly suspicious, as he had received similar email inquiries from angry, sometimes creepy, anti-education persons who had an axe to grind. What followed was an honest conversation about this “inconvenient truth” that led to DR inviting RB to present to graduate students and faculty at the University of Texas at Austin.

What exactly is this inconvenient truth concerning K-12 education that we all tend to avoid discussing – like a shameful family incident that is taboo at the dinner table during the holidays? When DR and his family moved to Texas in 1999, they considered several different locations near Austin. A major concern, in addition to the work commute and safe neighborhoods, was the quality of the schools the children would attend. Many people use the adjectives “good,” “great,” and “bad” when referring to schools. Who would want to send their kids to a “bad” school? But what does it really mean to be a good or bad school? Was it the quality of the teachers? The leadership (i.e., principal, superintendent, school board)? Resources? The appearance and cleanliness of the buildings? What is your first thought when you imagine a “good” school?

Well, in Texas, as in most states, school ratings are based on average student scores on some standardized achievement test given annually to students in certain grades. The public elementary school that DR’s kids eventually attended had recently received a blue-ribbon rating by the Texas Education Association. Those blue ribbons were awarded solely on the basis of test scores. Of course, there was another characteristic that separated good vs. bad schools: poverty. The percentage of students who received free-and-reduced lunches was always lower in the good (higher average test scores) schools than it was in the bad schools. In fact, this correlation between poverty and student achievement is well known and rather consistent. So, back to our original question. When DR and his family were searching for “good” schools, in Texas, as in other states, that simply meant looking for houses located in affluent neighborhoods.

Is it possible to have a good school (high test scores) in a high poverty area? Or is it possible for the opposite to occur – a bad school (low test scores) in an affluent area? The latter has never been documented. It would be akin to finding Bigfoot, a Leprechaun, a Chupacabra (sorry, you may have to live in the Southwest to understand this one), or a unicorn. However, even though it should be equally as unlikely, educational reformers would have you believe the answer to the first question is a definite “yes!” But a closer look at the evidence accumulated during the past fifty plus years of educational reform efforts, beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), suggests otherwise. The following are examples of school districts in large cities that claimed dramatic turnarounds where poor schools (in terms of high poverty) made sudden and impressive (and, thus, suspicious) improvements in test scores.

The Texas Miracle

In the 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush spoke often about an approach to education, especially in Houston, that led to declining dropout rates and increasing test scores. The secret? Simply holding superintendents and principals accountable for their students' performance. Rod Paige, Superintendent of Houston schools, was chosen by Bush to be Secretary of Education. Houston became the model on which the "No Child Left Behind" educational reform was based.

Was this success a true miracle? No. Most of the impressive numbers were a result of falsifying student records. Although Houston reported a dropout rate of 1.5%, the true dropout rate was between 25 and 50%. What was the incentive to "cook the books"? Principals were given only one-year contracts. If they met their goals, they received cash bonuses. If not, they were replaced. The numbers of students who were categorized as special education increased so their test scores would not count (Haney, 2000). As a result, test scores overall increased for many schools.

The whistleblower who first alerted the press about the Texas Miracle hoax was Robert Kimball, an assistant principal at a Houston high school, who noticed that his school reported zero dropouts when, in fact, 463 students had dropped out. After his school had reprimanded and demoted him, Kimball filed a whistleblower suit against Houston schools and received \$90,000 (Leung, 2004).

The New Orleans Miracle

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated large areas in New Orleans, displacing much of its population – especially in the poorest areas of the city. The city decided to replace the traditionally "bad" public schools with charter schools. According to Chait (2015), the new charter schools "produced spectacular results." The proportion of New Orleans students who performed at grade level had been only half compared to the rest of the state. By 2015, it trailed by only six percent.

Were the charter schools the cause of this great success? Prior to Katrina, there were 65,000 students enrolled in the New Orleans public school system. Today that number is 45,000. Most of the 20,000 students who left lived in the poorest areas of the city. Those same students scored low on tests, were more likely to drop out, etc. Take any large urban school district and simply remove 31% of its poorest students. Average test scores will shoot up and dropout rates will decline. The results will support any kind of reform someone could falsely claim.

The District of Columbia Miracle

The District of Columbia public school system had been singled out as a national model for educational reform. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan used DC schools as an example of what happens when you embrace innovative reforms. Former chancellor Michelle Rhee implemented accountability policies that linked principal and teacher salaries and job

security to student test scores and graduation rates. What could possibly go wrong with such high stakes?

In early 2018, the FBI, U.S. Education Department, and D.C. Office of the Inspector General began investigating the school system about graduation fraud. At one particular school, Ballou High School, it was revealed that over 900 students should not have graduated. Although the district had a record graduation rate of 73% in 2017, a city investigation concluded that roughly one-third of those students should not have graduated (Jamison & Nirappil, 2018).

The Atlanta Miracle

In February 2009, Beverly Hall was named Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The AASA applauded Ms. Hall for raising test scores and graduation rates and called Atlanta a model of school reform. In August of that same year, Hall referred to the Atlanta public schools as a model urban school district with double-digit test score gains. In February 2010, the state Board of Education ordered districts to investigate 58 schools in Atlanta for cheating. In November 2010, a study confirming the cheating was made public and Hall announced her intent to retire. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that Hall and other officials had overseen a campaign to suppress allegations of widespread cheating. Eighty educators later confessed to cheating.

Turnaround Schools

Are there any high-poverty, big-city school districts that are “doing it right”? Strauss (2018) suggested that Chicago may be one of them. Does anyone want to predict just how long it will take before this “turnaround” will be exposed as yet another Piltown Man? As previously mentioned, waves of K-12 educational reform efforts have been going on since the first ESEA in 1965. The most recent renditions were No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Neither have produced any evidence of successful policies or interventions that can be replicated. If they had, we would be witnessing improvements today. Turning around a high poverty school so that average test scores are high remains the elusive Loch Ness monster that no one can find.

What interventions are typically used in school turnaround efforts? The previous “miracle” examples clearly demonstrate that dramatic “turnarounds” often simply reflect a dramatic turnaround in ethics (for the worse) at the highest levels of leadership. Speaking of leadership, perhaps the most common turnaround intervention is changing school leadership at lower levels – typically the principal. Of course. The problem with children not learning what they should in classrooms is the fact that a bad principal is preventing or not allowing the teachers from teaching and/or the children from learning! (intended sarcasm here)

Heissel and Ladd (2018) recently examined the North Carolina school turnaround project called “Turning Around the Lowest Achieving Schools” (TALAS). The TALAS project indeed called for replacing principals. Shockingly (again with the sarcasm), Heissel and Ladd found no evidence that the replacement of principals led to an increase in leadership quality. Moreover, the TALAS project did not increase student test scores at the low-performing schools. These Race to the Top and School Improvement grants, like the one North Carolina received for TALAS, have

cost taxpayers several billion dollars. To be eligible to receive such a grant, states had to employ one of four models – two of which, and by far were the most popular among states receiving funding, involved replacing the principal. Back in 2010, the Lincoln, Nebraska public school system announced several changes in school staffing based on new federal education programs that tied significant amounts of available federal funding to state and school district improvement plans. You might recall this effort was mentioned in the email RB had sent to education faculty members. Again, two of the Nebraska options involved replacing the principal. A third simply called for closing the school and reassigning the students to other schools. DR recalls a brand-new school in east Austin, Texas (a high-poverty area) closing after only a few years due to low student performance. Students were simply shipped elsewhere. This is similar to a new health club building closing down because its clients aren't losing weight. It's not the building's fault! K-12 reform efforts are similar, and as ludicrous, to rearranging the deck chairs in an effort to save the sinking Titanic.

Now, let's step back for a moment and consider the principal replacement strategy. We have this problem of high-poverty, low-performing schools. The solution is to simply replace principals. How much influence do these new principals have in terms of what goes on inside the classrooms? Are they able to take teachers who are unable to teach effectively and suddenly turn them around so that they now teach effectively? And what about the students? Can new principals effect change in students, many of whom spend the majority of their time outside school in environments that are the least conducive to learning and have a history of low performance? We know that teachers account for only about 10-20 percent of student achievement outcomes (Hanushek, 1997). The effect of principals on student outcomes is less. Yet, for many K-12 policymakers, replacing principals remains the most popular solution. By the way, over 60% of student achievement can be explained by non-school variables, with family income being the largest.

Get Rid of Bad Teachers

What about replacing bad teachers with good teachers? Will that solve our problems and allow every child to succeed? Well, if you look to popular cinema for examples, then the answer is definitely yes! Look at the movie, *Stand and Deliver* (1988). Based on a true story, Jaime Escalante was a teacher in a high-poverty, low-performing East LA high school. Escalante took a group of kids and had them passing the AP calculus exam by their senior year. How did it happen? Well, Escalante did not just accept anyone into his program. He hand-picked students. Students who did not know multiplication tables or fractions were not allowed in his class. He got commitments from the students and their parents. His first AP Calculus course had 14 students. Only two passed the AP exam. This success rate is no more impressive than any other high-poverty school.

Another movie, *Waiting for "Superman"* (2010), blames public schools and teacher unions and instead promotes charter schools and privatizing education as the solution. Are charter schools the answer? They certainly "worked" in New Orleans! Ravitch (2011) cited the 2009 CREDO study that showed only 17% of charter schools performed better than their matched public schools, 46% did the same, and 37% did worse. These results are even more surprising given that charter schools are allowed to get rid of the lowest performing students

whereas public schools are not. The bottom line: no schools and, as Escalante demonstrated, no teacher can completely overcome the negative effects of poverty. This isn't to say that we should not strive to have the best teachers and best principals by any means. But they should not be held solely accountable for student failures. There are no low-performing schools; there are only low-performing students. Such students are fairly rare in affluent districts and very common in districts where a high concentration of financially impoverished children live. As a very wise superintendent once observed, "Spending money on statewide tests is a very expensive way to locate the places where poor families are concentrated." With each new installment of ESEA, teachers, principals, and schools are ordered to fix the developmental damage that occurs to children between the ages of zero to five. They have never been able to completely repair that damage (and for many poor students it continues during their school years) and they never will.

No one doubts that a good teacher can certainly make a difference in the life of a child. A good principal and superintendent are also important in ensuring that students have access to quality instruction. For this reason, we need university programs that certify teachers and principals to have high standards and rigorous training. Efforts to get rid of certification will only serve to erode the quality of educators. But, we also shouldn't expect miracles.

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