



REVIEW OF *FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION*

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Summary of Review

This Public Agenda report profiles nine high-poverty schools in Ohio that the authors believe have exhibited “sustained success.” It first lists 11 commonly accepted attributes they assert are demonstrated across the profiled schools. The report then offers six general recommendations for other schools to achieve and sustain success, although the connection between the attributes and the recommendations is unclear. How these “key attributes” and subsequent recommendations were derived from the interviews is not specified. The school selection criteria suggests sample bias. Six of the nine schools were from a state “schools of promise” list and three were not. Four of the schools’ poverty levels were near the state average, belying the high-poverty claim in the report’s title. The report’s biggest deficiency is that, while it is presented as addressing equity needs, and the interviewees pointed out that poverty related factors must be addressed, the recommendations fail to propose remedies or explicitly address these factors. This omission puts the report precariously close to the discredited “no excuses” genre. The common sense nature of the recommendations will likely be found acceptable to many readers, but the proposals are not sufficiently grounded in either the study’s own data or in the larger body of research. In sum, these shortcomings marginalize the work’s usefulness in advancing school reform and educational equity.

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REVIEW OF *FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION: HOW PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND PARENTS FROM OHIO'S HIGH-ACHIEVING, HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS EXPLAIN THEIR SUCCESS*

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I. Introduction

A variety of think tanks, policy centers, and popular media have reported on “miracle schools.”¹ All reflect a similar narrative: that with dedicated teachers and administrators, schools alone can solve educational inequities. Poverty and social conditions are obstacles that can be overcome by a *tour de force* of energetic, bright and relentless faculty. This conclusion implies that apathetic teachers and administrators perpetuate inequity. This “no excuses” body of work has been discredited,² but the basic argument is still quite common.

The report reviewed here, *Failure Is Not an Option*, produced by Public Agenda, echoes this “no excuses” theme.³ It profiles nine “successful” schools in Ohio and identifies “key attributes” it claims are common to all. In addition to these attributes, it then makes “recommendations” for other schools to sustain success. The report is basically a recounting of “best practices” for teaching and learning that have been written about extensively elsewhere. Thus, the report’s “key attributes” and “recommendations” add little to advancing the discussion of educational equity. More importantly, the report’s major flaw is that it largely ignores the fundamental fact that inequity cannot be remedied without attention to the effects of poverty and out-of-school factors.⁴

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report identifies 11 key “attributes and practices” that appear with “remarkable consistency” in nine high-achieving, high-poverty schools in Ohio (p. 3). These attributes were determined through interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, parents, and students. Illustrating their generic nature, the first two are: (1) “Principals lead with a strong and clear vision for their school, engage staff in problem solving and decision making and never lose sight of their school’s goals and outcomes;” and (2) “Teachers and

administrators are dedicated to their school’s success and committed to making a difference in their students’ lives” (p. 3).⁵

In addition, the report contains several recommendations for schools seeking to sustain success. These are:

- “Plan for smooth principal transitions” (p. 5);
- “Engage teachers” (p. 5);
- “When hiring, make sure incoming teachers endorse the school’s vision and practices” (p. 5);
- “Leverage a great reputation” (p. 6);
- “Be careful about burnout” (p. 6); and
- “Celebrate success” (p. 6).

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

Both the key attributes and recommendations are based almost exclusively on interviews and focus groups with stakeholders specific to each school. Each attribute is supported in the report by a few selected quotations from the interviewees.

Yet the study’s central claim—that the “key attributes” appear with “remarkable consistency” across the featured schools—is not substantiated. The report appears to randomly and inconsistently choose quotations from its profiled schools. Indeed, some schools feature more prominently than others in support of the attributes. For instance, quotations from representatives of “Elementary School 1” appear 13 times in the report’s “key attributes” section. Yet the report identifies only two quotations from “Elementary School 2.”⁶ The report suggests that these attributes are “remarkably consistent,” yet the data presented do not appear to support such a conclusion. The report should have included much more detailed description of its methods. Given the report’s conclusion about the ubiquity of so many attributes, one would expect a relatively even distribution of the supporting data.⁷

The report also sends conflicting messages with respect to the transferability of its “recommendations.” For instance, in the executive summary, the authors assert that the report has identified the “most important issues” that education leaders “need to address, both to match the success of these high-achieving schools and to sustain effective practices in schools over time” (p. 5). This suggests that education leaders from any school—high-poverty or wealthy, urban or rural—are compelled to adopt the attributes and recommendations. Yet, shortly afterward, the report concedes that it cannot conclude that its recommendations are “comprehensive” or “necessarily generalizable”⁸ because it is a

case study (p. 8).⁹ Indeed, this tension is reflected in the eleventh key attribute, which notes that each school followed different paths to success (p. 4). This internal struggle undercuts the report's final recommendations.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The study contends that its work is anchored in existing literature and builds off of prior findings. To support this claim, the authors present a table¹⁰ in the study titled "Previous research upon which this study builds" (p. 9). The table lists research from several reports or studies that it claims undergird its findings. The first bullet points to an Ohio Department of Education study, the second points to a study by the Fordham Institute, the third lists six studies that attempt to isolate best practices, and the fourth and final bullet points to Public Agenda's own prior work.

Yet the report fails to explain, in almost any regard, its connections to the studies that appear in the table. Indeed, the authors only connect the first "key attribute" (strong principal leadership) to existing research.¹¹ The remaining "key attributes" are not supported with similar pinpoint citations even though research on "best practices" for teaching and learning do exist.¹² The study would have benefitted from some discussion or specificity about its relationship to extant studies cited in the report.

V. Review of Report's Methods

The report is qualitative in nature and apparently employed a case study method. Of the nine schools it profiled, six were chosen because they were listed as one of the *Schools of Promise* by the Ohio State Department of Education in 2010-2011 and 2009-2010.¹³ Each of these six schools appeared as a *School of Promise* in one additional year, according to the report.¹⁴ More than 30 schools were named *Schools of Promise* in 2009-2010, 2010-2011 and at least one additional year,¹⁵ but the report does not explain how these 30 were narrowed down to six. There is also no explanation of why the authors chose to go off this list for three additional schools—all "high-needs schools" with "exceptional academic reputations" that had "shown remarkable improvements in student performance" (p. 56). And, finally, it is perplexing for some of the study's schools to be characterized as "high-poverty." Indeed, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in four of the nine profiled schools was remarkably close to the state average of 45.1%.¹⁶

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The validity of the report's findings and conclusions are questionable for a number of reasons. First, for the six schools experiencing "sustained success" on state ratings,

researchers elsewhere have cautioned about drawing conclusions of “high performance” from snapshots limited to only two tested areas and from test scores in general.¹⁷ Moreover, for the three selected non-*Schools of Promise*, it is difficult to accept the authors’ assertion of “sustained success” absent an objective, concrete definition of this attribute.¹⁸

More troubling is the failure of the report to acknowledge the influence of outside-of-school factors in the face of overwhelming research as well as data contained within the study itself.¹⁹ David Berliner, for instance, identified six out-of-school factors that play a “powerful role in generating existing achievement gaps.”²⁰ The report’s own discussion of “[k]ey attribute #2” relating to dedicated staff illustrates this point. Here, the report found that “[s]taff purchase shoes, jackets, clothes and underwear for students out of their own pockets. They emphasized that students can learn properly *only after* these basic needs are met” (p. 14, emphasis added). It is hard to imagine that the authors are implying that the students’ out-of-school obstacles can be substantially overcome merely by such faculty generosity. There is a much bigger issue here. Yet, the authors fly over this most fundamental of obstacles in their identified “key attributes” and recommendations.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report deserves some recognition in that it reiterates several of the “best practices” that contribute to improved teaching and learning. These are key elements to improving teaching and learning. But the report overemphasizes the impact of these attributes on resolving inequities in public schools. Their key attributes may be necessary, but they are not sufficient. Addressing out-of-school factors is primary and fundamental to resolving, education inequality.

By embracing “no excuses” (“Failure is not an option”) rhetoric and approaches, this report misleads policymakers and the public into thinking that a set of generic recommendations and attributes will overcome deeply-rooted social problems of poverty and inequality.

Notes and References

1 See for example:

Ten miracle high schools (2011, June 21). *Newsweek/The Daily Beast*. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/06/21/ten-miracle-high-schools.html>.

2 See:

Harris, D.N. (2006). *Ending the blame game on educational inequity: A study of “high-flying” schools and NCLB*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/EPSSL-0603-120-EPRU.pdf> ;

Rubinstein, G. (2011, December 1). Miracle schools: where are they now? Gary Rubinstein’s Blog. *Teach for Us*. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://garyrubinstein.teachforus.org/2011/12/01/miracle-schools-where-are-they-now/>;

Thomas, P.L. (2012, October 9). The delusional contradictions of “no excuses” reform and poverty. *EduSanity*. Retrieved December 29, 2012, from <http://www.edusanity.com/2012/10/09/the-delusional...rm-and-poverty/>.

3 Hagelskamp, C. & DiStasi, C. (2012). *Failure Is Not an Option: How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents from Ohio’s High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools Explain Their Success*. New York: Public Agenda. Retrieved January 7, 2013, from <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/failure-is-not-an-option>.

4 See for example:

Ladd, H. F. (2011, November 4). *Education and poverty: Confronting the evidence* (Working Paper SAN11-01). Durham, NC: Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University.

5 The remaining nine are as follows:

“School leaders provide genuine opportunities and incentives for teachers to collaborate, and teachers say that collaboration and sharing best practices are keys to their effectiveness” (p. 3).

“Teachers regard student data as clarifying and helpful, and they use it to plan instruction” (p. 3).

“Principals and teachers have high expectations for all students and reject any excuses for academic failure” (p. 4).

“School leaders and teachers set high expectations for school discipline and the behavior of all students” (p.4).

“Schools offer students nontraditional incentives for academic success and good behavior” (p. 4).

“Students feel valued, loved, and challenged. They are confident that their teachers will help them succeed and be at their side if they hit a rough patch” (p. 4).

“While parent and community support can be an asset, principals and teachers do not see their absence as an insurmountable barrier to student learning and achievement” (p. 4).

“School leaders and teachers seek to continuously improve practices and student achievement. They take today’s success as tomorrow’s starting point” (p. 4).

“Each school tells its own story of change and improvement, yet some commonalities exist” (p. 4).

6 This unevenness of distribution is apparent in light of the number of quotations attributed to each representative school:

- High School 1 (10);
- High School 2 (8);
- High School 3 (6);
- High School 4 (3);
- Middle School 1 (11);
- Middle School 2 (3);
- Elementary School 1 (13);
- Elementary School 2 (2);
- Elementary School 3 (6).

7 The report did not elaborate on the distribution of these attributes in either the body of its report or its discussion of its methodology on page 56.

8 “As with all qualitative research of this scale, we cannot conclude that our insights and observations are comprehensive or necessarily generalizable to all successful, high-poverty schools” (p. 8).

9 The study appears to have some attributes of case study research, including its clear focus on nine schools. But other attributes appear to be missing, including converging lines of inquiry and careful data analysis. See Yin, R. K. (2002). *Case study research: Designs and methods* (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, Sage Publications.

10 The study refers to them as “boxes.” The boxes are unnumbered in the copy reviewed by this author.

11 For instance, the report cites to the following, among others:

Fryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescio, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

12 Reports do exist that address some of the key attributes, such as the use of student data, mentioned in this report. See for example:

Means, B., Chen, E., DeBarger, A., & Padilla, C. (2011). *Teachers’ ability to use data to inform instruction: Challenges and supports*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved December 22, 2012, from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/data-to-inform-instruction/report.doc>.

13 According to the report, the criteria for selection as a *School of Promise* in 2010-2011 was as follows:

- (a) at least 40% of the student body was “economically disadvantaged”
- (b) The school met adequate yearly progress;
- (c) The school’s graduation rate was at least 85%
- (d) In 2010-2011, at least 75 % of all students in tested grades passed the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and/or the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) in reading or mathematics, at least 75% of students in economically disadvantaged subgroup in tested grades passed and at least 75% of students in each racial or ethnic subgroup in tested grades passed;
- (e) In 2009-2010, at least 65% of all students in tested graded passed;

- (f) On the OGTs, in 2010-2011, at least 85% of all 11th graders, 85 % of economically disadvantaged 11th graders and 85% of 11th graders in each racial or ethnic subgroup passed; and
- (g) If applicable the school received a “Met” or “Above” for the 2010-2011 value- added composite score.

14 Importantly, as the report noted (p. 56), the criteria for qualification as a *School of Promise* changed from 2009-2010 to 2010-2011. In 2010-2011, the test passage requirements applied to both math and reading whereas in 2009-2010, the requirement applied to only one of the subject areas.

15 This author compared the list of *Schools of Promise* from these academic years that were obtained from the Ohio State Department of Education’s website Schools of Promise. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEPrimary.aspx?page=2&TopicRelationID=1677>.

16 According to the report, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in four schools for 2010-2011 was:

- Grove Patterson Academy Elementary School (49%);
- River Valley Middle School (54%);
- Hannah J. Ashton Middle School (54%); and
- Northwest High School (58%).

17 See for example:

Harris, D.N. (2006). *Ending the blame game on educational inequity: A study of “high-flying” schools and NCLB*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/EPSSL-0603-120-EPRU.pdf> .

18 For a thoughtful and expansive discussion toward a definition of “success” see

Tough, P. (2012). *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

19 See for example:

Isaacs, J.B. (2012). *Starting school at a disadvantage: The school readiness of poor children*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved December 30, 2012, from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/03/19-school-disadvantage-isaacs>;

Rothstein, R. (2004) *Class and Schools*. Teacher’s College Press. New York;

Rothwell, J. (2012). *Housing costs, zoning, and access to high-scoring schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved December 30, 2012, from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/04/19-school-inequality-rothwell>.

20 Berliner, D. (2009). *Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved December 28, 2012, from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>.

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