

Truly Disadvantaged Schools

A heated and perennial education policy debate pits reformers who believe all schools have the capacity to improve against those who believe some schools, plagued by extreme poverty and its attendant social ills, face nearly insurmountable barriers to reform.

A new book from researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago injects fresh insight into this long-running debate. **Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago** considers why students in 100 public elementary schools in Chicago were able to improve substantially in reading and math over a seven-year period, while students in another 100 were not. The authors conclude that for a subset of "truly disadvantaged" schools, the task of improvement is more formidable than many have acknowledged to date. Yet, the authors also found that even the most disadvantaged schools can improve substantially if they implement proper organizational structures.

In reaching their conclusions the authors identified 46 very low-performing schools, which they labeled "truly disadvantaged schools." Even in a school district where disadvantage is the norm, these schools stood apart, serving neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty and extreme racial segregation. On average, 70 percent of residents living in the neighborhoods of truly disadvantaged schools had incomes below the poverty line. The student population at all 46 schools was 100 percent African-American.

But demographics alone tell just part of the story. Moving beyond simple analyses of racial and socio-economic descriptors, the authors examined these communities in terms of a range of other social capital indicators. They found the communities of truly disadvantaged schools had the highest crime rates and the highest percentages of children who were abused or neglected. Residents of these communities were the most likely to live in public housing and the least likely to attend church regularly or believe they could affect positive change in their community. Truly disadvantaged schools were seven times more likely than better off, racially integrated schools to stagnate in math and twice as likely to stagnate in reading.



Clearly, the social context of schools matters. Indeed, the authors found that community factors accounted for most of the difference in stagnation rates among schools. For instance, schools in communities with weak religious participation were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities with strong religious participation. Schools in communities where people did not believe they had the ability to make a positive change were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities where people believed they could. This pattern held true for social indicator after social indicator.

Still, despite tremendous obstacles, a handful of "truly disadvantaged" schools did improve. Over the seven-year period, 15 percent of "truly disadvantaged schools" showed significant academic improvement. While low, these improvement rates didn't differ significantly from those of schools in predominantly minority communities, which had much lower rates of crime and child abuse and higher median family incomes.

The small group of truly disadvantaged schools that "beat the odds" and improved suggests that community context matters, but only so far as it affects the likelihood of developing certain organizational structures that the authors found were vital for improvement. Whether in advantaged or disadvantaged communities, very well organized schools improved and very poorly organized schools stagnated, the authors found.

In short, in communities where there are few viable institutions, where crime, drug abuse and gang activity are prevalent, and where palpable human needs walk through the school doors virtually every day, robust efforts are necessary to ensure schools are organized for improvement. The hopeful news is that even truly disadvantaged schools *can* be organized for improvement.