

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Educational Strategies That Work

By Greg Anrig

Introduction

Throughout the course of last year's campaign and continuing through the first weeks of his presidency, Barack Obama has defined his policy goals in pragmatic rather than ideological terms. For example, President Obama said in a recent interview, "Our challenge is going to be identifying what works and putting more money into that, eliminating things that don't work, and making things that we have more efficient."

In the realm of educational policy, discerning "what works" can be an elusive undertaking, notwithstanding the enormously wide range of experiments that have been pursued and the abundant studies of those experiments. The gamut of initiatives includes the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); various state-level accountability regimes for schools, teachers, and students; vouchers; charter schools; teacher-recruitment and improvement policies; different pedagogical strategies; and so on. Research assessing the effectiveness of sundry school reforms is massive, but rarely conclusively points toward one particular approach as definitively successful.

This brief highlights three examples of educational policies that actually do appear to be effective, based on the lion's share of research to date: Oklahoma's universal pre-K program, the voluntary inter-district transfer program in St. Louis, Missouri, and New Jersey's innovative low-income public schools. In each case, the ideas pursued were an outgrowth of pragmatic experimentation as opposed to adherence to rigid ideology. As President Obama prepares to restore the public's confidence in government, embracing those successes and holding them up as models for broader emulation should be an important component of his agenda.

In each case, the federal government could create incentives for states and localities to pursue similar approaches to the ideas that have worked in practice while undertaking an active campaign to explain how to implement the same successful strategies across the country. All of these ideas would promote long-term, broadly shared benefits, and at least in some cases have the dual virtue of helping to create productive jobs during a period when the United States is experiencing what may be the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

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OKLAHOMA'S UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAM

The gold standard among state efforts to broaden the reach and improve the quality of preschool services is Oklahoma's state-funded pre-kindergarten program, which originated in 1990 and became universal in 1998. In most locations, this service is provided by the local public school system, although federally funded Head Start programs for low-income children and day care centers also are eligible to participate if they establish "collaborative" relationships with their local school districts. In those instances, the outside provider receives 85 percent to 90 percent of the state subsidy, while the school district receives the remaining 10 percent to 15 percent. The program has relatively high quality standards, requiring every lead teacher to have a bachelor's degree and to be certified in early childhood education, while offering more generous pay and benefits than most other states. The maximum student-teacher ratio is ten to one, and class sizes do not exceed twenty. State resources allocated toward the pre-K program amounted to about \$112 million in 2007.

Local school districts have the option of offering full- or half-day programs, or both, and parents are not obligated to participate. Pre-K enrollment roughly doubled between 1998 and 2005, to about 33,400, with a slightly higher share attending half-day than full-day programs. Over the same time period, the percentage of Oklahoma school districts offering pre-K increased from 65 percent to 96 percent. Oklahoma leads the nation in the share of its four-year-olds receiving pre-K services, with 73.2 percent enrolled, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.¹

Oklahoma's pre-K program has been carefully evaluated and found to produce positive short-term results on cognitive and language scores among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. One study found that the universal pre-K program in Tulsa boosted pre-reading skills by an average of nine months, pre-writing skills by seven months, and pre-math skills by five months compared to children the same age and background who did not receive pre-K services. The Head Start program in Tulsa also yielded improvements—though somewhat less sizeable—in each category.² A wide range of studies in different contexts have confirmed the efficacy of pre-K programs in improving the cognitive and language skills of children by the time they enter kindergarten, regardless of their socioeconomic background.³

Nationally, thirty-eight states offer some degree of support for pre-K programs, although the extent of that support and the ways in which services are provided vary enormously. After Oklahoma, the states covering the highest share of four-year-olds are Florida, Georgia, West Virginia, Vermont, and Texas—a range suggesting that political enthusiasm for pre-K is prevalent in both "red" and "blue" states.⁴

While political and financial support for pre-K programs at the state level has grown gradually, adoption of Oklahoma's universal model or something close to it has been slow to evolve because of concerns about cost, quality, and difficulties in implementation. Given how effective the Oklahoma experiment has been, the federal government

has a clear opportunity to help other states find their way toward overcoming the obstacles that have deterred them from following a similar approach. Oklahoma has demonstrated that universally available preschool improves the school-readiness of its children, and similar results have been found in Georgia, which has its own ambitious pre-K program.

The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, convened by the National Center on Education and the Economy, calculated the annual cost of universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds at \$19.3 billion nationally, over and above current federal and state spending that could contribute to that effort.⁵ The federal government should allocate annually between one-fourth and one-half of that sum toward a fund that would provide matching grants to states that submit qualifying proposals for universal pre-K programs, including concrete, realistic details about how quality would be assured and integration with existing programs accomplished. Flexibility should be allowed in the design of those proposals to take into account local circumstances—for example, some states do not have as much room available in their public schools as Oklahoma does. In addition, the current hodgepodge of federal programs and funding streams for early childhood support services should be streamlined and coordinated. Sharon L. Kagan and Jeanne L. Reid of Columbia University propose a number of useful recommendations that would strengthen and modernize the federal government’s role, including the establishment of a national electronic clearinghouse on early education innovations.⁶

An energetic effort to build on Oklahoma’s success nationwide would benefit hundreds of thousands of families, improve the school readiness of young children, and provide meaningful, productive jobs at a relatively modest cost.

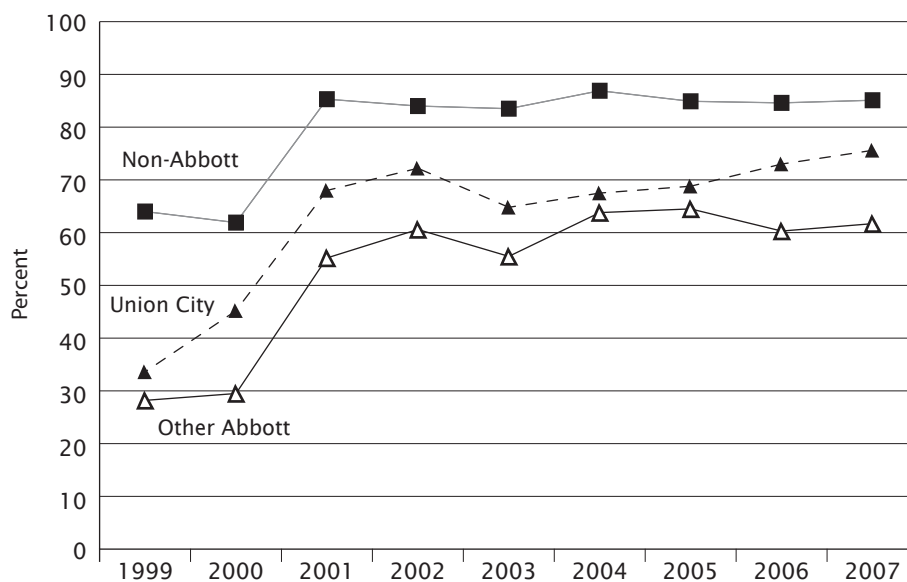
NEW JERSEY’S INNOVATIVE LOW-INCOME PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The most intractable challenge in American education has been providing effective instruction in urban schools attended predominantly by students from low-income, minority families. Some scattered low-income public schools and relatively small chains of charter schools such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)—whose students come from families that seek special instruction, including extended school days—have generated promising results. But virtually no impoverished public school systems can be described as successful.

Evidence is mounting, however, that a subset of the thirty-one poor school districts in New Jersey covered by the New Jersey Supreme Court decision, *Abbott v. Burke*—which channeled substantial additional funding to those communities to comply with the state constitutional requirement of a “thorough and efficient education”—are demonstrating remarkable success in improving children’s educational attainment. A newly published Century Foundation monograph by Gordon MacInnes delving into the Abbott experience finds that, while the additional money helped make the gains possible, the pedagogical strategies pursued were much more important, because not all Abbott districts improved significantly.⁷

The evidence of success begins with the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, on which fourth-graders in New Jersey improved relative to 2005 by eight scale points overall, including twelve points for African Americans and eight points for Latinos. (Massachusetts, which is much less diverse than New Jersey, was the only state with higher fourth-grade reading scores.) Literacy and math scores dramatically increased in the poor, racially isolated Abbott communities of Elizabeth, Orange, Perth Amboy, Vineland, Union City, and West New York. MacInnes points out that the most successful Abbott district, when it comes to narrowing the achievement gap, was Union City, the nation's most densely populated municipality and, by the most widely employed measure of poverty—eligibility for the free lunch program—New Jersey's poorest. Over the past five-year period, almost 70 percent of Union City's fourth graders were proficient on the state's benchmark fourth-grade literacy test, while only half of students with similar characteristics in other districts passed the same threshold. Between 1999 and 2006, eighth grade students in Union City closed the gap in math with students in wealthier non-Abbott districts from 26.3 percentage points to 0.6, and in language arts moved from 23.3 percentage points behind to only 3.0. Such steady and sustained improvement through the middle grades in high poverty schools is extremely rare (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of Union City Fourth Grade Students Proficient or Advanced Proficient in Language Arts, Compared with Abbott and Non-Abbott Districts, 1999-2007



Note: In 2001, the New Jersey Department of Education revised the cut score on the fourth grade Language Arts Literacy test, which had the effect of increasing the proficiency percents by about twenty-one points statewide.

Source: Peter Noehrenberg, "Pass Rates by Subgroup 4th Gr. LA '99-06," New Jersey Department of Education Statewide Assessment Data, December 8, updated by Gordon MacInnes.

MacInnes attributes the remarkable gains in Union City and the other successful Abbott districts not to any simple, quick fix or ideologically driven reform, but to several ongoing pedagogical strategies that have proven to bear fruit over time. They include:

- *Stressing early literacy.* The *Abbott* decision mandated preschool for three- as well as four-year-olds, which Union City has used to focus on nurturing language skills in young children. The tie-in between preschool and early literacy produced dramatic results: 83 percent of Union City third graders who had attended preschool there were proficient on the state's 2006 literacy assessment, compared to 73 percent who had not attended preschool, and to 64 percent in all Abbott districts. The emphasis on literacy as the doorway to deeper and more rigorous learning entails devoting a large portion of class time to activities related to reading and writing—with negligible use of textbooks.
- *Continuous measuring* of the progress of all students through district assessments that are completed every eight weeks, combined with ongoing collaboration between supervisors and teachers working to diagnose problems and prescribe specific follow-up. For example, if 80 percent of all third graders miss question number 17 on a test, the central office knows that it has a district-wide problem in conveying the material related to that question; or it may see that most of the students who missed question number 9 are from just two schools—requiring adjustments in teaching that material only in those settings. Union City's student database provides teachers, parents, and principals with timely information on what needs to be stressed in different classes and with each student.
- *Enlisting teachers to work collaboratively to solve pedagogical puzzles.* Teachers work closely together in developing the curriculum, experimenting with new approaches, testing and selecting instructional materials, and adapting technology to facilitate instruction. In contrast to the vast majority of public schools, teachers are not left to sink or swim on their own.
- *Analyzing the probable reasons that some students may be falling behind and spending whatever time is required to bring them up to standards.* Struggling students are expected to participate in extra sessions during the school day, including during breakfast, lunch, or after school. Students that share similar problems are put in small groups for more intensive instruction.

The *Abbott* decision, with its elevated funding toward poor school districts and requirement of early childhood education beginning at age three, created a unique set of conditions under which some of those districts managed to achieve a remarkable degree of success. But the main reasons why those school systems appear to have been so effective do not require a massive increase in funding. They do, however, require fundamentally different approaches toward teaching that are based not on simplistic answers of the sort that have come to dominate debates over educational reform. Rather, those successful strategies are built on the hard work, beginning with children at a young age, of focusing on the development of reading and writing

skills, closely monitoring the progress of students on an ongoing basis, devoting extra time to help students overcome identified weaknesses, and collaborative problem-solving among teachers and supervisors.

In this case, the main role for the federal government is to engage in hard work of its own: developing the capacity to help convey to urban educators in other high-poverty districts the lessons of the New Jersey experience and how to undertake similar approaches. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which targets over \$11 billion in financial assistance to schools educating low-income students—and another \$10 billion for teacher recruitment and professional development, educational technology, and after-school programs—is due for reauthorization as part of the expiring No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Revising ESEA during the reauthorization process to incorporate support tailored toward the kinds of strategies that worked in Union City and the other successful New Jersey communities is far more likely to produce similar results nationwide than a continuation of much more common, far less effective practices.

THE VOLUNTARY INTER-DISTRICT TRANSFER PROGRAM IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

St. Louis is among a handful of cities—the others include Hartford, Boston, Milwaukee, Rochester, and Indianapolis—that for many years have enabled several thousand minority students to attend suburban schools on a voluntary basis. The St. Louis program was originally included as part of a 1983 school desegregation order, and has allowed as many as 13,000 African-American students to attend public schools in sixteen participating suburbs. Even after the federal judge presiding over the court case recently said that the program was no longer required, all sixteen communities agreed to continue it, and thirteen decided to accept new students even though state funding for each transfer student was reduced. The superintendent of the affluent Clayton School District said after the vote endorsing continuation of the program, “You all know how I feel about this program. . . . It’s a very special thing.”

In The Century Foundation’s newly published volume, *Improving on No Child Left Behind*, Jennifer Jellison Holme and Amy Stuart Wells synthesize research that has been conducted over the years on these cross-district initiatives.⁸ Because the St. Louis program was the largest and most closely studied effort, it makes sense to focus on that model. Overall, the main findings from the St. Louis research show that African-American students from the city who transferred to suburban schools did not show significant gains on academic tests in the elementary grades; but in the long run, those who stayed in the program until they reached the tenth grade, displayed levels of achievement that far surpassed that of their peers who either remained in neighborhood city schools or attended magnet schools created as part of the court order. One study found that, by middle and high school, African-Americans able to attend suburban schools were scoring about 10 percent higher in reading and math than African-Americans in city middle and high schools.⁹ In addition, graduation rates were twice as high for the transfer students compared to counterparts who remained in the city schools.

Research into the other cross-district programs likewise consistently found that transfer students performed better on tests and other measures than those who remained in city public schools. Indeed, a multitude of studies going back to the Coleman Report in the 1960s have shown that students from low-income families who attend predominantly middle-class schools do much better than those who go to high poverty schools. For example, on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress given to fourth graders in math, low-income students attending more affluent schools were almost two years ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools. Concentrations of poverty create a confluence of dynamics that make it vastly more difficult for schools to provide a quality education. But when low-income children have an opportunity to go to middle class schools—where parents are more likely to be engaged, classroom disruptions are less pervasive, teachers are better qualified on average, buildings are in better repair, instructional materials are higher quality, and peers are more likely to value learning—they have a much better chance of succeeding.

The pending reauthorization of NCLB presents an opportunity to create new incentives and support systems to encourage much more widespread implementation of the sort of cross-district transfers that were so successful—both educationally and politically—in St. Louis and elsewhere. Holme and Wells argue for changes in NCLB that would target and support meaningful school choices for the most disadvantaged students, create strong incentives for significant participation of suburban districts, and further the goals of diversity and equity in public education. Among the specific changes to NCLB that they recommend:

- Students enrolled in schools that consistently fail to achieve “adequate yearly progress” and who meet other criteria, including residency in a neighborhood with a high concentration of poverty, should become eligible for voluntary transfers to suburban schools.
- Support services, including transportation and coordination of services and information, would be provided to such students with federal funding.
- Financial incentives would be provided to help suburbs more than cover the cost of educating transfer students; “safe haven” provisions would assure the suburban districts that the test scores of students they accept from the city would not, for an extended period of time, be counted in assessing their adequate yearly progress in connection with NCLB.
- Funding also would be provided for support and training for educators in suburban public schools that agree to participate in the program.

Although political resistance remains strong in many suburban communities against allowing the admittance of low-income minority children into their schools, the history of cross-district programs demonstrates that, over time, such communities evolve beyond grudging acceptance to valuing those programs as an important asset to their town—as well as beneficial to their own students. One role the federal government can play is to make the

case actively that socioeconomic integration demonstrably improves the performance of schools and students. That bottom-line result can help to overcome concerns and fears about the idea. Considering how many other reform strategies have failed year after year, it is time for the federal government to campaign energetically for a different approach that has proven to work.

Greg Anrig, vice president of policy at The Century Foundation, is the author of *The Conservatives Have No Clothes: Why Right-Wing Ideas Keep Failing* (John Wiley & Sons, September 2007).

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