

Can educators close the achievement gap?

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD ROTHSTEIN AND KATI HAYCOCK

BY HOLLY HOLLAND

American schools have been given an impossible job, researcher Richard Rothstein asserts. The No Child Left Behind Act requires them to get students from all demographic groups to high academic standards without simultaneously addressing the external social and economic factors — poverty, substandard housing, inadequate health care, and the like — that put poor and minority students on average behind their middle-class peers. In his book, *Class and Schools* (Teachers College Press, 2004), Rothstein writes that “the influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well-trained are their teachers and no matter how well-designed are their instructional programs and climates.” Rothstein, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute and former education columnist at the *New York*

Times, suggests that policy makers would be more effective in closing the achievement gap if they focused on reforms such as income equality, school-community clinics, and early childhood education in addition to school improvement.

Giving in to the common belief that schools can't succeed with disadvantaged children belies the growing evidence that skilled and dedicated educators are doing so every day in schools around the country, says Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust.

Rather than blame factors outside their control, effective schools focus on what they can do to close the achievement gap, including providing consistent and rich curricula and instruction proven to raise achievement for all students. “Poor and minority children don't underachieve

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Rothstein



Haycock

in school just because they often enter behind,” Haycock writes in *Teaching Inequality*, a new report from Education Trust, “but, also because the schools that are supposed to serve them actually shortchange them in the one resource they most need to reach their potential — high-quality teachers.”

In this interview with the two, education writer Holly Holland probes whether these seemingly opposing points of view have any commonalities, and whether two leading thinkers in the field of education can agree that teachers can truly make a difference in all children's lives.

JSD: Is the task of closing the achievement gap possible through education?

Haycock: Schools have been charged with getting all kids, regardless of family circumstances in which they live, to proficiency on state standards. Does that mean that they can or should obliterate any influence of family background on test performance? No, they've not been asked to do that. They've been asked to set a real-world, reasonably high definition of what kids should really know and be able to do to succeed in the world ahead and to get all groups of kids to that standard. Is that possible? Absolutely.

JSD: On what basis do you make the claim that it's possible to do that?

Haycock: Some schools already have. Many districts are well along the way toward getting lots of schools achieving in that direction. And in my mind, at least, it's a matter of time, energy, and resources. But I don't think there's any reason to believe that we can't do that for the vast majority of our kids.

Rothstein: If you set the proficiency point very low or very high, you can make the gap seem to disappear, when, in fact, the average achievement of children from different social backgrounds doesn't change. States and the federal government are charging schools with getting all students to proficiency. The states that are showing the most progress are meeting that by lowering the definitions of proficiency and are claiming that their success in approaching this new lower standard of proficiency proves they can meet the high standard of proficiency. So the fact that there are some schools and some districts that are making more progress than others in achieving low standards of proficiency is not evidence that schools and districts can achieve high

standards of proficiency for all social groups without addressing the social and economic disadvantages that those children come from.

Haycock: Wait a minute. You're suggesting that states are "gaming" the system under No Child Left Behind by lowering their own definitions of proficiency, and they're making more progress as a result of that? I'd like to hear some examples of that.

Rothstein: This year, both Mississippi and Kansas dropped all short-answer questions from the tests used for NCLB accountability and will now allow only multiple-choice items. Other states have previously made this change. In 2002, the year NCLB was enacted, Louisiana redefined its "basic" level of performance to be "proficient" for NCLB purposes. Connecticut created a new category of "proficient" performance, lower than the "goal" it had previously set for accountability purposes.

In many cases, it is difficult to find the specific way in which a state has reduced proficiency standards without examining the difficulty of each specific question on state tests to discover where the questions have become easier. However, there is solid, indirect evidence that this is happening. The most extreme cases are those where the percentage of students labeled "proficient" on state tests goes up from the previous administration, while the percentage of students labeled "proficient" goes down in a similar time frame on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Haycock: Let's look at the facts. First, as they were pressed to actually get students to high standards, some states have pegged their accountability systems to lower, near-term goals. But does that mean that, in those states, performance on state exams soared while performance on more rigorous exams like NAEP went down? Hardly. Louisiana, for example, seems to have

committed the unpardonable sin of keeping the rigor of its standards and tests high, but setting a near-term goal of basic rather than proficient. A review of that state's results suggests that scores are mostly going up and gaps narrowing. So what happened with Louisiana's results on the tougher NAEP test over the last five to seven years? It tied for fifth in the country on reading gains for black 4th graders; tied for 6th in math gains for black 8th graders; and was in 3rd and 4th place respectively in reducing black/white gaps. Second, even as some states appear to have lowered their sights in the post-NCLB era, at least as many appear to have raised the rigor of their tests. The Education Trust tracks this issue as closely as any organization, and while we don't have information on every state, we know that at least Arkansas, Georgia, and Texas have raised the rigor of their state assessments post-NCLB. But finally, all technicalities aside, I want to take issue with Richard's essential assumption: that the only way to narrow gaps between groups is to dumb down your test. That assumption is dead wrong, and it is deeply offensive to educators who are proving every single day that it is possible to get very poor children to very high levels of achievement.

Rothstein: Now I am confused. Is the accountability system that Kati supports one that holds students to "high standards" or to "lower near-term goals?" The contradictions in her last statement are precisely those in NCLB and its administration. Louisiana now holds, as Kati acknowledges, students to only basic levels of achievement and the federal

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government now counts that as meeting NCLB's explicit requirement of having all students proficient on "challenging state academic achievement standards." And there is nothing near-term about this goal. It is the state's now-permanent policy. Further, Kati has, unfortunately, again misstated my argument. I have never, anywhere, said that the only way to make progress is to dumb down the test. But it is one way. As Kati notes, Louisiana has made progress on the NAEP, and this probably reflects real progress. But after all this progress, Louisiana is still the 45th lowest-scoring

state in the country on 4th-grade reading. If it is to make substantial progress beyond that, it will have to improve instruction and improve the social and economic conditions of its children's lives. What is truly deeply offensive to dedicated educators is the demand that they be held solely accountable for getting truly high achievement from the most dis-

advantaged children, while society denies those children the social and economic supports that could help them succeed.

JSD: Richard, in your book, *Class and Schools*, it seems that you've gone beyond the argument that schools can't overcome the achievement gap alone. You're arguing that they can't do it, period.

Rothstein: Well, overcome means eliminate it. I'm not saying that schools can't do better than they've done in the past and that some schools don't do better than others. But what I said is that schools can't overcome the social and economic disadvantages from which children come. I stand by that. Can schools make a difference? Of course they

can. But they can't make the difference that's being expected of them in present policy.

JSD: Kati, you've written that educational improvements will only "inch upward" unless inside and outside forces collaborate to improve teacher practices. I'm wondering if that doesn't bolster Richard's point (that school can't overcome all social and economic disadvantages).

Haycock: First, let me be clear that I don't believe anybody should have to live in poverty or the difficult circumstances that so many of our children in this country do. And I have spent many years of my life fighting to improve the conditions of families in this country. That said, I've spent an awful lot of time in schools. And I also spend a lot of time with data. And from both of those experiences, it's very clear to me that even as we work to improve the conditions of families in this country, we can, in fact, get even the poorest children to high standards of achievement if we really focus in our schools on that goal — if we provide teachers with a strong curriculum, with the kind of supports and training they need, if we are relentless about the use of time, and if we stay focused on getting better results.

I've actually just been looking at some data from a school in Philadelphia that our staff has spent a lot of time working with. The school serves really, really poor kids, almost all of whom are black. A couple of years ago, this school had essentially given in to the circumstances in which its students lived. Roughly 13% to 15% of the kids in that school were proficient on the state assessments, and, frankly, because of all the things that Richard and others have mentioned, they thought that was about as good as they would ever do. But then they got a new leader,

they got additional support from the central office, and they decided to focus on what the school can do. And what they can do is a range of things that were mostly about instruction: getting a coherent curriculum in place, getting the teachers — most of whom were young and inexperienced — the kind of expert training and supports they needed, having team leaders get really focused. They hired a nurse to deal with a lot of the students' health care issues. They hired a parent liaison who both works positively with parents and testifies against them in court if they don't make sure the kids actually get to school.

As a result of that, about 85% of their kids are proficient in mathematics and about 75% are proficient in reading. Are they at 100% yet? No, they're not. But it's very different from the 13% to 15% of a few years ago. So would I say to them, "Gee, you've got to wait until all those things outside your school are fixed"? No. But what you can do turns out to be an awful lot.

Rothstein: I'm not familiar with this school, so I can't agree or disagree with what Kati is saying about it. But the description she just gave, first of all, is contingent on a definition of proficiency that's been set by the state of Pennsylvania — which is not middle-class levels of achievement. So you can have children at that level of proficiency and there would still be an achievement gap in terms of the average achievement of children in those groups, and that's ultimately what matters. It doesn't matter if you can get a high percentage of children over a proficient point if there's still a big average difference in the groups. They're still not going to be competitive with middle-class kids.

Haycock: Now wait. In this economy, you're arguing that it doesn't matter if we get kids who graduate from high school to have a high level of reading and math proficiency if

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that proficiency is somehow less than that of other students? We haven't done them a favor?

Rothstein: You keep on trying to suggest that I'm saying we should not try to improve the achievement of disadvantaged children. Of course we should do that. But you can have a situation where every single child in Philadelphia was at Pennsylvania's proficiency point and there would be a vast difference, for example, in the SAT scores of poor and middle-class children emerging from those schools. The proficiency point, as I said before, is a manipulative cut point. It's not an accurate way to describe the achievement gap.

Haycock: It is an accurate way to describe what we've asked schools to do. ... What somebody is saying, what the government has said, is "Look, we need to set a level of proficiency that represents what kids really need in the real world. And we've got to get all kids to that level of achievement."

JSD: Does this suggest that professional development for teachers has greater importance than ever before?

Haycock: There is no question when you look at both research and our experience around the country that expert teachers are the heart of any solution. Yes, there are some other things that schools can do in terms of curriculum, in terms of supports, in terms of longer school days and school years and the like. But in the end, the most central ingredient is teachers who really know their stuff and have a wide range of strategies to reach all kinds of learners. Yet when you look at what we're doing as a country, we're actually doing the opposite of that. Instead of taking the kids who are entering behind and pairing them with our most expert teachers who can help to catch them up, we're assigning the kids who come

in behind to teachers who have less of everything: less education, less experience, and less actual skill.

The second thing we need to do is help the new teachers we attract. There's a lot of talent that's very much interested in working with poor children. What we haven't been as good about is making sure those smart, eager newcomers, whether they're coming in from traditional routes or other professions, have the really careful, deliberate help that they need to become the good teachers that these kids need.

Yes, it's important to get kids help with the sort of nonschool things that they need, and schools can play an important role in brokering services with local health care agencies and others. But to get kids to high levels of achievement, schools have to remain really, really focused on what they do best, and that's really about instruction.

Rothstein: This issue about what schools do best is a complicated one. My main fear is that by proclaiming that schools alone can solve these problems — and this is certainly what our laws proclaim and many of our policy makers proclaim — we remove the responsibility from the public sphere of addressing the other problems. If it were really true that with only school improvement, all children would emerge from high school with college-ready skills, then, in fact, we wouldn't need to worry about anything else because in one generation, all of our problems would be taken care of. And by telling people that schools alone can accomplish this, what we're doing is taking all political pressure and all moral pressure off the public to deal with any of these other issues.

Let's take a look at health care. The main reason that low-income children don't have the same kind of health and health care that middle-class children get is because they don't

get the same kind of routine and preventive care that middle-class children get. And the reason why they don't get it is because their parents are working low-wage, hourly jobs, and they have to take unpaid time off from work to get their children the routine and preventive care that middle-class children take for granted. If the children are seriously ill, they can go to emergency care and their parents will take time off from work. But if we want children to get the routine and preventive care that keeps them in good health, we're going to need to bring clinics, not just with nurses, but also with pediatricians and dentists and optometrists into schools.

Haycock: I spend all of my time in schools and in the policy arena, and I have never ever heard anyone say we're not going to work on health care because we're going to fix everything through the schools. The truth is that governmental policy at the federal level has been about providing schools with extra resources. We can argue about whether the 40% to 50% increase in the past few years has been enough, and I think Richard and I would both agree that it hasn't been enough.

We get confused here a little bit between what we all want for kids — and that certainly includes good preventive health care, includes good before- and after-school care, includes good solid families, and a whole bunch of other things — and what schools should do. What schools typically want to do is focus first on the things that are outside their direct control: work with the parents, work with the families, get health care services, get social services. They don't do the things that are directly in front of them. And interestingly, what happens when you do that is you don't

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get anywhere in terms of student achievement. There is, at least as far as we can tell, no example of a school that's done all those external things and actually generated improvements in achievement. By trying to do way more than they're capable of doing, schools don't achieve what they can achieve when they really focus on getting instruction right. Those are the investments — the investments in teachers, the investments in curriculum, the investments in professional development — that are the ones that actually pay off in terms of greater student learning. The other ones simply don't. They're right for kids, but they're not right in terms of what results in greater student achievement.

Rothstein: I'm not suggesting that schools should be responsible for all these other things. I'm talking about what public policy should do. I'm not suggesting that principals should suddenly become health care experts and housing experts and should take on the responsibility of dealing with these outside forces. What I'm saying is that, as a society, we cannot equalize the achievement of children from different social classes without addressing all these institutional areas simultaneously.

JSD: So what's the next step? If we don't continue down the same path, which is to put more burden on the schools to raise achievement, doing all the things in their control, what would you have happen?

Rothstein: In addition to trying to improve schools, we also need to be reforming our health care system, we need to be dealing with our housing crisis in low-income communities, we need to deal with the growing income inequality in our society, and we need to do some of the things that Kati was talking about — we need to provide the funds for summer school and after-school programs. We certainly need to provide for more early childhood programs.

If we want to close the achievement gap — close it, not simply narrow it — we need to have high-quality early childhood programs. Right now, low-income children are parked in front of television sets in low-quality day care centers for the most part. Middle-class children have much more high-quality early childhood programs that develop their fine motor skills as well as their vocabulary, their preacademic skills. By the time children get to school, there's already an achievement gap. We're not going to completely eliminate that unless we address the early childhood issues. There are many areas that we should be working on. And the point I keep making is that we should be working on all of them simultaneously. We're not going to accomplish miracles by working on any one issue, whether it's health care or housing or early childhood or school improvement.

JSD: Then what's the message for educators? To keep on, or it doesn't really matter what you do until we fix all these other things?

Rothstein: No, I've never said it doesn't matter. You have to keep on. But the expectations of public policy should not mean that educators can solve these problems by themselves. And that is the current expectation of our public policy.

Haycock: No, actually the current expectation of our public policy is that schools will close the gap in proficiency on state assessments. Let me give one more concrete example about the impact of mobility. Everybody who works in schools knows that mobility is a problem. Rather than wait until the housing problem in this country gets fixed, what do educators who really have a sense of commitment do? They do the things that they can get done. What are some of those things? No. 1, if you have a common curriculum across the district, then when kids move schools,

the disruption is much less for the kids because you're roughly in the same book at roughly the same time. While you have to get used to a new teacher and new kids, there doesn't have to be a break in instruction.

It's also about doing what Santa Fe Unified did a few years ago. When Ray Cortines was superintendent there, the principals were talking about this mobility problem. He saw that kids were moving in a distinct pattern, that basically they weren't moving very far. So Ray said, "You know, we've got buses running all over the school district for special education already. What if we work with these families around the home-school concept? What if we said, 'It's really important for your kid's school to stay stable? And even if you move, we can bus them back to the home school and reduce the disruptions in their lives.'" Through doing two things like that, you're not going to eliminate mobility, but you can get it way down and mitigate the effects of it. That's what educators do who are aware of these problems but don't want to wait for public policy to take care of it all.

JSD: As we conclude, I'm wondering if each of you could suggest how we might continue the conversation about how to close the achievement gap. What follow-up questions would you want faculty members to ask each other about this topic?

Haycock: As far as I'm concerned, there are two questions. One is, "What can we do?" And the other is, "What can we learn from those who are ahead of us?"

Rothstein: I would say this: Teachers are also citizens, as are superintendents, school board members, and school administrators. And nobody is in a better position to

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district's more effective teachers to replace them.

Any school, he said, could manage one or two ineffective teachers. Principals could help one or two weak teachers grow professionally, or they could counsel them out of the profession. But no school could function effectively with 12 or 15 such teachers. No principal working alone could provide enough substantial guidance and professional development to help that many teachers improve.

Everyone, he said, would have to share equally in this deficit because, in effect, everyone had helped to create it.

"You could have heard a pin drop in that room," he said.

But there were no objections from Hamilton County principals or parents. Register had laid the groundwork for this through several years of deep conversations about the meaning of effective schools. The teachers union worked with him to negotiate the transfer process, and no grievances resulted.

"We really wanted to change away from a culture that enabled poor teaching," he said.

Some of those ineffective teachers left the district immediately, some left later, and others managed to improve when they were placed in a different environment and got the intensive support they needed to improve.

Importantly, highly effective teachers were recruited into the once low-performing schools. "Teachers told us they were willing to go, but they wanted the opportunity to be successful. They wanted support, and they wanted colleagues who would work with them," he said.

Hamilton County addressed these concerns with incentive pay, recruiting clusters of teachers committed to working together, developing leadership teams within each school, and offering a generous dose of public praise for successful teachers.

Register shrugs off the accolades, although he acknowledges his pride in the achievements during his tenure. He retired from Hamilton County in June 2006 and is now a senior adviser for district leadership at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

WHICH KIND OF LEADER ARE YOU?

As a school leader, are you like the first superintendent? Or are you more like Jesse Register, courageously taking actions today that match the convictions that drew you into the profession in the first place?

School leaders who wonder whether they could lead changes similar to those in Hamilton County can begin with an honest review of the reality of their schools today. Walk through your schools. Sit in classrooms. Compare the differences in culture, teaching skills, and classroom expectations. Reflect honestly on whether you believe that every child in your district has the same access to learning, regardless of which classroom he or she sits in. Then ask yourself what you can do to make any needed changes.

No teacher gets up in the morning deciding to do a lousy job that day, and it's unlikely that any school leader has decided that he or she wants to have a low-performing school. But teachers who are ineffective often are resigned to their poor performance. Those who are neither capable of making a change nor understand that they need to change are the teachers who most require the support and guidance of principals and district leaders.

Anyone who has assumed the mantle of leadership in a school or district is responsible for ensuring that every student has quality teaching every hour of every day. If any student is not receiving that, school leaders are the ones — and the only ones — who can make it right. ■

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know the damage that the social and economic inequalities in society do to low-income children than the educators who see these children every day. So I think that faculty members have two roles to play. One is what they do inside their schools. But the other is what they do as citizens, and they need to be much more vocal about these issues that they alone have expertise in.

Haycock: In the end, I doubt that

Richard and I have horrible disagreements about the policy end, even though we have a tendency to focus on what separates us rather than what unites us. I will say, however, that when educators talk about these issues, they need to be very careful about what they convey. If you talk about the impossibility of getting poor kids or minority kids to high levels of achievement unless all these things take place in the outside world, you can, if you're not careful, convey a belief that you think the children's capacity is limited and that you

think they are essentially worth less than other children. The language is very, very important.

The core message in high-performing, high-poverty schools is one that we wish that all schools were better at spreading to kids, and that is that high achievement is mostly the result of sticking with it long enough to build the skills you need to succeed in the world. And you really see very deliberate efforts to teach kids that, to help them see how they can get ever better by investing more energy in their work. ■