Opinion: Location, Location, Location -- The Real Determinant for Success in School

NEW STUDY INDICATES CAMDEN STUDENTS FLOURISH WHEN MOVED OUT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOLS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

By Laura Waters, November 20, 2012 in Opinion |1 Comment

This past September, the Camden City Public Schools formally accepted a Needs Assessment commissioned as part of a strategic-planning process. The assessment catalogs the district's "formidable governance challenges," the "deep lack of trust and respect among board members," a culture that fails to " hold administrators accountable for results," and an inability to "accomplish meaningful change" or develop "strategies to address systemic challenges."

"Despite spending more per pupil than almost any district in the country," the report notes, "Camden schools have failed to serve their students effectively for years. This is not the fault of any individual or group: There are many passionate, hard-working teachers and administrators throughout Camden. But they have been working in a broken system that has lacked effective leadership for too long."

By and large, that's how New Jersey serves its neediest students, a choice codified in the State Supreme Court's Abbott rulings. For decades we've pumped cash and other resources into Abbott districts like Camden and ascribed chronic failures to the "poverty is destiny" paradigm.

Anyway, it's a lot easier to write a check than confront the consequences of segregating poor kids into ghettoized school districts. Abbott is a soporific, allowing New Jersey to sustain the illusion that it can meet the constitutionally mandated equal access to public education without ruffling our home rule plumage.

A new study just out from Princeton offers a non-Abbott remedy for improving educational opportunities for poor kids stuck in districts like Camden. "School Context and Educational Outcomes: Results from a Quasi-Experimental Study," published in Urban Affairs Review this past August by Douglas S. Massey and Rebecca Casciano, tests the hypothesis, set out in the Abbott rulings, that students who live and go to richly funded schools in very poor cities can replicate the academic growth of children in wealthier districts.

In order to avoid statistical biases -- for example, comparing poor children who happen to have highly motivated parents with poor children with unmotivated parents -- researchers limited their data collection to applicants for a 140-unit affordable housing site in Mt. Laurel called the Ethel Lawrence Homes (ELH), which is eight miles east of Camden. Two cohorts were compared: a group of 37 teenage children whose families won the lottery for placement in ELH and another group of 34 teenaged children whose families lost the lottery and, thus, remained in Camden.

Data was collected on three aspects measuring educational growth: quality of schooling, exposure to within-school disorder and violence, and time devoted to reading.

The researchers conclude that the children who won placement in ELH "showed significantly improved educational circumstances compared with nonresident children" (i.e., the ones who lost the lottery). "To summarize our findings," they write "by moving into a subsidized housing development located in an affluent suburb, disadvantaged families increased the quality of the schooling their children received, lowered their exposure to within-school disorder and violence, and increased the time devoted to reading without suffering a decline in grades."

A related article by Massey called "Learning from Mt. Laurel" notes that the children placed in the Ethel Lawrence Homes were 33 percent more likely than children in lottery-losing families to have a quiet place to study and, as a result, "spent twice as many hours studying or doing homework."

Parents reported that the "relative tranquility of their surroundings" allowed them to supervise their children's education more closely. They were 40 percent more likely to check daily homework assignments and eight times more likely to take their kids to the library.

Massey writes, "when we constructed an index of school quality from published statistics on SAT scores, attendance rates, dropout rates, graduation rates, and advanced placement scores, we found that school quality was 2.3 times greater for ELH children than those in the comparison group. Exposure to disorder and violence within schools was 23 percent lower." One mother said, "They're straight A and B students. They love to read, and [when] I compare them with my family members who still are in Camden, there's no comparison."

Notably, students maintained their GPA's after moving from Camden's failing schools to Mt. Laurel's successful (and demanding) ones. It wasn't the kids. It wasn't the poverty. It was place.

We can continue to pour resources into chronically failing school districts and read the results in analyses like the Camden Needs Assessment. Or we can confront the fact that access to good educational systems can't be isolated from access to affordable housing.

Just this week the State Supreme Court took up, once again, New Jersey's Mt. Laurel Doctrine, ratty with loopholes and bipartisan disdain, which requires municipalities to provide a fair share of affordable housing. It's the inverse of Abbott (although, curiously, the initial decisions in both cases came down about the same time). Our Fair Housing Act requires integration. Abbott condones segregation. The children of Camden won't have their own fair chance until we find room for them in functional schools.

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