LEARNING FROM UNEXPECTED SCHOOLS

Thank you. I am honored to be asked to share a few thoughts from my work.

Although I had been writing about schools and education and education research for a number of years, my work "learning from unexpected schools" began in earnest a little under a decade ago. That is when The Education Trust hired me to help find high-performing schools with significant populations of students of color and students of poverty and figure out what they do to be so different from their peers.

Education Trust, of course, is the organization founded by Kati Haycock (a former Millman award recipient) to repeal the seemingly iron law that connects academic achievement and socio-economic status.

There are lots of ways to demonstrate that law, but one dramatic way is to array schools by their academic achievement along the y axis and percent of students who live in poverty on the x axis. You've seen many such scatterplots, and they demonstrate that as poverty increases, academic achievement tends to decrease. Very similar results could be replicated if we replace the indicator for poverty with percent of students of color or other socio-economic indicators.

These scatterplots are, really, very depressing. For one thing, they demonstrate how un-integrated our schools are. When you see so many schools with very low percentages of students of color and students living in poverty and then so many with very high percentages, you know that far too many children attend schools **only** with other children who are like them economically and ethnically, thus robbing them of the opportunities to know people not like themselves.

But that is a whole other subject.

What I want to talk about today is something else that those scatterplots demonstrate, which is that not only do we provide a **separate** education but an ***unequal*** one to far too many children.

We may not agree on much in this country – indeed, we appear to agree on very little – but a broad consensus exists that every child in our borders deserves a shot at the American Dream. We also – for the most part – agree that the most reliable way to provide equal opportunity to that dream is through a good education for all.

And yet these scatterplots demonstrate that ***something*** is keeping us from providing an equal education.

What is that something?

- There's the old standby explanation that students of color and students who grow up in poverty are simply less *able* than other students to achieve. If you force me to, I will discuss this one, but to me it is self-evident that these scatterplot patterns reflect not the internal abilities of children but rather the external forces that act on children.

So what external force causes these scatterplot patterns? Let's marshal what we know.

- We know the external effects of poverty are powerful – children living in poverty tend to have fewer experiences that enrich their vocabulary and background knowledge; their parents tend not to have the time or wherewithal to help them with their homework, and on and on. So the experience of poverty could explain it.

- We know that poor children and children of color, in general, have less spent on their schools than wealthier children, so school financing could explain it.

- We know that teachers who serve poor children and children of color *in general* tend to be newer and more inexperienced, so teacher expertise could explain it.

- We know that schools systems are highly bureaucratized monopoly systems, so their inability to respond nimbly to old problems with new solutions could be the explanation.

A compelling case could be made for each one of those factors, and lots of people have done so. As true as all of them are, however, they don't persuade me that ***even combined*** they completely explain those scatterplots.

The reason for my skepticism also lies in those scatterplots. Look again at them and note the schools in the upper-right quadrant.

There are almost always these outlier schools, and they are usually dismissed as the "exceptions that prove the rule."

I confess I never understood that phrase.

It seems to me that we can't be satisfied with any explanation that doesn't account for those persistent outliers when they have the same kinds of kids and operate under the same kinds of conditions as other schools that are less successful.

Back when I was writing an education column for the Washington Post I once wrote that schools were organized in a very sloppy way. In response an outraged teacher wrote saying that it was terribly unfair to talk that way. He and his colleagues worked very hard and the word sloppy shouldn't be used to describe any part of their work. Of course, he added parenthetically, there was always the occasional teacher who read the newspaper instead of teaching – but most teachers worked incredibly hard.

I wrote back asking him what his school did to ensure that the kids who had the newspaper-reading teachers were learning what they should be learning, and he wrote, "Nothing. They're screwed."

And that's what I meant by sloppy or, to be terminologically fancier, organizationally incoherent. It seems to me that that should be counted as another factor that has to be worked into the equation.

Richard Elmore and many others, of course, have been writing about organizational incoherence for a long time, and I am happy to say that I think the field as a whole has grasped the problem. Since Elmore began his work, there has been a lot of progress:

- There is now a clear sense that we need to have some common agreement on what kids ought to know and be able to do at the end of twelve or thirteen years of school and that they should be prepared for some kind of post-secondary education – whether four-year college or two-year career training. We still argue about it, of course, but for the most part people seem to grasp that some kind of agreement is necessary.
- There is now a clear agreement among most people, though with significant dissent among teachers, that we should have some kind of measures of learning that will allow us to compare how our kids are doing with other kids around the country and world.
- There is a relatively broad commitment to the idea that we can't only look at average achievement but must "dis-aggregate" what achievement looks like for different groups of students so that we can understand what gaps in achievement and opportunity exist.
- And, finally, most school and district leaders seem to understand that teachers need the time and opportunity to collaborate and work in what are called professional learning communities (though that term often covers a multitude of sins).

So very large pieces of the puzzle have been put together.

And it is certainly possible to say that something good is happening.

For example, there has been some genuine progress in early reading and math, according to the long-term National Assessment of Educational Progress, both overall and in narrowing achievement gaps. There's also been some progress for thirteen-year-olds. I won't mention 17-year-old results because this is the good-news portion of this talk.

But even with the progress that's been made, we are still left with those darn scatterplots.

So my question is, is there something we can learn from those outliers? That is, if we were to study them, would we see patterns that could help us understand this other factor that I have posited of institutional incoherence?

I would argue that the answer is yes, and I would further argue that the implications of those patterns reach beyond schools serving children of poverty to all schools.

So let's take a look at a couple of these outliers.

Right up at the upper-right hand quadrant of achievement in Alabama is George Hall Elementary School in Mobile. It is in a small neighborhood called Maysville, which consists of small single-family homes bordered by federal housing projects of the kinds typically built in the South, which is to say they don't look very different from warehouses. The students of George Hall for the most part live in those projects.

The students are poor, they are African American, and they live in an isolated neighborhood of a city in the Deep South. Given those factors, most people would expect the students of George Hall to be at the bottom right-hand quadrant of academic achievement. And in 2004 they were. In fact, they were performing below where most African American children were performing in Alabama, which was considerably below where white children in Alabama achieved.

That's when Terri Tomlinson became principal. She was part of a reconstitution by the city to fend off the possibility of a state takeover. An experienced principal, she brought her assistant principal Debbie Bolden and walked into a complete disaster. The staff had been required to re-apply for their jobs and – except for a maintenance worker and a cafeteria worker – were reassigned elsewhere in the district. On their way out the former staff members had trashed the building. People in the neighborhood, who saw a couple of white women they did not trust take over the most functional institution they had, did their own damage by putting a dead cat on the air conditioner and "fishing" the building – that is, rubbing dead fish on the bricks creating a horrible stench.

Tomlinson told me years later that even then she knew that "achievement wouldn't be an issue" once the right systems were in place.

Tomlinson and Bolden spent the summer putting some of those systems in place. As experienced educators they were able to draw on relationships they had built for decades, and teachers were eager to work for Tomlinson. They hired a staff drawn from around Mobile. But Tomlinson and Bolden wouldn't allow any of the teachers walk in the building until it was in shape. They rented a dumpster and, with the help of only one maintenance person, began hauling out trash. They rented a powerwasher and cleaned off the fish smell. They waxed the floors and put up bulletin boards.

But then they *really* got to work and wrote a school handbook outlining school opening procedures and school policies. They met with neighbors and promised that staff would walk children home so they wouldn't continue trashing the yards. They met with families and promised them that they cared about their children. They met with teachers and outlined how they expected the teachers to work together to pool their knowledge and adjust their practices if what they were doing wasn't working. The expectations were clear: teachers could not blame the students for failure.

Just weeks into the new regime a visitor from A+ Alabama who had been visiting the school for years asked whether they were the same children she had seen on previous visits. They were, but they looked happier, better cared for, and better behaved.

Tomlinson had put in place a system of, to use Ron Ferguson's term, "high support high demand." I have described some of the support, but it was all in service of the new demands on students to do serious work – that is, not simply behave, but engage in serious academic work. I wasn't there then so can't speak to the immediate demands, but within a few years the children were performing at the top of the state. Indeed, with average math performance in fifth grade hovering at around 90 percent on the nationally norm-referenced SAT-10, they were arguably up toward the top of the country, a fact that was recognized by Intel when it gave it an award for math performance.

That's a particularly dramatic story, but I have found that each of the schools I have visited that are in the upper-right quadrant has some kind of interesting story. Here's one that illustrates the same principles, though with a little less drama.

Graham Road Elementary is the kind of school often found in inner-ring suburbs. It began as a white middle-class school but a nearby townhouse project began attracting brand-new immigrant families, most of them low-income. As the children of the immigrants showed up to school, two very predictable things happened. Achievement dropped and the middle-class kids disappeared into magnet programs and private schools. By 2001 there were no white kids left and it was the lowest performing school in its district, Fairfax County just outside Washington, D.C. I talked with a teacher who said that the general

feeling in the district at the instead was that it should be closed and the kids dispersed. The school was considered that broken.

Instead Molly Bensinger-Lacy became principal.

She describes the school she found as demoralized. The teachers were content to explain the failure of the students as functions of their poverty and lack of English language fluency, and took little ownership over that. It wasn't that they didn't care about the students, but they spent a great deal of time worrying about their students' parents' utility bills and very little about their reading levels.

Without the luxury of starting with a new staff, Bensinger-Lacy started with a different lever point: the schedule. She organized the "specials" – art, music, p.e.—in such a way to ensure that grade levels could meet every day to plan together. She assigned the ESOL teachers, special educators, and teachers aides to push into classrooms on a coordinated schedule and told teachers that they must teach reading and math when those supports would be there, so that students could get as much individual attention as possible. And she organized professional development times so that teachers could study student assessment data together.

I am only scratching the surface of what she did, but among other results were that in 2008 60 percent of the students exceeded state standards in sixth-grade reading. That was high for just about any school, but given that 80 percent of the children did not speak English at home, that was extraordinary.

Those are two examples, but there are many more. In fact, I have visited dozens.

And when I looked at all of them in the aggregate, I concluded that they share remarkably similar processes, which I described in HOW IT's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools.

They begin by closely focusing on what kids need to know.

That seems obvious, and yet, it really isn't. As one teacher I spoke with in Norfork Elementary up in the Ozarks of Arkansas said, "We're not just teaching whatever, because we could teach anything, but we're dedicated to teaching for excellence – and that excellence is going to be the state standards." Many of these schools welcomed the advent of their state standards as giving them a "place to stand."

But they are well aware that their students are going to have to live in a wider world, which is why I haven't met an educator in one of these unexpected schools who isn't thrilled with Common Core standards.

Once they have focused on what students need to know and be able to do, they all share the following processes which I think you will recognize:

- They figure out ways they can tell if kids have learned what they should have learned;
- They collaborate to figure out what will be the best ways to teach kids;
- They dispassionately evaluate evidence of their successes and failures to understand what works and what doesn't for the students they are serving; and
- They adjust what they are doing to reflect the evidence. Or, to steal the words of a very accomplished principal, "Do more of what works and less of what doesn't."

That is, they apply the very basic principles of the scientific method – they begin with a theory, make a prediction, test, observe, modify the theory, and so on through the cycle.

This is the scientific process that has allowed us to move forward fields from astronomy to medicine and on and on.

But it is not common in education, which is a field that remains dominated by tradition coupled with fads.

So how did those schools learn to work in ways consonant with basic scientific principles?

I ended HOW It's Being Done with a kind of throwaway line that it seemed like the school leaders were important. This was hardly an original observation.

A large study financed by The Wallace Foundation led by Ken Leithwood, Karen Seashore-Louis, and Kyla Wahlstrom concluded, ""To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership."

That just raises the next question: what does it mean to be a "talented leader?"

To study this question my colleague Christina Theokas, who is director of research at Ed Trust, and I set about doing a systematic study of the leaders of unexpected schools – that is, schools with significant populations of students living in poverty or students of color that were either very high performing or rapidly improving. Many of them were leaders of the schools that I profile in It's Being Done and How It's Being Done, but a few more recent discoveries, chosen with the same rigorous criteria, were also included.

We ended up with a sample size of thirty-three principals, including three assistant principals, representing 24 schools. On average, about three-quarters of the students were students of color or students living in low-income families or both. This study resulted in Getting It Done: Leading Success in Unexpected Schools.

What did we find?

First of all they bring the belief that all children can learn to standards.

It is startling the effect this belief can have. This is not because, like in Peter Pan, if you simply *believe* and clap hard children will achieve.

No one should ever entertain the notion that the work of educating all kids is easy. It isn't even easy when all the kids are middle-class children of college graduates. Anyone questioning that should listen to the agonies quite a lot of middle-class college graduates go through in watching their low-performing children suffer through school.

Educating all kids *no matter what their family circumstances* is really difficult and requires a great deal of effort on the part of educators. Those efforts have to be greater when students live in poverty or other kind of difficulty. But when educators don't believe it is possible to do, it is impossible to muster

that effort. This is part of what Carol Dweck's work on mindset is about. If you don't believe it is possible to build a bridge across a roaring river, you will never do the hard work of testing materials and engineering designs that will make it possible.

So belief spurs effort.

But not just for adults. For the most part children absorb the beliefs of the adults around them. A child who trusts the teachers' judgment that effort will be rewarded with achievement can also muster the effort to work hard.

As one of the principals told me, "Develop the relationships…then you can make it as rigorous as you want. It's awesome to see when you establish the relationships."

The belief that all children can and should achieve drives the principals to develop strategies in accordance with that belief, take actions in line with those strategies, and then dispassionately assess whether they need to adjust their actions and strategies. I won't go through what some of those strategies are – they are laid out in *Getting It Done*. But they involve:

- Developing urgency around the use of time. (If you believe all kids must achieve and you have a realistic sense of how behind children who live in poverty are, you know that poor children don't have a minute to lose to inefficient classroom and school routines and foolish lessons.)
- Encouraging the leadership of all adults in the building. (If you believe all kids must achieve you know that there are thousands of urgent instructional and operational decisions that have to be made that can't wait for the principal.)
- Setting up careful monitoring systems that ensure that no child is forgotten.

What does this look like from the point of view of students?

One of the students I spoke with at Imperial High School summed up what a lot of students have said to me, "At other schools, it's 'those are the smart kids.' Here, we're all the smart kids."

So the next question here is, if other schools did the kinds of things these "outliers" do, would they be able to move achievement out of its normal pattern?

I want to say yes. But caution compels me tread lightly here. Too often this kind of thinking results in something of a checklist mentality. "We're doing professional learning communities and teaching phonics, and the scores are still low. Must be the fault of the kids."

So I want to seemingly shift gears here and bring in a concept from psychology. Psychologists talk about how people approach problems at the "surface level" versus at the "deep structural" level.

So, for example, in that famous experiment, students who had just completed their first college-level physics class were handed cards with a series of physics problems and asked to sort them in any way that made sense. They grouped all the problems with springs together, all the problems with inclined planes together, and so forth. Expert physicists were then handed the same problems. They sorted them according to whether they were problems of conservation of energy or other fundamental physical processes.

The physicists were looking at the deep structure of those problems, not the surface structure.

So I would say that we need to understand the really deep structure issues of education.

Too often we are talking about the surface structure questions, ranging from iPads to flipped classrooms. Educators are under tremendous pressure now to be "innovative," without ensuring that any innovation tackles a deep structural problem. Unless educators apply the scientific method to examining whether the innovation works or doesn't work with a given set of circumstances, we're going to be stuck at the surface level.

How can we define those deep structural issues? I think we need some real thinking from the entire field about that. Clearly ensuring that students feel cared about and supported to do difficult intellectual work is one of the deep structural problems that educators have to address. Defining the others will take the collective wisdom of the field, but I would say institutional and intellectual coherence has to be included in there somewhere.

It seems to me that the lesson from "unexpected schools" is that when schools address the deep structural problems of education and basically do everything right, they can overcome those other factors that we know are so powerful.

What is the bedrock of doing everything right?

1. Holding the belief that the work is possible
2. A clear idea of what the work is – that is, what students need to know and be able to do
3. Clear ways to measure success, failure, and progress
4. A commitment to dispassionately looking at that data and adjusting – or, as I have said here, the scientific method.

But to get the field to the point where all this is common will take serious, sustained, committed leadership on the part of school and district leaders and the demand for such leadership from the field as a whole and from the general public.

We can no longer simply accept that there is nothing schools can do to help the neediest and most vulnerable students overcome the barriers of discrimination and poverty. There is something to be done, and these unexpected schools point the way to what that is.