
Executive Summary

The vision of higher standards to be achieved by every student is the most ambitious challenge American public education has ever faced. This report overviews what we know about improving student achievement and discusses three policy alternatives from across the political spectrum: changes in the school aid formula, strategies for involving families and communities in school reform, and ways of improving teacher practice.

Lynn Magdol of the State University of New York-Buffalo discusses a number of risk factors that influence academic achievement in adolescence. To improve educational performance, we need comprehensive approaches that address individual academic and social skills, family dynamics, peer influence, school characteristics, and community support. Educational performance is much too complex and the solutions much too comprehensive to respond to any single policy or program.

According to Andrew Reschovsky, UW-Madison, most children in Wisconsin receive a high-quality education. Yet there is ample evidence that public education fails to provide all children with an adequate education. Educational adequacy is a minimum acceptable level of educational outcomes, such as a certain level of proficiency in reading, writing, or math.

In Wisconsin, the primary focus of the school finance system has been on achieving equity rather than educational adequacy. Wisconsin's existing school aid formula has been quite successful in guaranteeing that all school districts that choose the same property tax rate will have approximately the same amount of money available to spend on education. But even if Wisconsin achieves a high degree of equity in school finance, there is no reason to believe that it will have provided an adequate education for all its students. One of the primary reasons why equal spending doesn't necessarily result in equal educational outcomes is that costs differ across school districts.

In Wisconsin, the cost of education, as in "shared cost" in the aid formula, means how much we spend on education. When business people and economists talk about costs, they mean the value of the resources necessary to produce a given amount of a particular good or service. Thus, the cost of education refers to the amount of money a school district must spend to achieve any particular educational outcome, such as providing all children with an equal opportunity to read at the fourth-grade level by the end of the fourth grade.

Some school districts, due to factors over which they have no control, must spend more money to achieve the same educational goal. For example, costs will be higher in districts with more children who are disabled, have limited knowledge of English, or come from single-parent, low-income families. Costs will be greater in high-cost-of-living areas or in very small districts, where they are unable to take

advantage of economies of scale. This paper explains why guaranteeing an adequate education for all students requires that state aid formulas account for cost differences across school districts.

According to Anne Henderson in a recent report issued by 44 educational reform organizations, a fundamental flaw of the reform movement is that parents and communities are not included in meaningful ways. A recent survey found that 60% of Americans believed parents and the community should have more say in basic decisions in schools. Yet only 25% of teachers and 15% of administrators approved of greater parental involvement in decisions. Research clearly shows that when parents have many opportunities to be involved in the school, their children benefit in the following ways: higher grades and test scores, better attendance and more homework done, fewer placements in special education, more positive attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in postsecondary education.

The benefits extend to families too. Parents develop more confidence in the school. The teachers of their children have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations of their children. As a result, parents develop more confidence, not only about helping their children learn, but also about themselves as parents. Often the involvement encourages parents to seek more education.

Parents can be involved in three primary ways: (a) pushing the system for higher standards, effective systems of accountability, and the adoption of school reform; (b) helping design local school improvement by participating in school improvement committees, monitoring results, checking student work to make sure it reflects high standards, and insisting on report cards designed so parents can see how students are progressing; and (c) taking part in opportunities for parent involvement by participating in school governance councils, helping obtain resources to improve the schools, and attending staff development sessions.

Professor James Spillane of Northwestern University conducted a 5-year study of how teachers changed their classroom practices. Spillane surveyed all third- and fourth-grade teachers and all seventh- and eighth-grade math and science teachers in nine Michigan school districts. The study was conducted after the state introduced a school accreditation process that required schools to have 65% of students score in the satisfactory range on state tests, or lose state accreditation.

Spillane observed and interviewed a subsample of 25 teachers who said they had changed their teaching practices to fit with the state reforms. Yet the evidence revealed that only 4 teachers had extensively changed the core of their practice. How did this change occur?

One of the teachers who changed was a risk taker who was always in search of new ideas. Her undergraduate education prepared her to teach in ways advocated by the reforms without unlearning a lot of what she understood about teaching. But absent this individual initiative, support was needed for the other three veteran teachers to change. The professional development workshops that

most teachers attended were too brief, with no sustained attention to enacting a reform idea. These three teachers claimed that study groups and the opportunity to talk with their colleagues and outside experts contributed to their ability to revise their teaching practices. These teachers developed a sense of obligation to their colleagues to change. In other words, peer pressure motivated teachers to reform their practice. Observing how positively students responded provided yet another incentive.

For policymakers, this study suggests that state policy initiatives, such as holding schools accountable for student performance on state tests, were effective in getting teachers' attention. Yet policy alone failed to change the core of teaching practice. The most effective way to do this is to encourage teachers to learn about the reforms and to share ideas and teaching strategies both with each other and with experts.