



HOW TO FIX OUR SCHOOLS

It's More Complicated, and More Work, Than the Klein-Rhee 'Manifesto' Wants You to Believe

BY RICHARD ROTHSTEIN

Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York City public school system, and Michelle Rhee, who resigned October 13 as Washington, D.C. chancellor, published a “manifesto” in the *Washington Post* claiming that the difficulty of removing incompetent teachers “has left our school districts impotent and, worse, has robbed millions of children of a real future.” The solution, they say, is to end the “glacial process for removing an incompetent teacher” and give superintendents like themselves the authority to pay higher salaries to teachers whose students do well academically. Otherwise, children will remain “stuck in failing schools” across the country.¹

Klein, Rhee, and the 14 other school superintendents who co-signed their statement base this call on a claim that, “as President Obama has emphasized, the single most important factor determining whether students succeed in school is not the color of their skin or their ZIP code or even their parents’ income — it is the quality of their teacher.”

It is true that the president has sometimes said something like this. But in his more careful moments, he properly insists that teacher quality is not the most important factor determining student success; it is the most important *in-school* factor. Indeed, Mr. Obama has gone further, saying, “I always have to remind people that the biggest ingredient in school performance is the teacher. That’s the biggest ingredient *within a school*. But the single biggest ingredient is the parent.”²

There is a world of difference between claiming, as the Klein-Rhee statement does, that the single biggest factor in student success is teacher quality and claiming, as Barack Obama does in his more careful moments, that the single biggest *school* factor is teacher quality. Decades of social science research have demonstrated that differences in the quality of schools can explain about one-third of the variation in student achievement. But the other two-thirds is attributable to non-school factors.³

When the president says that the single most important factor is parents, he does not mean the parents’ zip code or income or skin color, as though zip codes or income or skin color themselves influence a child’s achievement. Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee’s caricature of the research in this way prevents a careful consideration of policies that could truly raise the achievement of America’s children. What President Obama means is that if a child’s parents are poorly educated themselves and don’t read frequently to their young children, or don’t use complex language in speaking to their children, or are under such great economic stress that they can’t provide a stable and secure home environment or proper

preventive health care to their children, or are in poor health themselves and can't properly nurture their children, or are unable to travel with their children or take them to museums and zoos and expose them to other cultural experiences that stimulate the motivation to learn, or indeed live in a zip code where there are no educated adult role models and where other adults can't share in the supervision of neighborhood youth, then children of such parents will be impeded in their ability to take advantage of teaching, no matter how high quality that teaching may be.

President Obama put it this way: "It's not just making sure your kids are doing their homework, it's also instilling a thirst for knowledge and excellence....And the community can help the parents. Listen, I love basketball. But the smartest kid in the school...should be getting as much attention as the basketball star. That's a change that we've got to initiate in our community."

Of course, there are exceptions. Just as not all children flourish with high-quality teachers, not all children fail to flourish just because their parents can't help with homework or because they live in communities where athletes are the most prominent role models. Under any set of circumstances, there will be a distribution of outcomes — that's human nature. And on average, disadvantaged children who have high-quality teachers will do better than similar children whose teachers are less adequate. But good teachers alone, for most children, cannot fully compensate for the disadvantages many children bring to school. As we noted, differences in the quality of in-school experiences can explain about one-third of the differences in achievement.

Even the president's more careful statement — that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor — is actually without solid foundation in research. It is true that some studies have found that variation in teacher quality has more of an influence on test scores than do the size of classes or average district-wide per pupil spending. In other words, you are better off having a good teacher in a larger class than a poor teacher in a smaller class. But that's it. It is on this thin reed that Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee are mounting a campaign to make improving teacher quality, and removing teachers whose students' test scores are lower, the centerpiece of national efforts to improve the life chances of disadvantaged students.

There are plausibly many other in-school factors, not quantified in research, that could have as much if not more of an influence on student test scores than teacher quality. Take the quality of school leadership. Would an inspired school principal get better student achievement from a corps of average-quality teachers than a mediocre principal could get from high-quality teachers? Studies of organizations would suggest the answer is yes, but there have been no such studies of school leadership. Take the quality of the curriculum. Would average teachers given a well-designed curriculum get better achievement from their students than would high-quality teachers with a poor curriculum? A very few research studies in this field suggest the answer might be yes as well.

Or take another in-school factor, teacher collaboration. Even when elementary school students sit in a single classroom for most of the day, several teachers influence their achievement. Teachers can meet to compare lesson plans that worked well and those that didn't. Teachers in lower grades can successfully align their instruction with what will be most helpful for learning in the next grade. Teachers of the arts can reinforce the writing curriculum, and vice-versa. Will average-quality teachers who work well together as a team with the common purpose of raising student achievement get better results than higher-quality teachers working in isolation? Plausibly, the answer is yes. Will promising to pay individual teachers more if their students get higher test scores than the students of another teacher reduce the incentives for teachers to collaborate? Again, a plausible answer is yes.

Of course, schools should try to recruit better-quality teachers and should remove those who are ineffective. After all, the quality of teachers is an important part of the one-third share of the achievement gap that can be traced to the quality of schools. But before making teacher quality the focus of a national campaign, school systems will have to develop better ways of identifying good and bad teachers. Using students' test scores as the chief marker of teacher quality is terribly dangerous, for a variety of reasons: it encourages a narrowing of the curriculum because only test scores in one or two subjects (math and reading) can be used for this purpose, and teachers who will be evaluated mainly by these test scores

will have incentives to minimize attention to other subjects; it creates pressure to “teach to the test,” that is, emphasizing topics likely to appear on our existing low-quality standardized tests rather than other equally important but untested topics; and it is likely to misidentify teachers — labeling many good teachers as poor and many poor teachers as good — because test scores can be influenced by so many other factors besides good teaching.⁴

The necessary task of identifying good teachers and removing those who are inadequate requires more than student test score data. It requires a holistic approach, in which qualified experts observe teachers’ lessons, evaluate the quality of their instruction, and examine a wide range of their students’ work and how teachers respond to it. This requires a bigger investment of qualified supervisory time than most schools are prepared to make. Using student test scores as a shortcut will do great harm to American education.

Making teacher quality the only centerpiece of a reform campaign distracts our attention from other equally and perhaps more important school areas needing improvement, areas such as leadership, curriculum, and practices of collaboration, mentioned above. Blaming teachers is easy. These other areas are more difficult to improve.

But most important, making teacher quality the focus distracts us from the biggest threat to student achievement in the current age: our unprecedented economic catastrophe and its effect on parents and their children’s ability to gain from higher-quality schools.

Consider the implications of this catastrophe for our aspirations to close the black–white achievement gap. The national unemployment rate remains close to an unacceptably high 10%. But 15% of all black children now have an unemployed parent compared to 8.5% of white children. If we also include children whose parents have become so discouraged that they have given up looking for work, and children whose parents are working part-time because they can’t find full-time work, we find that 37% of black children have an unemployed or underemployed parent compared to 23% of white children. Over half of all black children have a parent who has either been unemployed or underemployed during the past year.⁵ Thirty-six percent of black children now live in poverty.⁶

The consequences of this social disaster for schools are apparent, and include:

Greater geographic disruption: Families become more mobile because they can no longer afford to keep up with rent or mortgage payments. They are in overcrowded housing; they often have to double up with relatives in apartments that were already too small. Children have no quiet place to study or do homework. They switch schools more often, fall behind in the curriculum, and lose the connection with teachers who know them well enough to adapt instruction to their individual strengths and weaknesses. Inner-city schools themselves are thrown into turmoil because classes must frequently be reconstituted as enrollment rises and falls with family mobility. Even the highest-quality teachers cannot fully insulate their students from the effects of this disruption.⁷

Greater hunger and malnutrition: When more parents lose employment, their income plummets and food insecurity grows. More children come to school hungry and/or inadequately nourished and are less able to focus on schoolwork. Attentive teachers realize that one of the best predictors of how their students will perform is what they had for breakfast, if anything at all.⁸

Greater stress: Families where parents are unemployed are under greater psychological stress. Such parents, no matter how well-intentioned, often become more arbitrary in their discipline and less supportive of their children. Children from families in such stress are more likely to act out in school and are less able to progress academically. The ability to comfort and support such students may be a more important indicator of a teacher’s quality than her students’ test scores, which may still be lower than the scores of students coming from stable and secure homes.

Poorer health: Families where parents lose employment are also more likely to lose health insurance.⁹ Their children are less likely to get routine and preventive health care and more likely to miss school days because of illness. They are less likely to get symptomatic treatment for illnesses like asthma, the most common cause of chronic school absenteeism. Children with asthma, even when they attend school, are more likely to come to school irritable, having been up at night with breathing difficulty.¹⁰

All these consequences of unacceptably high unemployment rates for disadvantaged parents contribute to depressing student achievement for their children. It is obtuse to expect to narrow the achievement gap in such circumstances. It is fanciful for national policy makers to pick this moment to raise their expectations for academic achievement from children of families in such stress and to single out teacher quality as the culprit most deserving of their public attention.

It would inappropriately undermine the credibility of public education if, in such an economic climate, educators were blamed for their failure to raise student achievement of disadvantaged children. Indeed, educators should get great credit if they prevent the achievement of disadvantaged children from falling further during this economic crisis.

Meanwhile, our political system is paralyzed, unable to take meaningful steps to reduce unemployment. Corporate profits are healthy, but an unjustified fear of short-term deficits prevents public spending from putting low-income parents back to work. Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee, and the other superintendents who signed their manifesto are influential in states whose national and state leaders contribute to this paralysis. These school leaders should raise their voices in protest against economic policies that doom children to failure.

Of course, the superintendents should continue attempts to improve teacher quality. They should work on developing ways to identify better and worse teachers without relying heavily on the corrupting influence of high-stakes test scores.¹¹ In addition to teacher quality, they should pay attention to school leadership, curriculum improvement, and school organization. They should consider what initiatives they can take, either themselves or in partnership with other community organizations, to improve children's opportunities to come to school in good health and with enriched experiences in early childhood and out-of-school time.¹² But they will have to embed all of this work in an insistence on broader efforts of economic and social reform if they hope their school improvements to make any difference.

Otherwise, their manifesto might appear to be more an example of scapegoating teachers than a reflection of serious commitment to the futures of our children.

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Endnotes

1. “How to Fix Our Schools: A Manifesto by Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee and Other Education Leaders,” *Washington Post*, October 10, B01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/07/AR2010100705078.html>
2. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in Arnold, Missouri, Town Hall*. April 29, 2009. Emphasis added. Pauses and word repetitions omitted. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-arnold-missouri-town-hall>.
3. The 2/3-1/3 breakdown between family background and school influences was the core finding of the 1966 federal study, the “Coleman Report.” But this interpretation of the report overstates its finding about the influence of schools, because Coleman and his colleagues considered the influence of a child’s schoolmates (“peer effects”) to be a school factor, not an out-of-school factor. (Coleman, James S., and Ernest Q. Campbell, Carol J. Hobson, James McPartland, Alexander M. Mood, Frederic D. Weinfeld, and Rober L. York, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Government Printing Office, 1966.) Yet the only way to affect the composition of peers in the neighborhood schools he studied would be to change the composition of neighborhoods, with housing integration policies, for example. Of the in-school influences, the Coleman Report identified teacher quality (defined by teacher characteristics such as their educational attainment and experience) to be most important.
In a more recent study, Meredith Phillips and colleagues analyzed data from a federal longitudinal study, “Children of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth.” They controlled for factors such as whether anyone in the family subscribed to magazines or newspapers or had a library card, grandparents’ educational attainment, a mother’s own cognitive ability (test score) and educational attainment, how often a mother reads to her child, the size of a family and its income, single parenthood, parenting practices, child birthweight, and others. They concluded that “[e]ven though traditional measures of socioeconomic status account for no more than a third of the [black–white] test score gap, our results show that a broader index of family environment may explain up to two-thirds of it.” There are other differences, for example health and housing, not considered by these analysts that might explain even more of the gap. (Meredith Phillips, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, Pamela Klebanov, and Jonathan Crane, “Family Background, Parenting Practices, and the Black–White Test Score Gap,” in Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998.)
4. Eva L. Baker, Paul E. Barton, Linda Darling-Hammond, Edward Haertel, Helen F. Ladd, Robert L. Linn, Diane Ravitch, Richard Rothstein, Richard J. Shavelson, and Lorrie A. Shepard, *Problems With the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers*, Economic Policy Institute, 2010. <http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp278>
5. These data are for 2009, and have been calculated by analysts at the Economic Policy Institute from the Current Population Survey. Current overall unemployment is slightly higher than it was in 2009 (9.7% vs. 9.3%), so it is unlikely that the differences in family unemployment for black and white children are now appreciably different from a year ago. Tables from which these data were drawn are available from the author upon request.
6. Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, *A Lost Decade: Poverty and Income Trends Paint a Bleak Picture for Working Families*, Economic Policy Institute, September 16, 2010. http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/a_lost_decade_poverty_and_income_trends
7. In 2009, 18% of African American children lived in households that had moved at least once in the previous year, compared to 11% of white children (U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, calculated from <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/migration/cps2009/tab01-02.xls> and <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/migration/cps2009/tab01-03.xls>). A national survey of nearly 2,000 school districts finds substantially growing numbers of homeless students, largely due to parental unemployment and home foreclosure (Barbara Duffield and Phillip Lovell, *The Economic Crisis Hits Home: The Unfolding Increase in Child & Youth Homelessness*, National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) and First Focus, December 2008, <http://www.naehcy.org/dl/TheEconomicCrisisHitsHome.pdf>). A controlled study of homeless and stable children in New York City found that “homeless children perform at a lower academic level and have a higher rate of grade repetition...compared with housed children [otherwise similar demographically] in New York City, despite our finding no difference in cognitive functioning” (Donald H. Rubin, Candace J. Erickson, Mutya San Agustin, Sean D. Cleary, Janet K. Allen, and Patricia Cohen, “Cognitive and Academic Functioning of Homeless Children Compared With Housed Children,” *Pediatrics* 97(3):289-294, 1996).

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8. From 2007 to 2008, the percentage of black children who lived in households without adequate food (“food insecure households”) jumped from 26% to 34%, while the percentage of white children in such households jumped from 12% to 16%. From 2008 to 2009, the percentage of black children who at least some time were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because the household could not afford enough food nearly doubled, rising from 1.8% to 3.2%, while the percentage of white children in this category grew from 0.5% to 0.6% (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (ChildStats.gov) <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/eco3.asp>). By age 15, 85% of all black children have lived in a household that used food stamps at some time during their childhood, compared to 33% of white children (Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, “Estimating the Risk of Food Stamp Use and Impoverishment During Childhood,” *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 163(9):994-999, November 2009). The U.S. Conference of Mayors surveyed 27 cities and reported an overall increase of 26% from 2008 to 2009 in the number of requests for emergency food assistance, with unemployment by far the most significant causal factor (U.S. Conference of Mayors, *Homelessness and Hunger Survey: A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America’s Cities: A 27-City Survey*, December 2009 <http://usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/USCM-HungercompleteWEB2009.pdf>).
 9. In 2009, 11.5% of black children had no public or private health insurance, up from 10.7% the previous year. For white children, the percentage grew from 6.7% to 7.0% (Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic (ASEC) Supplement, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/health/h08_000.htm and http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032010/health/h08_000.htm).
 10. Another Conference of Mayors report summarized the situation as follows: “When a child is unable to concentrate because they haven’t eaten in days and misses a week of school because they could not fight off a simple cold, they cannot succeed in school. Lacking a solid education, they cannot find high-paying jobs. Ultimately, they are forced to remain in poverty, eventually placing their own children in the same situation” (U.S. Conference of Mayors and Sodexo, *Childhood Anti-Hunger Programs in 24 Cities*, 2009, <http://www.usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/20091116-report-childhoodantihunger.pdf>).
 11. The accountability statement of the “Broader Bolder Approach to Education” campaign (www.boldapproach.org) describes the outlines of appropriate school accountability.
 12. The initial call for a “Broader, Bolder Approach to Education” (www.boldapproach.org) elaborates on these points.