

# WHAT

(so-called)  
low-performing  
schools  
can teach  
(so-called)  
high-performing  
schools

BY RICHARD F. ELMORE

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My work as a researcher and consultant takes me into classrooms in all sorts of schools. My primary interest is improving the quality of teaching in high-poverty, racially diverse schools. Lately, however, I have also been called upon to visit schools in more affluent communities — some of them extraordinarily affluent.

While visiting schools in a variety of districts, I began to notice something that puzzled me. Some of these schools, particularly those with large numbers of poor and minority children, are working against daunting — some would say unreasonable — expectations for improvement in test

scores. In more affluent schools, those pressures are much less evident. Yet the kinds of instructional problems that surface in both types of schools are strikingly similar.

In wealthy schools and poor ones, I encountered the same recurring patterns: considerable variation among classrooms in the degree to which students were challenged; an emphasis on procedural knowledge and factual recall at the expenses of analysis, reflection, and understanding; a tendency to focus more on students who were “easy to teach” than on those who were struggling; and low estimates of students’ capabilities. I also noticed that teachers tended to base their instruction on the level of challenge that they — as teachers — were most comfortable with, rather than what students could actually do.

Then, as part of my research on accountability, I began to examine successful schools with high concentrations of poor and minority children

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— those in which students were doing as well as or better than those in affluent schools on statewide standardized tests — to see what they were doing to improve the level of instruction in their classrooms. These high-performing, high-poverty schools were not just different in degree from other schools, they were different in kind. School leaders had clearly articulated expectations for student learning, coupled with a sense of urgency about improvement; they adopted challenging curricula and invested heavily in professional development. Teachers in these schools internalized responsibility for student learning; they examined their practices critically, and if they weren’t

working, they abandoned them and tried something else.

Most important, school leaders insisted that classrooms be open to teacher colleagues, administrators, and outsiders for observation and analysis of instructional practice. For instance, teachers might review test scores together to pinpoint content areas and classrooms where children seemed to be struggling and then observe the classroom and discuss what changes in teaching practice might help these children succeed. Even high-poverty schools that were in the initial stages of improvement but still classified as “low-performing” seemed to be working in a different way than schools whose performance did not trigger adverse attention under the accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

#### OUTSOURCING THE PROBLEM

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One of the most powerful differences was that teachers and administrators tended to define student learning difficulties as a problem to be solved by students and their families, rather than one to be solved by schools. A common response to student learning problems in these districts is to suggest the parents seek private tutoring. At a recent gathering of about 300 educators from high-income schools and districts, I asked how many could tell me the proportion of students in their schools who were enrolled in private tutoring. Only four or five hands went up. But among those respondents, the answers ranged from 20% to 40%.

What does this mean for instruc-

tional improvement? These schools are outsourcing the task of teaching every student — and from classroom to classroom, teachers may not even be aware of it. As a result, teachers are not challenged to identify shortcomings in their own practice that inhibit student learning, or to share knowledge about which teachers are most successful and why.

In more affluent communities, I also found that variations in student performance were frequently taken for granted. Instead of being seen as a challenge to the teachers’ practice, these differences were used to classify students as more or less talented. Access to high-level courses was intentionally limited, reinforcing the view that talent, not instruction, was the basis of student achievement.

There were exceptions, of course — sometimes dramatic exceptions — to this general pattern, where teachers, principals, and superintendents were willing to challenge the conventional norms and expectations of high-performing schools and take a critical look at their own practice. Leaders in those schools question prevailing beliefs about the differences in student learning, stimulate discussion about the quality of student work, and — like their counterparts in less-wealthy schools — focus on content areas where classroom work seems markedly below what students are capable of doing.

While the verdict is still out, I have noticed that challenging expectations in these schools often puts leaders in a risky place. Parents and school boards in affluent communities may not want to hear that the teaching in their schools is mediocre. The accountability system does not call attention to the problems of instructional quality in these schools, nor does it reinforce efforts to solve them. Improvement can be dangerous business in settings like these, and some principals and superintendents have

the scars to prove it. Unlike low-performing schools, which may be galvanized by external pressure to improve, so-called high-performing schools must often swim against a tide of complacency to generate support for change.

### REWARDING THE WRONG THINGS

If existing accountability systems could actually measure the value that schools add to student learning, independent of family background, the schools now ranked as “high-performing” would probably cleave into two categories: schools in which students’ academic performance is related to the quality of teaching and learning, and schools in which performance is largely attributable to income and social class. But standards-based accountability systems don’t operate

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that way. They put all schools whose students perform at the same level into the same category, regardless of how they got there. Because the existing federal accountability system does not distinguish between schools that produce results through high-quality teaching and those that produce

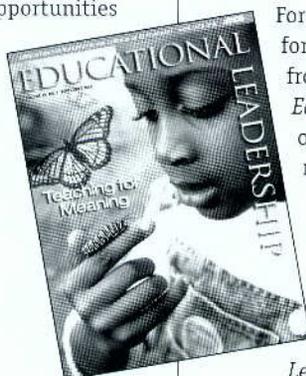
results largely through social class, it is largely rewarding the wrong things.

As an educator, I think we have much more to learn from studying high-poverty schools that are on the path to improvement than we do from studying nominally high-performing schools that are producing a significant portion of their performance through social class rather than instruction. Although these schools may be stigmatized as “low-performing” or “in need of improvement,” they are working hard to learn about their practice and beginning to focus on the individual and organizational conditions that create more powerful learning for adults and children. These nominally low-performing schools are, in most respects, the most interesting and colorful places to learn about learning.

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