Evidence-Based Article

Leading Amidst Criticism: Inoculate, Reframe, and Communicate

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Abstract

The author argues that despite demonstrable successes of public education, school leaders have not framed an effective defense against decades-long charges of school failure. Drawing on leadership literature from Aristotle through today's airport best-sellers, the author suggests that school superintendents have an obligation to make a case for public schools through a strategy of inoculation that acknowledges some shortcomings, reframing to point out the strengths of public schools, and communication that introduces audiences to the complexities of public schools in today's world. The case to be made: we have the best public schools in the world, international rankings compare apples and oranges, and many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions.

Key Words

leadership, superintendents, public schools, international rankings

Recently it's been apparent that public education and educators have been under assault for decades, indeed ever since *A Nation at Risk* was issued (National Commission on Excellence, 1983). A school superintendent who retired a few years ago told me that her entire career in education had been amidst unrelenting public complaints since the day she entered the classroom (personal communication, 2014).

Despite the demonstrable successes of public education, its leaders seem to have had a difficult time framing a defense against charges of school failure. In some ways this may be understandable. Leadership texts and programs tend to be focused on institutions and corporations, not on campaigns to persuade the general public. But amidst the barrage of criticism aimed at schools, developing persuasive arguments to turn around public opinion is a significant responsibility for school leaders.

Signs of Change

Fortunately, the tide of criticism is beginning to change. The astonishing "opt-out" movement of recent years in New York and elsewhere revealed that parents had had enough of drill-and-kill instruction and a bloated testing regime unique to the United States (Wallace, 2015). Teacher walkouts and strikes in Arizona, Oklahoma, and elsewhere helped transform the public perception of teachers (Will, 2018). Practically overnight teachers went from being maligned to being loved. And organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Board Association have recently mounted attractive campaigns to tell the public school story (American Association of School Administrators, 2018 and National School Boards Association, 2019).

Other efforts have also been significant. The Learning First Alliance, a coalition representing 10 million parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and researchers issued a compendium just last year summarizing decades of research on what works in schools (Learning First Alliance, 2018). The Alliance's *Elements of Success* essentially concluded that educators know what works. And they know what they're doing.

Meanwhile, the National Superintendents Roundtable and the Horace Mann League issued two influential critiques of the data used to support the widespread perception of school failure. One called into question the credibility of the "proficiency" benchmark defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP (National Superintendents Roundtable and Horace Mann League, 2018). The second questioned international assessments such as the Program on International Student Assessment. PISA issues rankings of school performance by nation with little regard for the social and economic conditions within which different national school systems function (Horace Mann League and National Superintendents Roundtable, 2015).

Although these efforts have tended to swim upstream against a flood of national bad press about schools, there's some evidence that they're making a difference. Some former critics now acknowledge that reform efforts were misguided. Two strong reform and pro-choice advocates—Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas and Michael McShane of EdChoice—published a candid exploration of the mistakes of reform supporters. Reformers, they confessed, have not been honest, often "wildly exaggerating the potential effects of their policy proposals" (Greene and

McShane, 2018). Prominent reformer Rick Hess of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, hitherto a staunch supporter of the reform agenda, acknowledged that Uncle Sam is good at forcing students to take tests but lousy at improving schools (Hess and McShane, 2018).

These developments represent real progress. They mark a new modesty amongst the saviors who swaggered onto the national stage in recent decades promising to save public school children from predatory and disinterested educators.

Now is the time for local leaders—school superintendents, board members, and union representatives—to build on that progress. And they can. It is time to step forward and start making the case that, while a lot remains to be done, public schools have been the backbone of American progress, they continue to play that role today, and they will continue to do so, well into the future.

Leadership Literature

Wandering through airport bookstores, it's easy to think leadership advice is the latest big thing. Bookshelves groan with them. But they are as old as written language. Aristotle in the 4th Century B.C. emphasized that leaders hoping to persuade others need to establish their credibility (ethos), appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos), and employ arguments listeners are likely to find logical (logos) (Lawson-Tancred, trans.1991).

Today an array of leadership manuals range across conflict resolution, getting from good to great, team dysfunction, principles of organizational development, and habits of effective people (Anderson, 2012; Collins, 2001; Covey, 2004; Gerzon, 2006; Kouzes and Posner, 2007; Lencioni, 2002; and Runde and Flanagan, 2010). Michael Fullan's seminal work in education has emphasized over the years the importance of moral purpose aligned with shared leadership amidst change (Fullan, 2001). Ronald A. Heifetz emphasizes the importance of leaders distinguishing between technical and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1996). And Peter Senge and his colleagues applied his "fifth discipline" insights to education in *Schools that Work* (Senge *et al*, 2000).

These are all valuable guides. Combined with case studies they promise to help school leaders frame a leadership style. But they tend to be longer on theory than on practice. They focus on organizations, not public persuasion. And they address leadership at a local level, not as a national imperative around an issue of paramount public importance. They provide little guidance on how to proceed in the face of the daily barrage of opprobrium with which educators contend.

A Model Response

Several years ago, Martha Bruckner, then-superintendent of schools in Council Bluffs, Iowa, climbed on a plane headed for an ASCD meeting in Los Angeles (personal communication, February 2013). There she would participate in a panel about the importance of placing international test results in the context of the economic and social challenges facing schools in different societies.

Bruckner was tired. School leadership is grueling. As the plane took off, the businessman beside her asked what line of work she was in. As she tells the story, Bruckner had the "educator's flinch": Oh, I'm about to get another lecture on the failure of our schools. "I'm in education," she responded. Sure enough, the lecture emerged immediately from someone who hadn't been inside a public school for decades. He was especially critical of what he thought were the failures of Council

Bluffs' schools. Why couldn't they be as good as Finland's schools, he wondered?

Martha Bruckner does not suffer fools easily. She responded: "Actually, I'm the Council Bluffs school superintendent. Of course, we have some problems. Things don't always go well. I worry about our students every night. But, you know, we have a poverty rate in Council Bluffs of 88 percent. In spite of that, we graduate 71 percent of our students on time. Finland has a student poverty rate of five percent. Imagine how well we could do if we had Finland's poverty rate. The conversation turned on a dime. With this information, the businessman was willing to discuss the challenges facing schools realistically, instead of parroting back what he had heard in the locker room at the local country club.

Bruckner had instinctively practiced what communications specialist Kathleen Hall Jamieson preaches about leadership in the face of criticism: Inoculate … Reframe … And Communicate (Harvey, 2013).

Inoculate

As school leaders, argued Jamieson, you need to understand that everyone you encounter carries in their head a picture of you and your schools. If you say you are an "educator," many people will immediately think "salt of the earth. But some will think: "overpaid and incompetent. As a leader, you need to be prepared for that. You cannot assume that everyone shares your view.

The technical term "enthymeme" defines these preconceived notions. In his *Rhetoric*, wrote Jamieson and her colleagues, Aristotle defined enthymemes as the "very body and substance of persuasion" (Jamieson, Falk, and Sherr, 1999, p. 13). Said Jamieson *et al*, "Enthymemes function by suppressing premises that are then filled in by members of the audience. Out of this complicity come conclusions whose impact is heightened by audience participation in their construction" (Jamieson, Falk, and Sher, 1999, p. 13). Say that again?

Translation: You approach the public with a view that educators are public servants dedicated to the welfare of children. You are running into people suppressing that view and replacing it with beliefs parroted on cable television that schools are over-staffed with shirkers who go home every day at 2:30 and enjoy a three-month summer vacation every year. Most will not be rude enough to say that to your face. Instead, they'll complain about test scores, graduation rates, or property taxes.

You need to inoculate yourself against these views, taking on a weaker strain of the virus so you can withstand the more virulent strains, said Jamieson (Harvey, 2013). Bruckner inoculated herself. She didn't pretend there were no issues. She acknowledged: "Of course, we have some problems. Things don't always go well. Aristotle could not have said it better: by acknowledging challenges without being defensive, Bruckner established her credibility (ethos).

Reframe

Buckner did a brilliant job of reframing. Let me tell you how well we're doing in the face of terrific challenges, she said. Imagine what we could do if we had the luxury of Finland's low poverty rates. The center of gravity shifted from what's wrong with the schools to the social and economic context in which schools here and abroad function.

As part of the reframing move from the abstract to the specific. Move as quickly as you can from talking about bureaucracy, assessment results, property taxes, and the

fabulous schools of Shanghai and Finland to real kids, real teachers, and real classroom issues. That's your sweet spot. Nobody knows as much about your schools as you do.

Real people like stories, not numbers. Search out and find local illustrations that tug at people's heartstrings. This is pathos at work. We know people feel good about their schools. Every year PDK International's Poll of Public Perceptions about Public Schools consistently reports that parents and the public consistently award high marks to local schools (Phi Delta Kappan, 2018). Your neighbors know your schools produce Merit Scholars, competitive sports teams, winter concerts, and spring musicals.

This view of local schools is an enthymeme that works in your favor. It's a gift horse for you.

Below are some examples of how you might humanize your schools:

- Mrs. Smith in tenth grade just won the state Teacher of the Year Award. She's in the running to be named National Teacher of the Year at the White House. She is just one of many outstanding teachers in our district.
- This year, our valedictorian is a young hearing-impaired man. Throughout his years with us he required teams of assistants skilled in American Sign Language. We provided those teams for John. He's just one of more than 1,000 students in our district with an individual education plan.
- As part of our civics education program emphasizing community service, our high school kids collected nearly $10,000 worth of toys and clothes in a "Toys for Tots" campaign organized by social studies teachers.

There are a lot of wonderful things going on in your schools. Dig them up and brag about them. After you've acknowledged there are some problems, stop apologizing for them.

Communicate

Note that in each of the human-interest stories above, the story itself is used, either explicitly or implicitly, as a launching pad to illustrate a broader truth. We have a lot of outstanding teachers. Our social studies program worries about civic education and community service. We provide the support needed by more than 1,000 of our students who live with disabilities of one kind or another.

Don't be afraid to introduce your audience to the complexity of the enterprise you lead and the difficult challenges facing many of your students. These are stories that need to be told. Alonzo Crim, a legendary superintendent in Atlanta in the 1980s, used to tell audiences that Atlanta Public Schools was the largest employer in the city with a budget approaching $1 billion.

On a daily basis, he said, the district served more meals than all the restaurants in the city and it transported more people than the city bus service. It also offered more classes to more students than all the universities in the state. Simply as a management exercise,

overseeing a district of any size, large or small, requires leaders to put on many different hats, as educators, community leaders, politicians, and managers.

And do remind people that the purpose of public schools in a democracy is about more than training young people to take tests. It's about preparing them for life in a complex modern society and for a future that's largely unknown. As Horace Mann, founder of the American public school put it, "education must be universal" since our "theory of government" requires that all "shall become fit to be a voter" (cited in Rebell, October 2018).

Here you have to be on top of the information about your own district. Some years ago, Jamieson provided school leaders with a list of twenty pieces of information they should have at the tips of their fingers (Harvey, 2013 p. 295). This is logos at work—an appeal to logic for those likely to be interested in data and where it leads them.

Making the Case for Public Education

But you need to go beyond defending your local schools. As a school leader you have an obligation to make a positive case for public education in the United States. And if you are on top of the data, it is an easy case to make.

Here's a three-part argument that will surprise many:

- Public schools today are better than they have ever been.
- We have the finest system of public education in the world.
- Despite progress, many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions

Our schools are better than ever

Think about it. The nostalgic view of the good old days ignores a lot of things, including segregation. Sixty years ago, the majority of students in the United States left school after completing Grade 8. Nobody labeled them dropouts or failures. Manufacturing and rural economies provided them with work. Women? Well, they were as scarce as hens' teeth in the professions, but they were blessed to be homemakers, nurses, or teachers.

At heart, it was a system that discriminated. Tracking was common from Grade 1 on. Students in need of special services were ignored, sometimes barred from school entirely.

And Jim Crow presided over a brutally segregated system through the South (Clotfelder, 2004). Meanwhile "de facto" segregation in the North and West was buttressed by banks which racially red-lined neighborhoods, and Federal policy that ensured mortgages went to the suburbs, effectively barred to families of color by housing covenants (Rothstein, 2017).

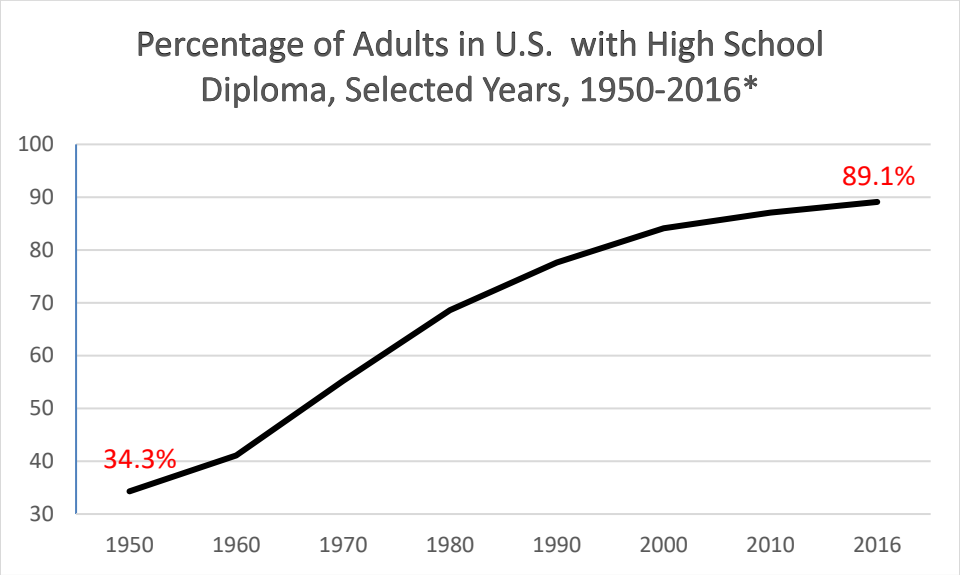
One of the great glories of the United States is that today's public school system has abandoned that discriminatory past. One of the nation's great tragedies is that our schools are still dealing with the consequences of that past.

Twenty Pieces of Information School Leaders Should Have at Their Fingertips

1. What is the expenditure per student? And the per-capita expenditure per resident?
2. How much have these figures increased or decreased in the last decade?
3. What is the average teacher salary?
4. How much has average teacher salary increased or decreased in the last decade?
5. What is the district graduation rate?
6. How much has that figure increased or decreased in the last decade?
7. What proportion of students go on to college?
8. What proportion of students are classified as special needs students?
9. What proportion of students use English as a second language?
10. What proportion of student qualify for help under the Americans with Disability Act?
11. What are district test scores (local and in comparison, with national data)? What are five- year comparisons with national and local scores?
12. What is the total district budget? How much has the district budget increased or decreased in the last decade? Compared to city or county budgets?
13. What proportion of students come from homes defined as in poverty?
14. What is the ethnic/minority composition of the student body?
15. What proportion do not speak English at home?
16. What proportion of students are mainstreamed? Have a serious disability?
17. What is the average salary of workers in your community? What has been their proportion of salary increase over the last five years?
18. List members of your state legislature who have a public school education. What proportion are public vs. private school educated?
19. Are there any legislators who are alumni of your district or schools?
20. List members of the press who have a public school education. Are there any who are alumni of your district or schools?

Graduation Rates

Where's the evidence to back up the claim that schools are better than ever? Figure 1 is the first part of that evidence. In 1950, just 34 percent of adults aged 25 or older in the United States held a high school diploma. By 2016, the proportion had climbed to 89.1 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, Table 104.10).



*Source: *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2016, Table 104.10

Figure 1. Evidence that schools are better than ever are represented in this figure.

Students with special needs

Meanwhile enrollment of students with disabilities nearly doubled between 1976 (when P.L. 94-142 went into effect) and 2015, from 3.6 to 6.6 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Table 204.30). The growth of programs for English language learners more than quadrupled in recent decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 1990, Table 52 and 2016, Table 204.20). In 1987, enrollment in English as a Second Language totaled about one million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1990, Table 205.10). By 2014, fully 4.5 million students were enrolled in programs for English language learners (National Center for Education for Education Statistics, 2016, Table 205.10).

Dumbing down the curriculum?

Well, say the critics, this has been accomplished by "dumbing down" the curriculum. Kids aren't learning anything. That is not true. The only long-term insight we have on student achievement is to be found in NAEP. Across the board, whatever their racial or ethnic background, students at ages 9, 13, and 17 were, on average, scoring higher on NAEP reading and mathematics assessments in 2012 than they had been in 1971 (National Assessment Governing Board, 2013). As Table 1 demonstrates we see impressive reading

performance gains across the board for all age levels and all racial and ethnic groups. For students of color, we see, 25-, 30- and 36-point increases in reading performance since 1971. Some analysts believe gains of this magnitude represent up to two or three years of additional schooling. Similar encouraging results can be displayed for mathematics achievement.

Table 1

NAEP Reading: Changes by Age, 1971 – 2012

Age	White	Black	Hispanic
9	+15	+36	+25
13	+9	+24	+17
17	+4	+30	+21

Source: National Assessment Governing Board, 2013

The meme of school failure, in short, is fake news. Our schools have been transformed demographically. Although in 1970 just 12 percent of public school enrollment was made up of children of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 1985, Table 43), currently the proportion stands at 52 percent (National Center on Education Statistics, February 2019). Amidst this dramatic and little-noted change, not only are public schools graduating more students, reducing dropouts, and educating more students facing challenges of language, disability, and poverty, but they are educating them to higher levels of achievement than schools of yesterday even dreamed about.

Yet, amidst the febrile criticism aimed at public schools, this impressive progress is ignored, and educators are belittled.

We have the best public schools in the world

Well, granted, but you know schools in other nations are just running circles around us. The Finns and the Chinese are eating our school lunch, according to results from the PISA administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Not so fast. When one takes a closer look at these international comparisons, the results overseas are not nearly as impressive as the headlines indicate.

School Segregation in Shanghai

Take, for example, those results from Shanghai, so impressive, according to a front-page 2010 story in the *New York Times*, that they "stunned" educational experts (Dillon, 2010). A torrent of expert criticisms of the Shanghai results have been largely ignored by OECD since, but the criticism seems, on balance, well taken. The University of Washington's Kam Wing Chan pointed out that the children of rural Chinese citizens who had migrated to Chinese cities for work were ineligible for public services, including school attendance, in their new cities (Chan, 2011). Literally hundreds of thousands of students are not in Chinese urban schools. The National Superintendents Roundtable pointed out that children with disabilities are nowhere to be seen in Chinese schools (Kohn and Harvey, 2009). Taiwanese scholar Pei-chia Lan describes an "apartheid" system of schooling in Shanghai (Lan, 2014). And a *Wall Street*

Journal analysis of Chinese national data suggests that fewer than 30 percent of 15-year-olds across China are in Grades 9 or 10, when PISA assessments are administered (Strauss, 2019).

The point is not that the Shanghai numbers "stun" the world. The point is that comparing the school performance of 30 percent of the wealthiest and brightest Chinese 15-year-olds with essentially 100 percent of American 15-year-olds calls the credibility of the entire PISA enterprise into question. Beyond that, the following needs to be clearly understood: In the United States, all children residing in a school district, including children of undocumented immigrants, are constitutionally entitled to a free public education by decree of the U.S. Supreme Court (American Immigration Council, 2016). Across China, by contrast, millions of children (all Chinese nationals) are discriminated against—as a matter of law—based on where they were born.

Apples-to-apples comparisons

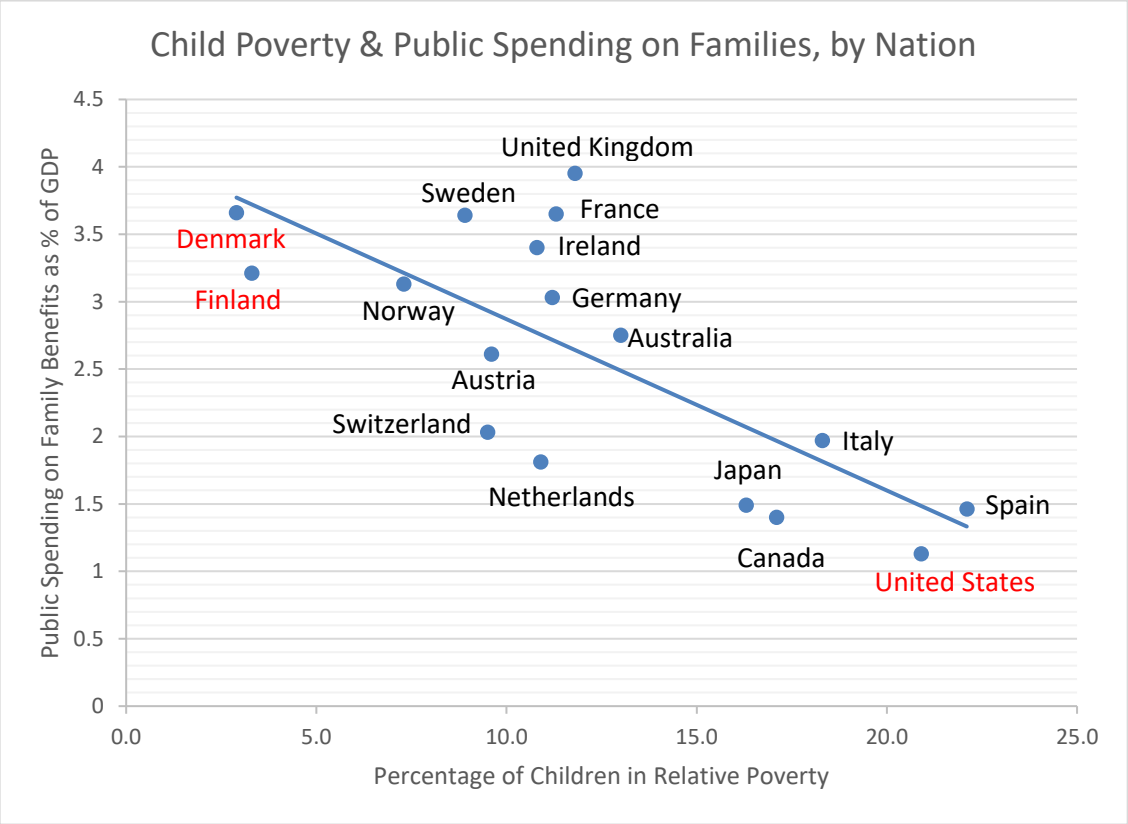
Beyond Shanghai and China, there are serious questions to be asked about most international assessments. The first serious question is that the measurement experts and psychometricians who developed these assessments said it would be "a false question" to ask whether the students in "country X were better educated than those in country Y" (International Project, 1960, p. xx). But politicians and ideologues have insisted that this false question is the only relevant issue.

The second is that what these assessments conceal is just as important as what they reveal. Does it really matter where American student performance stands in relation to that of students in dictatorships (Kazakhstan), religious monarchies (Qatar), wealthy European principalities with a just a handful of students (Lichtenstein), or the wealthiest city in China (Shanghai)? To the extent these comparisons have any value, shouldn't we compare ourselves to other large, democratic, market-oriented, relatively wealthy, and diverse societies?

When that comparison is made, American schools look robust. In the groundbreaking 2017 analysis cited earlier, *School Performance in Context* (aka, *The Iceberg Effect Report*), the Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable examined indicators of children's health, well-being, and education in the G-7 nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States), plus China and Finland. The detailed 60-page report examined 24 separate indicators of student, family, and community well-being in six broad dimensions: economic inequity, social stress, support for families, support for schools, student outcomes, and system outcomes.

What the report revealed is that on three of the six dimensions—economic inequity, social stress (including violent deaths), and support for families—the United States was in the bottom one-third of the nine nations. What about support for schools and student outcomes, two of the remaining dimensions? Here the U.S. found itself in the middle of the nine nations. In terms of the final dimension, system outcomes (i.e. years of education, possession of high school diplomas and bachelor's degrees, and global share of high performing science students), the U.S. is without peer. It is difficult to get a grip on 24 separate indicators. An easier way to apprehend the social context of schooling in different nations is to examine a different set of social indicators, also from OECD.

Figure 2 compares relative child poverty by nation with public spending on families as a percentage of GDP for 17 nations. *Relative child poverty* represents the percentage of children aged 0-17 in families living on 50% of the mean disposable income in each country. A locally referenced poverty standard is thought to reflect perceptions of disadvantage by nation since it reflects the social reality of people's lives in terms of cost of living. Public spending on families includes cash transfers, benefits such as food and health care, and tax preferences such as the Earned Income Tax Credit in the United States.



Child poverty data is taken from OECD Income Distribution Database at: http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm Chart CO2.2.A. Source for data on public spending on family benefits is taken from OECD Social Expenditure Data Base at https://www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm Chart PF1.1.A

Figure 2. This figure 2 compares relative child poverty by nation with public spending on families as a percentage of GDP for 17 nations.

What is immediately apparent is that Denmark and Finland are outliers at one end of the scale, while the United States is an outlier at the other. That is to say, Denmark and Finland are characterized by high levels of public support for families combined with remarkably low levels of child poverty. The United States, on the other hand, long considered the wealthiest nation in the world, displays the lowest level of public support for families combined with a shockingly high level of childhood poverty.

Many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions

Which gets us to the third major part of the argument you must make. The data documenting the status of children in the United States are distressing. More than 50 percent of students in American public schools are low-income (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). Segregation and social isolation by race and income have increased in this century (Jargowsky, 2013 and U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). An astonishing 1.5 million families in the United States, with nearly three million children, are reported to be living at subsistence levels on $2.00 per day (Shaefer and Edin, 2016). Subsistence levels means that some of these families are selling blood to put a roof over their heads and food on the table.

All of this is ignored and papered over in the public discourse about schools. Educators are somehow expected to pick up the pieces of these larger societal catastrophes. Yet for more than 50 years researchers have documented the powerful relationship between poverty and achievement: out-of-school factors account for 70 percent or more of variation in tested achievement (Berliner, 2006; Coleman, 1966; and Ladd, 2012).

To be clear, demography is not destiny. It is easy to find individuals who have heroically escaped the pull of childhood poverty and racial segregation—and schools that beat the odds for the most disadvantaged children. Indeed, apologists like to cite such examples as evidence that if only the disadvantaged displayed more "grit" and pulled their socks up, they too could join the "legacies" whose families buy their way into Ivy League institutions. But 50 years of research is consistent and powerful: On average, poverty and its accomplices—joblessness, parental absence, community and household violence, adult substance abuse, poor nutrition, lack of medical care, squalid substandard housing, homelessness and evictions, appalling rates of gun violence, and the shame and humiliation of perceived family failure—are powerful influences on student achievement and life outcomes.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, while mouthing pious cant and platitudes about "children as our most important asset," American policymakers have, in the biblical phrase, walked by on the other side as a train wreck of community disintegration has piled up in front of their eyes.

So, this is your final leadership challenge. You need to be prepared to say to your local Chamber or Rotary: We educators have done a lot. We don't need to apologize. We've done much more than we get credit for. And we're not finished yet. But we do not have the staff, the resources, or the expertise to deal with the severe challenges that walk through the schoolhouse door every morning. Many of these children are too traumatized to learn. Everyone needs to do their part. If they do, then our schools and our society can again be a shining model for the world.

If everyone does their part, perhaps then American society can heal its wounds and renew itself, community by urban and rural community. In that environment, educators can continue the hard work of renewing our schools, confident that they can help restore the dream that is America, while breathing new life into the dreams all our students bring with them as they enter school on the first day.

Author Biography

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