

Summary of Roundtable Discussion

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The final session of the day, moderated by Peter Bakstansky, was a roundtable discussion addressing the issues raised in the conference papers. The discussion was led by four individuals who are actively engaged in the effort to improve schools:

- Joseph Viteritti, research professor of public administration at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Policy and a coauthor with Diane Ravitch of *New Schools for a New Century: The Redesign of Urban Education*;
- Bill Andrews, executive director of National Parents Alliance, a New York City nonprofit group that sponsors "Inside Education," a cable television program designed for parents;
- Peter Flanigan, a founder of the Student/Sponsor Partnership, a nonprofit organization that provides scholarships and mentoring to inner-city youth; and
- Beth Lief, president and executive officer of New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop programs that promote better instruction, higher student achievement, and greater school accountability.

Joseph Viteritti began the session by highlighting some of the most significant findings in each of the conference papers. He went on to make general observations about the papers as a group. A fundamental lesson of the conference, he said, is that certain inner-city schools have devised a way to educate poor inner-city children successfully. The key components of these programs appear to

be more autonomy, real standards, a curriculum that meets those standards, and allocation of resources to reinforce the curriculum. Viteritti also emphasized that the school reform movement should not treat teachers and principals as factory workers who have nothing to contribute to the change process, nor should it treat parents as if they lack the ability to make intelligent choices about where their children go to school.

In closing, Viteritti commented that he sees more diversification within the U.S. education system today. He offered the following examples:

- students have greater choice in the public schools, as witnessed by the Milwaukee and Cleveland school systems;
- more private school scholarships, paid for by private philanthropists, are available to inner-city students;
- charter schools, which provide increased autonomy and accountability in using resources, are becoming more prevalent;
- parents, particularly in urban areas, are calling for more choice in schools and are rejecting a monopolistic education system; and
- principals and teachers are seeking to eliminate the regulations that seem to be running the schools.

Bill Andrews observed that the presenters touched on something that he has seen in practice: standards in and of themselves will not solve the problems in inner-city schools. Attention must also be given to the real problems

related to the governance of the public school system—most notably, the small role assigned to parent organizations relative to that of the educational administration or the unions. Andrews noted that parents are beginning to understand the magnitude of the problem—many of their children are not on the path to the “American dream,” or the American middle class. Too often, he said, they are on the path to Riker’s Island.

Andrews then commented on Catholic schooling and the reasons why Catholic schools seem to produce better educational outcomes. He argued that in Catholic schools children are not afraid in the classroom. In large, urban public schools, by contrast, many children are too frightened to learn effectively. According to Andrews, the key to educational reform is to communicate to parents that the public schools are not functioning well and to give parents the opportunity to improve the situation. Parents should also know that just pouring resources into the school system is not the answer.

Peter Flanigan spoke next, noting the huge number of troubled schools in the inner city. He cited recent articles that referred to some urban schools where only a third of students could read at their grade level as being in educational “dead zones.” Still, Flanigan observed, a number of schools in these zones do produce students that pass tests—students whose family income, parent education, risk factors, and English skills are similar to those of the failing students. So what is the ingredient present in successful schools that is absent from the others? Flanigan’s answer is competition.

Flanigan set forth two alternative models of education. In the bureaucratic, top-down, monopolistic system, the principal is tenured, has very limited freedom to deal with the curriculum, is assigned teachers who may or may not support his or her approach to running the school, and is given students who attend the school because they have no other choice. In the competitive system, by contrast, the principal has the freedom to sell his or her view of education, the flexibility to create curriculum, and the ability to choose teachers. Further, the principal and teachers

are accountable to the parents: they must say to parents, we want to teach your children, and here is how we are going to do it. Presented with the school’s offerings, the parents then make their decision.

Competition, according to Flanigan, means creating many more chartered schools and vouchers for students in poor school districts. He noted that students and parents desire bold experiments. For example, 23,000 students applied for the 1,000 scholarships that his nonprofit organization, Student/Sponsor Partnership, offered to public school students to attend private schools. In Albany, when vouchers were offered to students attending the city’s worst school, 25 percent of students accepted. The remaining students in the school did not suffer the way some thought they would. Instead, the principal was replaced, new teachers were hired, the building was painted, and the school opened in the fall with a much improved program. These examples, Flanigan suggested, show that competition is the key to reforming poor schools.

As the final lead-off speaker, Beth Lief raised three important points. First, there is no one magic bullet to solve the problems of our schools. She characterized the challenge as a search for the best partial solutions that, in combination, will improve our schools quickly. Second, standards are one part of the solution and a revolutionary part—they can change the way we think about education. According to Lief, we have moved away from the notion of a standardized Bell curve—which measures how well children perform relative to each other—to the new standards movement—which demands that all children reach a certain level of achievement. A serious problem in reaching this goal, however, is that many teachers lack the training to meet the high standards required by today’s economy, much less to prepare students to meet them.

Third, Lief emphasized that raising learning outcomes for all children will require large-scale reforms. Charter schools and more choice through vouchers are important steps, but to reach enough children we need to work at changing entire public school systems. Lief

underscored the need for better facilities, and she urged that public schools be given more power over staffing, curriculum, resources, and budgeting. At the same time, she called for greater accountability and more explicit rewards and consequences. Lief added that the consequences of failure must be felt by the adults in the system rather than by the children. Tenure needs to be examined in this context. To make sure that children are not exposed to poor teaching, the system must remove bad teachers quickly.

Following the speakers' remarks, the discussion was opened to all conference participants. The first issue raised by the group was the removal of tenure. One participant stressed the importance of preserving due process in removing tenure and noted that teacher reassessments raise complex issues. Derek Neal continued with the theme of accountability and focused on the current difficulty of rewarding good performance. He argued that unions tend to compress wage differentials so that supervisors have little latitude for rewarding individual employees for performance. Lief added that she envisioned a system designed not only to remove principals who failed, but also to nurture all principals and teachers—such a system would find and reward those leaders who enabled their students to excel.

The conversation then turned to ways to provide more choice and competition. Viteritti suggested that the fundamental rule should be that the dollar follows the child, giving poor parents the power to walk away from bad schools. The fear of job losses by teachers and others could prompt a failing school to turn itself around.

Robyn Brady offered two observations about the earlier discussion. First, she cautioned against using negative terminology to frame the debate over improving educational outcomes. For instance, calling schools that are on the failing list "dead zones" implies that there is no hope for them. Second, she noted that the topic of welfare reform had been absent from the discussion and urged participants to keep in mind that welfare changes would have a profound effect on the parents of many school children.

The session concluded with more discussion about why private schools seemed to outperform public schools. Some participants commented that rules and regulations in the public schools are more onerous than those in private schools. Another participant noted that many inner-city Catholic schools take all comers and rarely expel children, so that greater selectivity cannot explain the difference in outcomes. Finally, Andrews reiterated that inner-city public schools lack a safe environment that is conducive to learning.

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