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- *Efforts to ensure that each child receives a quality education must recognize that not all schools confront the same educational problems.*
- *Neither the competitive business model nor private schools are the answer to education's problems.*
- *There are too many variables to control for standardized testing to be effective.*
- *Children cannot focus and learn when their lives are chaotic. Before and after school and weekend programs are "life saving" for inner city children.*
- *Schools in low income neighborhoods desperately need more support services.*
- *Teachers need to be supported and protected, and be more involved in developing curriculum policy.*



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issue: *Education's Problems: Teachers' Perspectives*

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Editor's Note: A key, and much too ignored, perspective on Illinois' challenges regarding public education is that held by those dedicated, hardworking professionals who actually *teach* the students. Illinois' teachers constitute a very large group, and obviously a group with widely varying perspectives on the status of Illinois' system of public education at the start of the 21st century. But the fact that there are so many teachers with so many different opinions in no way reduces the value of their perspectives. *Policy Profiles* feels it appropriate to offer some of those perspectives and put them before the state's policy makers and opinion leaders.

To make some strides in this direction and to give the teachers a voice in *Policy Profiles'* ongoing series on public education in Illinois, this issue of *Policy Profiles* presents the views of three of the state's very respected teachers: Susan DeVincentis and Karen Larsen from Chicago and William R. (Randy) Fritz from Williamsfield. *The paragraphs that follow are a composite of the views of these three teachers. Not all three of them necessarily hold all of the views expressed herein, but all of these views have been expressed by at least one of them.* All three have proven their commitment, their dedication, and their concern for Illinois public education.

Public education today faces a huge debate between those who want fundamental education reform (business and political leaders) and those who feel such a reaction to modern educational challenges is a vast over-reaction (most public school teachers). Unfortunately, the voices of the teachers are rarely heard.

Teachers generally agree that improvements can be made and they understand that public education is the great leveler of society. They also realize that school cannot solve all the problems their children face. In fact, the question of how best to educate all children, ensuring that each child receives access to a quality education, must address the fact that not all school districts confront the same educational problems. In particular, school districts serving large numbers of disadvantaged students typically confront a unique set of problems that can not be adequately addressed within the context of the school alone or even within the context of a public education system. Rather, these schools and these children require special consideration.

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How do teachers define education's problems?

Education's problems can best be defined in two contexts: in a generic sense for the system as a whole, and in a specific sense for schools serving a high proportion of disadvantaged students. Generic problems include the need for:

- smaller class sizes,
- better teacher preparation and in-service training,
- adequate learning facilities,
- better discipline,
- supportive parental involvement,
- more teacher involvement in educational program design, and
- more community appreciation for the job the schools are doing.

Problems facing schools serving the disadvantaged, and especially inner city schools that require special efforts to address their unique and especially egregious situation, include the need to:

- involve families as partners in the educational process;
- address the impact of the unstable environments in which the students live;
- expand partnerships with the business and academic communities;
- provide more effective discipline for disruptive students and more classroom support for teachers;
- put more curriculum emphasis on reading; and
- make better use of evolving technology in the classroom.

Teachers believe that these problems must be addressed if Illinois' public

education system is to be meaningfully improved and that neither a competitive business model nor more standardized testing are going to solve them.

Are today's teachers aware of the severity of education's problems?

Teachers are aware of the charges and the statistics. They know, for example, the complaint of former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, who points out that the nation's public schools, from kindergarten through 12th grade, spend, in constant dollars, almost three times more per child than they did in 1960, yet student achievement has, at best, stagnated over the last 40 years. According to what is often considered the best measure of student achievement – the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – two-thirds of American children, by the fourth grade, cannot read at a proficient level, three-fourths can not write proficiently, and four-fifths are not proficient in mathematics. They also know the Illinois statistics: more than 400,000 low-income students are not meeting state standards. They know, better than anyone, that these problems are real.

Inner city teachers cite a myriad of problems that they believe are factors in their students' low test scores. They include violence and extreme poverty in their students' daily lives and in their communities. Teachers are also concerned with high student mobility rates, inadequate school resources, and lack of teacher input into school

curriculum and programs. Inner city teachers know better than anyone that inner city students suffer severely from the lack of family involvement in their schools. Moreover, the teachers of the poor realize that most students from disadvantaged families enter kindergarten without the language skills, background experience, or nurturing that students from more affluent families typically bring to school.

Why aren't teachers more supportive of proposed models for educational reform?

Most frequently, reformers suggest that reform be achieved either by greater reliance on private schools or that the present system of public education be replaced with competitive schools, based on the American business model, that are "modern and efficient." These models, in the view of teachers, have two serious failings.

First, a competitive business model does not take cognizance of the special handicaps under which inner city schools must work. It fails to account for the differences between learning environments in the inner city and in mainstream educational settings. For example, the competitive model does not account for the differences in students' backgrounds or their special needs. Students with special needs make up the larger portion of the learning community in the inner city.

Too many inner city students are learning disabled or behavior disordered because of poverty; drug-addicted parents; lack of stable, nurturing role models; and the generally unstable conditions in which they live. Teachers who work in inner city schools contend that many special needs students have not even been identified as such, and help is hard to get even for those students whose special needs have been identified.

Second, the business model simply does not apply to public education. *No business firm could succeed if it had to be run the way public schools must be run!* For the business model to apply, businesses would have to operate under the constraints which all public schools face every day. For example:

- The business could have no control over its raw materials. Just as each public school must accept any student who lives within a defined geographic area, the business firm would have to accept any and all raw materials sent to it, regardless of quality or the lack thereof.
- The firm's quality control would be externally determined. Much like the mandated, standardized testing being imposed on schools, the firm would be subjected to an annual, external review of its products, the results of which would be public information.
- The firm's legitimacy would be based on its products, not its

profits. Like schools, the firm's viability would be determined by the external review of its products, not by its financial records.

- The firm's products would have to be made using mass production techniques, yet each item would have to be unique, just as each student's uniqueness must be preserved in the classroom setting.
- The firm would be required by law to perform a great variety of extra services for its products, none of which would be necessary to the production of the product, just as the schools must provide a variety of social welfare services ranging from busing to food services to the enforcement of public health requirements.
- Most retooling would have to be financed with the firm's existing resources, just as schools must acquire new teaching equipment within the confines of a limited budget reinforced by tax levy constraints and caps.

No business would operate, or could survive, under the constraints confronting public schools. But even the comparison of business firms and public education is biased: it typically tends to compare the most successful businesses with the least successful schools, hardly a fair comparison.

Is greater reliance on private schools a viable option?

No business could survive if it had to operate under burdensome constraints that did not apply to its competitors, yet public schools are constantly compared to private schools that do not have the same constraints as public schools. For example, private schools:

- Can accept or reject potential students, and thus can limit themselves to students who do not have special needs or who do not come from disadvantaged backgrounds. (The oldest existing "school choice" model is that in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, alternative private schools – that accept vouchers – may reject any student for any reason.);
- Do not have to pay for, or provide, the array of support services, like busing, school lunches, and nursing and social work services. In fact, special education services and busing must be provided by public schools, even to private school students.

If private schools can siphon off a disproportionate share of the best students (e.g. the best raw materials), the public schools, and especially those in the inner city, would be left in even direr straights, and thus would be more likely to produce an even poorer performance record. Heavier reliance on private schools will make educational opportunities for many inner city students even less equal than they are now.

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Won't standardized testing help improve the schools?

Most educators agree that testing is necessary in order to measure student achievement. There is much disagreement in the profession, however, on how testing should be conducted. Some feel that a single evaluation tool – a standardized test – will not work at all. They argue that there are too many variables – school-to-school, student-to-student, and day-to-day – that cannot be controlled. Several examples demonstrate this contention:

- Students in one school were tested just after the violent death of two of its students. Needless to say, many of the children were not focused on the test.
- Some teachers count a standardized test as part of a grade and others do not. Consequently, some students are more motivated than others.
- A small school district recently had to administer standardized tests on the same day it was scheduled, for the first time in its history, to play a basketball game in the state tournament. Many of the students were not focused on their tests that day.

For those who accept the idea that a standardized test would be helpful, however, there is much disagreement about which testing instrument most accurately evaluates student learning. Their frustration is that the State of Illinois uses one form of assessment (the Illinois State Achievement Test or ISAT) and the Chicago Board of Education uses another, the Iowa Basic Skills Test, to determine

whether a student will pass to the next grade. They also dislike the fact that the value of the scores changes from year to year, as does the way the scores are defined. This makes progress difficult to measure and causes confusion for parents and students.

Many teachers hope that the new federal “Leave No Child Behind Act” will address the problem of multiple tests and interpretations and that one test will be sufficient for assessment in all Illinois schools. One test would also reduce stress levels in young inner city children, particularly third graders who currently must take both tests within a two-month period.

Further, many teachers, including those who teach in the inner city, find themselves evaluated on the basis of their students’ test scores and so they teach to the test. This necessary evil undermines the idea imparted to children that learning can be a joyous undertaking.

What do teachers recommend for inner city schools where problems are most severe?

Inner city students often live in the turmoil of life caused by drug addiction and gang activity in their neighborhoods and often in their own homes. Inner city teachers understand how difficult it is for a child to focus and learn when its life is chaotic. This has motivated some schools to provide additional programs, both academic and athletic, before and after school and on weekends as well as during

winter, spring, and summer breaks. These programs provide students with the security of a safe and consistent environment and instill in them the value of “all the time” education. Students who eventually leave the inner city view programs such as these as “life saving.” Such programs, where they exist, must continue, and inner city schools which do not have them must be given the funding to provide them.

Because of the high student mobility rates in the inner city, students often lack a sense of security and trust basic to learning. Homeless children who live either on the streets or in shelters, as well as children who are wards of the state or in foster homes, usually enter school already two years behind (on average). When districts close schools whose test scores are low, it creates another major disruption in the already challenging lives of these students and reinforces a destructive “resigned to fail” philosophy in them. Students transferring to other schools following the closing of their own are often stigmatized as coming from “failing schools.”

Inner city schools often lack adequate learning resources such as materials, books, and even teachers. Not only must such resources be provided, but they must be current, relevant, grade appropriate, and take into consideration the cultural backgrounds and primary languages spoken in the learning community. While extra funds have sometimes been directed to inner city schools, teachers seldom have a voice in how those dollars are spent; and often, very few of these

funds go directly to classroom instruction. Expensive “programs” that may be effective in some communities are often ineffective in the inner city and, in fact, are a waste of teachers’ time and school funds. Too often, the search for new programs prevents those already in place from getting off the ground.

While such problems are particularly intense in inner city schools, they are often found in rural schools as well, and always in schools in low income neighborhoods, wherever they may be.

Do families play an important role in inner city schools?

Typically, there is very little family involvement in inner city schools. That must change. As parents are encouraged to participate at school, they become partners, and as school and home goals line up, learners no longer find themselves choosing between what they are learning at home and what they are learning at school. But this is easier said than done. The “report card pick-up” day in Chicago means that, twice each year, parents must come and talk with their child’s teacher in order to receive the child’s report card. This has proved very effective and might well be expanded to include all four quarters. The practice might also be usefully applied in any other school or district plagued with little parental involvement.

Some schools have a strong parent involvement component where parents have monthly workshops, speakers, and trips, book fairs, cultural

celebrations, and field days that include families. These activities, and the statewide “Family Reading Night,” also bring parents and siblings into the schools. There needs to be a collaboration among those schools that are successfully implementing family outreach programs and those schools that have yet to expand these partnerships.

Again, while the absence of adequate family involvement in education is particularly severe in inner city schools, many other schools throughout the state suffer from the same malady.

What should be done for students with learning disabilities?

There are too many barriers to effective programming for students with learning disabilities. Lack of parental cooperation is a common barrier. There is often a backlog of cases, making for a long wait before a student can be formally tested and staffing is made available to provide help. Often the system breaks down when services needed by a particular student are not available in the student’s school, or the student has to wait for an opening in the appropriate—but overcrowded—class. Although parents may be given a copy of a “Rights of Students with Disabilities” brochure the parents often are not informed enough (often not even able to interpret the text) to serve as their child’s advocate.

Inner city schools desperately need more support services. They need more trained professionals – psychologists, social workers, and health professionals – in the school on a full-time basis, not just one or two days a week. Teachers need more support services for learners with cognitive as well as physical disabilities, and more strategies for working with those with behavioral disorders. Alternative schools are needed for the most severe behavior disordered learners. Parenting classes are needed to help parents deal with issues such as “effective discipline,” building self-esteem in children, and health issues. More GED programs are needed for parents and older siblings so that children will have positive role models. Rural schools, especially in poor neighborhoods, face similar problems and needs.

Since it is probably unrealistic to assume that such services will be put in place anytime soon, it is crucial that regular education teachers be better equipped with training and resources so that they can better serve the needs of the students in front of them every day.

What should be done about discipline in the schools?

Teachers know only too well that learning often hinges on effective discipline. Too often, school discipline is not effective. Students are often no longer intimidated by threats to call the parent, and often they will act out in the hopes of getting attention of some kind. Administrative support for

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teachers is often inconsistent and inappropriate. Throughout the state, school district discipline codes frown on high numbers of disciplinary actions in any particular school, which this further reduces administrative support for teachers. Teachers are discouraged from keeping students from special learning opportunities, such as resource classes or field trips, as disciplinary measures. Without adequate support, teachers frequently become discouraged and experience burn-out.

Such problems are prevalent – indeed very common – both in inner city schools and rural schools. Students in these schools, in many ways, often have a worldly awareness way beyond their years, and the typical “tattling” so common in schools too often becomes serious accusations, sometimes against other students but also sometimes against the teacher. All teachers, and especially inner city teachers, need to be supported and protected.

Are reading instruction programs working?

Various reading programs have been tried, some with modest success, but there are still not enough children reading at grade level in the inner city. Too much effort is spent looking for the “right” reading program. This effort too often ignores the reality that, for many inner city children, *any association with print is foreign*. Many have never even seen anyone reading, let alone seen a book or been read to. The most basic concepts, such as how to hold a book, or where the

front of the book is, or left to right directionality, must be taught to many kindergarten and first grade students who live in the inner city. There are first grade students who enter school not knowing their own names, let alone how to spell them.

It is crucial that children be given much reading time. The Chicago Board of Education mandate that two and a half hours of reading instruction take place in every classroom every day will hopefully become a permanent expectation. The federal “Leave No Child Behind Act,” the assignment of reading specialists to work in probationary schools, smaller class sizes, and increased funding for school library books will, hopefully, also help.

Will more technology help?

Kids love computers! As they interact with technology, kids are learning to read whether they know it or not. Current reading software is especially helpful with students who lack phonetic skills and a basic vocabulary or sight word knowledge. In some schools, the technology available to learners is sophisticated and, in some of those same schools, the expertise is available to support student learning and achievement. Too frequently, however, technology is not utilized as it could be. For example, there might not be enough computers available for effective, whole-classroom instruction. Teachers themselves do not always have the technology expertise necessary to deliver the instruction adequately. There is a lot of

information out there, but many teachers are so overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities that they lack the time and energy to search out this information.

It should also be noted that computers, like all classroom aids, are tools, not solutions to problems. Teachers who use computers must be mindful of an over-reliance on this technology, or overuse of the World Wide Web (especially as a research tool). They must, instead, ensure that students learn and understand traditional means of research and learning.

What is the role played by business and academic partnerships?

Teachers, especially in the inner city, are encouraged by the numerous corporations who are responding to the needs of the schools. Microsoft, United Airlines, Disney, and Amoco are some of the major corporations which have partnered with low achieving schools and the benefits to both schools and corporations are many. Students are often provided with “cutting edge” technology; tutoring opportunities and facilities, both inside and outside of school, are also made available.

Colleges and universities, such as North Central College with its “Into the Streets” tutoring program, also join partnerships with selected schools. While these programs have proven successful, in Chicago such academic partnerships are only mandated in the cases of schools that are on probation because of extremely low standardized

test scores. What is needed are more university programs that are committed to inner city and other “poor” schools and more corporate awareness of this need. Also needed are dollars to help aspiring teachers, who already have a college degree, to teach during the day and receive additional training toward their certification after school hours. Such funds are especially valuable as a way to direct such teachers to areas where the need is greatest, which is often in inner city schools.

When will schools overcome their current problems?

They will be much more likely to overcome their problems when the teaching profession, and especially the teachers themselves, can, *in partnership* with community and education leaders:

- Exercise significant decision-making influence over how public educational resources are spent;
- Teach how they know best instead of spending time worrying about scoring at certain levels on external instruments;
- Teach a manageable number of students;
- Receive meaningful support, especially for their efforts at innovation and discipline; and
- Obtain adequate facilities for all students, regardless of income level.

All teachers face many challenges, but they also derive much satisfaction from helping students grow intellectually and personally.

Inner city teachers derive particular satisfaction from teaching the neediest of children. Children need strong educators who are willing to be social workers, counselors, parents, disciplinarians, and friends as well as their teachers. Inner city teachers acknowledge that there are days when they go home physically and emotionally exhausted, but they also experience days when they have great lessons, whether it is pointing literature chairs for Black History Month or playing hopscotch for multiplication facts, and then all their other frustrations seem to dissipate. Inner city teachers often are the most positive and stable force in their students’ lives; they thus have a special role in helping their students become productive, responsible citizens.

Like flowers, children need nurturing, especially those in the inner city who are trying to grow among the weeds. While no one has all the answers to education’s problems, the search for ways to improve education must never stop.

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