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Class Matters. Why Won't We Admit It?

By Helen F. Ladd
and Edward B. Fiske

NO one seriously disputes the fact that students from disadvantaged households perform less well in school, on average, than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. But rather than confront this fact of life head-on, our policy makers mistakenly continue to reason that, since they cannot change the backgrounds of students, they should focus on things they can control.

No Child Left Behind, President George W. Bush's signature education law, did this by setting unrealistically high — and ultimately self-defeating — expectations for all schools. President Obama's policies have concentrated on trying to make schools more "efficient" through means like judging teachers by their students' test scores or encouraging competition by promoting the creation of charter schools. The proverbial story of the drunk looking for his keys under the lamppost comes to mind.

The Occupy movement has catalyzed rising anxiety over income inequality; we desperately need a similar reminder of the relationship between economic advantage and student performance.

The correlation has been abundantly documented, notably by the famous Coleman Report in 1966. New research by Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University traces the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families over the last 50 years and finds that it now far exceeds the gap between white and black students.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that more than 40 percent of the variation in average reading scores and 46 percent of the

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variation in average math scores across states is associated with variation in child poverty rates.

International research tells the same story. Results of the 2009 reading tests conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment show that, among 15-year-olds in the United States and the 13 countries whose students outperformed ours, students with lower economic and social status had far lower test scores than their more advantaged counterparts within every country. Can anyone credibly believe that the mediocre overall performance of American students on international tests is unrelated to the fact that one-fifth of American children live in poverty?

Yet federal education policy seems blind to all this. No Child Left Behind required all schools to bring all students to high levels of achievement but took no note of the challenges that disadvantaged students face. The legislation did, to be sure, specify that subgroups — defined by income, minority status and proficiency in English — must meet the same achievement standard. But it did so only to make sure that schools did not ignore their disadvantaged students — not to help them address the challenges they carry with them into the classroom.

So why do presumably well-intentioned policy makers ignore, or deny, the correlations of family background and student achievement?

Some honestly believe that schools are capable of offsetting the effects of poverty. Others want to avoid the impression that they set lower expectations for some groups of students for fear that those expectations will be self-fulfilling. In both cases, simply wanting something to be true does not make it so.

Another rationale for denial is to note that some schools, like the Knowledge Is Power Program charter schools, have managed to "beat the odds." If some schools can succeed, the argument goes, then it is reasonable to expect all schools to. But close scrutiny of charter school performance has shown that many of the success stories have been limited to particular grades or subjects and may be attributable to substantial outside financ-

ing or extraordinarily long working hours on the part of teachers. The evidence does not support the view that the few success stories can be scaled up to address the needs of large populations of disadvantaged students.

A final rationale for denying the correlation is more nefarious. As we are now seeing, requiring all schools to meet the same high standards for all students, regardless of family background, will inevitably lead either to large numbers of failing schools or to a dramatic lowering of state standards. Both serve to discredit the public education system and lend support to arguments that the system is failing and needs fundamental change,

School reformers still act as though we can look past poverty.

like privatization.

Given the budget crises at the national and state levels, and the strong political power of conservative groups, a significant effort to reduce poverty or deal with the closely related issue of racial segregation is not in the political cards, at least for now.

So what can be done?

Large bodies of research have shown how poor health and nutrition inhibit child development and learning and, conversely, how high-quality early childhood and preschool education programs can enhance them. We understand the importance of early exposure to rich language on future cognitive development. We know that low-income students experience greater learning loss during the summer when their more privileged peers are enjoying travel and other enriching activities.

Since they can't take on poverty itself, education policy makers should try to provide poor students with the social support and experiences that middle-

class students enjoy as a matter of course.

It can be done. In North Carolina, the two-year-old East Durham Children's Initiative is one of many efforts around the country to replicate Geoffrey Canada's well-known successes with the Harlem Children's Zone.

Say Yes to Education in Syracuse, N.Y., supports access to afterschool programs and summer camps and places social workers in schools. In Omaha, Building Bright Futures sponsors school-based health centers and offers mentoring and enrichment services. Citizen Schools, based in Boston, recruits volunteers in seven states to share their interests and skills with middle-school students.

Promise Neighborhoods, an Obama administration effort that gives grants to programs like these, is a welcome first step, but it has been under-financed.

Other countries already pursue such strategies. In Finland, with its famously high-performing schools, schools provide food and free health care for students. Developmental needs are addressed early. Counseling services are abundant.

But in the United States over the past decade, it became fashionable among supporters of the "no excuses" approach to school improvement to accuse anyone raising the poverty issue of letting schools off the hook — or what Mr. Bush famously called "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Such accusations may afford the illusion of a moral high ground, but they stand in the way of serious efforts to improve education and, for that matter, go a long way toward explaining why No Child Left Behind has not worked.

Yes, we need to make sure that all children, and particularly disadvantaged children, have access to good schools, as defined by the quality of teachers and principals and of internal policies and practices.

But let's not pretend that family background does not matter and can be overlooked. Let's agree that we know a lot about how to address the ways in which poverty undermines student learning. Whether we choose to face up to that reality is ultimately a moral question. □

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Military Children Stay a Step Ahead of Public School Students

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. — The results are now public from the 2011 federal testing program known as NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational

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Progress. And tests for fourth and eighth graders.

And once again, schools on the nation's military bases have outperformed public schools on both reading and math

At the military base schools, 39 percent of fourth graders were scored as proficient in reading, compared with 32 percent of all public school students.

Even more impressive, the achievement gap between black and white students continues to be much smaller at military base schools and is shrinking faster than at public schools.

On the NAEP reading test, black fourth graders in public schools scored an average of 205 out of 500, compared with a 231 score for white public school students, a 26-point gap. Black fourth graders at the military base schools averaged 222 in reading, compared with 233 for whites, an 11-point gap.

In fact, the black fourth graders at the military base schools scored better in reading than public school students as a whole, whose average score was

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221. How to explain the difference? It has become fashionable for American educators to fly off to Helsinki to investigate how schools there produce such high-achieving Finns. But for just \$69.95 a night, they can stay at the Days Inn in Jacksonville, N.C., and investigate how the schools here on the Camp Lejeune Marine base produce such high-achieving Americans — both black and white.

They would find that the schools on base are not subject to former President George W. Bush's signature education program, No Child Left Behind, or to President Obama's Race to the Top. They would find that standardized tests do not dominate and are not used to rate teachers, principals or schools.

They would find Leigh Anne Kapiko, the principal at Tarawa Terrace Elementary, one of seven schools here.

Test preparation? "No," Ms. Kapiko said. "That's not done in Department of Defense schools. We don't even have test prep materials."

At schools here, standardized tests are used as originally intended, to identify a child's academic weaknesses and assess the effectiveness of the curriculum.

Ms. Kapiko has been a principal both inside and outside the gates and believes that military base schools are more nurturing

than public schools. "We don't have to be so regimented, since we're not worried about a child's ability to bubble on a test," she said.

Military children are not put through test prep drills. "For us," Ms. Kapiko said, "children are children; they're not little Marines."

Under Mr. Obama's education agenda, state governments can now dictate to principals how to run their schools. In Tennessee — which is ranked 41st in NAEP scores and has made no significant progress in closing the black-white achievement gap on those tests in 20 years — the state now requires four formal observations a year for all teachers, regardless of whether the principal thinks they are excellent or weak. The state has declared that half of a teacher's rating must be based on student test scores.

Ms. Kapiko, on the other hand, has discretion in how to evaluate her teachers. For the most effective, she does one observation a year. That gives her and her assistant principal time for walk-through visits in every classroom every day.

"We don't micromanage," said Marilee Fitzgerald, director of the Department of Defense Education Activity, the agency that supervises the military base schools and their 87,000 students. "Individual schools decide what to focus on."

The average class in New York City in kindergarten through the third grade has 24 students. At military base schools, the average is 18, which is almost as good as it is in the private schools where leaders of the education reform movement — Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York; the former education chancellor in New York City, Joel I. Klein; and Bill Gates of Microsoft — have sent their children.

A 2001 study on the success of

At schools on bases, no test prep or state oversight.

the military base schools by researchers at Vanderbilt University cites the importance of the smooth relations between the teachers' union and management, and Ms. Fitzgerald said that continued to be true.

Helping children succeed academically is about a lot more than what goes on inside the schools. Military parents do not have to worry about securing health care coverage for their children or adequate housing. At least one parent in the family has a job.

The military command also puts a priority on education. Bry-

ant Anderson, a petty officer who is stationed at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Dahlgren, Va., is given time off from work to serve as president of the base's school board and coach middle school basketball and track teams.

Parents with children at the civilian schools where Ms. Kapiko has been the principal have not received that kind of support from their employers. "If Dad works in a factory, he gets three absences and he's fired," she said.

A family's economic well-being has considerable impact on how students score on standardized tests, and it is hard to make exact comparisons between military and public school families. But by one indicator, families at military base schools and public schools have similar earnings: the percentage of students who qualify for federally subsidized lunches is virtually identical at both, about 46 percent.

What is clear is that the base schools have made impressive progress in narrowing the achievement gap.

In the last decade, the gap in reading between black and white fourth graders at base schools has decreased to 11 points this year (233 compared with 222), down from a 16-point difference in 2003 (230 compared with 214), a 31 percent reduction. In public schools, there has been a much smaller decrease, to a 26-point

gap this year (231 compared with 205) from 30 points in 2002 (227 compared with 197), a 13 percent reduction.

The military has a far better record of integration than most institutions. Almost all of the 69 base schools are in the South. They were opened in the 1950s and '60s because the military was racially integrated and did not want the children of black soldiers to attend racially segregated schools off base.

Nevin Joplin, a sergeant in the Air Force, has a son in the sixth grade at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. Sergeant Joplin, who is black and a single father, said both he and his son, Quinn, had been given ample opportunities to succeed. Quinn has been placed in a gifted program, and Sergeant Joplin said he had been treated fairly in the military promotion system. "My records go to the board, my name is blacked out, anything that would identify me is blacked out; they only see what I've done and decide on the merits," he said.

Capt. Derrick Bennett Jr. of the Army is also black and has a 7-year-old son attending school at Fort Benning, Ga. He says race rarely, if ever, comes into play on the post. But when he visits family in Birmingham, it is not the same. There is still a tendency in Alabama to look at a black man differently, he said.