

# Myth of Insurmountable Problems

*Reforms that focus on incentives lead to educational gains.*

By Jay Greene

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Schools frequently cite social problems like poverty, broken homes, and bad parenting as excuses for their own poor performance. They claim the existence of these challenges means education is doomed to fail.

Some seem to think that the very idea of a "failing school" is misleading — that it is really society that has failed, not educators.

"It's just plain folly to demand that a school, where a kid spends part of the day, be held accountable for what happens the rest of the day," argues Richard Cohen. Student failure is inherent in poverty itself, he says.

No one would deny that because of factors beyond a school's control, learning is more difficult for some students.

If the advocates of this argument were merely cautioning us to be mindful of difficulties like poverty and broken homes, or exhorting us to try to alleviate social problems, no one could disagree with them. But instead, they use these problems as an excuse to oppose school reforms.

If low-income minority students perform poorly, they argue, it's because of poverty. No school reform can ever make a difference. Kids who start out lagging must always lag. Social problems are forever more powerful than anything a school may do.

This argument that schools are helpless in the face of social problems is not supported by hard evidence. It is a myth.

The truth is that certain schools do a strikingly better job than others at overcoming challenges in the culture.

To test the evidence on this question, I developed a systematic method for measuring levels of advantage and disadvantage in student populations across US states.

I combined measurements of 16 social factors that researchers agree affect student outcomes, such as poverty, family structure, and health.

I named this measurement the Teachability Index, and tested its relationship with actual student outcomes. I found it to be a reliable predictor.

Armed with this tool, I calculated the level of achievement that each state's students should be expected to reach. Then I compared that to actual achievement in every state. I found a large degree of variation.

In Texas, for example, schools perform much better than their student demographics would predict. Whereas its raw test scores place it 32nd among the states, Texas ranks fourth after its academic outcomes are adjusted for the Teachability Index.

In Louisiana, on the other hand, schools performed less well than student backgrounds would predict.

Inherent in the claim that schools are helpless to educate disadvantaged students is the idea that any attempt to improve educational outcomes through reforms to the system would prove futile. However, the evidence suggests that reforms that focus on the incentives of public schools lead to educational gains.

One reform that has been shown to work is measuring each school's performance through standardized testing, and then providing rewards or sanctions based on a school's performance.

This gives a school a direct incentive to educate its students well. States with this sort of accountability testing make statistically significant improvements, researchers have demonstrated. Stanford investigators have found that stronger accountability systems particularly help black and Hispanic students.

Another reform that can help overcome the educational challenges caused by social problems is school choice. Few question that vouchers help the students who use them to leave failing public schools for a private school.

This positive impact for voucher participants has been found in five "random assignment" studies. Less understood, however, is the positive effect that school choice has on students who remain in the public schools as well.

When school choice programs, such as vouchers and charter schools, are adopted, urban public schools that once had a captive clientele must improve the education they provide or else students, and the funding they represent, will go elsewhere.

In a study I performed of a voucher program in Florida, I found that when chronically failing public schools faced competition from vouchers, they made very impressive gains compared to the performance of all other schools.

However, when we studied low-performing schools whose students were not eligible for vouchers, no similar gains were found.

Many other researchers have found that school choice programs increase the performance of public schools. In fact, despite the frequent claims of teachers unions, I am not aware of a single study that has found that a school choice program harmed the academic performance of a public school system.

Both of these strategies — accountability and choice — have been shown to improve student performance, even in places where lots of kids come to school with lots of problems.

Other strategies that focus on the incentives of public schools have also been demonstrated to have positive effects. So schools are hardly helpless in the face of social challenges — they need only choose the proper reforms.

*(Excerpted with permission from "Education Myths" in The American Enterprise, July/August 2006. Dr. Greene is a senior fellow at New York's Manhattan Institute.)*