



What Should Be The Boundaries Of The Schools We Need?¹

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Recent conflicts between the Ontario government and especially the Toronto District School Board are based on two quite incompatible views of public schools. The “independent producers” view holds that schools are largely separate from the rest of society and capable of doing their job well in the absence of much interaction with families, communities and the wider world. Schools have “no excuses” for failing to teach all children to the same high standards.

Two quite different groups of people advocate this view: one (not much concerned with equity) believes that if school professionals were more highly motivated, “the problem” would be solved; a second (passionately concerned about equity) knows the solution is much more complicated but believes that even to acknowledge such complexity decreases the school’s motivation to achieve high standards with children who, traditionally, do not do well in school.

A second view of public schools, the “interdependent co-contributor” view, holds that, while schools must certainly continue to improve on what happens inside their buildings, they stand little chance of addressing the needs of highly diverse populations unless the boundaries of their work encompass children’s experiences in the home and wider community. Those adhering to this view typically value equity as a prominent goal for public schools and consider the

building of productive working relationships with parents and the wider community part of the core mission of schools; schools cannot overlook the social and emotional needs of students manifest in classrooms every day. People adhering to this view typically believe, as well, that most teachers are already strongly motivated to do whatever it takes to educate children and that piling on external sanctions and incentives is likely to do more harm than good.

These two views of schooling have strong roots in political ideology. The independent producers view as advocated by those not much concerned with equity is closely aligned with ideology of the political right, while those from the middle to the left of the political spectrum may adhere to either view depending on their understandings about what works best for children’s learning. Because political ideologies represent more or less coherent value systems, they are quite useful for many purposes. But they also get in the way of pursuing shared values. As we see with the two groups of “no excuses” advocates, ideology does not always help us decide how best to realize our most fundamental values.

When it comes to the shared value of educating all of our children well, evidence of what works, not political ideology, ought to carry the day. So, let’s look at what the evidence tells us.

SEVEN DEFENSIBLE CLAIMS

1 A family's socio-economic status is strongly related to student learning and behavior.

Beginning with the now-famous evidence reported by Coleman and his colleagues², study after study suggests that socio-economic status (SES) of families explains more than half of the difference in student achievement across schools; it is highly related also to violence, dropping out of school, entry to post secondary education, and levels of both adult employment and income.

Schools serving low SES families often find themselves in an “iron circle” that begins with the family’s impoverished economic conditions. These conditions may be a consequence of unemployment, cultural, racial and linguistic diversity, recent immigration, high mobility, family breakups and the like. These conditions often give rise to such family risk factors as erratic parenting skills, poor parental supervision, low family income, poverty, isolation, family violence, abuse, neglect, and parental conflict. Low SES families are more likely to have low expectations for their children’s performance at school.

Impoverished economic conditions increase the chances of families struggling to survive in high-density housing communities and suffering from malnutrition, other health problems, and substance abuse. These are community risk factors, as are high turnover of residences and lack of facilities and services for young people.

2 A family's economic status influences learning indirectly by shaping the educational culture of the home.

A family’s socioeconomic status is a symptom, rather than a direct cause, of student difficulties at school. Some low SES families have children who do very well at school. In fact, SES is a relatively crude proxy for a set of family and community

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conditions and interactions considerably more direct in their impact on student success than SES. These conditions and interactions constitute the family’s educational culture; they vary widely across families, occasionally without much relation to income or other social variables, although statistically the relationship between SES and family educational cultures is both positive and significant.

At the core of family educational cultures are the assumptions, norms, and beliefs held by the family about intellectual work in general and school work in particular. The behaviors and conditions resulting from these assumptions are related to school success by a substantial body of evidence. Based on such evidence, Walberg³ concluded that family educational culture includes family work habits, academic guidance and support provided to children, and stimulation to think about issues in the larger environment. Other components resulting from Walberg’s analysis include academic and occupational aspirations and expectations of parents or guardians for their children, the provision of adequate health and nutritional conditions, and physical settings in the home conducive to academic work. Communities are able to supplement and sometimes substitute for some dimensions of family educational cultures in ways we touch on below.

3 Strong family educational cultures provide children with intellectual, social and emotional capacities that greatly improve their chances of mastering the school curriculum.

Family cultures are only the first part of the explanation for differences in student success. Primary mechanisms, joining particular types of family educational cultures with student success, are the capacities children acquire by virtue of experiences with, and relationships among, immediate and extended family members. Such “social capital” is comprised of the “assets” people accrue by virtue of their relationship with other individuals and networks of people. Depending on the existence of high levels of trust, these assets may take a number of forms:

- reciprocal obligations and expectations of one another held by members of a group (e.g., the obligation a child feels to work hard at school in return for the obligation a parent feels to provide a happy, secure and stimulating home environment);
- the potential for information available in social relations (e.g., a relative’s knowledge of who best to contact in order to be considered for a job opportunity);
- the existence of effective norms and sanctions that encourage some forms of behavior and discourage others (e.g., norms held by the family about what constitutes respectful behavior toward teachers); and
- the habits and dispositions evident in family members’ individual and collective responses to everyday problems. When such habits and dispositions are productive, and can be learned by the child, they help the child solve a wide array of problems and contribute to the child’s sense of self-efficacy. Robust self-efficacy generates persistence in the face of the challenges presented by the school curriculum, a key explanation for differences in pupil success.

EN BREF

Quelles devraient être les limites de l'engagement des écoles ? Devraient-elles fonctionner en vase clos, à distance de la société environnante, ou devraient-elles plutôt élargir leur champ d'action pour inclure le vécu des enfants au foyer et dans la collectivité ? Si cette décision s'appuie sur les résultats de la recherche et non sur des considérations idéologiques ou politiques, il est clair que ce champ d'action ne peut être contraint que si les décisions prises dans un contexte plus large peuvent résoudre les problèmes qui affectent la réussite scolaire. Cet argument s'appuie sur sept « assertions valables » qui montrent l'existence d'un lien clair entre l'économie, la famille ainsi que divers facteurs communautaires et la réussite scolaire de l'enfant. L'absence d'un soutien adéquat au plan du revenu, du logement et de la santé dans la plupart des provinces accorde un poids moral considérable aux commissaires scolaires, tels ceux de Toronto, qui affirment que les écoles sont l'institution la mieux placée pour offrir aux enfants le soutien dont ils ont besoin pour réussir tant à l'école qu'à l'extérieur.

4 The wider communities in which the children live also contribute to the capacities needed for school success.

The old adage that “it takes a village to raise a child” also reminds us that the nuclear family, or even the extended family, is not the only source of social capital for a child. Community agencies, neighbors, churches, clubs and the like, are all capable of contributing to this form of capital. In the best of circumstances, these networks, people and agencies form “strong” communities based on familiarity, interdependence and commitment to a common purpose; they may add to the capital provided by healthy family cultures or compensate for unhealthy cultures. But this means that children living in unhealthy family cultures situated in weak community cultures face especially difficult challenges.

5 The nature of school-parent relationships is critical to children's success at school, but those relationships are varied, complex and uneven in their effects.

Parents and schools interact in a wide variety of ways that influence children's learning. Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long-lasting, and well planned. Benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary level. They continue throughout high school, as well.

To make their greatest contribution, parents are involved at all levels in the school, although direct involvement in teaching in the home and the school has the greatest impact on children's learning. Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents, and parents do not have to be well educated themselves to help.

This evidence makes clear that we cannot look at the school and the home in isolation from one another; we must see how they interconnect with each other and with the world at large.

6 The capacities some children bring to school are often underutilized.

Until this point, it might seem that we are blaming families for their children's failure at school. So it is quite important to acknowledge that many schools *can* do more with the social capital that diverse groups of students already bring to the schoolhouse door. The value of a child's social capital depends on what the school chooses *not to count* as educationally useful social capital, as well as what it does count.

Schools exhibit a large array of not obvious to quite overt responses to some forms of social capital arising from linguistic, racial, religious and cultural diversity. Prejudice, bias, racism, and other sources of inequity are instruments for denying the value of social capital different from that produced within the dominant culture, religion, or race, for example. More schools must learn to view these forms of social capital as resources rather than deficits if a wider array of children is to be well educated.

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7 Teachers already have extraordinarily high levels of commitment to the learning of students without piling on more external sanctions and incentives.

Ever since Lortie's landmark 1975 study,⁴ virtually all relevant evidence has portrayed a level of “intrinsic” commitment by teachers to the learning of their clients by teachers that other organizations can only dream of with their employees. Reformers are wasting their resources, this evidence suggests, by excessively and exclusively focussing on high stakes motivational strategies. Widespread student testing policies and much of the accompanying baggage (such as target setting) may, indeed, help focus teachers on important but sometimes neglected student outcomes. But carried to extreme, these policies generate considerable “collateral damage” (e.g. teachers quitting the profession, excessive time

spent teaching test-taking skills) and threaten to displace the intrinsic desire of most teachers to serve their students' best interests with far less preferable, extrinsic, sources of motivation.

Resources would better be spent on improving those conditions of work that are known to matter for teaching and learning. It does not help improve the education of, for example, economically disadvantaged children to pretend that all of their educational needs can be met within the classroom. To adopt the "no excuses" position does a disservice to teachers and blinds us to issues that need attention if we are to better serve such students.

WHAT DO THESE CLAIMS MEAN FOR POLICY?

What are the implications of this evidence for policies that establish the boundaries of schooling? Was the Ontario government, for example, correct to insist that schools stick to what can be delivered inside the classroom? Or, as some Toronto trustees insisted, should schools do whatever it takes to ensure the success of their students at school?

Actually, either position could claim support from this evidence depending on the larger provincial policy context. For the Ontario government's position to be defensible in light of this evidence, however, that larger policy context would have to include, for example:

- A well implemented housing policy that significantly reduces the forced mobility of families and provides those families with enough housing space to support their children's school activities at home. Frequent relocations of families erodes the school's ability to provide a consistent set of educational experiences for children;
- Adequate and easily accessible health care for children and their families. Evidence suggests that children from lower income families often wait until illness becomes critical before accessing health care, resulting in increases in school absenteeism.
- Significant efforts to reduce the proportion of family incomes below the poverty line. The number of families falling below the poverty line has been increasing, not declining, across Canada and in Ontario. Evidence suggests that sustained increases in family income are strongly associated with increases in both IQ and school achievement.

These conditions clearly do not exist in most Canadian provinces, at present – certainly not in Ontario. And the lack of such conditions provides considerable moral authority to the position taken by trustees, like those in Toronto, who claim that schools are the most likely institutions to provide the support children must have if they are to be successful both in and out of school. Nonetheless, governments still have choices as they consider how best to improve the education of highly diverse populations of children. In a recent report written for the Spencer Foundation, Richard Rothstein concludes that:

Because families, communities, and social policies all have an

impact on student achievement, programs to raise student achievement should not assume that the only way of doing so is with better school policies. A variety of interventions – social, economic, and instructional – should compete for attention and resources as means of raising student achievement. 1

- 1 This paper is part of: "The Schools We Need" Project, funded by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.
- 2 J.S. Coleman, *Equality of educational opportunity* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966).
- 3 H. J. Walberg, "Improving the productivity of America's schools," *Educational Leadership*, 41, no. 8 (1984): 19-27.
- 4 D. Lortie, *Schoolteacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
- 5 R. Rothstein, *Out of Balance: Our Understanding of How Schools Affect Society and How Society Affects Schools* (Chicago, IL: The Spencer Foundation, 2002), 25.

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