

Accelerated Schools for Disadvantaged Students

By mobilizing instructional and community resources to bring students up to grade level before they leave elementary school, a Stanford model program expects to prevent future dropouts.

Although the rhetoric of recent state reforms stresses improvement of education for *all* children, the substance of the reforms does not support it.¹ The reform movement systematically neglects educationally disadvantaged students.

Moreover, the number of disadvantaged students in our schools is increasing rapidly. The current enrollment is about 30 percent of elementary and secondary school students, a far higher proportion than in the 1960s.

Why are these numbers increasing so rapidly? Several explanations apply. First, disadvantaged populations have a higher birth rate than other populations. Second, the United States is experiencing legal and illegal immigration in waves unprecedented since the turn of the century. And third, the proportion of children in poverty families, many of them female-headed, is higher today than it was a decade ago.

The dropout rate of disadvantaged students is also higher; according to recent data, it approaches 50 percent. In addition, a 1976 government study found that while 13 percent of all 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate, among Hispanics the percentage was 56; among blacks, it was 44. These figures, too, are undoubtedly higher today. The current reforms stress raising standards at the secondary level, but do not provide additional resources or new strategies to help disadvantaged students meet these higher standards.

Any strategy for improving the educational plight of disadvantaged students must begin at the elementary

level, and it must be dedicated to preparing children to do high quality work in secondary school. Simply raising standards without making it possible for disadvantaged students to meet them is more likely to increase their dropout rate than to improve their education.

Two typical state reforms set competency standards and raised course requirements for graduation. Yet even with the current standards, disadvantaged students enter secondary school with achievement levels that are two years or more below those of their counterparts. Unless this gap can be closed before students enter secondary school, the higher standards will discourage students far more than they will improve their performance.

In this respect, the current wave of reforms may benefit some students, while actually blocking educational improvements for others who are disadvantaged. Reforms for disadvantaged youths must address their needs directly, rather than assume that raising general standards will automatically meet the needs of all students.

Existing Intervention Models

Experience over 20 years has shown that instructional interventions² exist that promise to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students. For example, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, mastery learning, computer-assisted instruction, preschool programs, and new curriculums all have shown some success. The major challenge is that these successes have been exceedingly modest relative to the achievement gap. Raising achievement

from the 15th to the 20th percentile, for example, does not substantially improve the educational or occupational fortunes of disadvantaged young people.

Our progress toward improving the education of disadvantaged youths is also limited by the way in which we think about and address the problem. We know that they begin school with a learning gap in areas that schools and mainstream economic and social institutions value. But remedial interventions are not adequate unless they substantially narrow that gap by bringing the disadvantaged up to the same range of academic performance as their peers.

Several inconsistent assumptions characterize the existing intervention model: it assumes that disadvantaged students will not be able to maintain a normal instructional pace, that merely providing remedial services will close the learning gap, and that no timetable is required. Placing youngsters in a less demanding instructional setting without a time limit may appear rational and even compassionate, but we must consider the consequences.

First, the current intervention model reduces learning expectations of both the children and their educators. By labeling both children and teachers as inferior, the model contributes to weak social support for the activity, and low social status and negative self-images for the persons engaged in remediation. The combination of low social status and low expectations treats such students and their educators as educational discards, marginal to mainstream education. These are

the unhealthy conditions under which to expect significant educational progress. In contrast, *an effective approach would create learning activities characterized by high expectations and a learning environment characterized by high status for the participants.*

Second, the usual treatment of the educationally disadvantaged students is not designed to bring them up to grade level. No timetables exist for doing so, and few incentives or even provisions are available to move students from remedial instruction to the mainstream. In fact, since we expect students in remedial situations to progress at a slower than "normal" pace, they fulfill our expectations by falling further and further behind their counterparts. The result is that once we relegate a disadvantaged student to remedial or compensatory interventions, that student will be expected to learn at a slower rate, and the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students will grow. While the gap may be measured in months of achievement in first grade, it will have grown to years of difference by secondary school. *A successful program would set a deadline for closing the achievement gap so that ultimately educationally disadvantaged children will be able to benefit from mainstream education.*

Third, by deliberately slowing the pace of instruction to a crawl, the existing intervention model emphasizes endless repetition of material through drill-and-practice. The result is that the school experience of disadvantaged youths lacks vitality, and their slow rate of progress reinforces our low expectations. The programs omit interesting applications and assignments in favor of drudgery. The premise is that students must learn fundamentals before they can be offered anything more challenging. As a result, both language and mathematics skills are virtually without substance, emphasizing mechanics over content. Such a joyless educational experience diminishes the possibility that the child will view school positively. *An effective curriculum for disadvantaged children would not only be faster paced but would actively engage their interests and motivate them to learn.*

"An effective approach [for educationally disadvantaged students] would create learning activities characterized by high expectations and a learning environment characterized by high status for the participants."

In addition to these shortcomings, most compensatory educational programs do not adequately involve parents or use available community resources. Furthermore, the programs exclude the professional teaching staff from participating in important educational decisions. Such an omission means that teachers are expected to implement programs which do not necessarily reflect their professional judgments, a condition which is not likely to spur their enthusiasm. *The implementation of successful educational programs to address the needs of educationally disadvantaged students requires the involvement of parents and the extensive participation of teachers.*

Given the severity of these impediments to the effective schooling of the educationally disadvantaged, it is little wonder that even the most successful programs have produced only modest results. It is the basic approach and its underlying assumptions that are at fault.

A New Approach

What we have learned from the experience of the last 20 years is that an effective approach to educating disadvantaged students must be characterized by high expectations, deadlines by which they will be performing at grade level, stimulating instructional programs, planning by the educational staff who will offer the program, and

the use of all available parental and community resources. At its heart, however, the educational intervention must be transitional: it must be designed to close the achievement gap after a period of intervention so that students can benefit from regular instruction.

To meet these goals I have been working with a group of colleagues at Stanford University's School of Education to design a program of accelerated schools. The accelerated school is a transitional elementary school designed to bring disadvantaged students up to grade level by the end of sixth grade so they could take advantage of mainstream secondary school instruction. The approach is also designed to prevent dropouts by eliminating the single most important cause of dropping out: serious achievement deficits.

The goal of the accelerated curriculum is to bring all children up to grade level, rather than to limit interventions for the disadvantaged to "pull out" sessions. This approach requires an assessment of each child's performance at school entry and sets a series of objectives. Periodic evaluations on wide-spectrum, standardized achievement tests, as well as tailored assessments created by school staff for each strand of the curriculum, enable the school to see if the child is meeting objectives in a timely manner.

The curriculum emphasizes language—reading and writing for meaning—in all disciplines, even in mathematics. The curriculum also applies learning to everyday problems and events. Instructional strategies also include peer tutoring and cooperative learning.

Parents are deeply involved in two ways. First, school representatives ask parents to sign a written agreement that clarifies the obligations of parents, school staff, and students. Second, the school provides opportunities for parents to interact with the school program and actively assist their children. Parents are also asked to set high educational expectations for their children, to encourage reading, and to support their success.

Another aspect of the program is an extended day which provides rest periods, physical and arts activities, and time for independent assignments or

homework. During this period, college students and senior citizen volunteers work with individual students. Both strategies have been shown to be especially effective with disadvantaged students. Since many of the students are "latch-key" children, the extension of the school day is likely to be attractive to parents.

These broad features make the accelerated school a total institution, rather than a graft of compensatory or remedial classes onto conventional elementary schools. However, in adopting the accelerated school model, each school will choose its own curriculum and instructional strategies; those who will provide the instruction will make the decisions.

Each school will set out a program that is consonant with the strengths of the district and its own staff. A site team, composed of instructional staff and a representative of the central office, will coordinate this effort. The Stanford group will assist in the planning process by providing information, technical assistance, and help in initiating a school-based governance model. In this approach to reform, the professionals who are providing the instruction make the decisions that they will implement and evaluate.

The Costs of New Initiatives

During the 1986-87 school year, the Stanford group has been developing a full information clearinghouse on the Accelerated School, on training capabilities for staff, and on an assessment model. At the same time we are working with school teams in San Francisco and Redwood City, California, to plan accelerated schools that will open in autumn 1987.

We believe that accelerated schools can be successful because they emphasize the instrumental goal of bringing students up to grade level by the completion of sixth grade and stress accelerating learning and high expectations. They will rely on a model of school governance that is attractive to educators, and they will benefit from instructional strategies that have produced good results within the limits of existing compensatory education models. In addition, the schools will draw upon all of the resources available to the community, including parents and senior citizens.

In large measure, we believe that schools can implement the approach within existing resource constraints, including federal and state categorical grants. Only extending the school day will add to local budgets. Finally, this approach does not require new legislation at either the state or federal level, but can be implemented with local initiatives by educators and parents.

By solving many of the problems educationally disadvantaged students face at the elementary level, we hope to save much of the cost of secondary school dropout programs and to reduce the risk that students will drop out. We believe that improved levels of school achievement and self-concept will also go far to reduce problems of violence, drugs, and teen pregnancies among secondary school students. Unless we take a bold stand to intervene now on behalf of disadvantaged young people, we will soon

reap the distasteful harvest of our neglect. □

1. Henry M. Levin, *Educational Reform for Disadvantaged Students: An Emerging Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: The National Education Association, 1986).

2. Included among these are Jere Brophy, "Research Linking Teacher Behavior to Student Achievement: Potential Implications for Instruction of Chapter 1 Students"; Penelope Peterson, "Selecting Students and Services for Compensatory Education: Lessons from Aptitude-Treatment Interaction Research"; and Thomas A. Romberg, "Mathematics for Compensatory School Programs." Papers prepared for the Conference of Effects of Alternative Designs in Compensatory Education, sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 17-18 June 1986.

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