

# Reform that works: The community schools movement

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue



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The 2010 documentary film *Waiting for Superman*, about the failures of the American education system, includes the story of a fifth-grader named Daisy. She is bright, passionate and charismatic. Though the child of a custodian and a high school dropout, she dreams of being a doctor or a veterinarian. You can see the American dream gleaming in her eyes.

The filmmakers point out, however, that at the high school Daisy will attend, only six out of ten students graduate and very few of those graduates go on to college. Regardless of Daisy's gifts and motivation, her chances of achieving her dream are very slim.

Nearly everyone agrees that the American education system needs to do better by Daisy and the millions of children like her. Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor at Stanford University, has charged that America's education system borders on being an apartheid system in which the children of the wealthy enjoy the latest equipment and a rich curriculum and are put on the track to college while only one in ten low-income students goes to college and a higher percentage see the inside of a prison. Some states, says Darling-Hammond, can predict their future need for prison beds based on third-grade reading scores.

During the most recent economic downturn, people who lacked a high school education were the most likely to be unemployed, and those unemployed were disproportionately black and Latino, the product of struggling schools nationwide, but especially in urban areas. Activist Marian Wright Edelman calls this part of the American education system the "cradle-to-prison pipeline."

Since 2002 the main national vehicle for addressing failing students and failing schools has been the No Child Left Behind program. Backed by President George W. Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy, the legislation was a bipartisan effort that focused on accountability and testing. It mandated that each state develop a standardized test that would be issued to all children between grades three and eight. (It allowed each state to determine the content of these tests.) In schools where children showed poor test results, the federal government would provide help, but after six years of failure, the school would be called on to close or relinquish ownership to a private party. The law further mandated that all children be "proficient" in grade-level reading and math by 2014.

No Child Left Behind has provoked a storm of criticism. Some educators say it has had the effect of narrowing the curriculum to the teaching of rote facts. Its strictures have meant that some 80 percent of America's schools are deemed failing—which only further demoralizes hard-working staff and faculty. The law is set to be renewed this fall, but it's unclear whether Congress will want to revise it or scrap it.

Meanwhile, various other reform movements have made their case. Joe Klein, former chancellor of the New York City school system, thinks that NCLB is on the right track and that public schools that fail their students should close their doors and give others in the community a chance at running schools. Klein, like the makers of *Waiting for Superman*, believes that school choice in the form of public vouchers and charter schools is the best vehicle for change.

The school choice movement has drawn the attention of private foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Foundation (which funded *Waiting for Superman*), the Broad Foundation and the DeVos Foundation. These foundations have been pouring money into experimental and innovative schools, while traditional public schools have been desperate for funding. There are now more than 5,000 charter schools in the U.S., educating more than 1 million students.

Despite the message of *Waiting for Superman*, the success of charter schools is quite varied, says New York University education professor Diane Ravitch. In fact, any evidence that charter schools make a difference for students in poor neighborhoods is hard to come by. Research shows that, with some exceptions, charter schools are most successful in raising achievement levels (defined as scores on standardized tests) when they can preclude the enrollment of the children least likely to succeed—a requirement public schools cannot impose. A recent study by Stanford University showed that while 17 percent of charter schools provide a "superior" education for children, most show results equal to traditional schools and 37 percent show worse results.

Another group of reformers emphasizes not so much creating successful schools as fostering excellent teachers. A representative figure of this movement is Michelle Rhee, who to much fanfare took over the struggling Washington, D.C., school system in 2008. She quickly dismissed 241 teachers who she did not think were doing their jobs. She boasted about her own teaching performance and the effect that it had on test scores in a poor district in Baltimore: "Those kids, where they lived didn't change. Their parents didn't change. Their diets didn't change. The only thing that changed for those 70 kids was the adults who were in front of them every single day teaching them." Rhee, who faced strong opposition from teachers, resigned her post in 2010.

Inspired by figures like Rhee, many states are proposing ways to improve teaching or to fire teachers who fail to improve test scores. The movement has support from President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Obama has backed the idea of rewarding excellent teaching with merit pay, an idea that on the surface seems hard to argue with. Teachers are chronically underpaid and are often blamed for the ills of education. To reward those who do their jobs exceptionally well might offer teachers a just recompense.

Teachers fear, however, that the movement for merit pay is likely to judge them solely on the basis of test scores—a very narrow definition of success that may, in fact, miss the most significant moments of teaching and learning. Mike Rose, a professor at UCLA, spent a year traveling around the country in search of "great teaching" moments (see his book *Possible Lives*). "The good classroom," he concluded (writing in a recent issue of *Dissent* magazine), "is rich in small moments of intelligence and care." Good teaching involves careful attention to context, to opportunity and to the dynamics of individual children. Great teaching cannot be measured by what Rose calls the "technocratic-managerial orientation."

Focusing on "teacher success" may also have the opposite of the desired effect for children in low-income neighborhoods. Teachers who work with children who are most challenged academically are less likely to get "results." As education journalist Dana Goldstein says, "This model stacks the deck against teachers who work with high-poverty, academically struggling students." Students who start out the year with already decent test scores are those most likely to show progress. Progress for students whose lives may otherwise be chaotic is slower and harder to come by. Paying teachers more who are able to show progress may discourage educators from working with educationally struggling students.

The idea of merit pay troubles Carl Weaver, a 30-year veteran of the classroom, because he thinks this focus is a distraction from poverty and the role it plays in education. In contrast to Rhee and Klein, Weaver believes that income level is a critical factor in student success.

"Studies show that poverty—the way these young children enter the classroom—has everything to do with their success later on." The movements for merit pay, for charter schools or for No Child Left Behind each skirts the issue of poverty in order to lay blame somewhere else.

Romal Tune is another reformer who thinks that issues of poverty cannot be avoided. Poverty itself is a shorthand expression for a myriad of problems and circumstances. He remembers when he was a struggling student in "failing" urban schools. He switched schools every year until the 11th grade. Tune recalls a day when he was 11 years old. His mother handed him money for bus fare to get to and from school but said she didn't have any money to give him for lunch. As the school day progressed, Tune got hungrier and hungrier. He knew that he faced certain humiliation from the other children if he confessed that he didn't have lunch money,

so he decided to spend his bus fare on lunch.

At the end of the school day, he avoided the other children as long as he could and then started asking strangers on the street for bus fare. Most of them looked away, but one woman finally looked him in the eyes, smiled and said, "What do you need to get home?"

What that gift of \$1.25 meant to him has stayed with Tune all of his life. It's evidence to him of what the kindness of a stranger, someone simply willing to pay attention, can do.

Tune has launched an organization called Faith for Change, a consortium of churches in seven cities that are committed to working with public schools by supplying tutors, books, mentoring, emergency funds, dental and medical clinics and counseling. Tune believes that this kind of support is crucial: "The theme for children who succeed when their circumstances are against them is that someone cared. When they tell their stories, they don't mention how they were taught, but how they were talked to."

Tune is part of a wave of education reformers who are trying to shift the focus from test scores to the broader circumstances of children's lives. Education reformer David Kirp has sketched perhaps the clearest vision for this approach in his book *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children's Lives and America's Future*. Kirp's five "big ideas" include parental education, strong early childhood programs, mentoring programs, and universal savings accounts for every child. The fifth idea is what he calls the community school—a school that is a community center, a place where children connect with the broader society. Community schools thrive on alliances with local churches, synagogues, mosques and nonprofit organizations.

The Coalition for Community Schools, a branch of the Institute for Educational Leadership, is collecting data, disseminating information, creating partnerships and trying to put weight behind the idea that children thrive with strong community support. The first official community school was instituted in the late 1990s. Some 5,000 schools have adopted some aspect of the community school strategy—a tiny percentage of the nation's more than 100,000 schools, but still a significant number.

Shital Shah, manager of policy at the Coalition for Community Schools, tries to avoid many of the debates that currently inflame education activists. She does not want to be drawn into a conversation about, say, the pros and cons of charter schools. "We

are focused on figuring out how to support schools no matter what kind they are."

Explains Shah, "Community schools draw on local partnerships to meet student needs in order to create the conditions for learning." Specifically, the coalition helps schools find the resources to hire a coordinator who can work with local churches, mosques, synagogues, nonprofits or any community agency to provide resources so that students can be ready to learn. Both Shah and Tune see community schools as a way to stop playing the blame game. They don't blame teachers, unions, administrators or parents. They assume that everyone is invested in seeing children flourish.

Community schools are supported on a national level by federal grants, but they work out the specifics on a community-by-community basis. In one community, a church has agreed to supplement the diet of schoolchildren whose nutritional needs are not being met. Congregation members take food to families that are identified by the school district as being in need. In another school district, a nonprofit organization provides every child with school supplies. The myriad of needs and the multitude of ways to meet those needs—by supplying dental clinics, or lice shampoo, or counseling—suggests an alternative to hierarchy-heavy, top-down policies. Because contemporary school reform is intensely data-driven, Tune and Shah are focused on producing evidence that the community schools strategy works.

An example of the community schools movement is the work of the Salazar Partnership in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The partnership emerged at the United Church of Santa Fe (UCC) following a presentation at the church by Vicky Sewing, principal of Salazar Elementary School. She spoke about the challenges at Salazar, where all students were eligible for a government-funded lunch program, 8 percent were homeless and 60 percent needed help learning English. Sewing identified a lack of parent involvement as one of many problems that the school faced.

Among those who heard Sewing speak that day were Bill and Georgia Carson, newcomers to Santa Fe. They approached Sewing and asked, "What can we do?"

Out of that meeting, seven volunteers from the church began to read to children in kindergarten classes at Salazar. Thirteen years later, with over 70 volunteers, the Salazar Partnership works with two low-income schools. It provides readers, mentors, books, equipment and medical clinics and even obtains private funds to

pay the salaries of physical education teachers, nurses and clerical staff. It is a thriving organization that is only now beginning to formalize its relationship to the schools.

"We know what we are doing works," says Bill Carson. "But proving it to the state is another matter." While the partnership can count the number of books it has given away through the Reading Is Fundamental organization (whose funding was recently cut out of the federal budget), it cannot count the effect of putting books in homes where there are none. That effect will not be known until much later.

"Each child at Salazar Elementary will leave our school with a library of 21 books," noted Sewing. "We think this is significant."

The pastor at United Church, Talitha Arnold, points out that the partnership with the schools, which now goes beyond the confines of her church, is important not only to students but to church members. It connects hand-on support with the work of outreach and advocacy. Spending time in city schools prompts members to ask, "Why are these schools so much more poorly funded than the schools where my children and grandchildren are?"

Every year, the church holds a commissioning ceremony for those who volunteer to work at the schools. Arnold has noticed that people who may disagree about church politics or about theology or social issues can agree on the importance of reading to a child. Ideological adversaries become partners in service to the community.

Many people in the congregation say that volunteering in Salazar's classrooms is the most important thing they do all week. One woman told Arnold that it has been the most important work she has ever done.

Sewing doesn't see the community school concept as a panacea, though she has seen student performance improve. "The partnership with United Church was key," she says. "But as a struggling school, you've got to do and try everything. I can't say that the volunteers made the final difference, because we were trying a dozen other things at the same time. Together all of it worked and is working."

The partnership with United Church has done two things that Sewing would love to see replicated all over the country. First, the children in Sewing's school get special, one-on-one time with an adult. "That," she says, echoing the views of Romal Tune, "can make all the difference for a child, especially if that is tied to learning to read."

When children are connected to adults who are mentors and "reading buddies," they value what they are learning. "We know for a fact that if children don't learn to read, they aren't going to make it."

Second, says Sewing, the volunteers have become advocates for her school. The debate over public schools is heated, and many people are hearing only the negative stories. Sewing notes that through the Salazar Partnership some 70 people in the community have passed through the doors of her school and spent time with teachers and students. They are in a position to respond when critical comments are made. "They say, 'I see wonderful things happening. I see teaching and learning. I see teachers who really care, who are working hard.' That kind of PR is priceless."

The social problems that make learning difficult for children have not gone away. Every year, Salazar welcomes children who are behind before they begin. There is no state standardized test in the world that can make up for lost time, and progress is slow.

The key to a thriving school is to get everyone working together: parents and teachers, volunteers and administrators, people with resources and people without. Community schools take up this challenge by providing assistance across the spectrum of need. Rather than point the finger at teachers or administrators or public schools, they invest in all of them, believing that the success of any school depends on the support of the community. While the community school movement remains small, its thousands of participants remain committed to the idea that one can make a difference in a school and in the life of a child just by paying attention and asking, "What do you need?"