

CHAPTER ONE

WHY?

What's Wrong with American Schools?

How can it be that in the United States more than a million teenagers—one in four—leave high school for the streets each year?¹

How can it be that more than 60 percent of all students and nearly 80 percent of black and Hispanic students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade are reading and doing math below grade level?²

How can it be that a third of all fourth graders can't read at even a basic level?³

And why is it that things get worse the longer our students stay in school? Our nine-year-olds score in the top quarter on international tests in math, reading, and science. By age fifteen they've fallen to the bottom half.⁴

We used to be the world leader in graduating kids from high school. Now twenty-five of the world's thirty-four large industrialized nations have higher high school graduation rates than the United States.⁵

Not long ago we set the pace in sending students to college. Now we're thirteenth in the world—not because our college attendance rates have dropped, but because other countries have expanded opportunity and postsecondary capacity faster than we have.⁶

And it isn't just that we have more poor kids (one in five American kids grows up in poverty) and more minorities.⁷ The gaps in learning between rich and poor are lower in numerous other countries, many of which also have large numbers of minority and immigrant students.

8 Mission Possible

Sadly, we kid ourselves into thinking that this is an inner-city problem or a poverty problem or a black problem. The reality is that mediocrity is a pandemic in American education. Our schools, as philanthropist Bill Gates put it in a recent speech to the National Urban League, “range from outstanding to outrageous.”⁸

The management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, in an analysis of the 2006 results for the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to fifteen-year-olds in dozens of countries, concluded, “The facts here demonstrate that lagging achievement in the United States is not merely an issue for poor children attending schools in poor neighborhoods; instead, it affects most children in most schools.”⁹

McKinsey also calculated that GDP would have been between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion higher *each year* if the United States had closed the gap between its educational achievement levels and those of such top-performing nations as Finland and Korea.

Scholars from Stanford University, Harvard University, and the University of Munich recently compared the math scores of American eighth and ninth graders with the scores of kids around the world. Their conclusion: “The percentages of high-achieving math students in the U.S.—and most of its individual states—are shockingly below those of many of the world’s leading industrialized nations. Results for many states are at the level of developing countries.”¹⁰

According to the same study, only 6 percent of all U.S. students (and only 8 percent of white students) reached the advanced level. Sixteen countries, from Canada to Switzerland to Finland to Hong Kong to Taiwan, had two to four times that percentage of advanced students. “The only members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development . . . that produced a smaller percentage of advanced math students than the U.S. were Spain, Italy, Israel, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Chile and Mexico.”¹¹

In Massachusetts, our top state, 11 percent of students were advanced, but even if every American student knew that much math we’d still trail fourteen countries. “The lowest ranking states—West Virginia, New Mexico, and Mississippi—have a smaller percentage of high-performing students than do Serbia and Uruguay (although they do edge out Romania, Brazil, and Kyrgyzstan),” the study said. In Mississippi, only 2 percent of students with a college-educated parent scored at the advanced level.¹²

New research by Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas and Josh McGee of the Arnold Foundation explodes the myth that the problem is confined to inner-city schools and minority students. In an *Education Next* article titled “When

the Best is Mediocre,” they compared the OECD test results with those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and concluded that students in ritzy Beverly Hills, California, who are approximately 85 percent white, 7 percent Asian, 5 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent black, scored barely above average in math (53rd percentile), and those in Fairfax County, Virginia, an affluent suburb of the nation’s capital, fell just below average (49th percentile).¹³

The picture is worse in big cities. Students in Washington DC stood at the 11th percentile compared with those in developed countries, in Chicago at the 21st percentile, and in New York City at the 32nd percentile. Not one of the twenty largest school districts—which enroll more than 10 percent of the nation’s schoolchildren—was above the 50th percentile. Overall the results are disappointing “even in our best districts,” Greene and McGee concluded. The “rare and small pockets of excellence in charter schools and rural communities are overwhelmed by large pools of failure.”¹⁴

In a world where prosperity is almost entirely driven by brains, not brawn, we are losing the education race. We’ll have to change our course dramatically if we are to have a prayer of recovering.

Learning algebra in ninth grade is not rocket science. But legions of American kids can’t do it. Most public schools ask shockingly little of students. Rich, poor, or in between, our children are being permanently held back by the slipshod standards and mediocrity in our schools.

It’s not just our children’s futures that are at stake. As President Barack Obama has said repeatedly, “It’s an economic issue when countries that out-education us today are going to out-compete us tomorrow.”¹⁵

THROWING MONEY AT THE PROBLEM

Let’s start with a close look at how we got into this predicament. Americans have been wringing their collective hands over the shortcomings of our public education system for a half century or longer. As a country, we’ve repeatedly thrown money at the problem and tried reform after reform to make schools better. Presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower (the post-Sputnik National Defense Education Act) to Lyndon B. Johnson (Head Start, Title I) to Ronald Reagan (the *A Nation At Risk* report) to George W. Bush (the No Child Left Behind Act) all made passes at the problem but came up short.

In 1989 George H. W. Bush and the nation’s governors (including Bill Clinton) pledged to make American schoolkids tops in the world in math and science by 2000; that didn’t happen by a long shot. George W. Bush, Senator Ted

10 Mission Possible

Kennedy, and Congress decreed in 2002 that all students would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. That's not happening either.

No one can say we have not invested in education. We spend well over \$10,000 a year, on average, educating each of the forty-nine million children and teens in public schools.¹⁶ No country in the world except Luxembourg spends that much. New York State spends roughly \$20,000 per pupil, double the national average. We pay teachers more than \$55,000, on average, with summers off.¹⁷ This pay is less than for other professions requiring graduate degrees, but 10 percent higher than the median household income in the United States.

Real spending (after inflation) on K–12 schools has doubled since Reagan was in the White House and quadrupled since John F. Kennedy's inauguration. (Still, it's sobering to realize that as a nation we spend almost two and a half times as much per prisoner as we do on each student.)¹⁸

We've expanded teaching and support staffs dramatically,¹⁹ cutting class sizes from twenty-five-to-one to sixteen-to-one. We've made some modest gains and trimmed the shameful dropout rates in some places (including New York City), but nothing has really budged the needle. The achievement gaps between white students and minority students have narrowed somewhat on the federal government's NAEP, which is given to a cross-section of thousands of students in a variety of states each year. A third of all fourth graders and a quarter of all eighth graders have below basic reading skills; in math, 9 percent of fourth graders and 16 percent of eighth graders scored below basic. Although black and Hispanic students have made progress in the past two decades, the gulfs between majority and minority students remain monumental. In math, almost half of all black eighth graders and two-fifths of Hispanic eighth graders fall below basic compared with one-sixth of white eighth graders.²⁰

Society blames poverty—Who could possibly expect black and brown kids and those from impoverished families to keep up with kids from affluent homes?—but that doesn't explain why children from privileged families are also doing poorly.

Most of the countries that are beating the pants off us—Singapore, South Korea, China, Finland, Belgium, and Canada among them—have a single education system and rigorous curriculum for all students. Singapore in particular puts us to shame. “Remember that in the early 1970s, less than half of Singapore's students even reached fourth grade. Today, Singapore ranks near the top,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted.²¹

We've got a crazy quilt of school districts, curricula, and standards that vary widely. Most standards are way too easy. No Child Left Behind was supposed to boost all schoolchildren to proficiency in reading and math, and to place highly qualified teachers in every classroom. Despite sharp increases in funding, the public schools have fallen far short of the lofty goals, and the U.S. Department of Education is now letting them off the hook. Although the 2002 law required every state to administer statewide tests in reading and math, it let each devise its own tests and use its own yardstick to measure results. This led to a misleading cascade of rosy test data that allowed politicians and educators to claim big progress with the same old sorry results. NAEP assessments told the real story, with a third of fourth graders reading below average and a quarter of all eighth graders scoring below basic in math.²² The move by forty-five states to adopt the Common Core of Standards could eventually improve those scores, but that will almost certainly take years. For now we are falling behind the countries with which we compete in the international marketplace. Among the sixty-two countries plus Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Macao whose fifteen-year-olds took the OECD's Programme in International Student Assessment exams in 2009, the U.S. teens on average ranked fourteenth in reading, twenty-second in science, and twenty-ninth in math.²³ A majority of students in six countries, Shanghai, and Hong Kong were proficient in math; fewer than a third of the American fifteen-year-olds were proficient.²⁴

JUST HOW LOW IS THE BAR?

Although the NAEP tests are harder than state assessments, even that bar isn't set very high. A typical question on the math test for fourth graders involves dividing a three-digit number by a one-digit number, or telling a parallel line from a perpendicular one. On reading, a third of fourth graders got this easy question wrong:

The article says that some bees "*sparkle* in the sun." This means that these bees:

1. Like to fly in the daytime
2. Have unusual markings
3. Prefer warm weather
4. Look very shiny

12 Mission Possible

Half flubbed this question, which the test writers considered to be of medium difficulty:

The author of the story says that Willy hears only “*erie*” silence.” This means that Willy:

1. Finds the silence strange and frightening
2. Believes the silence will go away soon
3. Wonders what causes the silence
4. Feels alone in the silence

The reputation of Success Academies rests in part on how well our scholars have performed on the New York State Education Department’s standardized tests. We’re happy and proud of their accomplishments, but also keenly aware how pathetically low the state sets its bar. Here are a couple of sample questions from New York’s third-grade test:

Sam and Jenna have been saving pennies. Sam has 232 pennies, and Jenna has 151 pennies. How many more pennies does Sam have than Jenna?

1. 71
2. 81
3. 121
4. 181

Find the word or words that best complete the sentence:

_____ came from the pillow.

1. Feathers
2. Floating
3. Soft and white
4. All over the bed

Look out, Singapore.

If you believe in equality for all, if you believe in social justice, if you believe in the American dream, the status quo in our schools is intolerable. In America, of all places, kids should not be consigned by the color of their skin or

by poverty to a dropout factory. But the problem in America goes beyond tragic educational injustice. The crisis in public education affects all kids, not just our most vulnerable. Even our best schools are not putting our kids in a position to compete internationally. American children are not holding their own in what is turning out to be a fierce education race.

CHANGING KIDS' LIVES

What if it didn't have to be that way? What if poor kids, black kids, and Hispanic kids could learn as much as or more than students in most schools serving rich, white kids? And what if all American schoolchildren got a world-class education? How different would their, and our, futures be?

It sounds impossible, but that's what we're doing in Success Academies. We're doing it by rejecting the conventional wisdom that poor and minority kids cannot possibly become high achievers and that poverty and demographics are destiny.

We're fortunate to be in a position to hire the best of the best—and when they teach in Success Academies, they become even better. We are furnishing our talented principals and teachers with extraordinary amounts of time and resources to develop their craft. And when the principal and teachers are knocking the ball out of the park, the students are rounding the bases right with them. Student achievement soars, and they wind up, as our schools did, posting some of the highest scores in the city and state.

We opened our charter schools and staked our reputation on the conviction that regardless of family circumstances, children are smart and ready and eager to learn if only they have great, well-prepared principals and teachers to inspire, instruct, and direct them straight down the path to college graduation.

A HEALTHY DOSE OF COMPETITION

Why is our public school system so feeble? How did it get so bad? The late Albert Shanker, who stood up for serious reform as president of the American Federation of Teachers, once said that public schools had fallen into the same trap as the U.S. auto industry of old, thinking quality didn't matter because it had a largely captive audience for its products. More than two decades ago Shanker—who was parodied in the Woody Allen sci-fi movie *Sleeper* as a guy so militant he blew up the world—said, “It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and

14 Mission Possible

productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve; it more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."²⁵

Well, charters came along after that to provide some badly needed competition. The common school was a good and noble thing when Horace Mann worked in the nineteenth century to create schools serving wealthy and poor alike. They educated the children of immigrants who helped make America great. They've made tremendous strides in recent decades in educating children with disabilities.

But somewhere along the line public schools got lazy and complacent, just like General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. A lot of things came together—grade inflation, social promotion, the breakdown of discipline—and made public education a mess. Sociologist James Coleman, no stranger to controversy, roiled the waters in 1981 when he concluded after an exhaustive study that Catholic schools provided a better education for the same children than public schools.²⁶

But with fewer nuns and higher costs, Catholic schools were closing left and right in our cities. Enrollment, which peaked at 5 million during the baby boom of the 1950s, stands at barely 2 million today.²⁷ Some states experimented with tuition tax credits and vouchers to help families pay parochial and private school tuition, but those efforts never moved beyond a small scale. A growing number of disgruntled parents turned to home schooling their children—1.5 million and growing by the National Center for Education Statistics' last count.²⁸

Then charter schools emerged to give parents a new alternative and to give district schools a run for their money. Charters are public schools, often operating with less money from their city and state funders but with a lot more freedom over how the school is organized and run, from who gets hired and let go to how long students spend in class and what they study.

Charter enrollments have quadrupled over the past decade to 1.7 million, according to the Center for Education Reform, a charter advocacy organization.²⁹ Charters now make up 5 percent of all public schools. There are charters in forty-one states and the District of Columbia. Nine states still have laws preserving the public school monopoly: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. Other states, including New York, limit the number of charters (although New York recently lifted its limit on charters from 200 to 460).

Not all charters are great. There are lousy ones, and ones that have quickly folded due to mismanagement. In some charters the students fare no better than they did back in their district school.

But then there are charters like ours that take the same kids who might founder in their neighborhood school and propel them to high achievement. As former New York City Schools' chancellor Joel Klein wrote in a June 2011 article in the *Atlantic* magazine titled "The Failure of American Schools," Success Academy Harlem 1 "now performs at the same level as the gifted-and-talented schools in New York City—all of which have demanding admissions requirements, while [Success Academy Harlem 1] randomly selects its students, mostly poor and minority, by lottery."³⁰

America was built on competition. Every other sector of our society, from the auto industry to supermarkets, faces stiff competition to get better or get beaten in the marketplace by those who come along with an improved approach or product. As a nation, we face intense competition in the marketplace from China, India, and other fast-developing nations.

You can't outsource elementary and secondary education. You have to provide it locally. But people should have the right to choose what school to entrust with their child's future. The notion of competition remains anathema to the people running public schools. They resist competition at every turn, the way the U.S. Postal Service resisted FedEx when it came along.

The Postal Service went to Congress and asked that FedEx be prohibited from delivering packages. The lawmakers wisely said no, and today we've got the best, most competitive delivery system in the world. Order a replacement coffee pot or widget, and it's on your doorstep tomorrow, delivered by FedEx, UPS, or the Postal Service itself because, yes, the Postal Service after pressure to keep up with the competition has gotten much better at on-time delivery with its Express and Priority Mail.

Traditional public schools now need to face the reality that if they don't meet the competition from high-flying charters, parents are going to take their "business" elsewhere. Left to its own devices, the monopoly of district public education will never put the customer first and never find ways to boost productivity and innovate. It needs schools like ours breathing down its neck. We don't want traditional public schools to fail while charters like ours succeed; we want all schools to improve, and fast.

As Secretary Duncan said when the latest international test results came out in December 2010, "The real problem with K-12 spending in the U.S. is our low educational productivity. Unlike high-performing systems, we achieve less per dollar. And we do less to target spending on the most challenged students and schools."³¹

HIGHLY TRAINED, EXCELLENT TEACHERS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

There's another question we need to ask ourselves: Why is it that some schools consistently deliver great results, whereas others teaching the exact same kids—from the same families, the same neighborhoods, and almost identical circumstances—never make the grade? How can one school get it right almost all the time, while one down the block (or even in the same building) almost always gets it wrong?

The short answer is that the quality of the school and the quality of the teaching both matter. With highly effective, well-trained principals and teachers, kids will soak up knowledge and ace even the toughest of tests.

Eric Hanushek, the Stanford economist who has lanced several sacred cows in education (his studies have challenged the value of cutting class size and raised doubts about the value of throwing more money at schools), has documented what a difference a great teacher can make in children's lives. In a classroom with an excellent teacher, the whole class may make a year and a half's progress in nine months. Stuck with a bad teacher in a class down the hall, similar kids may advance only half a grade level in that same school year.³²

Same kids, different teachers, and the unlucky ones fall a year behind classmates with the great teacher. Multiply that by four years or eight years or, heaven forbid, twelve years of mediocre or worse teachers and it's no mystery why a million kids drop out of school each year. High school kids who cut school and refuse to study bear a lot of responsibility for the bind they place themselves in, but how can you blame a seven-year-old who's already a year behind in school? That child most likely is being miseducated or very, very poorly educated by a teacher and a school that just aren't doing their job. And once a child starts to fall behind, it just gets harder and harder to catch up later on.

The journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures*, summed it up: "Teacher effects dwarf school effects: your child is actually better off in a 'bad' school with an excellent teacher than in an excellent school with a bad teacher."³³ If you find a school with a great principal and lots of great teachers, it's a safe bet that the students are going to get an excellent education. Add in supportive parents, and you're on your way to success.

Charter schools don't have a monopoly on excellence. But they do have advantages that help explain why schools like ours are succeeding in places such as Harlem and the South Bronx where schools have known little but failure for years.

Charter status gives you the freedom to get things right. You don't have to play by all the rules of the school bureaucracy or abide by stifling work regulations. You have the freedom to set the school schedule and school year. You have the freedom to organize school around the best interests of children rather than the convenience of grown-ups.

We'll lay out in detail in the next chapter how we do what we do at Success Academies. But one thing we do differently than most schools is invest a tremendous amount of time and resources in training our principals and teachers and supporting their growth.

If we can do it, why can't everybody?

We think they can. The rest of this book will show you how.

