

Effective Schools: A Brief Review after Forty Years

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Abstract

April 2013 marks the 30th anniversary of “A Nation at Risk,” and its counterpart the forty year old Effective School Movement. Alison DeNisco (2013) implies that little has changed since the beginning. Quoting from the U.S. Department of Education’s Equity and Excellence Commission’s report (2013) she stated that after pushing three decades of education reform little has changed for the American student. With this ominous comment let us go back to the beginning and see where we started and where we are now. Has thirty years of Effective School Reform actually worked?

A Brief History of the Effective School Movement:

In a cover article by the Association for Effective Schools (Lezotte, 1995), it describes in brief the historical nature of the Effective School movement. The movement and subsequent research was a response to the federal paper written by Dr. James Coleman, a prominent education researcher. Within this paper, Dr. Coleman concluded that public schools did not make a significant difference. He credited the student’s family background as the main reason for student success in school. Dr. Coleman further stated that lacking the prime conditions or values to support education certain students could not learn, regardless of what the school did. The cover article then explained the reaction by Dr. Ronald Edmonds, then the Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University. Dr. Edmonds and others refused to accept Dr. Coleman’s report as conclusive, although they acknowledged that family background does indeed make a difference. The article goes on to say that the challenge by these professionals was to find schools where kids from low-income families

were highly successful and thereby prove that schools can and do make a difference. The major researchers at the time that were determined to dispel Dr. Coleman's paper were Dr. Edmonds, Dr. Wilber Brookover, and Dr. Lawrence Lezotte. The report stated that, while their research showed many schools where low-income students were learning, they were left without an answer as to why.

P. Sammons (1999) briefly stated that the major impetus for research in effective schools, in both North America and Britain, was a reaction to the deterministic interpretations of findings by researchers Coleman and Jencks. D. Murray (1995) introduced his paper to the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association by reminding them that the "roots" of the Effective Schools movement could be traced to the late Ronald Edmonds. He went on to explain that it was unfortunate that Dr. Edmonds died in 1983 before he could fully realize his contributions to school improvement efforts. He further stated that Dr. Edmonds' work challenged the theory that familial effects outweighed any school effects on learning. Some of these familial effects included the family's socio-economic status, location, or population composition.

R. Edmonds (1979) seminal work stated that we can teach children whenever and wherever we choose. He said that we can do this successfully. The author further stated that we already understand how to do this, but contends that we must question ourselves as to why we have not so far.

E. Eubanks and R. Parish (1992) in a paper, which revisited the history of Effective Schools, related that Ronald Edmonds' work added to knowledge about school organization. The authors suggested that the Effective School Correlates created by Edmonds are simply an ongoing collection of "known knowledge." They implied that Edmonds' work simply indicated an organizational profile that produced schooling outcomes that were not correlated with race or class. Edmonds' work showed that this type of organizational pattern in such schools created success at the same percentage of students whether they were from a privileged background or a less privileged background. They further suggested that Dr. Edmonds' work also showed a growth across the board relative to top and bottom quartiles. Thus, Edmonds made the argument that schools could make a difference separate from other social/cultural factors in the society. P. Sammons (1999) in her article also concluded that the correlates were "common sense." "There is a grain of truth in this argument. Because school effectiveness research by its very nature sets out to identify the components of good practice . . . it is inevitable that some of the findings are unsurprising to practitioners" (p. 46). In a later research article that reviewed school effectiveness research by P. Sammons, J. Hillman, and P. Mortimore (1995), found other researchers who had concluded the same thing. In their paper, they quoted Rutter et al. (1979). . . "research into practical issues, such as schooling rarely comes up with findings that are totally unexpected. On the other hand, it is helpful in showing which of the abundance of good ideas available are related to successful outcomes" (p. 25).

Research on Effective Schools has been a significant area of growth in educational studies (Coe & Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). The authors suggested that this area of study is more than just a thriving field of theoretical academic research; they implied that it is an applied discipline. This discipline was described by the authors as having direct implications for the well-being of the national educational system and directly affecting the lives of all those who work within the system. They suggested that the Effective School Research is vital and must be done correctly.

C. L. Uline, D. M. Miller, and M. Tschannen-Moran (1998) wrote that school effectiveness literature spans three decades. The authors further stated that the research has analyzed large regional and national data sets, conducted in-depth qualitative case studies, and has mixed these research models across reasonably large samples of schools. They further implied that the large body of research will strengthen the theory directing this empirical work.

Coe and Fitz-Gibbon (1998) wrote , “the First International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement, held in London in January of 1988 and the subsequent launch of its own journals, were significant points in this development, and the annual expansion has continued ever since” (p.421).

Sammons et al. (1995) implied that the effectiveness research is generally recognized to have been a reaction to the deterministic interpretation of findings by Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972) and, in particular, their pessimistic view of the potential influence of schools, teachers, and education on students’ achievement. The writers continued to suggest that early effectiveness research incorporated the writers contended that the early research had a limited and specific focus.

The authors shared that the overall reason for Effective School Research, and thus the central focus, is explained by Reynolds and Creemers (1990) who stated, “The central focus of school effectiveness research concerns the idea that schools matter, that schools do have a significant effect upon children’s development and that, to put it simply, schools do make a difference” (p. 4).

Murray (1995) in his paper, “Analysis of Parent Perceptions on Effective School Correlates: A Springboard for Planning” remarked that, The Effective Schools movement in the United States, having its origins with such pioneer researchers and school reformers as Ronald Edmonds of Harvard University and Lawrence Lezotte of Michigan, has steadily grown and emerged to be one of the most respected ways of assessing school improvement (p. 4).

Mr. Murray identified five Effective School Correlates that are directly related to the late Ron

Edmonds. These correlates are:

1. strong instructional leadership
2. clear instructional focus
3. positive school climate
4. high expectations
5. measurement of student achievement

According to Mr. Murray, some states have extended these original correlates to include others. In New York, the State Education Department extended the original correlates to include 11 characteristics. Coe and Fitz-Gibbon (1998) stated in relation to the correlates that “Commonly cited are Edmonds’ (1979) ‘five-factor model,’ Purkey and Smith’s (1983) model with eight factors, and Mortimore et al. (1988), who expanded the list to 12” (p. 430).

In a quote in the preface to the book, *A Place Called School*, by J. I. Goodlad (2004), Daedalus stated, “The problems confronting American Schools are substantial; the resources available to them are in most instances severely limited; the stakes are high, and it is by no means preordained that all will go well for many of them in the end” (p. 1). Goodlad (2004) remarked in chapter one of his book that American schools are in trouble. In fact, he continues, the problems of schooling are of such crippling proportions that many schools may not survive. Later in the chapter the author discussed the basic premise that we have not outgrown our needs for schools. He said that should schools suddenly cease to exist we would find it necessary to reinvent them. He went on to say that schools we need now are not necessarily the schools we have known in our past. He also criticizes the current wave of criticism due to what he explained as a lack of diagnosis required for the reconstructions of schooling. He said that the criticism is in part psychologically motivated—a product of a general lack of faith in ourselves and our institutions.

Another related article, which was a case study by M. Jones and E. Ross (1994), took the opportunity to relate the history of the Effective Schools movement in the United States. These two authors give a structural characteristic of the educational system in the United States which bears repeating: The structure of the educational system in the United States has been described by Bowman and

Deal (1991) as loosely coupled and comprised of multiple layers of semi-autonomous, sociopolitical organizations, groups, and individuals combined tenuously into a system, the purpose of which is to form, fund, and implement educational policy. Within that loosely coupled structure there are at least three formal organizational levels of control, the U.S. Department of Education, the Departments of Education of the fifty plus states and outlying areas, and thousands of individual local school boards (p. 4).

These authors referred to the 1983 study, "A Nation at Risk," as the impetus that created school reform. This study indicated to the American public that their children were significantly less educated than their counterparts in other countries. While historically there had been research on Effective Schools dating back to the mid-1970s, the authors contended it was this study that focused the nation.

The codification of the Effective Schools Research school improvement process into federal law in 1988, in the Hawkins-Stafford Amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, provided a means for forging new and more cooperative relationships among the formal organizational levels of public education (p. 6).

The authors further remarked that a continuation of this research moved forward with the integration of Deming's work into the school improvement process. Historically, it is good here to review the actual remarks by Edmonds, which were worked into the Hawkins-Stafford Law of 1988. Jones and Ross suggested that the characteristics of Effective Schools codified into law in the Hawkins-Stafford Amendments came directly from the work of Ronald Edmonds. In his characterization of Effective Schools, Edmonds said:

1. They have strong administrative leadership without which the disparate elements of good schooling can neither be brought together nor kept together;
2. Schools that are instructionally effective for poor children have a climate of expectation in which no children are permitted to fall below minimum but efficacious levels of achievement;
3. The school's atmosphere is orderly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand;
4. Effective schools get that way partly by making it clear that pupil acquisition of basic school skills takes precedence over all other school activities;
5. When necessary, school energy and resources can be diverted from other business in furtherance of the fundamental objectives; and
6. There must be some means by which pupil progress can be frequently monitored.

These means may be as traditional as classroom testing on the day's lesson or as advanced as criterion-referenced system-wide standardized measures. The point is that some means must exist in the school by which the principal and the teachers remain constantly aware of pupil progress in relationship to instructional objectives (Edmonds, 1979, p. 8).

The two authors go on to indicate that later research by Lawrence Lezotte and others discovered that long-term school improvement required a systemic approach and went beyond the original indicators set forth by Dr. Edmonds. This became the next stage of research in *Effective School* and is now highlighted by two new strategies. Thus, according to the authors, the *Effective School Research* model embraces a systemic change approach that (1) involves the study and application of organizational theory and strategies that include the concept of continuous improvement, and (2) when defined in the context of the educational organization and in the effective school, refers to increased and continuously improving achievement.

To put the historical review of the *Effective School Research* and the subsequent correlates into perspective, a brief statement from an article by Joseph J. D'Amico (2001) has been included. In his article on reviewing the achievement gap of minorities he gives us a brief historical overview:

"The notion of an 'achievement gap' between America's minority and non-minority populations is not new. Lucas (1999) notes that as early as 1785, Thomas Jefferson saw it as an issue when he wrote his *Notes on Virginia*. Lucas also points out that W.E.B. Du Bois made its elimination a cornerstone of his agenda. And of course the history of the civil rights movement and concomitant court decisions highlights that the 'gap' has long been a crucial political, economic, and educational focal point of this country" (p. 1).

In an article on serving disadvantaged youth, Bruno Manno, Gregg Vanourek and Chester Finn, Jr. (1999), gave us an excellent statistical description of the youth who attend urban schools. They wrote that in many large American cities, one can find some exceptional effective public schools. In these schools the disadvantaged youth are learning and being well prepared for the workplace and their role as proper citizens, as well as preparation for higher education. Yet, at the same time, the authors contended, the educational outcomes for most students are disappointing. The writers quoted the U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard Riley from 1994, who expounds the belief that some places "should never be called schools at all" (p. 429).

It is within the framework of these statistics that we are reminded of the reasoning and impetus to move forward with *Effective School Research*. In the article on serving disadvantaged youth, they reminded the reader that, of the 11 million youngsters who attend urban schools, 35% come from poor families and 43% are members of a minority group. Using data from articles written in *Education Week* (1998), the authors tell us that most 4th graders who live in U.S. cities cannot read and understand elementary children's books and most 8th graders cannot use arithmetic to solve uncomplicated mathematical problems. The graduation rate for urban schools is slightly more than 50% in four years. When the authors compared 4th graders in non-urban schools who reach 'the basics' in reading with a success of 63%, the data show that 43% of students in urban schools and only 23% in poverty urban schools reached the same levels. According to the authors, the data indicate that the longer a student stayed in an urban school setting, the wider the performance gap grew. "Somehow, simply being in an urban school seems to drag down performance" (p. 429). As the article approached the question of reform. Present Research and the *Effective Schools Movement*:

Researchers continue to examine educational processes and reform programs (T. Bergeson 2007, p.5).

Twenty years after the original discussion by F. Hess (1999) Joel I. Klein (2009) remarked, in an article in U. S. News and World Report, “In fact, the skeptics of urban schools have got the diagnosis exactly backward. The truth is that American will never fix poverty until it fixes its urban schools.” A. Levine (2012) also brings us to realization of Effective Schools research not fulfilled. He recently completed an opinion article in The Wall Street Journal where he remarked about an international study on education and gaps around the world. The study showed the United States and especially our urban school districts performed inadequately compare with their suburban counterparts. He further comments that this seems to imply that the floor for student performance in America is too low. He ended with the strong comment that America’s weakest school districts are failing their students and the nation. Nearly thirty years ago Ron Edmonds (1979) wrote, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us...We already know more than we need to do that...Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not so far” (p. 23).

Achievement data across our nation illustrate we are not yet doing so. School improvement gurus also point out that educators generally know more about improving schools than they are doing. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) refer to this inconsistency as the “knowing-doing gap.” Reeves (2007) call it the “implementation gap.” The path of Effective Schools has carried us from the late 1960’s up to the present date. The history of successes in helping school and students has been shown through countless research. On the other hand, the path has been full of starts and stops, political and philosophical challenges and has shown a lack of sustainable change. Commenting on Effective School Research, Thomas and Bainbridge (2001) wrote an article in which they described the ‘fallacies’ of Effective School Research. “The fallacy, however, is the belief that all children can learn the same curriculum, in the same amount of time, and at the same level” (p. 661). Taylor (2002), in an article conceded that there had been a movement away from the original direction of the research. T. Bergeson (2007) in his study remarked that no single characteristic leads to school success. He continued that most studies will identify the traits but found that reaching that level of sustainability took years. The lack of sustainability yielded superficial changes, but not lasting success.

The Foundation for Excellence in Education (2013) placed in their reform agenda these very sobering words, “There is no Silver Bullet that will change the course of American schools” (p.1). The Equity and Excellence Commission was a federal advisory committee chartered by Congress. This extensive report helps focus the results of forty years of Effective School Reform. In comments about school reform the commission remarked that while efforts to move in the direction of reform have been important, it had not been enough (p. 14). They further remarked that in the age of skills dominating the world labor markets we were (with the present disparities in education) relegating a large portion of the United States population to a bleak economic future (p. 13). Inequality and a lack of closing the achievement gap from differing demographic groups is dismal reported the commission (p. 13).

The Effective School Movement in the United States has reached a milestone. The efficacy of the movement and all of the studies, reports and discussion is in doubt and truly the movement to reform has missed the promised rewards.

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