



Standardized Ratings of Urban Public Schools Ignore Contributions to Their Students and Communities

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Urban public schools are often viewed very negatively – bringing to mind for many Americans images of aging buildings, crumbling facilities, apathetic teachers, and troubled minority youth who don't care about learning. Negative assumptions about urban public education appear in the speeches of politicians and reformers and gain currency when viewed through films like *Lean on Me* (1989), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *Waiting for Superman* (2010). And pejorative views are only reinforced when urban schools are rated using standardized test results, graduation rates, and rates of college acceptance as the sole criteria. In such systems, “failing” urban schools are defined as lacking the attributes of “successful” suburban schools.

Of course, there are very real disparities among schools in school resources, staff experience, community participation, graduation rates, and performance on standardized assessments. Nevertheless simply labeling urban schools as deficient ignores the valuable contributions they make to their students and surrounding communities.

Camden High School in Context

Camden, New Jersey, is a northeastern city directly east of Philadelphia that has long been plagued by poverty, unemployment, and violence. Much like other public services that have fallen into disrepair, Camden public schools are undermined by multi-generational poverty and decades of federal and state neglect. The Camden school district is categorized by the New Jersey Department of Education as a “District Factor Group A” system that serves one of the poorest areas in New Jersey. Indeed, Camden has long been the poorest city in the state. As reported by *USA Today* in 2013, more than four out of every five Camden public school students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches, a notable marker of pervasive poverty. During the 2014-2015 academic year, Camden schools had a low graduation rate of 64%. Furthermore, public school enrollment is dwindling due to the proliferation of charter schools that siphon away better-performing students. Currently, about 5,000 of Camden's 14,000 schoolchildren are enrolled in charter schools.

A 2012 New Jersey Department of Education Quality Single Accountability assessment rated 20 of 23 Camden district schools as “failing” due to persistently low graduation and promotion rates, poor performance on state standardized tests, poor curriculum, and a host of other metrics. As a result, the Camden public school system has been taken over by the state, meaning that Governor Chris Christie and the state legislature, rather than an elected school board, oversee all operations. Camden residents have been forbidden from electing the public school board since the New Jersey Municipal Redevelopment Act went into effect in 2002. Today, all members of the Camden City School District board are directly appointed by Mayor Dana Redd. In 2013, moreover, Governor Christie stripped away the right of Camden's Advisory School Board to appoint a new superintendent and instead himself appointed a former Teach for America staffer to fill the post. This happened even though the governor's appointee had less than two full years teaching experience, and lacked a master's degree and other requisite certifications. Of New Jersey's 586 independently operated school districts, Camden's is the only one with a fully appointed board of education and a state-appointed superintendent.

The state takeover has not produced promised results. Since the state takeover, policymakers and powerbrokers have taken steps they promised would improve educational outcomes – but measurable progress has not occurred. Camden's public schools are still considered by many outsiders to be among the worst in New Jersey, using standard statistical metrics.

But in fact, an over-reliance on such metrics can end up overlooking important successes attained by urban schools. My colleagues and I surveyed Camden students to discover their own attitudes toward the school

system that so many had labeled as failing.

Measuring Student Views Can Improve Our Understanding

Some positive achievements by Camden schools emerged from our interviews. Although readily acknowledging improvements needed at Camden High School, a clear majority of students expressed a positive emotional connection to their school. Notably, many also expressed strong skepticism about the motives and accuracy of people who negatively assess their school and their larger Camden community.

As both academic research and popular media accounts highlight the ugly inequality between urban and suburban schools, it is easy for the American public to caricature urban public schools as irredeemable wastelands. Although some who accept this bleak view may conclude that urban public schools ought to be wholly dismantled, supposedly to “save” the students “trapped in failing schools,” actual student voices remind us that local pride and community attachments are also at stake.

Despite the challenges within their schools and larger community, urban students are extraordinarily resilient and capable of seeing authentically meaningful, positive aspects in the educational settings others rate as irredeemable. Our research on student perspectives does not discount disparities in funding, staff quality, or school supplies. Nor do we mean to suggest that society does not have a moral and legal responsibility to deliver equal quality education to urban students. Nevertheless, our findings do underline that in any quest to achieve educational equality, reformers need to understand that many urban poor students do achieve success and local communities take pride in their schools. Students, parents, and community members praise even struggling schools for helping people learn and get ahead in life. The continuing quest to equalize schools should take into account not only statistical rankings but also the views and aspirations of students and their communities.

Read more in Keith Eric Benson, “They Don’t REALLY Know Camden High: Student Perspectives on Their Negatively Viewed High School,” in *Re-authoring Savage Inequalities: Counter-Narratives of Striving and Success in Urban Education*, edited by Lori Davis Patton, Raquel Farmer Hinton, Ishwanzya Rivers & Joi D Lewis (forthcoming).