

Lessons from Newark: Modern School Reform and Where We Go Next

by Cami Anderson

Overview

Since the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the school reform movement has gained significant insights and promising practices for improving schools for children in poverty and students of color. Few efforts demonstrate the complexity of attempting to provide a bold plan to ensure educational excellence for all children better than recent experiences in Newark, New Jersey. Building on the lessons and experience from nearly twenty years of reform, a number of ambitious but commonsense reforms were undertaken there, culminating in the “One Newark” plan.

The lessons learned in Newark provide a blueprint for systems leaders who seek to foster environments where a variety of school models can thrive, including steps policymakers can take to catalyze change and center the students and families who face the most challenges.

Guidance for Policymakers

- Systems leaders should set direction and advocate; procure the best-in-class materials; set policy to incentivize districts, schools, and charter management organizations to implement what we know works; and discourage practices antithetical to student progress.
- Accountability systems are needed to help families hold schools to a standard of excellence for all kids. These systems should be family friendly and public, and should include academic growth, college-readiness, and retention as critical outcome measures.
- Policymakers need to actively tear down federal, state, and local policies that block individual schools from innovating. They need to wake up every day wondering what they can do to ensure that people running schools have the time to do the right thing as opposed to managing byzantine policies and procedures from competing departments.
- The students who face the most challenges have generally been failed by multiple systems. We need cross-agency and community-based solutions with school success at the core. Tools like interagency memorandums of agreement between disparate agencies—the DA’s office and probation, public housing, and school systems—can lead to better coordinated supports for young people and families connected to multiple systems.

What the Research Tells Us

- A growing body of research shows us that teachers are the most significant in-school factor determining a child’s level of achievement. Teachers want access to high-quality curricula, comprehensive assessment systems, and the ability to collaborate with colleagues.
- The most significant factor in getting great teachers in every classroom is the quality of the school principal. Schools with high levels of trust are far more likely than their counterparts to get “beat the odds” results.
- High-quality instructional materials are critical to ensuring that students are truly internalizing difficult content.
- The One Newark reforms raised the citywide graduation rate, closed the gap with the state average, and nearly doubled the percentage of graduating students who passed the state exit exam.

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