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What No School Can Do

By JAMES TRAUB
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Last fall, the New York State Education Department released the results of a fourth-grade math test and eighth-grade math and language tests. It will come as no surprise to hear that the numbers for students in New York City were dreadful. About two-thirds of city eighth graders failed the English language arts test, and about three-quarters failed in math; half the fourth graders failed the math test. The results provided fuel for those who felt that New York City schools are underfinanced, that the city uses too many uncertified teachers, that academic standards are low, that junior high schools are neglected and that the tests themselves are unfair. There's some merit in all these notions. What was not said, however, was the obvious: that the city districts that performed poorly, like those that performed well, scored almost exactly as the socioeconomic status of the children in them would have predicted. You could have predicted the fourth-grade test scores of all but one of the city's 32 districts merely by knowing the percentage of students in a given district who qualified for a free lunch. Only a few dozen of the city's 675 elementary schools scored well despite high poverty rates. In other words, good schools aren't doing that much good, and bad schools aren't doing that much harm.

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This is the case in virtually every big city in the country. Though over the past 35 years we have poured billions of dollars into inner-city schools, and though we have fiddled with practically everything you could think to fiddle with, we have done almost nothing to raise the trajectory of ghetto children. This is a fact, but it is one of those painful facts that it seems better to ignore. Why say anything that could discourage the children, parents and teachers who so desperately need encouragement? Why give aid and comfort to the opponents of high standards? After all, we know that some schools succeed where others fail. We know that some reforms work better than others. In a recently published book, "Choosing Equality," Joseph P. Viteritti, a professor of public policy at New York University, describes the failure of one innovation after another before embarking on a defense of the one reform he believes in, school choice. Or perhaps, if the answer isn't choice, it's something else. Surely there must be some way of making a difference in the lives of poor children.

Indeed, you can't spend much time in the schools and not believe in the efficacy of reform. In the past few years, I have visited dozens of schools, almost all of them serving inner-city children and most of them exemplary in one way or another. I have been to charter schools where concerned parents and educators have wrested control of the classrooms from ineffective bureaucracies, and also to schools with effective leaders and schools with traditional curricula and schools with "less is more" curricula and schools with "multiple intelligences" teaching styles. The good news is that we know more about what works than we did even a decade ago; should what is left of the ideological fog surrounding education evaporate, we might even agree on a better mousetrap.

But how much better? How powerful can this one institution be in the face of the kind of disadvantages that so many ghetto children bring with them to the schoolhouse door, and

return to at home? In "An American Imperative," a minutely detailed study of educational inequality published in 1995, Scott Miller, a scholar now affiliated with the College Board, wrote that while "some strategies for investing resources in disadvantaged children are substantially more productive than others . . . there is little evidence that any existing strategy can close more than a fraction of the overall achievement gap" separating children with low socioeconomic status from their wealthier, largely suburban counterparts.

The idea that school, by itself, cannot cure poverty is hardly astonishing, but it is amazing how much of our political discourse is implicitly predicated on the notion that it can. The national debate over entrenched poverty virtually ended with welfare reform. We now speak of the inner-city poor as if they were a remote tribe that has not yet been exposed to the miracle of the marketplace. In November, President Clinton was able to announce his antipoverty initiative jointly with Speaker Dennis Hastert because the plan was so vague and modest -- it came down to encouraging private investment in the inner cities -- that the G.O.P. was happy to sign off on it. But the same Congressional Republicans who oppose on principle virtually all federal programs focused on the urban poor also voted to add \$2 billion to President Clinton's request for Title I, the main source of federal funds for schools in high-poverty areas. George W. Bush has come out in favor of increased spending by the federal Department of Education. In recent years conservatives have come to play a critical role in the debate over inner-city schools; indeed, school reform is the one type of social engineering with which conservatives feel comfortable.

Although education is fundamentally a local issue, and national politicians can do very little about it, we will probably hear a great deal more about the schools as we enter the primary season and the presidential campaign. Bush is running as a "compassionate conservative," which is to say that he cares about the poor and will not simply consign them to the whim of the marketplace. What this means in practice, however, is that he believes in school reform. Last fall, Bush seemed to be visiting an inner-city school every week; in his speeches he returns constantly to the virtues of market-driven school reforms like vouchers and charter schools, as well as to the need for rigorous academic standards for high-poverty schools.

Al Gore takes a very different view of the matter -- although he, like Bush, thinks education is the main answer to poverty. Gore is in favor of high standards -- if any national figure isn't, he hasn't stuck his head up yet -- but he also wants to spend more money to fix crumbling school buildings and to hire more teachers to decrease class size. The Democrats say that the current system can be made to work with the right incentives, while Republicans think the system has to be forced to change through competition. Though largely agreeing with Gore, Bill Bradley has at least begun to create a platform that places school reform within the context of broader antipoverty policies. But no candidate can, it appears, afford to reckon with the seemingly intractable nature of inner-city poverty.

It is hard to think of a more satisfying solution to poverty than education. School reform involves relatively little money and no large-scale initiatives, asks practically nothing of the nonpoor and is accompanied by the ennobling sensation that comes from expressing faith in the capacity of the poor to overcome disadvantage by themselves. Conversely, the idea that schools by themselves can't cure poverty not only sounds like an un-American vote of no confidence in our capacity for self-transformation but also seems to flirt with the racist theories expressed by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, who argued in "The Bell Curve" that educational inequality is rooted in biological inequality.

An alternative explanation, of course, is that educational inequality is rooted in economic problems and social pathologies too deep to be overcome by school alone. And if that's true, of course, then there's every reason to think about the limits of school, and to think about the other institutions we might have to mobilize to solve the problem. We might

even ask ourselves whether there isn't something disingenuous and self-serving in our professed faith in the omnipotence of school.

The idea that bad schools perpetuate poverty, and that good schools can go a long way toward curing it, is quite new and, like most current ideas about entrenched poverty, dates to the civil rights era. One provision of the 1964 Civil Rights Act mandated the publication of a survey "concerning the lack of availability of educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion or national origin in public educational institutions."

The sociologist James Coleman was asked to head up the survey project. The implicit assumption behind the survey, an assumption that Coleman said at the time he shared, was that black children were failing because the segregated schools they attended were grossly underfinanced. Coleman found that black students were, in fact, highly segregated, but he also concluded that resources like school libraries and laboratories were distributed more equally than was widely believed and, far more startling, that "differences in school facilities and curriculum, which are the major variables by which attempts are made to improve schools, are so little related to achievement levels of students that, with few exceptions, their effect fails to appear even in a survey of this magnitude." Coleman found that everything schools did accounted for only 5 to 35 percent of the variation in students' academic performances, though he did find that the figures for disadvantaged students were at the higher end of the scale. He concluded that "the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school."

This was, if true, astonishing and deeply unsettling news. Nobody believes in school the way Americans do, and no one is more tantalized by its transformative powers. School is central to the American myth of self-transcendence, whether it's Thomas Jefferson's seedbed of the republican spirit, or the one-room schoolhouse that propelled Abe Lincoln out of frontier backwardness, or those teeming junior high schools in Brooklyn that served as the melting pot for three generations of children from Russia and Italy and Ireland. In the national myth -- and of course not only in myth -- school has the miraculous power of leveling inequalities even as it lifts everyone. And by the time Coleman came along we had come to expect far more of school than we ever had before, because we were firmly entrenched in a meritocratic culture in which the most important rewards were decided by school success. Coleman's argument that schools essentially passed along inequality was simply unacceptable, and largely ignored.

In the 1960's, the nation embarked upon a vast and utterly unprecedented national experiment in the use of schooling to alleviate poverty. Of all Washington's undertakings, the most popular, and the most romantic, was the Head Start program for impoverished preschool-age children, which continues to this day to be thought of as the one Great Society program that really worked. Head Start began in 1965, and President Johnson immediately fell in love with the imagery of little children playing with scissors and glue; he ramped the program up within the first year from \$18 million to \$50 million to \$150 million, and he bragged that Head Start was raising children's I.Q. scores 10 points. Researchers have known from the virtual outset of the program that Head Start had no effect at all on I.Q. scores. And although beneficiaries were somewhat less likely than nonbeneficiaries to be left back, or placed in special-education classes, whatever gains children made on test scores faded out within a year or two. A 1985 study by the Department of Health and Human Services concluded that "in the long run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged students who did not attend Head Start." A 1995 study found no difference between siblings who did and did not attend Head Start.

It was also in 1965 that Congress passed Title I of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act, which provided federal funds to local school districts with high concentrations of impoverished students. Title I now reaches 10 million children, including one in every five first graders. Over the years about \$100 billion has been dispensed through the program; the annual budget is now \$7.7 billion, though Congress just voted to increase the amount to \$9.9 billion. Until the law was amended in 1994, most school districts used their Title I money to offer additional instruction, mostly in reading, to students who were falling behind; in effect, students took an extra half-hour class in reading every day, generally using the same methods that had already failed. The Title I results are even more unequivocal than those for Head Start. A 1997 study conducted for the Department of Education concluded that "there were no differences in growth" between students who did and did not receive Title I assistance.

Finally, it was in the late 1960's and early 70's that desegregation moved decisively from the courts to the schools. Throughout the South, where Jim Crow had reigned, desegregation was a matter of simple justice. But in the North and Midwest, where whites as well as blacks had to be bused, and often a very long way, it was critical to demonstrate a significant benefit to black students to justify the disruption and discontent. The Supreme Court had been persuaded by the views of the psychologist Kenneth Clark that desegregation could help black children overcome the stigma of inferiority conferred by segregation. James Coleman had, in fact, found an "integration effect," which he explained by suggesting that black students in largely white schools experienced "a greater sense of control" over their own destinies than students in segregated schools. But most subsequent studies found that the effect was only a modest one. A 1975 survey of the best-designed studies of integration's effects found that more than half disclosed "no significant difference" between segregated and nonsegregated black students. The Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks concluded in his 1972 book, "Inequality," that desegregation could close the academic gap by no more than 10 to 20 percent -- which struck him as too small an effect to trump the issue of parental preference. Desegregation has faded as a remedy in part because many parents, including black parents, do not feel that the disruption is worth the gain.

Head Start, Title I and a host of other programs have gone a long way toward proving one of Coleman's central claims, which is that money does not buy educational equality. Although the premise of many a crusading volume, including Jonathan Kozol's "Savage Inequalities," is that ghetto schools have been allowed to rot, many of the most catastrophically failing school districts, like Newark's, spend far more money per student than do middle-class communities nearby. Labor economists have had a field day proving that school spending is not correlated with school achievement. And that desegregation never had nearly the academic effect its advocates hoped for shows that equality of educational opportunity is much more elusive than it once seemed to be.

Of course, we are talking about an enormous social experiment that is quite new; it is scarcely surprising that the first round of educational reforms didn't work very well. Thus, 35 years ago, when he compiled "Equality of Educational Opportunity," Coleman naturally measured the resources that were easy to measure and that were commonly assumed to matter -- physics labs, academic curricula, teacher qualifications and so forth. It turns out, however, that some of the resources that he didn't measure, and perhaps couldn't have measured, are the ones that do make a difference. In 1981, Coleman and two colleagues published a study titled "Public and Private Schools," in which they argued that private and parochial schools do a better job than the public schools do, especially with impoverished students. They attributed the difference to higher expectations and a better disciplinary environment. In the mid-70's, an education scholar named Ronald Edmonds looked for the common elements among inner-city schools that exceeded expectations. The "effective schools" movement, which sprang from Edmonds's research, emphasized the importance of strong leadership and an unambiguous focus on academic achievement -- findings that were not, at bottom, incompatible with Coleman's.

The schools that Coleman studied in the mid-60's differed from one another very little; now, by contrast, we live in an era of rampant educational experimentation. There is hardly anything more powerful in the literature of social policy than accounts of individual schools or school districts or pedagogical systems that defy the odds in the worst neighborhoods. The titles alone convey their inspirational quality: "Miracle in East Harlem," "The Power of Their Ideas," "Every Child Every School." School reform suffers, even more than other forms of social intervention, from the problem of the ideal case. It turns out that almost anything can work when instituted by a dedicated principal supported by committed teachers. Jaime Escalante, the teacher celebrated in the movie "Stand and Deliver," prodded his impoverished Chicano students to extraordinary achievements on their Advanced Placement math tests, but any method that depends on a Jaime Escalante is no method at all.

There is an overwhelming tendency in the public schools toward regression to the mean, and not only because charismatic leaders are in short supply. Thus, "Miracle in East Harlem" presents the moving story of administrators who, beginning in the mid-70's, produced an "overwhelming transformation" in America's most famously blighted neighborhood by freeing schools from bureaucracy and forcing them to compete for students, creating "schools and a school system that put children first." The authors conclude that "the revolution of District Four can become the path of the future for our nation's schools." Certainly public-school choice is a good idea, but since District Four finished 24th out of 32 New York City districts last year on the state's fourth-grade reading test -- slightly worse than its poverty ranking would have predicted -- either the approach itself or its application is less than revolutionary.

It is true that we know far more than we used to about what does and doesn't work. But we are only beginning to figure out how to make something work on a meaningful scale. The most intriguing development in recent years is the rise of "comprehensive," or "schoolwide," reform, terms that refer to models for change that incorporate a coherent and self-consistent vision of pedagogy, curriculum and structure -- a replicable, purpose-built school. There are now two dozen such models, many of which stake their reputations on their abilities to improve the performance of inner-city children drastically. More than 9,000 schools have adopted one of the designs. The most popular model among inner-city schools, and the most successful, is a reading program called Success for All, which has expanded into a whole-school reform known as Roots and Wings. The premise of Success for All is that reading is the key to success in school, and that the best way to teach reading, or any other basic skill, is to focus relentlessly on "prevention and early intervention" rather than on remediation. I recently spent a day at P.S. 159, a Success for All school in the supremely devastated neighborhood of East New York, in Brooklyn.

The day began with a minutely choreographed 90-minute reading class. The combined first- and second-grade "Roots" class is the heart of the design; these children are expected to gain proficiency in decoding skills by the end of the year. Carolyn Skolnick's class was reading a "shared book" about skating. This is a specially designed text that has the full narrative for the teacher and a separate, phonetically controlled text for the students; over time, the teacher's "scaffolding" drops away, and the children read all of the text. Skolnick read a line, and the children repeated it. Teacher and students read several pages in this fashion. Next the class practiced sounds -- phonics, to use the term of abuse. Then the children shifted to vocabulary words designed to reinforce one particular sound -- dived, "beside," "ride," "time." Skolnick pointed, and her students recited. The class practiced letter recognition. Then the children paired off and took turns reading the story, the listener helping the reader over rough patches. Virtually all of the children could read the story. Skolnick handed out clipboards, and the children wrote down the names of the characters and described the setting, the "problem" and the "solution" of the story. Almost all of the children were at least minimally competent at

this, too.

Success for All is about as close as schooling has gotten to the level of medicine -- to matching a treatment to an affliction. But it is a treatment, not a cure. Five years ago, 39 percent of the children at P.S. 159 were reading at grade level; after four years of Success for All, the figure has risen to 47 percent. Fifty-four percent of the kids failed the fourth-grade reading test last year. That was better than the district average, at 66 percent, but worse than the statewide average. Studies of Success for All show "strong evidence of positive effect on student achievement," according to a recent report, but it's important to keep in mind the size of those effects. Other types of comprehensive reform have shown slighter effects, or none at all.

Since we don't know how much school can be made to matter, we should work to reform schools as if there were no limit to their powers to compensate for disadvantage. But we also have to reckon with how modest the accomplishments of reform have been, especially with regard to the gap between white students and poor (though not necessarily poor) black students. Although black students now earn high-school diplomas at virtually the same rate as whites -- an extraordinary achievement in itself -- they are enrolling in, and graduating from, college at a much lower rate. Despite significant gains, blacks are still scoring about 200 points below whites on College Boards. And despite improvements in reading scores, the average black 17-year-old is reading at a 13-year-old level. According to one study, the racial gap in language scores approximately doubles between the time a black student enters school and the time she leaves.

There is reason to believe that schools can make some kind of difference, but right now they are not making nearly enough.

The failure of school reform to make a significant dent in educational inequality tells us something about the nature of school, and something about the circumstances that produce the inequality in the first place. School, at least as we understand it now, is not as powerful an institution as it seems. Most children do not encounter school until age 5, unless they happen to be in an unusually rigorous preschool program. Anyone who has ever reared a child knows how immense, and lasting, are the effects of those first five years. Nor is school quite as all-encompassing as it seems: academic work typically takes up only about half the time that children spend in school. And whom you hang out with, both during and after school, can matter more than what happens in the classroom. One reason so many apparently effective school interventions fade over time, according to Kenneth Wong, a professor of education policy at the University of Chicago, is that while small children are responsive to adult authority figures, adolescents pay more attention to peers.

The question of exactly what it is that inner-city culture does to children is painful and immensely contentious. The success of those Russian and Italian and Irish immigrants three-quarters of a century ago, and of many Asian and Hispanic immigrants today, makes it plain that the issue has less to do with poverty as such than with culture -- with conscious values as well as unconscious behaviors. It was Kenneth Clark, who is black, who first popularized the phrase "the pathology of the ghetto," in "Dark Ghetto," published in 1965. Clark wrote bluntly about how "the stigma of racial inferiority" leads to self-destructive behavior, including violence, alcohol and drug abuse, family breakdown -- every social pathology save suicide. But Clark understood this damage as emotional and psychological, not cognitive. Thus, he said that desegregation, by removing the stigma, could lead to a huge improvement in black academic performance. And he railed against what he called the "cultural deprivation" argument, insisting that there was no reason "a low economic status or absence of books in the home or 'cognitive deficit'" should "interfere with the ability of a child to learn to read."

Clark did not reckon with the cognitive harm done to children who grow up in a world

without books or even stimulating games, whose natural curiosity is regularly squashed, who are isolated from the world beyond their neighborhood. A study carried out in the early 80's at the University of Kansas reached the almost unfathomable conclusion that 3-year-olds in families with professional parents used more-extensive vocabularies in daily interactions than did mothers on welfare -- not to mention the children of those mothers. Here is a gap far greater than even the gulf in income that separates the middle class from the poor; it is scarcely surprising that Coleman found that the effects of home and community blotted out almost all those of school.

Social scientists use the expressions "human capital" and "social capital" to describe and quantify these effects. "Human capital" was invented by the economist Theodore Schultz in 1960 to refer to all those human capacities, developed by education, that can be used productively -- the capacity to deal in abstractions, to recognize and adhere to rules, to use language at a high level. Human capital, like other forms of capital, accumulates over generations; it is a thing that parents "give" to their children through their upbringing, and that children then successfully deploy in school, allowing them to bequeath more human capital to their own children.

"Social capital" refers to the benefits of strong social bonds. Coleman defined the term to take in "the norms, the social networks, the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the children's growing up." The support of a strong community helps the child accumulate social capital in myriad ways; in the inner city, where institutions have disintegrated, and mothers often keep children locked inside out of fear for their safety, social capital hardly exists. Coleman consistently pointed out that we now expect the school to provide all the child's human and social capital -- an impossibility.

A great deal of social science has recently gone into explaining how differences in human and social capital account for the gap that exists before children even arrive in school. In a finding published in 1998 in "The Black-White Test Score Gap," edited by Christopher Jencks and a colleague, Meredith Phillips, a group of five researchers examined the 17-point difference between black and white 5- and 6-year-olds on something called the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Equalizing black and white parental income, they concluded, would account for only about one point of the difference, since black children scored far lower than whites from a comparable economic background. Equalizing parents' years of schooling would add only another point or two (though equalizing "quality" of schooling would add a bit more). Between half and two-thirds of the gap, however, could be erased if you could address a wide array of socioeconomic factors that accumulate over generations -- the size of the household the child's mother grew up in, the mother's sense of control over her life, the child's birth weight. The single largest chunk, accounting for 3.5 points, is "middle-class parenting practices" -- reading to your children, taking them on trips, using reason rather than the flat edict.

I recently asked Edmund W. Gordon, the first research director of Head Start and perhaps the foremost black psychologist of his generation, what he concluded about the 35-year effort to conquer poverty through the schools. Gordon, a diminutive, bearded man of painstaking precision, said: "Back in the 60's, there was desegregation, there was the War on Poverty, there was Head Start -- and most of us really thought that we were going to do it. I must say that I no longer believe that. I think that schools can be much more powerful, but I don't think they can reverse all the ill effects of a starkly disadvantaged status in society. If you go back and look at Coleman's stuff, and Bourdieu's" -- Pierre Bourdieu, the French social theorist -- they're talking about human and cultural capital development. It seems to me that the logic of that argument is that schools work for people who have those varieties of capital to invest in it. And if they don't, then schooling is going to be greatly handicapped."

In recent years, Gordon has become preoccupied with the "academic underproductivity" of middle-class black students, which he attributes largely to the difference in child-

rearing habits and peer culture between the black and white middle classes. These are forms of private behavior that are both overwhelmingly important and extremely difficult to reach through conscious acts of intervention. Gordon is working with black organizations "to make it the thing to do in the black community that you spend your time reading to your kids, that you take your kids to visit colleges, that you go to the library." He recognizes that the same problems apply, with vastly greater intensity, to impoverished black families, but he doesn't think exhortations will do any good. Moreover, he said: "I'm 78 years old. I want to do something where I can have some chance of success in the next 10 years. I don't know if we can do anything in that time frame at the lower economic levels."

Nowadays we read the Coleman report as a "conservative" document, dashing cold water on the faith that we can diminish inequality through conscious effort, and thus end the isolation of inner-city children. But Coleman was suggesting not that we should learn to live with inequality but that we will have to look to institutions other than schools to provide human and social capital. In their review of Coleman's findings, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Frederick Mosteller, then both professors at Harvard, made this point explicitly. They cited the psychologist Jerome Kagan to the effect that "the differences in language and number competence between lower- and middle-class children" is "awesome" by first grade; the critical task is thus to change "the ecology of the lower-class child in order to increase the probability that he will be more successful in attaining normative skills."

How do you alter that ecology? Perhaps, they suggested, you could do more by raising families' occupational levels or wage rates than by direct spending on school. Christopher Jencks, in "Inequality," adopted the more radical position that if school was only passing on and legitimizing inequality, the only solution was a socialist-style redistribution of income.

A great deal has, of course, changed since then. For one thing, at the time, Jencks argued that raising blacks' test-score performance wouldn't make much of a difference because the labor markets were so biased against blacks that academic success hardly paid off. By 1998, in "The Black-White Test Score Gap," Jencks stated that for blacks, as for whites, cognitive achievement largely determines professional success; eliminating the gap would in fact solve the problem of persistent black poverty. And Jencks now says, as he did not before, that some things schools do can effect educational inequality -- but only just so far. And so, like Moynihan and Mosteller, he turns his attention to the child's ecology, though he no longer holds out much hope for large-scale social change. "Broadly speaking," Jencks and Meredith Phillips wrote in "The Black-White Test Score Gap," "there are two ways of improving 3- and 4-year-olds' cognitive skills: we can change their preschool experiences and we can change their home experiences. Changing preschools is less important but easier than changing homes."

Preschool is a device for extending the reach of school downward toward the time when the cognitive gaps are beginning to form -- a means of distributing human capital to children who grow up with little to none. That few Head Start programs have actually done this may say more about the design of Head Start than about the inherent limitations of preschool. In fact, several studies of "model" programs -- which typically start from birth, last all day, hire professional teachers and offer a wide range of services -- show large and lasting effects, drastically reducing placement in special education and being held back and boosting academic achievement. And a long-term study of the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, a preschool program financed largely by the federal government, shows that children who received just such early preparation were far more likely than a control group to graduate from high school and attend college and got higher grades and better scores on cognitive tests.

Last fall, I spent a day at a preschool program in Vineland, a small town in southern New



Jersey, where the population is for the most part Hispanic and black. Impact, which is largely state financed, has several advantages that would be hard to reproduce in East New York. The school sits among a series of low brick buildings in the middle of a campus setting; everything is clean and fresh. What's more, only a little more than half of the 239 students are poor enough to qualify for a free lunch, because working-class and some middle-class parents are delighted to have their kids spend the day in such a salubrious setting. Nevertheless, what's really striking about Impact, at least if you have been to a typical Head Start program, is how appealing the preschool classes look: the teachers are well-spoken professionals, the classes are small and richly stocked with books and art materials and computers and the kids move purposefully among activities. These were classrooms, not nursery schools. Even in the child-care center, each group of children has a teacher who is certified in early-childhood education.

Impact is not so much a preschool as a multipurpose social-service agency, offering year-round, all-day child care from birth, adult literacy programs, episodic health care, including mental health, and education and counseling for pregnant teenagers. It absorbs a larger portion of a child's life than a school does, and it makes a far more ambitious attempt to offer itself as a kind of alternative community. Impact has contracted with the Vineland public schools to take teenagers in the early stage of pregnancy and give them one year of schooling in small classes as well as intensive instruction in child-rearing, nutrition and health care. The girls I met represent the middle stage of the typical downward spiral of disadvantage: themselves often born to teenage mothers, they had already been left back once or twice, and some were on their second child, by a different boyfriend from the first.

Paula Bender, who runs Impact, says: "We're in the business of trying to break cycles. A teen mother comes in. If she had stayed in her old school, she probably would have dropped out. Her child might have had a low birth weight. She can come here and get nutrition, prenatal care and education. Then we're going to take care of her baby, and make sure that any developmental lags are diagnosed and treated. The mothers are going on to high school, and we have the children from birth."

Programs like Impact are very expensive: Bender says she is spending \$8,000 to \$10,000 a child, which is at least double the cost of the Head Start program down the road. Al Gore has proposed spending \$50 billion a year to make Head Start-type programs available to all 4-year-olds, whether poor or not. Steven Barnett, a professor of economics at Rutgers, has estimated that it would cost \$25 billion to \$30 billion to offer an enriched preschool program to every poverty-level child in the country -- about triple the current cost of Head Start -- and that making such a system universally available would run into the hundreds of billions. Perhaps we should keep our expectations modest, but it's worth bearing in mind that the French have created, in the form of the *ecole maternelle*, an extraordinarily effective and widely admired form of preschool that reaches 85 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds. For the French, universal public education effectively starts at 3. Can we think of a good reason it shouldn't here?

An all-day, year-round child-care and preschool program -- and especially one intended specifically for the poor -- smacks of a kind of Progressive Era paternalism in which mothers are expected to yield up their children to wise professionals. Back when he was just a congressman with strange ideas, Newt Gingrich once suggested that inner-city children be shipped en masse to the equivalent of Boys Town, a proposal that makes poverty sound like a crime punishable by loss of offspring. But Gingrich understood something important: ghetto children need an enveloping environment that is secure and nourishing, as the streets and often the home itself are not. And school is not enveloping enough. You can't take children away from their mothers, but you can place them in an alternative environment for much of the day (which the end of welfare, in any case, has now made indispensable). There's a strong argument for universally available after-

school activities. No less important would be the restoration of the web of church, community and police-sponsored programs that once flourished in big cities. The breakdown of families means that we have to ask more of social institutions -- and not just schools -- than we used to.

Of course we also have to ask more of the families themselves. In Jim Sleeper's "Liberal Racism," the black economist Glenn Loury recalls vexing a symposium on race by saying: "Let's talk about who's going to read to these kids. . . . How come these public libraries at the corners of housing projects aren't overflowing?" The language of personal responsibility makes many liberals flinch, and Edmund Gordon, Head Start's first research director, is almost certainly right in thinking that middle-class parents are a lot more likely to respond to advice about child-rearing than are single mothers struggling to keep their heads above water. But if the cognitive gap between black and white 5-year-olds has to do with the human and social capital children do or do not acquire at home and in the community -- and not, or at least not principally, with racism or unfair tests or different "cognitive styles" -- then we can't do without the explicit language of values and behavior. We have to unambiguously embrace the virtues of a "middle-class parenting style." And prominent black figures have to weigh in against the antiacademic and even "oppositional" peer culture that Gordon and others say is retarding black progress.

It's not impossible to imagine a bargain in which conservatives agree to pay for comprehensive institutions like Impact or for after-school activities and liberals agree to embrace the language of personal responsibility, but we would still be asking ghetto children to thrive in an incredibly adverse environment. The idea of directly addressing that environment through jobs programs, housing, health care or the adoption of "a living wage" survives only in the fringes of political discourse. But you cannot disentangle the objective conditions of a place like East New York from the habits and values of the people who live there. The most effective solution -- and the most unlikely one of all -- is to move families out of the ghetto environment altogether. As Lawrence Katz, a Harvard economist, puts it, "You can't change the parents, but you can change the neighborhood." Katz points to the famous Gautreaux experiment in Chicago, in which families were given subsidies to move from high-poverty neighborhoods to the suburbs; studies have found that children in these families were far more successful academically than would have otherwise been predicted. Katz is now in the midst of a long-term study of families involved in Moving to Opportunity, a five-year-old program sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development that allowed a small number of families in five cities to leave the ghetto for working-class neighborhoods. Though it is too early to look at academic results, Katz's early study found very large drops in incidents of misbehavior and sizable improvements both in children's physical health and in mothers' mental health.

A few years ago, I spent several days at the McDonough School, an elementary school in Hartford. Despite its reputation for corporate wealth, Hartford is one of the poorest cities in the country; it was there that President Clinton recently announced his extremely modest new antipoverty initiative. McDonough's population was almost 100 percent Hispanic and black and 100 percent poor. The school was decrepit, but clean and orderly, cheerful and safe -- an oasis of purposefulness in a neighborhood so chaotic that a few months earlier a janitor was chased off a snowblower and shot outside the school's annex. The principal, Donald Carso, was the kind of irrepressible enthusiast who made a point of greeting parents out in front of the school every morning, even in the dead of winter -- a figure straight out of the "effective schools" literature. But McDonough was a failing school: three-quarters of the graduating sixth graders had scored at the remedial level on the state reading test. Carso said he had reached the limit of his powers. "In this world," he told me, making a little globe with his fingertips, "we're very successful. But we can't control all the stuff on the outside."

At bottom, the reason the kids at McDonough and practically every other elementary school in Hartford were failing, while the kids in the wealthy suburbs that began just on the other side of West Hartford were thriving, was not that the schools in Hartford were bad and the schools in the suburbs were good, but that each set of children was repeating patterns, and following trajectories, established before they arrived at school. McDonough's children lived in a world bounded and defined by poverty. One teacher told me that when she talked to her sixth graders about college, they'd say: "What's college? I don't know anyone who's been to college." They didn't know anyone who had succeeded in school, landed a good job, made it to the suburbs.

I met Carso because he had decided to testify for the plaintiff in a well-known desegregation case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*. He said something had to be done to spring the children free from the isolation of urban poverty; he played with the idea that the Hartford schools should simply be shut down, and the children dispersed into the surrounding suburbs. Carso said he never thought the litigation would solve the problem (it hasn't), but he hoped that it would at least force people to pay attention. "We are," he said to me almost pleadingly, "saying to our neighbors, 'Take ownership of our problem.'"

That is the issue: are we going to take ownership of the problem? The gulf between the poor and the well-off is much wider than it used to be, not only financially but also psychologically. The memory of the Depression, with its "there but for the grace of God" reflex, has passed out of American politics and culture. Once it was the rich who seemed to live on an island of their own; now it's the poor. Their isolation makes them gratifyingly invisible. The drop in crime even makes the poor seem like less of a threat to the prosperous; it frees us to contemplate, along with George W. Bush, the spiritual hollowness of plenty. But here's a thought: maybe our prosperity will continue to seem hollow as long as so many 3-year-old black girls face such grim prospects.

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