Much has been said of the inadequacies of America's schools—falling test scores, rising illiteracy rates, and misguided appropriations of funds. Such topics become headline news with every new Gallup Poll and national education report. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle questioned these assessments of the public schools by politicians and the press and maintain that the attacks on education are a "manufactured crisis." By examining the hidden agendas of various critics and political forces (primarily neoconservative policymakers who wish to undermine the public school system), Berliner and Biddle ask whether educators should be held responsible for certain outcomes often considered beyond the power of schooling. The manufactured crisis has caused a loss of faith in public schooling, and they conclude their book by examining what they consider real problems confronting education and suggesting methods for improvement. The focus of their recommendations, treated through a series of principles for improving education, include providing parents more dignity and children more hope; establishing fair school funding; reducing school size; enlarging the goals of curricula; adopting innovative teaching methods (encouraging thoughtfulness); redesigning student evaluation; abandoning age-graded classrooms; strengthening school-community relations; and strengthening the professional status of educators.

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In this excerpt, Berliner and Biddle describe their belief that the most fundamental way to improve schools is "to enhance the dignity of parents and the autonomy and professional status of educators," calling for more research and more compassion as a method for reforming public education.

Key concept(s): nature of educational change

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**Fundamentals of School Improvement: Research and Compassion**

By now it should be clear that American education has recently been subjected to an unwarranted, vigorous, and damaging attack—a Manufactured Crisis. Early in the 1980s, prominent figures in our federal government unleashed an unprecedented onslaught on America's schools, claiming that those schools had recently deteriorated, that they now compared badly with schools from other advanced countries, and that as a result our economy and the future of our nation were seriously threatened. These claims were said to be supported by evidence, although somehow that evidence was rarely cited or appeared only as simple, misleading analyses of limited data.
Nevertheless, this attack was waged with great vigor, was eagerly supported by prominent figures in industry, and was widely reported and endlessly elaborated by a compliant press. And as a result, many of the claims of this attack came to be accepted by good-hearted Americans, including a lot of powerful people and leaders in the educational community; and great mischief resulted because of the misunderstandings and poor policies this attack created.

[We] examined the actual evidence bearing on major claims of this attack and found that most were unsupported. Instead, the evidence suggests that, on average, American schools are not only holding their own but are also improving in modest ways. Thus, the major claims of the attack turned out to have been myths; the Manufactured Crisis was revealed as a Big Lie.

But these conclusions raised related questions. Why did this attack appear in the early 1980s, and what did research suggest about the educational agenda being pushed by those responsible for the crisis? [The] crisis was indirectly generated by escalating problems, both in the larger society and in education itself; but it was also promoted by specific groups of ideologues who were hostile to public schools and who wanted to divert attention from America's growing social problems. [We] examined evidence indicating that key educational policies urged by promoters of the crisis would, if adopted, seriously damage America's schools and debase the educational experiences of its students.

Our analysis did not stop at this point, however. One of the worst effects of the Manufactured Crisis was that it distracted Americans from the real problems of American education and from thinking about useful steps that we might take to resolve those problems and improve America's schools. So, ... we examined a number of dilemmas faced by America's schools, some created by serious and escalating problems in the society at large, some resulting from questionable traditions for conducting education in our country. And given these pressing dilemmas, ... we set forth a set of principles that seem promising for improving American education.

As we've seen then, the average American school is a lot more successful than those responsible for the Manufactured Crisis would have us believe. This does not mean that our schools are perfect; indeed, they face serious problems, and their programs and achievements vary enormously. But this variation is due, in part, to huge differences in income, wealth, and support for schools in our nation. Thus, whether or not one accepts the principles for improving education that we outlined ..., the task of improving our schools remains a serious and ongoing challenge for Americans.

Since this challenge is unlikely to go away, it is useful to suggest conditions that will govern how well that challenge is to be met.

The Need for More Research

Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.

—James Madison (1822)

Americans share many concerns about education, and because of our energy, optimism, and willingness to tinker with social institutions, we often set out to "reform" the public schools. And yet, most programs for improving education fail. Many turn out to have few good effects, others are unworkable, others cost a lot more than anticipated, and still others are found to create serious problems for educators or students. As a result, most programs for improvement are eventually abandoned.

And yet, some attempts to improve education succeed, and America's schools clearly do change over time. What makes for a successful improvement proposal? How can we tell ahead of time whether a reform effort is likely to succeed or fail? These questions have been addressed by various scholars, and we offer here a brief summary of only some of their ideas.

In general, reform proposals are more likely to succeed if

• they reflect genuine (rather than fictitious) problems faced by schools;
• they are based on attainable goals that are shared by the people concerned;
• they are planned with an understanding of structural forces in the society and the education system that will affect the proposed changes;
• they encourage and respond to debates about alternatives among educators, students, parents, and others affected by those proposals;
• they involve plans for both starting and maintaining the program;
• they enlarge (rather than restrict) the lives of affected people; and
• they are adequately funded.

This list sounds impressive, but it actually skirts a truly crucial criterion. Attempts to improve education are more likely to succeed if they are associated with research suggesting that they actually work.

Thus, plans for improving education should solve the problems they were supposed to solve or generate other lasting benefits that educators, students, parents, or others concerned with education can detect. Unfortunately, only a few improvement efforts actually generate benefits—positive and detectable outcomes; and this is surely a major reason why most reform efforts are abandoned. Despite good intentions, a lot of effort, and no little expense, a great many programs designed to improve our schools fail simply because they don't work.
Is there no way to detect ahead of time which proposals for improving education are likely to work and which are not? To answer this question we need only look at other arenas of endeavor in which policy decisions are contemplated. Suppose our community, state, or nation were thinking about building a bridge, sending astronauts to the moon, or authorizing an expensive program to control a disease. In each case, we would want to base our decision about the issue on research—on relevant theories and evidence that investigators had assembled concerning our decision. Moreover, in many cases we would demand to see the results of that research before we made our decision, and if the research had not yet been conducted, we would commission that research as a necessary step before we took action. Thus, for such crucial matters, we would turn to research to reduce the chances that errors would be made. But education can surely be studied and is no less crucial in its effects on us and on the future lives of our children. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that Americans would also turn to research to avoid making errors when planning ways to improve education.

Unfortunately, they don’t. Only a few efforts to change education seem to be based on knowledge generated by research. In all too many cases, reform programs that are set in motion by our federal government, state legislatures, school boards, or local educators are based neither on evidence nor on careful reviews of relevant theory—and it would be difficult indeed to find cases where a decision-making body refused to consider a proposal for improving education because the relevant research had not yet appeared. For example, various states passed laws in the 1980s that attempted to reform education by intensifying school curricula or standards. As we noted earlier, these laws were not based on research evidence or on the analytic scholarship of the research community, and most did not work. Similarly, current federal efforts to promote programs for gifted students fly in the face of both theory and evidence. “In short, the ‘radical’ notion of supporting calls for educational reform with research knowledge seems not yet [to be] popular among many reformers.” And Americans pay the price by instituting a host of reforms that cannot, and do not, work.

Why do so many reformers behave this way when it comes to education? This question has elicited a lot of interest, and scores of scholars have written about it. In part, most research on education is conducted by social scientists, and social research is not thought to have the “definitive” character, the importance, that is accorded research in the physical and biological sciences. In part, also, our society has not yet evolved efficient mechanisms for getting the knowledge generated by research on education to those who must make decisions about our schools. In part, research on education also came under direct attack as part of the Manufactured Crisis, so that many concerned Americans have been given the false impression that educational research is less valid or useful than research in other fields. And in part, since most Americans have had personal experience with public schools, they seem to think of themselves as “experts” on educational topics; hence, they feel little need for guidance from research when making decisions about schools.

Above all, however, research on education is not used because there is so little of it! Some readers may find this statement surprising, given our extensive citations of research evidence in the first six chapters of this book. However, we were lucky. The educational topics we reviewed for this effort are among the few for which research truly has been accumulated. Indeed, when constructing the Manufactured Crisis, those hostile to public education chose topics for which research had been conducted; and to counter their myths, all we had to do was to look at the evidence they had misrepresented. Research has simply not yet appeared for many important educational issues. For example, we cited relatively little research evidence on ways to improve education in Chapter 7. The reason is that little research has yet appeared that bears directly on most of the topics we reviewed in that chapter. Good ideas and relevant scholarship have appeared, true, but empirical studies on most of these topics have not yet been reported. Thus, those who look for research that will help them plan a specific program for improving education may find their search to be fruitless.

The reason why so little educational research exists is that funding for it is almost nonexistent. Most support for research in many fields comes from the federal government, of course, and Americans annually spend billions of their tax dollars to support research in the physical and biological sciences. Annual federal support for research in medicine alone is now running at more than five billion dollars, and billions more are spent each year on research relevant to defense. And yet, the entire federal outlay for research on education—including that on the costs of keeping records of the nation’s schools, all research on school issues funded by all federal agencies, and the salaries of all those who administer education—research budgets—currently amounts to only a few hundred million dollars each year. And in recent years the annual amount set aside by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement for new studies by competent and motivated scholars has been a piddling five hundred thousand dollars—or about what it would cost to fund fully the research efforts and staff of three scholars in the fields of biology or medicine.

Or perhaps percentage figures would make more sense. Our federal government currently funds nearly all of the costs of defense but only about 6 percent of the total cost of primary and secondary education (down from about 10 percent in 1980). Nevertheless, “while 15 percent of the federal dollars that go for defense are used to support research, only 0.1 percent of the federal dollars spent on educational programs are used to support research.” This is indeed peanuts.
For the government to provide such picayune support makes no sense. Each year scores of decisions are made throughout the country about new programs for improving or reforming American schools. Many of those programs will fail and thus will waste a great deal of money and possibly disrupt the lives of educators, students, and parents. Much of this waste of tax dollars and needless disruption could be prevented if Americans would only demand that reforms in schools not be initiated without benefit of relevant research and that a good deal more funding be set aside for research on pressing issues in education.

Education is not fundamentally different from other fields of human endeavor. It is perfectly possible to conduct research that bears on major decisions we need to make concerning the organization, staffing, curricula, and teaching methods appropriate for America's schools. When that research is conducted, it can produce knowledge that helps us avoid serious and costly errors. But good research does not come cheap. It requires competent and highly-trained workers. It also requires forethought and planning, and it always takes more time than decision makers would like. But if America is to avoid the wasted dollars and disrupted lives that poor policy decisions in education generate, we must step up our regular investment in educational research. Certainly, failure to fund educational research is a case of "penny wise, pound foolish."

The Need for Compassion

No poor, rural, weak, or black person should ever again have to bear the additional burden of being deprived of the opportunity for an education, a job, or simple justice.

—Jimmy Carter (1971)

Research will certainly help, but it alone is not sufficient if America really wants to reform public education. Thus, we turn to a second, crucial criterion for successful reform. Public schools can never be judged successful until they provide equal opportunities for all, and true improvements in public education will not come about unless they are based on compassion.

Of all the ugly assumptions of the Manufactured Crisis, two of the worst are the ideas that useful improvements in American education can be initiated by scapegoating those who labor in America's schools and that education for poor and minority students doesn't matter. Time and again, those responsible for the crisis told us how rotten our schools were—how the performance of those schools had declined, how they had lost direction, how their standards and discipline had been debased—and that this was all the fault of the untalented, poorly trained, unmotivated teachers and administrators responsible for those schools. And when the critics grew tired of bashing educators, they tried to blame America's students as well (and, indirectly, their parents) for the supposed shortcomings of our public schools. In addition, the same critics consistently asserted that too much attention has been given to America's poor and minority students (many of whom must attend the country's most poorly funded schools), and they have tried to cut funds for programs that support those students—by fair means or foul. And the critics have studiously ignored evidence indicating that, although those students are now making better progress, they still need additional help.

We simply cannot believe that effective reforms in education can follow from premises that scapegoat educators, blame students, or heap indignities on minorities and those who are impoverished. Rather, we believe that all Americans respond best when they are treated with dignity and respect; and this clearly should be the case in public schools, which are, above all, institutions that should teach and exemplify intellectual values and moral conduct. Most of the poor reform ideas we reviewed in Chapter 5 would treat educators as if they were unskilled hacks, punish students for unsatisfactory conduct, or redistribute tax support so that schools for the poor are further debased and those for the rich are given even more support. Such proposals are almost guaranteed to harm both the intellectual and moral efforts of America's public schools.

Let us return to basic principles. Public schools were instituted in our country to ensure that all children would have access to a common store of ideas, skills, and moral instruction so they could learn how to live in harmony with each other and how to build useful adult lives and institutions. And those schools were to be staffed by professional educators who could both impart the common store of knowledge and respond to the needs of individuals, thus helping all students to develop a love of learning. Great harm can result if we forget these ideals.

If we pay teachers substandard wages and treat them like recalcitrant incompetents, won't they eventually come to think of themselves in this light? And if we foolishly structure schools so that many students are regularly bored, threatened, or punished in them, who would be so naive as to assume those students would thereafter love learning?

Above all, if we structure our public school system so that large groups of students are not provided equitable education, we create a host of problems. Students who are not exposed to common moral standards learn to lie, cheat, steal, and assault other people. Students who are forced to attend badly underfunded schools become angry and alienated; indeed, they may eventually form dissident movements and seek to destabilize our government. Students who are not provided good schooling wind up ignorant, and ignorance is expensive. Those who know nothing contribute nothing; rather, they blunder and make messes with their lives that others must clean up. But, as we now know, America's current system of public education is massively inequitable and imposes badly underfunded schools on some of America's neediest students. And the result is that many young people in
the country today are violent, angry, and alienated, and lead ignorant, messed-up lives.

Of course, these social problems are not solely the result of inequities in our public-school system. Violence, anger, alienation, and ignorance are also the results of poverty, drugs, gang warfare, police brutality, poor job prospects, discriminatory treatment, mindless television, and other features of contemporary American civilization. But surely what goes on in our public schools also has an effect. Who, then, would be surprised to learn that rates of violence, anger, alienation, and ignorance are lower in other industrialized countries where public education is more equitable?

If we are truly to improve American education, and through those improvements help to solve serious problems in our country, we must change our public schools so that all those who labor in them are treated with compassion. We will stimulate the best efforts from educators if we treat them as responsible professionals. Our students will grow most effectively if we encourage their achievement and project images of adult responsibility for them. And our poor and minority students are more likely to realize their dreams and join the mainstream of American society if we provide them with genuinely equal opportunities through our public school system. To paraphrase Goethe: If you treat people as they are, they will stay as they are. But if you treat them as if they were what they ought to be, they will become what they ought to be and could be.

To summarize then, Americans hold high expectations for their public schools. Moreover, they assume that those schools are responsive and that their programs can be improved. Thus, efforts to improve those schools will surely continue in our country. For the past decade many of those efforts have been misdirected by the myths and false premises of the Manufactured Crisis. As Americans turn away from these damaging ideas, we will want to address the real issues that the public schools of our country face—issues that are tied to serious and growing social problems in the nation. And as we debate ways to address these issues and plan programs that we hope will improve our schools, we should remember that reforms in education are far more effective when they are based on knowledge derived from research. Research is not a frill; rather, it is badly needed if our efforts to improve public schools are to be effective.

In addition, compassion is needed if Americans truly want to realize the goals of public education. Compassionate reforms are not only moral, but they are required if we are to improve education and enable our schools to help solve some of America's worst social problems. In Lincoln's words, it has always been clear that effective reform of education must begin "with charity for all." We now suggest that compassion in education is an utter necessity if we in America are to realize our long-held aspirations for equality, justice, true democracy, and a decent standard of living for us all.

Notes
1. See, for example, Astuto et al. (1993), Cohen & Garet (1975), Cuban (1990), or Glickman (1993).
3. Anderson & Biddle (1991) discuss this issue and provide a useful collection of articles concerned with the topic.
4. Misconceptions about social research are discussed by Biddle (1987).
5. See, for example, the hostile attack by then Assistant Secretary of Education Chester Finn (1988).
8. Indeed, in November of 1990 the Bush administration's Office of Education assembled a conference of researchers who were asked to explain how the supposed "failures" of America's schools could be linked to the "inadequacies" of America's students and parents. This request was resisted by the more thoughtful people who attended the conference.
9. At one point the critics attempted to have ketchup declared a "vegetable" to reduce pressure for federal nutrition programs for poor students.

References
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