



*Ron Edmonds is Professor, Department
of Teacher Education, Michigan State
University, East Lansing.*

On School Improvement: A Conversation with Ronald Edmonds

Researcher-reformer Ronald Edmonds believes he knows why some urban schools teach poor children successfully. In this interview with Executive Editor Ron Brandt, Edmonds elaborates on his list of the five characteristics of effective schools.

Q: You've identified five characteristics of effective schools. Briefly, how did you identify those characteristics?

Edmonds: In methodological terms, the characteristics are a discovery. First you identify schools that produce the outcomes you're interested in. Then you watch them and try to figure out what makes them different from ineffective schools. Across the broad sweep of the school effectiveness research there is, for example, substantial agreement on the role of leadership. That is not a theory; it is a discovery.

The same can be said about climate and expectations and the other characteristics. All of them derived from the attempt to find schools that came closest to the standard of effectiveness and then systematically to watch the men and women who were parties to that environment and see what they did that others didn't.

Q: You say an effective school "brings an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social classes to minimum mastery." Isn't that definition rather arbitrary? What about a school in which both low income and middle class students are doing poorly?

Edmonds: The middle class can be depended on to intervene in any school in which a significant portion of middle class children are not doing well. We rarely encounter schools in which as many as 15 percent of middle class children are failing to achieve minimum mastery.

Q: Let's talk about the five characteristics. First, leadership. What exactly do principals do who show attention to the instructional program?

Edmonds: Effective principals spend most of their time out in the school—

usually in the classrooms. They are constantly engaged in identifying and diagnosing instructional problems.

These men and women spend a lot of time observing classes. But that's only half the formula. They are never content just to identify problems. Their diagnosis is always accompanied by the collegial offering of alternative ways to teach that particular content. What one observes, therefore, is a lot of interaction between teachers and principals to decide which of three or four possible ways to teach, say, multiplication is most appropriate in that situation.

Q: The second correlate: you've said it's not *what* the school's purpose is but that everyone *knows* what it is. Surely the content of the purpose is also important.

Edmonds: I think the reason the content doesn't discriminate is that there isn't much variability. If you analyze answers to the question, "What does this school care most about?" you find they don't really vary all that much. Most teachers mention pupil acquisition of school skills. Then they usually go on to talk about some aspect of socialization, some interest in creativity and independent thinking, or perhaps "taking the student to his fullest intellectual potential."

The point is that any organization is more cohesive if all parties understand its major purpose. Unfortunately, most American schools either don't have an articulated focus or the focus is not disseminated in a way that makes it permeate the adult environment.

In an effective organization, the leader articulates its major purposes and then undertakes systematic dissemination. We've seen some schools where the focus is exhibited in the dis-

"The reality is that poor children are sometimes portrayed as having made satisfactory progress when they're actually not even close to mastery."

play case, or it's stated in the form of a slogan and it's up over the entrance of the school, or it's on the masthead of the PTA newsletter, or the principal paperclips it on the paychecks. I don't think there's anything especially radical about the notion that whatever your mission is, it ought to be broadly understood.

Q: The third characteristic: a safe, orderly climate. No one would quarrel with that—but how do schools get it?

Edmonds: Take broken windows. It isn't so much whether schools get windows broken; it's how long the windows stay broken. It isn't so much whether the water fountains stop working; it's how long they don't work. Apparently the issue here is that the school must avoid tangible evidence of institutional neglect.

We've all seen schools in which some teachers walk through the building or the parking lot ignoring everything they see because they disclaim responsibility for any activity outside their classroom. One of the reasons effective schools are relatively quiet is

that all teachers take responsibility for all students, all the time, everywhere in the school.

Q: Your fourth correlate: how, specifically, do teachers show high expectations?

Edmonds: One way to discriminate between effective teachers and others is to record the proportion of students who are asked to answer questions as a function of the students' race or social class. Teachers in ineffective schools prefer to question the children they predict are most likely to know the answers. Children who sit in those classes day after day without being asked to participate eventually decide the teacher doesn't expect them to know as much. As a result they are least likely to do their homework, least likely to be prepared to master the lesson, and so forth.

Teachers who convey the universal expectation of minimum mastery make recitation random. They may not call on every student every day, but they take steps to see that the distribution of recitation is independent of race, social class, or sex. One teacher told me he did it by putting little sticks over students' names as he asked questions. Another made dots on a piece of paper. I don't recommend that all teachers use little sticks or dots. What's important is translating the concept of random recitation into actual classroom practice.

Q: You seem to imply it's the fault of educators that low income kids do poorly in school. Do you believe that?

Edmonds: No, I don't. I'm not very interested in fault. I try to understand why the norm in American schools is depressed achievement by poor kids and higher achievement by middle class kids. I'd say it's bound up in a lot of things, especially the familial effects literature by Coleman, Moynihan, Jencks, and others, which argues that achievement derives from family background. If you think about the implications of that, it doesn't imply school intervention at all. If achievement derives from family background, educators aren't responsible for that.

There is no vast malicious conspiracy whose purpose is to deprive poor and minority children of their birthright. But there are circumstances that explain the phenomenon, and one of the ways to interrupt it is to attack the conceptual posture on the origin of achievement.

Q: Perhaps the most controversial of your five characteristics is close monitoring with standardized tests.

Edmonds: I acknowledge that available standardized tests do not adequately measure the appropriate ends of education. However, I also argue that it is important for students to learn minimum academic skills as a prerequisite to successful access to the next level of schooling.

The reality is that poor children especially are sometimes portrayed as having made satisfactory progress when they're actually not even close to mastery. I find that unacceptable. I think it enormously important that students and their parents know how they're doing in relation to what they're required to do. And despite all the limitations of standardized tests, I would argue as forcefully as I can that they are—at this moment—the most realistic, accurate, and equitable basis for portraying individual pupil progress.

Q: The problem for some people is that your sole criterion is raising those test scores. If the only thing that matters is raising scores, it can perhaps be done, but some of the negative results of such an effort go unmeasured.

Edmonds: That's a good point. Instructional effectiveness is not the same as educational excellence.

Excellence means that students become independent, creative thinkers, learn to work cooperatively, and so on, which is also enormously important.

I see no reason why making a school instructionally effective ought to preclude educational excellence. In fact, it is hard for me to conceive of an educator who can obtain excellence but who is incapable of managing these rather more modest chores. I would take the position that you have to earn the right to experiment with something as precious as excellence. The way you earn it is by just teaching the kids to read and write.

Q: One reason for being concerned about a preoccupation with test scores is that teachers might spend all day teaching only those things that are tested, so art, music, creative writing, and so on might get shortchanged.

Edmonds: Well, from a pedagogical point of view, that's not a very sound way to teach basic skills. One of the most effective reading programs in the United States is "Reading Through the

Arts." Teaching basic skills does not imply some rigid, mechanical approach. You are more likely to be effective if you go about it in flexible, responsive, inventive ways.

Q: Sometimes researchers find whatever they're looking for. If someone had asked you ten years ago what an effective school was like, what would you have answered?

Edmonds: I began with the notion that some schools were demonstrably better than others, but I thought money mattered more than it turned out to matter: the amount of supplies, the age of the building. One of my biases was toward small schools. So I would say in a general sense I wasn't startled by the results, but there were dramatic changes in particulars.

Q: Is there a possibility that your five characteristics are really just indicators of something else that's more subtle, more difficult to define?

Edmonds: I think that's highly probable. What you're talking about is the distinction between correlation and causation.

Q: You say the correlates are not necessarily causative, but if you improve them you will improve effectiveness. Do you have any evidence for that?

Edmonds: New York's School Improvement Project set out to systematically introduce the five correlates into a group of schools in New York City. So did Project RISE in Milwaukee. Both projects have demonstrated substantial increases in achievement in the schools participating in the project. It shouldn't trouble us to say, "They got the results; we don't know exactly why." It's probably true that the actual cause of the improvement lies in some interaction between one's interest in obtaining the correlates and the means by which it's done.

Q: In 1978 you were asked by the New York City Schools to put your ideas to work there. What did you do?

Edmonds: For two and a half years I commuted between Harvard and New York City. As chief instructional officer of the New York City Schools, I designed the School Improvement Project which was intended to demonstrate that it is possible anytime, anywhere to intervene in a school.

But aside from that, I participated in

several major curriculum policy decisions. For example, we introduced a uniform districtwide curriculum. Urban school districts like New York have very high rates of pupil mobility, most of it within district. With a uniform curriculum, when kids move from one school to another, they encounter a similar program of instruction.

Another reason for a standard curriculum is to make clear that the requirements in poor neighborhoods are identical to those in middle class neighborhoods. One of my assumptions is that all students ought to graduate from high school prepared to go to college. I don't care whether they go to college or not, but they ought to have the choice. So one of the curriculum changes made in New York was to raise the requirements for high school graduation.

Q: You are saying that to improve school effectiveness you should have a uniform, fixed curriculum across the school system.

Edmonds: Absolutely.

Q: Which decreases the teachers' discretion over what they will teach.

Edmonds: But not how they'll teach it. I definitely think it inappropriate for teachers to decide what is to be taught or the level at which it is to be taught. But they must have the widest possible latitude in deciding textual materials, classroom organization, instructional strategy, and the like.

Q: What else did you change?

Edmonds: We changed the promotion policy to require that students not be promoted unless they demonstrate minimum academic mastery. The reason for that is that the longer poor-performing, low income children go to school, the farther behind they get. That has to be stopped.

Q: But research also seems to show that children often do not profit from having been retained.

Edmonds: That's why it was decided that in New York the elevated requirement for promotion would be accompanied by an alternative program for the failing students—not an alternative curriculum, but an alternative class. For example, classes for students who have failed the fourth grade are dramatically reduced in size. Instruction is based on the most exemplary and

effective remediation programs. The teachers are chosen from those who have volunteered for the assignment and they are explicitly trained to teach those classes.

Q: The picture you create is really a rather conservative one: an old-fashioned school where education is businesslike and everybody studies the same thing and is expected to master the same standards. In recent decades some of our most respected educational thinkers favored individualized instruction. The idea was that some students learn more rapidly than others so every student should work at his or her own level. Is it possible for a nongraded, individualized school to be effective?

Edmonds: Certainly. I would endorse any pattern of organization so long as the school demonstrates annual improvement in the proportion of its students rising to academic mastery. I would endorse open classrooms as readily as self-contained classrooms. But no matter what your pattern of organization, no matter what your instructional strategy, your willingness to stick with it ought to depend on evaluation of its instructional efficacy.

Q: Let's conclude by having you tell as much as you can about designing a school improvement program.

Edmonds: I think the most important issue is how you portray achievement. If you're going to seriously think about the implications of the research on school effectiveness, you will see the necessity of what's called "disaggregated analysis" of test scores. This means you divide the pupil population into social classes, races, or sexes, or whatever other groups you're interested in.

If you do such an analysis and find that, for example, the proportion of black children demonstrating minimum mastery is virtually identical to the proportion of white children, you don't need a program of school improvement. However, many schools will discover that 50 percent of the poor kids demonstrate mastery, compared with 97 percent of the middle class kids. They do need a school improvement program.

The next step is a systematic, formal evaluation of the presence or absence, strength or weakness, of each of the correlates of school effectiveness I listed earlier. I have instruments for doing that—so do Brookover and Lezotte, the

Connecticut Department of Education, and the documentation unit of the New York School Improvement Project.

Based on this needs assessment, the next step is to design a school intervention focused on introducing the correlates where they're absent and strengthening them where they are weak. While it is highly desirable to have funding resources to support the plan, it is not absolutely essential. New York had additional resources; so did St. Louis. Milwaukee did not. In any case, the design should not imply any permanent change in per pupil expenditure or any other resources. And it must depend only on those things over which the local school has control.

The ultimate test of the design, of course, is its ability to cause an annual increase in the proportion of low income children rising to academic mastery. If the program results in such an increase, go on. If it slips, something must be changed.

Q: You've said the design must depend only on the local school. That means the staff of any school can undertake such a project if they choose to.

Edmonds: In Milwaukee there were 20 participating schools, so they could support one another. Schools in New York got reinforcement from the central administration. But the normal pattern is one school at a time.

Q: What is the most difficult part of this whole idea?

Edmonds: A motive for doing it. The focus of the evaluation is proportionate mastery among low income kids. Why should you care about that? That's not the basis on which boards of education hire or evaluate superintendents. It's not the basis on which superintendents hire or evaluate principals. It's not the basis on which teachers get evaluated. It has not been a tradition for the American public school to feel compelled to extend its services to the full range of the population.

That may be changing, however. I think the public policy discourse in 1982 is a substantial advance over what it was in 1966.

If we diminish the gross inequities in American society—one of which is the failure to teach even the most rudimentary skills to poor children—then we will observe changes in values and cultural perspectives that will make our society a far better place to live. □

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.