

Chapter 24

Understanding the Context for Existing Reform and Research Proposals

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It is commonplace to categorize reforms intended to ameliorate educational disadvantage as either “external” or “internal” to the school. The usefulness of this distinction is limited in the case of policy interventions. Many interventions do fit neatly into one category, but some fit into both and others into neither category. Furthermore, advocates of reform do not fit the strict dichotomy: some advocate an exclusive internal-to-school agenda, others a mixed strategy of internal and external to school. None, however, advocates an exclusively external-to-school agenda. More important, policymakers—whose contexts, funds, and feasible sets vary—must seek the combination of interventions that has the best chance of success, and they should be open to considering items in each category, both categories, or neither one.

The division into two categories may have strengthened support for a reform agenda that includes promoting “high-commitment” schools—charter schools serving poor neighborhoods—by having longer school days, stringent disciplinary norms, and rigorous “basics” academic curriculums. Some advocates of these schools have attacked efforts to promote an external-to-school agenda as making “excuses” for failing schools. Several large funders of reform, as well as both the previous and the current presidential administrations, display enthusiasm for this model. We argue that the evidence concerning those schools in many contexts does not warrant making them the core of an agenda to tackle educational disadvantage.

Richard Rothstein’s chief contention in *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (2004) is that policymakers concerned with educational disadvantage have focused too narrowly on internal-to-school reform strategies, whereas the preponderance of the evidence shows that the causes of educational disadvantage lie outside of schools. He advocates more political attention to external-to-school factors.

Both of Rothstein’s central claims are plausible. The U.S. Department of Education’s *Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2007–12* (2007) mentions few factors outside the control of schools as causes of educational disadvantage, and its strategic focus is relentlessly school-based. The three leading nonprofit funders of educational reform—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation—have focused almost entirely on

schools and school-governance structures, or on school-focused advocacy groups, such as the Education Trust and the Education Sector. As the largest nongovernmental funder of education reform, the Gates Foundation focused its first phase of operations on reforming the structure of high schools, and its current phase is focused on reforming school curriculums and identifying high-quality instructors. However, the evidence is compelling that factors over which schools have little or no control—such as the health states of children, the employment status and income of their parents, and the concentrations of disadvantage within their neighborhoods—have a substantial impact on educational disadvantage.

Although Rothstein insists that “many of the curricular and school organizational reforms promoted by education critics have merit, and should be intensified” (2004, 9), he argues that policymakers should pay much more attention than they do to external-to-school factors. Some leading advocates of internal-to-school reform strategies have criticized him for this, the worry being that paying attention to the factors over which schools have no control gives schools an excuse for the poor performance of their students and thereby reduces their incentive and will to improve.

In this chapter we argue that although placing factors implicated in the production of educational disadvantage into a dichotomous taxonomy of internal-to-schools and external-to-schools categories provides a nice heuristic and captures a considerable part of the conceptual and empirical space concerning the causes of disadvantage, is misleading, especially for policymakers and practitioners. Some important factors do not fit neatly into either category, and others seem to fit well into both. Policy advocates, too, do not divide neatly into corresponding categories: the advocacy space is occupied by proponents of exclusively internal-to-school strategies and advocates of mixed external and internal strategies, but no one proposes exclusively external strategies. And because many policy and practical interventions influence what happens both within and outside the school, the dichotomy does not help policy makers answer their central question: “Which among the feasible policies in my circumstances will ameliorate educational disadvantage most cost-effectively?” In any given circumstances, the most cost-effective package of feasible policies may include items from both categories, and items that do not fit neatly into either. So policymakers must consider, and need relevant evidence concerning, many discrete items on a large menu that does not respect the dichotomy.

We start with a discussion of the meaning and causes of educational disadvantage and then consider how knowledge about causation relates to how we should think about policy agendas. We subsequently sketch versions of the external-to-schools and internal-to-schools reform agendas, and explain why we think that dichotomous taxonomy is misleading. We focus on the specific case of what we call “high-commitment” schools, a central item on the internal-to-schools policy agenda, and we challenge the conviction that such schools have a central role to play in large-scale efforts to ameliorate educational disadvantage. Finally, we examine the policy dilemma that would arise if high-commitment schools were given such a role.

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AND WHAT CAUSES IT?

The current project concerns the connections between social inequality and educational disadvantage. As Sean Reardon (chapter 5 in this volume) observes, we have a wealth of analysis of the (declining) correlations between race and educational achievement; his contribution is an analysis of the (larger and growing) correlation between household income and educational achievement. Much of the evidence concerning what actually causes educational dis-

advantage is at best suggestive. Educational disadvantage refers to the way that some children are put at a disadvantage relative to others in their ability to negotiate the adult world by how they interact with whatever educational institutions are available to them. But not only do we not have precise measures of the skills and traits that educational institutions can produce and that influence how well people succeed over their life course; we do not even know precisely what those skills and traits are. The standard measures are as follows:

- Attainment—the number of years a child attends school
- Graduation—whether a child graduates from high school
- Achievement—how well he or she performs on tests of narrowly defined achievement, usually reading and mathematics

A fair amount is known about which factors influence variation in attainment, graduation, and achievement, and we have reason to think that factors influencing poor performance on these measures cause educational disadvantage. But even if precise weights could be assigned to these factors, attainment, graduation, and achievement are sufficiently distant from the traits and skills that make for successful negotiation of the economy and civic and social life that we could not conclude a great deal about the relative weight of the factors causing overall educational disadvantage.

Given this definition, an exclusive focus on the “achievement gap” can be misleading. In contemporary usage, “achievement gap” has come to mean a gap among two or more groups in the percentage that reaches a proficiency cutoff score on a test. But even if two groups are identical in the proportions that achieve proficiency, one group may be disadvantaged if, say, only 10 percent of its members achieve significantly above proficiency, whereas 80 percent of the other group achieves significantly above proficiency. Because “proficiency” is an arbitrarily set cutoff, the gap varies depending on where the cutoff is set (Rothstein 2004, 15–16). Finally, scores on math and reading tests, which tell us something about the level of reading and math competence of the students, are only part of the story of how schools influence students’ life-course outcomes.

Eliminating educational disadvantage (“closing the achievement gap”) would mean that valuable educational outcomes no longer correlate with social class, race, or ethnicity. Though some philosophers argue that this is part of educational justice (see, for example, Brighouse and Swift 2008; Koski and Reich 2008), it seems not to be a central goal of public policy. Even advocates of closing the achievement gap seem centrally concerned not with eliminating all educational disadvantage, but with raising the floor: muting the worst educational disadvantage. Accordingly, we shall talk of *ameliorating* or *reducing*, rather than *eliminating*, educational disadvantage.

Educational advantage and disadvantage are realized in the interaction between educational institutions and students. How successful that interaction is depends on what both parties bring to it—how well equipped the student is to take up what the institution offers, and how well designed the institution is to offer opportunities that the student can take up. What the student brings to the interaction is influenced by her experiences outside the school and whatever unchangeable traits she was born with; the socially designated purpose of the school is to create educationally productive interactions. So the standard taxonomy of causes of educational disadvantage distinguishes factors that are external to schools (those that operate on the student outside the purview of the school) from those that are internal to schools (even though those, too, are obviously influenced by external factors such as government policy, the economic environment,

and social attitudes about teaching). Here, then, is a non-exhaustive list of factors, broken down by the standard taxonomy.

External to Schools

Factors to educational disadvantage that are external to schools include variations in how well families prepare children to interact with school, in family income and wealth, effectiveness of public health measures, access to health care and, hence, health status, levels of parental stress and parental health, types of parental employment, family structure, levels of neighborhood crime, quality of policing in the neighborhood, concentrations of disadvantage or advantage in the neighborhood, quality of physical environment (especially as it affects health), frequency of moving homes, and the peer group within the neighborhood.

Internal to Schools

Factors to educational disadvantage that are internal to schools include variations in spending within and among schools, teacher quality, principal quality, curriculum and instruction, disciplinary regime, peer group within the school, and the physical environment of the school, especially as relating to health.¹

CAUSES AND POLICIES

One natural thought is that policies for ameliorating educational disadvantage should directly tackle the fundamental causes of educational disadvantage where they are found: according to Rothstein, largely outside of schools. Some of Rothstein's critics, such as Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom, worry that Rothstein's analysis will make teachers and school leaders, who have very little ability to tackle the causes on which Rothstein focuses, complacent about those things they can influence, genuine problems within schools: Stephan Thernstrom (2005) refers to Rothstein as the "excuser in chief" for his emphasis on the external factors that prepare students unequally for school (see also chapter 25 in this volume). Whatever the merit of this worry, there is no reason to think that fundamental causes must be addressed. If a city is built on a flood plain, policymakers do not attempt to change either of the fundamental causes of its proneness to flooding, tidal patterns and location; instead, they try to manipulate where the flooding will occur by engineering protections for the most socially valued and vulnerable sites. They cannot alter tidal patterns, and relocating the city is too costly. The same holds for purely socialistic phenomena: we may not know how to alter some causes, and it may be unduly expensive to alter others. So even though most fundamental causes of educational disadvantage may indeed lie outside the school, the only known or knowable, or cost-effective, or feasible levers to ameliorate the disadvantage may lie within the school.²

External-to-Schools Reforms

Rothstein is the most prominent advocate of an external-to-schools agenda, and the agenda of the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA) coalition reflects his book's arguments. Neither he nor the BBA denies that internal-to-school reforms can be effective; rather, they argue against exclusive focus on schools, contending that a panoply of external-to-school reforms are more likely to be effective than many internal-to-school measures. The "Main BBA Statement" says:

Education policy in this nation has typically been crafted around the expectation that schools alone can offset the full impact of low socioeconomic status on learning. Schools can—and have—ameliorated some of the impact of social and economic disadvantage on achievement. Improving our schools, therefore, continues to be a vitally important strategy for promoting upward mobility and for working toward equal opportunity and overall educational excellence.

Evidence demonstrates, however, that achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status are present before children even begin formal schooling. Despite the impressive academic gains registered by some schools serving disadvantaged students, there is no evidence that school improvement strategies by themselves can close these gaps in a substantial, consistent, and sustainable manner.

Nevertheless, there is solid evidence that policies aimed directly at education-related social and economic disadvantages can improve school performance and student achievement. The persistent failure of policymakers to act on that evidence—in tandem with a school-improvement agenda—is a major reason why the association between social and economic disadvantage and low student achievement remains so strong. (BBA 2010)

Figure 24.1 displays the causal model Rothstein endorses: he sees the background institutions rather than schools as the key causes of educational disadvantage. The policy agenda is informed, though not determined, by this view. It is useful to distinguish two main strands of his agenda:

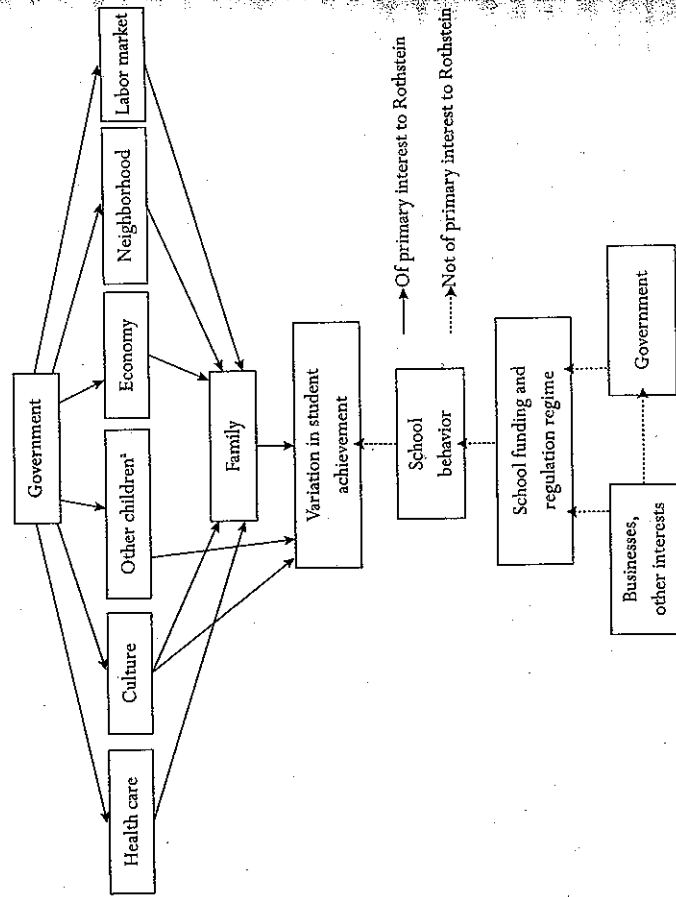
Background Institutions. These include such measures as reducing income inequality by, for example, increasing the minimum wage, using collective bargaining, expanding the earned-income tax credit, and establishing a commitment to full employment as a central part of economic policy, stabilizing low-income housing by mechanisms that make it easier for low-income renters to stay in their homes; integrating housing by socioeconomic class through inclusionary zoning ordinances; and improving public health measures affecting disadvantaged neighborhoods and health-care access for low-income families.³

Support to Schools. These include such measures as school integration by socioeconomic status; establishing school-community clinics that would serve both parents and children; improving prenatal and postnatal care through visiting nurse programs and improved health-care access; expanding high-quality early childhood education for low-income and minority children that emphasizes social skills as well as literacy, mirroring middle-class early childhood experiences; establishing stable and high-quality after-school and summer programs.

Internal-to-Schools Reforms

The assumption that schools currently operate below the production-possibility frontier—that given the level of resources they currently deploy, they could, with some reorganization, produce better results—is plausible. Researchers find that resources are used less effectively than they might be for a range of reasons, including poor management, a deficient school culture, teachers' inadequacies in pedagogical knowledge or skill, and deficient discipline (see, for example, Fullan 2007; Elmore 2004; Payne 2008). At least some of these problems could in principle be corrected without radical personnel changes or budget increases. Different agendas locate the inefficiencies in different places. One approach locates the central inefficiency in the structure and culture of the teaching profession, which prevents managers from learning what the

FIGURE 24.1 Rothstein Causal Model



Source: Authors' figure based on Rothstein (2004).
 *Rothstein does not consider "other children" to be an in-school factor, because schools have limited control over student characteristics.

effective instructional practices are and teachers from implementing them. (For examples of this approach, see Elmore 2004; Wagner 2010; McLaughlin and Talbert 2001.) An alternative approach locates the problem in schools' failure to appropriately accommodate the cultural expectations and norms of children from demographic groups that exhibit lower achievement (see, for example, Apple 2006; Ladson-Billings 1994). (For a state-of-the-art account and analysis of current school improvement strategies, see chapter 25 in this volume.)

How could improving schools ameliorate educational disadvantage? The hunch is that disadvantaged children generally attend schools that are less efficient than average, and that within heterogeneous schools, efficiency gains from school improvement can be turned disproportionately to benefit lower achievers. There is no reason to believe this will happen as a matter of course: one review of U.K.-based studies from the 1980s and early 1990s indicates that school improvement in that context tended to widen achievement gaps because the gains flowed disproportionately to those who were already the higher achievers (Mortimer and Whitty 1997). On a societywide basis, if efforts were equally distributed among schools, it is easy to imagine that, other things being equal, school-improvement efforts would be more likely to take root and succeed in schools with relatively advantaged populations than in schools with relatively disadvantaged populations.

Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom (2003) propose a variant of the internal-to-schools reform agenda specifically designed to address disadvantage. Because elements of their agenda have been influential and are shared by large funders and by the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, we think it is worth outlining in some detail. The Thernstroms start from surveys of schools that "beat the odds" by producing achievement among disadvantaged students similar to what we can expect from more advantaged children.⁴ The Thernstroms argue that these successes are evidence that schools can narrow the gap, and they propose that we replicate what these schools do in order to narrow the gap on a larger scale. The agenda includes recommendations for policymakers concerning regulation, but we shall concentrate on their template for the "No Excuses" school.⁵

Lengthened School Day and Year Success requires that African American and Latino students spend a good deal more time at school than is standard and that most of this additional time be devoted to instruction.⁶ Moreover, children are expected to continue studying outside the school gates.⁷

Basics Curriculum The curriculum emphasizes basics. Fact-based emphasis on the core subjects, traditional-style drilling, and insistence on mastery of basics are preferable to "progressive, fuzzy new-age" teaching methods (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 62–63).

Discipline Successful schools must make it clear to their students what constitutes misbehavior and that it will not be tolerated, and ensure that consequences for misbehavior are administered consistently and reliably. A well-publicized system of rewards and penalties is strictly enforced. Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools, for example, set out expectations in contracts, signed by teachers, parents, and students.⁸ Expectations include "coming to school on time, attending every class, listening with their full attention, burning the midnight oil" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 7).

Emphasis on Teaching and Learning The schools have excellent teachers, meeting the criteria set forth by principals, which include subject knowledge, ability to inspire, and dedication. If teachers can manage their classrooms effectively, fewer are needed, and more money can be spent elsewhere.⁹ Principals control budgets and management with entrepreneurial discretion and autonomy, but are primarily instructional leaders who "coach teachers, helping them plan lessons to reach all children, and so forth"; and teachers have ample collaboration time in which they "meet, they watch each other, they discuss strategies, and see themselves as a team dedicated to finding the best way to reach their students—a collective responsibility" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 53).

Ethos of Disconnection from Home Culture The schools maintain an ethos that makes limited concessions to the home culture of the students, since "too heavy a dose of African-American history and literature arguably reinforces the isolation" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 77). The school sends the optimistic message about America that hard work opens doors (74–75) and teaches students to "think of themselves as unique, free to choose their identity" (78). Students see themselves as members of a team; their school is their second home (71), and students take responsibility for the appearance of both the school and themselves; clothes, for example, are not a means of self-expression. If the expectations of the school conflict with their culture, students must "leave their culture at the door" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 69).

Many of these elements are common to other school reform agendas. The distinctive feature is the combination of two key components: an emphasis on academic basics in the instructional

regime and a disciplinary regime that is highly regimented and seems to prepare the students for the corporate culture they are liable to experience in the semiskilled jobs largely in the service economy for which many of them are bound.

PROBLEMS WITH THE "INTERNAL-EXTERNAL" DICHOTOMY

What is wrong with the dichotomous taxonomy of "internal" and "external" reforms? The first problem is obvious from a careful glance at the two sketched agendas. One prominent item—increasing the length of the school day and school year—appears on both. In the most obvious sense it seems school-based. But it is also a neighborhood-changing reform, because when children spend more time in school, several features of the neighborhood change. Their parents are less limited in the hours they can engage in the labor force; they can spend more hours working, more flexibly. The period between the end of the school day and the arrival home of working parents is the time when teenagers are most at risk of involvement with drugs, crime, and early sexual experiences; reducing that period reduces their risks (Waldfogel 2006, 167). It also reduces the risks to neighborhood residents of becoming victims of juvenile crime (Jacobson and Lefgren 2003). Consider the limiting case of the lengthened school day: boarding school. Curto, Fryer, and Howard (this volume, chapter 23) describe SPEED schools—public college preparatory boarding schools in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore for students grades six through twelve—as offering a "very safe and structured nurturing environment that is somewhat removed from the risks and distractions [students] would normally face in their status quo low-quality environments" (14). But they also change those very environments—both the families and the neighborhoods—by removing the children from them Sunday evening till Friday afternoon every week of the school year.

Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) regard the lengthened school day and school year as part of a larger package of internal-to-school reforms because these are part of what the successful schools they take their cue from do. Rothstein simply makes it one item on a menu: he is inspired by the work on the summer learning gap, which indicates that the achievement gap between members of different socioeconomic classes and racial groups remains constant while children are in school, but grows during the summer. The inference is that something happens when children are not in school that increases the gap, so reducing that time will diminish the gap. Rothstein does insist that summer programs for poor children should replicate the kinds of experiences middle-class children are having (2004, 143–44). But even this does not amount to requiring a change in the character of what happens within schools during the school year. And if the findings about the summer learning gap are correct, simply doing more of what happens in the school year should ameliorate disadvantage. So, quite independently of the effects such programs are likely to have on neighborhoods, categorizing them as "internal" seems forced.

After-school tutoring programs also fit both categories. Some are conducted on the school grounds, some outside, some by school employees, some by other service providers; some are coordinated with the school curriculum and instructional practices, others not. They affect the neighborhood and the family by keeping children out of the home and off the street; but if they affect the school and its operations, it is by doing the same things as well as by supplementing students' learning.

Now consider a second problematic case: items that do not naturally fit either category. Many of Rothstein's proposals have this character. Consider school-community clinics: Rothstein (2004, 37–38) observes that many disadvantaged children enter kindergarten with undiagnosed (and hence untreated) visual and hearing impairments:

Children with vision problems have difficulty reading and seeing what teachers write on the board. Trying to read their eyes may wander or have difficulty tracking print or focusing. . . . Poor children have severe vision impairment at twice the normal rate. . . . Lower-class children are more likely to suffer from vision problems because of their less adequate prenatal development. . . . [V]isual deficits also arise because poor children are more likely to watch more television, activity that does not train the eye to develop hand-eye coordination and depth perception.

These conditions are diagnosed prior to school in more advantaged children because their parents teach them to read and therefore are more likely to discover an impairment if there is one. Vision problems sometimes underlie unruly behavior, which is punished, leading to further alienation. Poor children also suffer much higher rates of hearing problems, poor dental health, lead exposure, exposure to smoke, fetal alcohol syndrome, low birth weight, poor nutrition, and asthma, all of which affect their interactions with school. As a partial corrective, Rothstein (2004, 138–39), proposes

. . . establishment in lower-class neighborhoods of school clinics that serve children through their high school years and their parents as well. To narrow the achievement gap, a school-community clinic should include services that middle-class families take for granted and that ensure children can thrive in school. . . . includ[ing] obstetric and gynecological services . . . pediatric services . . . dentists and hygienists . . . optometrists and vision therapists . . . social workers to refer families to other services, community health educators and psychologists or therapists to assist families and children who are experiencing excessive stress and other emotional differences.

Notice that establishing school-community clinics does not deal with the fundamental causes of poor vision and other health issues outside the school: low-income children inhabit conditions that tend to promote worse health, and that their parents have less access to health care. It simply treats the symptom so that the child can function better in school. And it seems odd to call it an external-to-school reform, because the proposal is to place it inside the school. But nor is it natural to call the establishment of a school-community clinic an internal-to-school reform. It does affect what happens in the school and may require a change in the job description of the principal (who now becomes a manager of a health-care facility), but it does not influence the way that the school conducts its core mission—curriculum and instruction.

Consider two other kinds of programs often mentioned in holistic approaches to ameliorating educational disadvantage: nurse visiting programs and parent education schemes. Susan Neuman (2009, 86; see also chapter 22 in this volume) describes the Nurse-Family Partnership:

Helping women improve the outcomes of pregnancy, child health and development, and maternal life course, the program uses a "person-process-context" model that draws heavily upon research in self-efficacy, attachment, and human ecology. . . . Home visits [by nurses] are considered essential in developing these close, therapeutic alliances with mothers and other family members. As [one visiting nurse] reports, "We're on their own turf—it breaks down barriers."

The Nurse-Family Partnership looks like an external-to-schools intervention. But now consider the Baby College and the early-childhood programs in the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), which the Obama administration promises to replicate across twenty cities. Like the Nurse-Family Partnership, Baby College attempts to teach young parents and parents-to-be how to raise their children more effectively, using Saturday classes to teach what are widely regarded

as "middle-class parenting techniques" such as, when discipline is needed, using time-outs rather than hitting a child, and reasoning with children rather than commanding them. The subsequent stages of the HCZ early-childhood program, which starts with children at age three, prepare children for entry to the charter elementary schools run by the HCZ. The HCZ's early-childhood programs look like an extension of school—in the way that the lengthened school days in an extension of school—but its aims are similar to those of the Nurse-Family Partnership and are informed by similar analyses of the problems. And, again, neither attempts to change the underlying background conditions that give rise to educational disadvantage: the cultural assumptions of the communities the parents inhabit, the disadvantages they endure and the stress they bear under, the health-affecting physical conditions in their homes. Instead they intervene at an immediate stage, attempting to block the transmission of the disadvantage. From the perspective of the policymaker, whether one or the other is external to school or internal to school is neither here nor there.

The dichotomy does not, furthermore, really describe the political advocacy map. Where the Gates Foundation, Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003), and the U.S. Department of Education (2007) all focus exclusively or almost exclusively on changing what schools do and make little or no mention of the external factors causing the educational disadvantage, neither Rothstein (2004) nor the Broader, Bolder Coalition (2010) advocates exclusively "external" measures. As quoted Rothstein earlier to the effect that many school-based reforms were valuable; the first on the Broader, Bolder Coalition's list of four priorities is to "continue to pursue school improvement efforts." The focus on external measures is meant to correct, not replace, an unduly narrow focus on schools.

Before moving on, we want to alert readers to an issue we shall discuss at length later. Although we accept that the inside-outside dichotomy quite naturally captures most of the causal factors of educational disadvantage, there is one exception. Peer effects on learning are widely thought to be significant and are usually counted as school-based factors from the point of view of the researcher looking at causes. But from the policy point of view, this seems wrongheaded: In a nonchoice system of allocating children to schools, schools have little or no control over who the schoolmates of a particular child are, so one would not want to design a policy that punished or rewarded schools for peer effects. In a choice-based system of allocation, it is true that over-subscribed schools can influence who attends (either by skewing the applicant pool or by actively selecting children with particular characteristics); but this is at the expense of other schools. Internal-to-school reforms cannot change the fact that there is a pool of children who are likely to affect others negatively and that these children will have to be in some school or another.

ASSESSING FEASIBILITY AND PROBABILITY IN CONTEXT

Rothstein's aim is not to deflect decisionmakers from attending to school improvement. Rather, he alerts them to other features of the social environment over which they may have more leverage than schools have, and suggests changes that may be more promising in ameliorating educational disadvantage. Decisionmakers have limited resources and, depending on their situation, face different feasibility constraints. Even though changes in instructional practices would not be expensive and would be effective in ameliorating disadvantage, a particular principal may not be able to implement them because she may be unable to activate the staff turnover necessary to make the change, or because her district leadership may block the necessary resource reallocations. She may, though, be able to access county funds to establish regular health visits or private grants to supply prescription eyeglasses. Another principal may have changes in instructional practices forced on her by a district leadership and be in a position to influence those

changes positively. The Thernstroms (2003) rely heavily on choice and charter schools to produce the changes they desire; officials in districts where introducing such measures is unfeasible must look for other ameliorative measures. In other words, whether internal or external factors are more significant in the production of disadvantage is not what the decisionmaker needs to know; she needs to be alert to the wide range of measures, each of which may have some ameliorative promise, and be able to judge which are feasible and which package of those is most likely to work in her circumstances. The optimal feasible package may include items from both categories, and items that fit neither.

HIGH-COMMITMENT SCHOOLS

The Thernstroms' model is inspired by a small group of what we label "high-commitment" schools identified by the Heritage Foundation and Education Trust as high-performing. We label these "high-commitment" schools because they exhibit features such as parental contracts, long school days and long school years, and demanding long hours from teachers, including substantial after-school hours interacting with parents. Most are middle or elementary-through-middle schools, and almost all are small charter schools serving low-income communities, admission to which is controlled by choice. Many belong to the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) franchise founded by David Levin and Michael Feinberg in Houston in 1994 (described in detail in Mathews 2009). These schools are not only the model for the Thernstroms but also for the instructional style of the Promise Academies in the Harlem Children's Zone, which the Obama administration has promised to replicate in other cities and which appear to have influenced the Obama administration's insistence on states' removing barriers to the expansion of charter schools for the Race to the Top competition and for the plans to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The KIPP schools, the schools on the Heritage Foundation and Education Trust's lists, and the advocates for KIPP appear to have had considerable influence in establishing the internal-external dichotomy in the policy arena—which we reject—by influencing advocates and policymakers to believe that internal-to-school reform efforts alone can ameliorate, or perhaps even eliminate, educational disadvantage. So a separate discussion of their status is essential to a comprehensive presentation of our case.

The available evidence does not establish that these "high-performance" schools have produced effects on educational disadvantage. We do not mean to criticize the schools, still less to urge that they be excluded from the menu of options for tackling disadvantage. Rather, we urge caution in seeing them as the central element of a national strategy. Why should we be cautious about making them the basis of a large-scale improvement strategy? First, it is not clear how many "high-performance" schools systematically improve achievement. Rothstein reports his examination of the Education Trust's 1,320 schools, at least half of whose students were both poor and minorities, and whose test scores in math and reading were in the top third of their states: "Only a third of the high-flying schools had high scores in both reading and math. Only a 10th were high in reading and math in *more than one grade*. Only 3% were high in reading and math in at least two grades for *two years running*. Less than half of one percent of these high-poverty and high-minority schools were truly high flying, scoring well consistently" (Rothstein 2004, 76; emphasis added). Doug Harris's (2007, 384) further analysis with a sample of 18,365 schools finds that when "high-performing" is defined to include consistency over time, fully 93 percent of schools identified as high performing for a year drop out of the category.¹⁰ He finds that on the more demanding definition, "the likelihood that a low-poverty-low-minority school is high-performing is 89 times greater than for a high-poverty-high-minority school" (385; emphasis added).

Second, as Rothstein (2004, 71–83) argues at length, the Thernstroms' model schools have special characteristics that cannot necessarily be replicated at scale. Most practice some form of selection. A few schools cherry-pick promising students (Rothstein 2004, 72). Many, however, because they are schools of choice, probably unintentionally exclude many of the students most likely to perform very badly and to consume high levels of disciplinary attention. For example, KIPP schools require parents to opt in and sign a contract and then enforce the contract by expelling students who display major behavioral problems thus concentrating the most difficult students in other schools. Some schools rely heavily on a limited supply of young teachers who have not yet started their own families (the KIPP schools appear to do this; see Mathews 2009) and have found exceptional principals. The Thernstroms ignore the possible magnetic effect of excellent principals on good teachers who may concentrate in particular schools, producing remarkable results at a cost to other schools; nor do they discuss the need to increase the supply of high-quality teachers and principals. Yet a large-scale strategy must deal with all these issues. Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer (2009) find remarkable test score gains for children in the Promise Academies in the Harlem Children's Zone, which is taken by some commentators as evidence that such schools contain the key to eliminating disadvantage. David Brooks ("The Harlem Miracle," *New York Times*, May 8, 2009, A31) described the schools as follows:

The typical student entered the charter middle school, Promise Academy, in sixth grade and scored in the 39th percentile among New York City students in math. By the eighth grade, the typical student in the school was in the 74th percentile. The typical student entered the school scoring in the 39th percentile in English Language Arts (verbal ability). By eighth grade, the typical student was in the 53rd percentile. Forgive some academic jargon, but the most common education reform ideas—reducing class size, raising teacher pay, enrolling kids in Head Start—produce gains of about 0.1 or 0.2 or 0.3 standard deviations. If you study policy, those are the sorts of improvements you live with every day. Promise Academy produced gains of 1.3 and 1.4 standard deviations. That's off the charts. In math, Promise Academy eliminated the achievement gap between its black students and the city average for white students. Let me repeat that. It eliminated the black-white achievement gap.

The problems here are twofold. First, test scores are only one indicator of educational disadvantage, possibly not the most important. To know the contribution to ameliorating disadvantage, we need to know whether these gains persist through high school and whether they influence dropout rates, involvement in crime, and other outcomes. Second, it is clear from Paul Tough's (2009) laudatory description of the Harlem Children's Zone that in the period Dobbie and Fryer studied, raising test scores became an obsessive focus for Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone. He removed the school principal for maintaining a more balanced curriculum and threatened her successor with replacement by the KIPP team if test score gains were not considerable. Variation in test scores may well tell us a good deal about the relative preparation and skill levels of different students, but it is not clear whether big improvements in test scores are a useful measure for the elimination of educational disadvantage (Booher-Jennings 2005; Deming et al. 2010; Jennings and Beveridge 2009).

What can children attending these schools really expect? The schools are said to raise substantial numbers of students above proficiency in state-mandated tests—yet such successes fall short of college readiness. The culture and disciplinary regime that the Thernstroms advocate is not harsh by any standards, but it emphasizes deference to authority, hard work, and abnegation of self in the school setting; this emphasis may reminding readers of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's (1976) arguments that education's function is not to teach knowledge

and skills, but to form the personality of future workers so as to fit them for the employment they can expect. This is not what advantaged parents seek or provide for their children (Lareau 2003).

Suppose that what the instructional and disciplinary regimes of these schools in fact prepare students well for is semiskilled service jobs. Whether a strategy producing this result is justified depends on what the feasible alternatives are. If an alternative strategy for preparing the same students to be college-ready is feasible, and jobs requiring college readiness are available, that justifies adoption of the alternative. If, by contrast, the feasible alternatives do not prepare students to take and hold on to even semiskilled service jobs, the strategy is more defensible, despite the nonideal state to which the students are consigned. A different possibility, of course, is that the schools are designed to prepare students well for jobs that are disappearing (or have already disappeared)—skilled manufacturing jobs in urban areas. If so, there's a case against what the schools are doing, though one that would be mitigated if preparation for those nonexistent jobs had collateral effects enabling students to perform in actually existing jobs well.¹¹

Our final observation raises, but does not resolve, a serious policy dilemma. The high-commitment schools use two mechanisms for selecting students. Parents must choose the school, in an environment in which the necessity of making choice is not the default condition. And parents have to sign a contract with the school making a commitment to ensure that the student abides by its norms and rules, and must maintain that agreement. This is not cherry-picking the strongest students: students attending these schools are disadvantaged relative to the general population. But careful analyses of these schools emphasize that the effects can only be shown for the kind of student who actually attends, and nothing is known about their likely effects for other kinds of students (Dobbie and Fryer 2009, 4). Students whose parents do not enter the lottery—student who are liable to be among the very most disconnected and disadvantaged—are concentrated in regular schools. The more concentrated the presence of high-commitment schools in a region, the higher will be the concentration of extreme disadvantage in the regular schools in that region.

There is evidence, furthermore, of peer effects on student learning: that learning in a classroom with harder-working, higher-achieving, and less disruptive peers increases a student's own learning; the converse is that less-hardworking, lower-achieving, and more disruptive peers harms a student's own learning (Ding and Lehrer 2007; MacCoun et al. 2008; Hoxby 2000; Vigdor and Nechyba 2004; but see chapter 5 in this volume, by Sean Reardon, for a skeptical view). If so, then some if not all of the amelioration of educational disadvantage that high-commitment schools generate may be gained at the cost of increasing the educational disadvantage of those students who concentrate in the regular nonchoice schools.

Those who analyze such schools must be alert to this possibility. One necessary piece of information for evaluating a strategy involving the schools is how large the negative effect on the outcomes that really matter is on other children, whether these relevant outcomes are seen to be academic achievement or later life-course outcomes. Suppose these effects are small, whereas the benefits of attending No Excuses schools are considerable; if that is so, the negative effects on other children do not support a case against the strategy. Suppose, by contrast, that the negative effects on other children are considerable; this would constitute a reason to object to the agenda. On the other hand, the benefits to attending children might be so large that these effects might justify the agenda despite the downsides to other children. (By analogy, some regard affirmative action as justified even if it benefits more advantaged members of racial minorities at some cost to less advantaged members.) The dilemma for policymakers—whether to adopt policies that benefit some but harm others among the disadvantaged—requires a nuanced understanding of how to properly distribute the benefits and burdens among subgroups of the

educationally disadvantaged, as well as detailed information about what the effects of putative policies on all of those subgroups actually are.

CONCLUSION

The evidence concerning the success of high-commitment schools does not warrant the conclusion that internal-to-schools reform is the best, or even a central, strategy for ameliorating educational disadvantage. Depending on their context and the level at which they make decisions, policymakers have a wide array of options—some internal to schools, others external to schools, and others that don't naturally fit either category. The policymaker must judge, among the feasible items on a large menu including internal and external strategies, which combination has the highest probability of paying off in her context.

We want to reiterate a word of caution we sounded earlier. We have defined educational disadvantage as referring to the way that children are put at a disadvantage relative to others in their ability to negotiate the adult world by the way they interact with whatever educational institutions are available to them. Any given policymaker has limited space for action and is unlikely to make a huge impact on educational disadvantage. Good evidence about what might work in her circumstances will be sparse, because the variable she is trying to influence is not something as readily measurable as test scores or graduation rates or attainment. Studies demonstrating changes in those variables, even if they can identify the mechanisms responsible, demonstrate in themselves, demonstrate reductions in educational disadvantage. So policymakers have to make difficult judgments. Categorizing interventions dichotomously as "internal" and "external" does not make those judgments easier or better.

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NOTES

Online appendix available at: http://www.russellsage.org/duncan_murnane_online_appendix.pdf.

1. Our goal in this chapter is to criticize the internal-external taxonomy's value for policymakers. Beyond this vein, however, the taxonomy does not work perfectly even for merely itemizing causes. Consider Sean Reardon's documentation (chapter 5 in this volume) of the increasing educational returns to living in a higher-income household. The income distribution fits well within the external category. But the mechanisms that he suggests might be at work don't fit in either one: parent-school interactions, for example, are shaped by factors outside and inside the school, and have consequences beyond as well as within the school (Lareau 1989).
2. Frank Furstenberg suggests this (see chapter 22 in this volume).
3. Note that programs designed specifically to alter the internal life of the family of the kind surveyed, largely negatively, by Furstenberg (chapter 22 in this volume) feature in this very broad category.
4. Their "starting point" in seeking these schools was the Heritage Foundation list of twenty-one high-performing high-poverty schools. Most, but not all, are charter schools (the notable exception is Hobart Elementary in Los Angeles, where Raft Esquith teaches).
5. Note that not all elements of the agenda fit well with one another or with the causal assumptions at play.
6. "Almost all the schools we describe added hours to the day and days to the year," and "almost the entire day is devoted to learning core subjects . . . every minute is regarded as precious" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2009: 46, 54).

7. "At good schools, the day is organized for nonstop learning, and the children generally go home with hefty homework assignments" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 55).
8. Several of the model schools belong to the KIPP franchise. For a detailed, and strongly partisan, account of the development of this franchise, see Jay Mathews (2009). For a more measured discussion, see Paul Tough (2008).
9. According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003): "Great teaching is central to this success. . . . In part, the right people were hired; in part, talent is nurtured; and in part, the teachers are freed up to teach. The administrative headaches are gone. The lunch duty is gone. The paperwork is gone. Teachers are in the school a very long day, but we build in a minimum of two and a quarter hours of lesson planning time" (50). Teachers receive "more professional training, mentoring, and collegial advice" (51).
10. Similarly, a team of researchers examining "beating the odds" schools in California found that "365 elementary schools were beating the odds during 2002 and 307 schools were beating the odds during 2003; however, only 61 elementary schools were beating the odds every year over the 2002-05 time period" (Pérez et al. 2007).
11. This is not the place to defend a full account of the considerations we should be attentive to when making an "all things considered" judgment of policy alternatives (see Brighouse 2009 for a sketch of an account). But we do want to mention a relevant consideration here that might count in favor of the high-commitment school; what the school environment contributes to the quality of the youth's childhood. If a youth's home life is lacking in order, it might be very beneficial for his or her everyday experiences to be in a highly ordered school setting with clear rules and boundaries. We suspect that the children with the most disorderly home lives do not attend No Excuses schools because their parents are unlikely to engage in the choice process, but this consideration might count in favor of making the schools they do attend more like No Excuses schools.

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Interv Educational Outcomes of Lessons from Recent Work in

In this chapter I describe what America's high-poverty educational outcomes of students in poverty. Whether these efforts have been targeted mainly at learning or whether they also have been aimed at improving learning. The question is important because research and socioemotional learning are correlated in school.

This correlation is especially relevant for poor children in poverty enter kindergarten with lower academic advantaged children. As early as when they first begin to schoolwork and more likely to engage in school settings. Research suggests that if these children's subsequent trajectories through schooling patterns of low academic achievement, low engagement the risk of academic failure, including dropping out centers 3 and 4 in this volume).

Thus, the key question considered in this chapter efforts in high-poverty settings should focus solely on learning or whether they also should aim to improve learning.

Problems of academic and socioemotional learning in percentages of students live in poverty. In this country (defined as schools with more than 75 percent of students) has increased during the past decade, climbing to 17 percent of schools in 2011. As of 2011, about 6 percent attend high-poverty schools, and about 6 percent