

Fraud and Failure in D.C. Public Schools

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The much-celebrated success of education reform in the nation's capital turns out to have been a lie.

Syllogisms have gone out of style in education, but the conclusion to this one ought to keep parents across the country up at night: (1) Washington, D.C.'s "expert driven" education reforms were hailed as a national model and emulated in districts nationwide; and (2) Most of the alleged progress in D.C. public schools turns out to have been fraudulent.

Education reformers used to celebrate D.C.'s dramatic decline in school suspensions. Then a Washington Post investigation revealed that it was fake; administrators had merely taken suspensions off the books. The same reformers used to celebrate D.C.'s sharp increase in high-school graduations. Then an NPR investigation revealed that it, too, was fake; almost half of students who missed more than half the year graduated.

For people who talk ceaselessly about "accountability," experts have been curiously silent in the face of these revelations. Worse yet, the top-down mandates they implemented in D.C., intended to hold principals and teachers "accountable" for improving "outcomes," have long since caught on across the country.

When former D.C. Public Schools chancellor Michelle Rhee assumed leadership, she had a searing critique, and a clear argument: Urban schools were paralyzed by collective-bargaining agreements and inertia, so the best path forward was to have expert-designed systems for a new generation of leaders to implement. The unions, in turn, warned that administrators would weaponize these new systems to force teachers to go along with dishonest schemes that would harm true education reform in the service of posting meaningless numerical improvements. It turns out both sides had a point.

None of this should be surprising. DCPS's "accountability" system essentially requires principals to post impossible statistical improvements. You can't make student behavior better through a dictate banning traditional school discipline. You can't change life trajectories by ordering teachers to graduate students who fail their classes. Do things the old-fashioned way — by offering teachers support, encouraging students and giving them structure, and making incremental improvements to curriculum and instruction — and you likely won't achieve the so-called "transformational" change you'd need to be deemed a successful principal.

On the other hand, consider Abdullah Zaki, who back in 2013 was named DCPS principal of the year. He was just placed on administrative leave (not fired, mind you) after an audit revealed that 4,000 changes were made to 118 students' attendance records at his high school. He had already systematically lied about school suspensions. But back then, DCPS Chancellor Antwan Wilson actually said he was proud of the strides D.C. had made in lowering suspensions by 40 percent.

Or consider Yetunde Reeves. She was the "transformational" leader who took Ballou High School from 57 percent graduation to 100 percent college acceptance in just one year. She was placed on administrative leave (again, not fired) after NPR reported teacher allegations that she leveraged the teacher-evaluation system to coerce teachers to go along with her scheme and drive out those who wouldn't. If not for the obscene audacity of her attempted con, we would have no idea that that all but two D.C. high schools were committing systematic policy violations to increase graduation rates.

Beyond the issues of systematic fraud in DCPS, there's a more immediate crisis of physical safety. A 17-year-old student with special needs at Ballou recently died after his classmates attacked him because he wouldn't let them use his cell phone. This is, to put it mildly, not normal. In a school where teachers' first priority is the well-being of their students, where kids know that the teachers care and want to help them, these things don't "just happen." But at Ballou, the teachers who cared were systematically driven out, and the kids knew that their school was a national scandal.

The only thing that's actually worked in Washington, D.C., has been school choice. Randomized controlled trials show that kids in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship voucher program feel safer, learn more, and legitimately graduate more often. Charter schools have also driven real gains for low-income students in the district. Yet to skeptics, school choice is problematic because there's not enough "accountability." If the "accountability" they seek is metric-chasing mandates, then its absence in school-choice programs is a virtue, not a fault. But to most parents, "accountability" means having a school that's responsive to their child's needs. The way to make that happen is to give parents choices, which will encourage schools to pursue safety and academic quality with integrity.

True accountability won't come from forcing school leaders to squeeze schools into producing statistical improvements. True accountability will come only when parents and the community, rather than clueless bureaucrats, are the ones putting pressure on schools.

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