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The Secret to Fixing Bad Schools

By DAVID L. KIRP

WHAT would it really take to give students a first-rate education? Some argue that our schools are irremediably broken and that charter schools offer the only solution. The striking achievement of Union City, N.J. — bringing poor, mostly immigrant kids into the educational mainstream — argues for reinventing the public schools we have.

Union City makes an unlikely poster child for education reform. It's a poor community with an unemployment rate 60 percent higher than the national average. Three-quarters of the students live in homes where only Spanish is spoken. A quarter are thought to be undocumented, living in fear of deportation.

Public schools in such communities have often operated as factories for failure. This used to be true in Union City, where the schools were once so wretched that state officials almost seized control of them. How things have changed. From third grade through high school, students' achievement scores now approximate the statewide average. What's more, in 2011, Union City boasted a high school graduation rate of 89.5 percent — roughly 10 percentage points higher than the national average. Last year, 75 percent of Union City graduates enrolled in college, with top students winning scholarships to the Ivies.

As someone who has worked on education policy for four decades, I've never seen the likes of this. After spending a year in Union City working on a book, I believe its transformation offers a nationwide strategy.

Ask school officials to explain Union City's success and they start with prekindergarten, which enrolls almost every 3- and 4-year-old. There's abundant research showing the lifetime benefits of early education. Here, seeing is believing.

One December morning the lesson is making latkes, the potato pancakes that are a Hanukkah staple. Everything that transpires during these 90 minutes could be called a "teachable moment" — describing the smell of an onion ("Strong or light? Strong — duro. Will it smell differently when we cook it? We'll have to find out."); pronouncing the "p" in pepper and pimento; getting the hang of a food processor ("When I put all the ingredients in, what will happen?").

Cognitive and noncognitive, thinking and feeling; here, this line vanishes. The good teacher

is always on the lookout for both kinds of lessons, always aiming to reach both head and heart. "My goal is to do for these kids what I do with my own children," the teacher, Susana Rojas, tells me. "It's all about exposure to concepts — wide, narrow, long, short. I bring in breads from different countries. 'Let's do a pie chart showing which one you liked the best.' I don't ask them to memorize 1, 2, 3 — I could teach a monkey to count."

From pre-K to high school, the make-or-break factor is what the Harvard education professor Richard Elmore calls the "instructional core" — the skills of the teacher, the engagement of the students and the rigor of the curriculum. To succeed, students must become thinkers, not just test-takers.

When Alina Bossbaly greets her third grade students, ethics are on her mind. "Room 210 is a pie — un pie — and each of us is a slice of that pie." The pie offers a down-to-earth way of talking about a community where everyone has a place. Building character and getting students to think is her mission. From Day 1, her kids are writing in their journals, sifting out the meaning of stories and solving math problems. Every day, Ms. Bossbaly is figuring out what's best for each child, rather than batch-processing them.

Though Ms. Bossbaly is a star, her philosophy pervades the district. Wherever I went, these schools felt less like impersonal institutions than the simulacrum of an extended family.

UNTIL recently, Union City High bore the scarlet-letter label, "school in need of improvement." It has taken strong leadership from its principal, John Bennetti, to turn things around — to instill the belief that education can be a ticket out of poverty.

On Day 1, the principal lays out the house rules. Everything is tied to a single theme — pride and respect in "our house" — that resonates with the community culture of family, unity and respect. "Cursing doesn't showcase our talents. Breaking the dress code means we're setting a tone that unity isn't important, coming in late means missing opportunities to learn." Bullying is high on his list of nonnegotiables: "We are about caring and supporting."

These students sometimes behave like college freshmen, as in a seminar where they're parsing Toni Morrison's "Beloved." They can be boisterously jokey with their teachers. But there's none of the note-swapping, gum-chewing, wisecracking, talking-back rudeness you'd anticipate if your opinions about high school had been shaped by movies like "Dangerous Minds."

And the principal is persuading teachers to raise their expectations. "There should be more courses that prepare students for college, not simply more work but higher-quality work," he tells me. This approach is paying off big time: Last year, in a study of 22,000 American

high schools, U.S. News & World Report and the American Institutes for Research ranked Union City High in the top 22 percent.

What makes Union City remarkable is, paradoxically, the absence of pizazz. It hasn't followed the herd by closing "underperforming" schools or giving the boot to hordes of teachers. No Teach for America recruits toil in its classrooms, and there are no charter schools.

A quarter-century ago, fear of a state takeover catalyzed a transformation. The district's best educators were asked to design a curriculum based on evidence, not hunch. Learning by doing replaced learning by rote. Kids who came to school speaking only Spanish became truly bilingual, taught how to read and write in their native tongue before tackling English. Parents were enlisted in the cause. Teachers were urged to work together, the superstars mentoring the stragglers and coaches recruited to add expertise. Principals were expected to become educational leaders, not just disciplinarians and paper-shufflers.

From a loose confederacy, the schools gradually morphed into a coherent system that marries high expectations with a "we can do it" attitude. "The real story of Union City is that it didn't fall back," says Fred Carrigg, a key architect of the reform. "It stabilized and has continued to improve."

To any educator with a pulse, this game plan sounds so old-school obvious that it verges on platitude. That these schools are generously financed clearly makes a difference — not every community will decide to pay for two years of prekindergarten — but too many districts squander their resources.

School officials flock to Union City and other districts that have beaten the odds, eager for a quick fix. But they're on a fool's errand. These places — and there are a host of them, largely unsung — didn't become exemplars by behaving like magpies, taking shiny bits and pieces and gluing them together. Instead, each devised a long-term strategy reaching from preschool to high school. Each keeps learning from experience and tinkering with its model. Nationwide, there's no reason school districts — big or small; predominantly white, Latino or black — cannot construct a system that, like the schools of Union City, bends the arc of children's lives.

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