

IMPROBABLE SCHOLARS



DAVID L. KIRP

Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America's Schools

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No school district can be all charismatic leaders and super-teachers. It can't start from scratch, and it can't fire all its teachers and principals when students do poorly. Great charter schools can only serve a tiny minority of students. Whether we like it or not, most of our youngsters will continue to be educated in mainstream public schools.

The good news, as David L. Kirp reveals in *Improbable Scholars*, is that there's a sensible way to rebuild public education and close the achievement gap for all students. Indeed, this is precisely what's happening in a most unlikely place: Union City, New Jersey, a poor, crowded Latino community just across the Hudson from Manhattan. The school district--once one of the worst in the state--has ignored trendy reforms in favor of proven game-changers like quality early education, a word-soaked curriculum, and hands-on help for teachers. When beneficial new strategies have emerged, like using sophisticated data-crunching to generate pinpoint assessments to help individual students, they have been folded into the mix.

The results demand that we take notice--from third grade through high school, Union City scores on the high-stakes state tests approximate the statewide average. In other words, these inner-city kids are achieving just as much as their suburban cousins in reading, writing, and math. What's even more impressive, nearly ninety percent of high school students are earning their diplomas and sixty percent of them are going to college. Top students are winning national science awards and full rides at Ivy League universities. These schools are not just good places for poor kids. They are good places for kids, period.

Improbable Scholars offers a playbook--not a prayer book--for reform that will dramatically change our approach to reviving public education.

Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America's Schools Details

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From Reader Review Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America's Schools for online ebook

Mel says

I selected this book with a purpose. Why did Newark with its Zuckerberg funding and support from Mayor Booker and Gov Christie fail but Union City succeed? This book tells Union City's story. If you really want to look at how to make urban City education work this is a book to begin your study. It is about community and continuous improvement. Bottom up not top down.

Carol Mann Agency says

Guest Review by "Publishers Weekly"

Too many American public school students, especially poor and minority students, lack basic reading and math proficiency and are educated by uninspired teachers. What to do? To find out, UC Berkeley education and public policy expert David Kirp spent a year at in classrooms in a school district in Union City, N.J., that, improbably, works very well, despite its 20% poverty rate and substantial immigrant population. Among the keys to success are mutual help among teachers through mentoring, and more informal support among students through learning centers, as well as a sophisticated bilingual program. Kirp devotes a chapter to Union City's preschools, which are available to all and focus on pre-K language development skills. Particularly on the high school level, Union City isn't immune to the bane of contemporary education, "teaching to the [state proficiency] test." However, Kirp shows how administrators and teachers mine test data to benchmark and help advance students' progress, so that 89% of those who begin high school graduate compared with 74% nationally. The school system also benefits from a mayor who doubles as a state senator and has secured extra state education funding. This impressive book doesn't provide a blueprint, but the author describes seven guiding principles for how other school systems can achieve sustained educational success.

Lucille says

I very much appreciated the hope this story offers for public schools. Although he fails to bring up some of the hardships and difficulties Union City faced, Kirp truthfully takes a more holistic approach to school reform and reveals the truth: that the issues in education are complex. It isn't a blame game like most views these days. He stresses the importance of collaboration between all players: teacher feedback/mentoring, supportive administration, an engaging active learning curriculum, mandatory pre-K for all students, parental involvement, funding, experienced teachers from the community, etc. Whether the book is biased or not, it shows us that charter schools are not always the answer.

Kate says

We published this at work and my boss gave me a copy. I was confused as to how this would be relevant since I don't work in a school but it quickly became apparent. I learned so much about leadership skills and performance management that are transferable to all businesses. I'd highly recommend this particularly if you're a manager or trying to effect changes at work.

Joe says

Kirp's book is mediocre-to-decent (2.5 stars?)...I rounded up because I appreciated the positivity and hope. Kirp explores the public schools in Union City, NJ and their decade climb to "success" - primarily to prove that a) charter schools, private schools, money, and other factors aren't the only sources of progressive change in education these days and b) public school's in areas of socio-economic stress are capable of positive change. As an elementary school teacher it was uplifting and encouraging to read about classrooms that mirror mine and strategies (that are working long term elsewhere) will continue to work for me (I hope). However, my main problem with this book is how the high-stakes state-wide testing is still used as the sole determinate of "success" - this baffles me. Kirp is clear that these tests are brutal, alter the classroom in many horrible ways, deter actual growth and learning, etc. etc. etc. - however, he still insists on using them to define and mold success and progress. Why? I don't see how these exams are the apex of understanding. They offer a small glimpse into a child's performance ability - but don't come close to measuring academic growth or character development (or anything else that actually serves as reliable predictors for future success as human citizens on Earth).

Steven Peterson says

We all know--from standardized scores--that American students in K-12 compare indifferently with students from other countries. Much work has been done to identify why American scores often tend to be mediocre in terms of international leaders.

This book uses a case study--of the Union City, NJ school district--to determine what factors may be at play in students in this poor district doing better than anticipated. Once a very poorly performing school district, student performance improved greatly.

How? The book addresses this in several ways, including describing the work that certain teachers do, the role played by administrators, and so on. Tools included early childhood education, student-centered teaching, and so on.

One central point: No au courant reform suggestions need apply in this district. Too many reform advocates begin with a prior notions as to what will work, and do not use data to identify what works and what doesn't.

On the other hand, this book is a case study, with sample size=1. It is hard to generalize from a case study, so one should not say "Eureka, we have found the cure." What happened in this city and school district may features elements that would not translate well elsewhere.

At any rate, a good book for generating ideas about what works and what might not be so effective.

Ashley says

One of the best books I have read. Ever.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

It's all bad news out of American public schools these days. Tests scores are declining, we hear, students don't want to go to school, and the curriculum is more and more watered down.

But what about those schools that should be failing but are not? What are those teachers and administrators doing differently?

Kirp takes a close look at one such school district. It's in Union City, New Jersey and the students are predominantly poor and predominantly not native English speakers. Yet students are doing well on nationally normed tests. Why?

Kirp reveals the commitments that have helped Union City students do well despite the obstacles students in the city face. Instead of revising curriculum and bringing in new teachers and new methods, Union City staff has worked on strengthening the parts of their system that have always worked well. Kirp cites four key components: strong early childhood education, a word-rich environment, help for teachers, and a program known as abrazos which emphasizes connections in the school.

Great read.

Nicholas R. says

Very good book on education. Shines hope on public education and the system in place. It takes a village. Very well thought out with data to back up claims.

Erica says

If someone wanted to understand the current education debate, I would absolutely point them to this book. It focuses on the many things that the Union City (New Jersey) school system is doing right and the struggles it still has despite their successes. This encompasses most of the book, though from different levels (classroom, city, district, state, etc.). I found myself skimming through some of these parts because there was very little new to me. The "Strategy for America's Schools" part of the title feels a bit misleading as all of the advice for others is held off until the last chapter. Truthfully, a lot of this book reads as very obvious - I mean, DUH changes take time! But I guess that's why it's important the book exists, since everyone seems to be looking for a magic cure.

Phyllis Fredericksen says

Another recommendation from my grandson. The author spends a year in Union City School District in New Jersey studying administration, faculty and students. This district has made gains in state tests and has a high percentage of college bound graduates. The reasons: administrators who are instructional leaders, not paper pushers; teachers who are invested in their students and willing to try new things to engage their learners; students who are excited about school because of their teachers; parents and community who give full support to the district. This includes the mayor of Union City. Seemingly so simple! The author also writes about a few other districts across the country with similar results. One of the insights: state testing kills creativity of teachers and students...something we all know. But these districts have built such caring communities that students still thrive in spite of testing.

Manderson says

Kirp does a good job of conveying the principles of running an effective school system: consistency, a coherent curriculum, and hard work. He tells this story from within a few classrooms and schools in Union City, New Jersey, and his narrative made me miss my 5th grade classroom and also made me wish that every teacher had a supportive audience recording the long-term progress of their students in their classroom. It can be hard to see the forest for the trees while teaching, but Kirp is able to somehow weave together the narrative of the dynamics of a warm and dynamic classroom and demonstrate how it operates alongside of the vision of leadership and systems of accountability, interspersed with the constant noise of city and state politics. He doesn't pretend to be an objective observer, and makes his biases known, which made me trust him more. No one can sit in an elementary classroom and not become engaged with the children, and he obviously fell in love with what teaching is about.

Good book, important message.

Terry says

This is an easy read and I think gives an excellent overview of "school reform" that works. Of course, that reform works if, and ONLY IF, the community, the entire school system, AND local government works together to benefit the students they actually have, instead of the students they might wish they have. Oh and extremely generous per-pupil funding. *cough* In the main example in the book, I was bowled over by the acceptance of and pursuit of 1. bilingual education and 2. the excruciating importance of quality early childhood education. I was also saddened that so many school districts and so many people remain adamantly against both. The downside is that the outcome is still focused almost exclusively on raising test scores, but at least the focus is on moving more students into proficiency in math and reading from K-12 and making high school students truly college-ready so that even if they don't go to college, their high school diploma actually means something. Kirp also reminds us that each school system/district is unique and has its own needs and quirks, so there really is no "one size fits all" silver bullet to magically fixing every single district in the country all at once and immediately.

Marks54 says

This is a book recounting a successful example of a turnaround effort in the primary and secondary school districts of a poor urban community - Union City, New Jersey. The author is a public policy professor at Berkeley who appears to focus in part on education policy issues. The book is a case study/narrative that involved the author supplementing his documentary and archival sources with an extended period of sitting in on the operations of schools and interviewing administrators, teachers, students, and others involved in the district. The book is well written and entertaining and the story told is positive - this is a strong performance story about improving education for children in the poorest communities.

I would normally be suspicious of such after the fact testimonial accounts of success stories. This is a form of "sampling on the dependent variable" and authors are notoriously adept at finding pleasing explanations for successful outcomes, even if the reasons provided were not the "real" reasons for the success. That is not the problem here, however, because the author is candid about raising both the good and the bad in his account and in noting the difficulties that the district has had in maintaining its peak performance. It may be a case, but it is an honest and well presented one.

I liked the book due to the explanations provided by Professor Kirp, especially in how these contrast with the privatization and testing logics that are so currently dominant in educational debates. Kirp's account is not one of luck, high stakes testing, or "hero" leaders. Rather, it is an account that stresses to tie together all the parts of a complex school system so that they can work in a more coordinated fashion. When such system-building and consensus building is combined with a curriculum that reflects research on how children learn and led by teacher and administrators who are both teachers and administrators, then there is a chance for something positive to occur that will be more likely to persist for some time after the hard period of initial turnaround. This is a book about how to successfully manage an urban school system to reflect all of its political and institutional constraints while also putting into practice the best thinking about how children learn. Part of this is also coordination between and across grade levels. The transition from one grade to another is important as is the need for different teachers at a given grade level to be following a general plan (and general principles) which can then be adapted to their particular class settings.

What I also liked was that this book focuses on interconnections between students, teachers, parents, administrators, and even politicians without focusing on one element -- getting high performing teachers (whatever that means) and getting high test scores. The book focuses on getting real school systems to improve without doing violence to the complex setting in which programs must work. There are no "silver bullets" and TFA students parachuting into a district to stay for a brief time does not promote manageable continuity. I realize that many aspects of the educational reform debate are confrontational in the extreme, but this account is a balanced one which in my opinions errs in the direction of changes that are potential feasible and that can improve the lot of poor children. Is it generalizable? Who knows - most case studies do not generalize well. Even so, this book is thoughtful and a welcome change from current debates on reform.

Jonna Higgins-Freese says

I think this is the best book on education/education reform that I've read, and I think I'm at about twenty now.

It's entirely calm and sensible, with a complete lack of overheated hyperventilation about the need to train people for the 21st century and how far behind we are and how it's education that prevents people from getting decent jobs and earning a good living (as though our economic system and the fact that median wages have been stagnant since 1971 have nothing to do with those problems). Kirp also summarizes nicely the evidence that charter schools have, overall, achieved results no better than those of public schools serving the same children. And he debunks the super-teacher myth of Teach for America by pointing out that while students' test scores can be correlated with particular teachers, teachers' performance using that measure seems to vary year by year (192 citing Tim Sass article on the stability of value-added measures).

Kirp spends a year in a public district in New Jersey that has used sensible, incremental, evidence-based continuous improvement strategies throughout the district to improve student learning for all kids -- and these kids are mostly Latino and very poor. The youngsters have been doing better and better for twenty years, and they now perform as well as students in rich, suburban districts (!). 89.4% graduated in 2011 (15% higher than national average) and 60% of graduates headed to college (8).

He summarizes what Union City has done:

1. High quality full-day preschool for all children starting at age 3
2. Word-soaked classrooms to give youngsters a rich feel for classrooms (because many students speak only Spanish at home, instruction first occurs in both languages, then gradually shifts to English)
3. Immigrant kids become fluent first in their native language and then in English
4. The curriculum is challenging, consistent from school to school, and progressive from one grade to the next.
5. Close-grained analyses of students' test scores are used to diagnose and address problems.
6. Teachers and students get hands-on help to improve their performance.
7. The schools reach out to parents, enlisting them as partners in their child's education
8. The school system sets high expectations for all and maintains a culture of abrazos -- caring -- which generates trust.

I learned something interesting about "proficiency" - that holy grail of testing and NCLB -- "What counts as proficient varies from state to state -- what's acceptable in Arkansas may not suffice in Massachusetts -- and . . . it may change in a particular state from one year to the next" (which is how some states have been making AYP for NCLB) (100).

Kirp also outlines the accomplishments of two other public school districts that have achieved slow and incremental change, Montgomery County and another in California.

He provides more convincing evidence of why extensive standardized testing is not a helpful way to measure student learning -- he notes a sociological theorem whose name I wish I'd noted, which says that whenever an indicator becomes used for high-stakes decisions, it becomes subject to cheating/manipulation and less useful as an indicator of what it's actually trying to measure.

He gives sad examples of the ways that the tests' focus on reading and math force out focus on anything else -- hands-on science that might engage the students, for example.

I do still have some questions about the age/developmental-appropriateness of some of the "rigorous" standards now so much in favor. Is it really important that third graders know and use words like "gorgeous" and "exquisite"? Should they be able to "understand fractions, know how to convert 3/12 into its simplest form; complete the pattern, 1/3, 2/6; estimate the volume of a rectangle; and use the metric system"? (66).

On ASK, the New Jersey state test, third graders must "find patterns in number sets, represent data in the form of a graph, and calculate probability . . . calculate the area and perimeter of a pentagon -- and even simple algebra: "What does K equal in the equation $6 + K = 18$ " (173) (that last was 8th grade material for me, and I went to Iowa public schools, which at that time had the best student learning outcomes in the country).

I'm not convinced. I'm pretty sure I didn't learn fractions of that kind until 7th grade or so, and I think by almost any measure I've grown up to be a professionally successful and productive citizen.
