



Education Accountability, School Report Card Ratings, and Spudd Webb:

The Goal Really is Higher for Some than for Others

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I probably will not catch too much backlash if I say that short people (or "vertically challenged," to be politically correct) should not be expected to dunk a basketball. Common sense and physics dictate that the greater the distance from beginning point to goal, the likelihood of success diminishes. That's why 3-pointers are worth more, and why we are less confident facing down a forty-foot putt than a two-foot putt, right?

In 1986, standing a slight 5' 7"--somewhat short to us regular folk, and darn short in the NBA--Anthony "Spudd" Webb faced down the odds, defied common sense and what most of us experience as gravity, and soared to win the NBA All Star Game Slam Dunk Championship. Not only did this "vertically challenged" individual dunk a basketball, but he also did it better than his much taller counterparts. WOW!



In city parks, recreation centers, and playgrounds around the country, there are undoubtedly several other instances of vertically challenged high-risers, and such people astound me. Despite these exceptional performers, we cannot reasonably expect every 5' 7" player to be able to dunk a basketball, much less require them to do so and penalize their failure. If some truly hard-pressed doctoral student cares to measure the statistical relationship between player height and dunking success, he or she will certainly find that the point from which the ascent begins is very, very significant. Some short people CAN dunk, but most cannot.

In December, the Education Trust released a report titled "Dispelling the Myth Revisited" about the same time South Carolina schools received their first "Report Cards." The tie between the two is important, and here's why. The motivation for the "Dispelling the Myth" report was to provide evidence that high-poverty schools CAN and DO succeed, they attain high-level performance with some frequency. The "myth" rightly dispatched is that any social class of students cannot succeed. Indeed, they can and they do succeed.

Unfortunately, data in South Carolina and around the country indicate that there is an extremely strong negative relationship between school-level poverty and education performance. Just as with short people trying to dunk basketballs, some high poverty schools defy the statistical trends and soar to mind-boggling heights, but the vast majority remains mired in the far-reaching effects of poverty. As a matter of fact both the National Education Association and The Education Trust advance the ideal that "all children can achieve," but acknowledge that poverty and inequitable learning resources and opportunities constitute a very real and highly debilitating obstacle to widespread realization of this ideal.

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The results reported in "Dispelling the Myth" are quite often misused to suggest that because something can be done, we ought rigidly to require it to be done--the report's words are often cited yet its spirit frequently obscured. With the release of the School Report Cards, you've likely seen much attention given our own "high performing / high poverty" schools, and these schools used as evidence that we can and should require every school to attain a particular performance standard regardless of circumstance. Yes, we should applaud very loudly the success of these schools, but we must be very careful not to create unrealistic requirements and associated penalties based on exceptional cases.

Do these ratings constitute penalties? I think they do, and given the relationship between the ratings and poverty, I think they are unjust penalties. It is quite possible that teachers and principals may lose jobs due to chronic poor performance at their schools, when high-poverty explains a significant amount of their performance woes. These are sticky ratings labels that may attract or repel people and businesses to communities. It is certainly plausible to imagine real estate agents referring to these ratings when dealing with prospective home buyers, and time will tell if this unintended consequence comes to pass. Being labeled as "unsatisfactory" is a statement against the teachers, the students, the entirety of a community, and even with the most noble intentions, is especially cruel if we fail to make good on promises of resources to address the shortcomings of a school.

South Carolina's PACT data show that for a school with 80% of its students eligible for free- or reduced lunch, we can expect 40% of that school's students to fail to meet standards. Regarding South Carolina's School Report Cards, here are the facts:

- Our "unsatisfactory" elementary and middle schools have an average of approximately 79% of their students eligible for free or reduced lunch, compared to approximately 32% in our "excellent" schools.
- Less than 20% of our "excellent" elementary and middle schools have more than 50% of their students enrolled in free- or reduced-lunch programs, while almost 93% of our "unsatisfactory" schools have more than 50% of their students enrolled in free- or reduced-lunch programs.
- For every "excellent" high-poverty elementary and middle school, we have about a dozen "unsatisfactory" or "below average" schools.

Interestingly, few dispute the "facts" of the relationship between academic performance and poverty, but they instead argue the "meaning" or how to respond to these facts. If we account for poverty's affects, are we in essence setting a different standard for poor kids or resigning them to failure? If we don't account for poverty's effects and hold all to one standard, should we question our fairness when we see the ratings-cellular inordinately populated with high poverty schools? Having the facts doesn't always equal having the answers.

As a research methods professor, I always teach my students to be aware of alternative explanations when comparing groups on some factor, and the School Report Card ratings labels essentially give us five groups: Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, and Unsatisfactory. Our School Report Cards at a minimum suggest that a school's rating is a function of student effort, teacher and leadership effort, or some combination of these. Other than test scores, the best explanation of the differences between the ratings groups, derived from the data, is that we haven't sufficiently addressed the pervasive effects of poverty to place students, teachers and schools on a level evaluation field. Because the schools falling into the "excellent," and "unsatisfactory" ratings categories significantly differ on a number of fronts, and differ most profoundly on measures of school-level poverty, it is impossible make any justifiable claims regarding student, teacher, or leadership effort. When the riddle of poverty is sufficiently addressed, our ratings categories will no longer show such profound separation related to poverty levels.

If we statistically adjust every school in the state to the same level of poverty, we see some oft-praised schools with very low poverty drop like a stone in their ranking, and some very high-poverty schools climb the rankings as much as 200 slots. Rating a high poverty school as unsatisfactory with no consideration of the context of their performance is akin to saying all 5' 7" basketball players are lousy jumpers if they can't

dunk, because Spudd Webb and relatively few gravity-defying others can. Likewise, being able to dunk doesn't necessarily mean one is a good jumper. Caution is necessary to ensure that our much-needed movement toward high standards and accountability does not err toward penalizing poverty and rewarding affluence.

If we truly want to activate and enable the vast potential in every child in every school, we must consider ways to meaningfully counter poverty's effects. Research reveals children living in poverty show achievement gaps as they first enter our formal education settings, related to diminished early brain development from inadequate nutrition, exposure to substance abuse and environmental factors in the home, prevalence of maternal depression and adult illiteracy, and inadequate daycare. And upon entering schools with these and other obstacles already in place, poor students typically have our least qualified and lowest paid teachers attempting, often quite valiantly, to help them get up to speed. Increasing teacher pay and improving teacher training are important strategies, especially in high-poverty schools. But it is naïve of us to reckon the seven hours in the school environment can adequately counter the seventeen hours spent in impoverished homes and communities. Perhaps it is time to look beyond the school's gates, and seek ways to better enable parents and communities to financially, emotionally, and intellectually support their children.

The good news is the effects of school-level poverty are not exactly like one's height. Short basketball players are short, will remain so, and are forced to do the best they can. Public policies and programs, economic development strategies, and the like have potential to mitigate the effects of poverty in our schools. We should be so bold and responsible as to place greater emphasis on addressing this, what the data show as the greatest hurdle to all children achieving high and rigorous standards.