Commentary on Rachel Shatten’s paper

Rachel Shatten’s paper is instructive for several reasons: It reminds us that many of London’s inner-city schools are in the same precarious mode as their American urban counterparts, a conclusion reached a generation ago by Michael Rutter’s “Fifteen Thousand Hours”. It underscores the notion that there is no single silver bullet solution to the challenges of urban education. The paper informs the reader that no matter how well-conceived a reform initiative, for its influence to be sustained, it has to be institutionalized. Otherwise, like jello, state education will simply revert to the status quo ante when those efforts are no longer funded by an external agency.

Other merits of the paper should be mentioned. It is well-researched, clearly written, and captures both the intent and presumed salutary effect of the triple-headed strategy of the “London Challenge”.

However, I am troubled by the paper’s limitations. As the author herself admits, how much of the improvement in test scores is attributed to these particular initiatives? Is it really convincing to identify improved student academic achievement solely with standardized test scores? Shouldn’t students be gauged on less quantifiable measures—reasoning ability, critical thinking, ability to work with people, integrity, etc? Rational as the efforts to recruit and retain high quality teachers, and to heighten public perceptions about the quality of schools appear to be, of themselves they are not sufficient to transform schools. Moreover, is it really fair to suggest that the diversity of the ethnic origins of the teaching force in inner-city schools is necessarily a disadvantage?

Notwithstanding these caveats, this paper is a legitimate contribution to the litany of serious and thoughtful efforts to address the needs of the various constituencies associated with the urban high school. It is, at the very least, sobering to rediscover how many similar challenges confront schools in other highly-developed countries at a time of unprecedented change and stress in the contemporary world.

Graham Down