

# What Makes A Good School\*

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A number of studies independently conducted and published over the past decade has confirmed what most people have believed for a very long time about schools. That is, that some schools are better than others; that the reason some are better than others is that some teachers and administrators are better than other teachers and administrators; and that some schools take their responsibility for education seriously while many others do not.

The most important of these recent studies, all of which are unpublicized and indeed almost unheard of by the general public, is that conducted in the schools of London by Michael Rutter and his colleagues. In *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*, published last year by Harvard University Press, Professor Rutter demonstrates that children are most likely to be well-behaved and achieve scholastically if they attend some schools rather than others.

Professor Rutter measured a school's effectiveness by assessing the following: children's behavior from school to school, the regularity of student attendance, the proportion of children who stayed at school beyond the legally enforced period, the students' success in public examinations, and their delinquency rates. Stunningly (or perhaps not so stunningly to the non-expert), Professor Rutter found that over the period studied—four years in some cases, five in others—variations in both behavior and academic attainment at each school were almost nonexistent. What the schools were, they were over time.

Some of the schools were better at producing well-behaved and better educated pupils. Why? Professor Rutter found that factors such as school size, age of buildings and space available, and differences in administrative structure or organization made little or no difference to educational outcomes. "It was entirely possible," he wrote, "for schools to obtain good outcomes in spite of. . . un-

\*This article is an out-growth of conversations with William J. Bennett, formerly president of the National Humanities Center, now chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

promising and unprepossessing school premises.” Rather, the differences among schools and the reason for different outcomes rested in the schools’ characteristics as “social institutions.” The Rutter conclusion is that a set of factors mainly involving actions and measures taken by school personnel determines successful schools. When this set of factors is present, a school has what Professor Rutter calls the right “ethos.”

Schools having this “ethos”—those that are healthy social institutions—were ones where “the teacher had prepared the lesson in advance . . . [where] the teacher arrived on time at the start of the lesson . . . and [where] the teacher mainly directed attention to the class as a whole.” Teachers in such schools kept the “pupils actively engaged in productive activities” and did not wait “for something to happen.” They gave praise freely and rarely took disciplinary action; yet when they did, it was firm. Such teachers were able to spot disruptive behavior early on and deal with it appropriately without digressing at length from the lesson at hand. Interestingly, Professor Rutter found that the most important way to teach proper behavior to students was by example—the example of teachers and other adult authorities in the school. This homely finding, in line with a large body of evidence from Aristotle to modern social science, argues that children have a strong tendency to copy the behavior of people in positions of authority whom they like and respect.

In schools with the right “ethos,” Professor Rutter also found that children quickly picked up that the adults around them had expectations about their academic competence. This finding, too, is congruent with wisdom and social science research: people, particularly young children, tend to live up (or down) to what is expected of them. Professor Rutter found that children had better success in schools where they were given homework that was regularly set and graded, and where it was consistently remarked that they could and would learn.

### **Learning and Behavior**

In regard to both student behavior and academic success, Professor Rutter found that the values and norms parents want their children to adopt will be adopted if these values and norms have widespread support throughout a school. This support started at the top, with the example and behavior of the school principal, and continued down through the administrative ranks to the teachers. What the administrators and teachers were, the students

tended to emulate and imitate. What standards they held, the students tended to chase.

Professor Rutter noted that certain factors outside a school's control were important, such as the average intellectual ability of students entering a school. He found that a block of students who enter with greater learning aptitude do tend to have better educational outcomes than a block of students with lower aptitudes. Yet such differences—the “balance of intake,” as he calls it—did not appear to have any comparable influence on how a school functions and whether the students in the school, at whatever various levels of ability, learn or not. Those desiderata—learning and behavior—still remained a function of the right “ethos.”

What Professor Rutter and his colleagues found to be true in England has also been found to be true in America. In his heartening study of inner-city schools originally published in 1971 but still not widely known, George Weber of the Council for Basic Education found that children of generally poor backgrounds best learn to read in schools (also generally financially poor) having the following characteristics: “strong leadership, high expectations, good atmosphere, a strong emphasis on reading, additional reading personnel, the use of phonics, individualization, and careful evaluation of pupil progress.”

Professor Weber's study, like that of Professor Rutter and his colleagues, is interesting in light of previous and far better known studies of school effectiveness, such as James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) and Christopher Jencks *Inequality: A Reassessment of Family and Schools in America* (1972). These influential studies suggested that compared with other factors such as income, race, and entering achievement levels, schools themselves made little difference to educational outcomes. Yet these studies largely ignored just those factors addressed by Professor Rutter and Professor Weber. As Professor Jencks himself has since pointed out, his research “ignored not only attitudes and values but also the internal life of schools.” And it is precisely “the internal life of schools”—their ethos—that Professors Rutter and Weber, and others such as Ronald Edmonds, in the School Improvement Project for the New York City public schools, focussed upon throughout the 1970s.

Beginning in the Spring of 1979, Professor Edmonds conducted “case studies” of nine New York City public elementary schools in his “search for effective schools.” His team concluded that five factors determined academic success and thus made schools “effec-

tive." These were (once again) strong administrative leadership, a school climate conducive to learning, a school-wide emphasis on basic skills instruction, optimistic teacher expectations of pupil ability, and an ongoing assessment of pupil progress.

Professors Rutter, Weber, and Edmonds are professionals in the field; their findings have been corroborated by journalists. On January 4, 1981 *The New York Times* reported at length on Rice High School at 124th Street and Lenox Avenue, in Harlem. Two-thirds of its graduates go on to further schooling, and "the overall SAT scores," reported *The Times*, "though slightly below the national average, have climbed recently and are higher than those of nearby . . . high schools." At this school, known for its "character of order, dignity and achievement," there are no graffiti on the walls because they are not allowed. Absenteeism is low, discipline high, fighting rare. The school "regime" is, *The Times* reported, "gently but firmly applied." There is an emphasis on prompt, courteous behavior, insistence on neat attire, and a close watch to see that assignments are completed. The principal, Brother Lawrence Kililea, says, "The real challenge is to get a youngster to value himself and to start developing himself as a human being. One thing we do is to supply a responsible male image."

Rice, of course, is a Catholic school, and perhaps may be expected to have the right ethos. But the right ethos is not the exclusive property of parochial schools. Not by any means. "What Makes An Effective School?" is the question seven education writers investigated in a study sponsored and published last year by the George Washington University Institute for Educational Leadership. These journalists, working independently in a variety of states, found the same answer.

Robert Benjamin of the *Cincinnati Post*, for example, found that the formula for success at any given school involves good principals, a belief and expectation that students will learn, and time spent "directly and efficiently teaching academic skills." Mr. Benjamin wrote: "The story of exceptional schools is the story of exceptional people, adults who are taking responsibility for children's education."

Jane Eisner of the Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot* studied Virginia schools in the cities of Portsmouth, Alexandria and Martinsville, and also in Henrico and Greensville counties. She found: "An effective public high school in Virginia does not require a new building, or fancy equipment, or a wealthy student body, or the latest in educational programs. A school can work if it has good teachers . . . strong leadership . . . and high expectations of its students."

The work of these professionals and journalists testifies to the same points in the same voice. From their findings, if not from our own institutions, it is clear what makes a good school.

This testimony may come as good news, if not also as a surprise, to the layman. But this set of claims and evidence is not the usual news reported to the American public. Indeed, most of the news one hears about schools conveys a sense of despair. One reads, for example, about teacher illiteracy and incompetence, the failures of the teachers' colleges, administrative shilly-shallying, and ineffectual fads and fashions such as "life adjustment," "humanities fairs," and "values clarification." Further, there are legions of stories about students' failures, the most notable of these being the decline in test scores and the increase in vandalism and drug use.

Because of these stories, many of which are true, of course, it is no wonder that many people believe not only that the schools in America are failing to educate but also that such failure is inevitable. The supposition of such inevitability, however, is plainly contradicted by the studies of these educators and journalists and the undeniable experience of success at a number of schools. Not only is it clear what makes a good school, but it is also clear that a school can become good if certain efforts are made. Why, then, aren't these efforts being made more widely and systematically? Why aren't there more schools with the right ethos? Why, in short, aren't there more good schools?

Part of the answer lies in the times. The faith educators had in what one might call "innovative education," a product of the late 1960s and early 1970s, has waned. The hopes so many placed in, *inter alia*, the "open" or "participatory" classroom, "creative teaching" and "self-expression" by students in an atmosphere of "sensitivity" and "sharing" shorn of the need for authority, have been largely dashed. Few educators still share this faith, but a new faith expressing the doctrines developed by Professors Rutter, Weber, and others has not taken hold. In education today, the characteristic attitude is, in a word, uncertainty. Many teachers and educators, disillusioned with the false doctrines of the recent past, simply do not know what to believe, or what to do.

### Professional Teachers Associations

Presumably, teachers, at least, might find new guidance from their professional teachers associations, such as the National Education Association (NEA). But the NEA—unlike the American

Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose president, Albert Shanker, approvingly brought Professor Rutter's findings to the attention of his membership—has responded to Professor Rutter and the others with indifference. The indifferent response of the NEA is particularly disquieting in view of the fact that it is by far the largest teachers union in the country. The NEA claims three times as many members as the AFT, some 1.5 million teachers, a huge number of those hired to teach the young. Far from being attentive to and concerned with the "internal life" of schools, the NEA is instead concerned with the "interests" of teachers, in easing their teaching burdens (hence the call for smaller classes) and raising their salaries (though not, of course, by merit), and in wielding their political clout (for example, by lobbying for the creation of the Department of Education). Teachers organizations such as the NEA have thus encouraged teachers to look outward—away from their schools—to their own interests, to their status, and to Washington. It has not encouraged teachers to look at themselves and their schools in terms of their efforts, expectations, and examples. The NEA has raised teachers' political consciousness but not their standards.

The NEA is not the only educational institution, or even the only important societal institution, which fails to see the importance of the findings of Professor Rutter and others. There is, it must be said, a general blindness that forbids an understanding of what Professor Rutter calls "ethos." This notion is foreign to our age. It is foreign because it is, first, an idea, which is a thing of little use to many policy-makers today; and second, because this particular idea is rooted in antiquity, when thinkers understood life in categories broader and more penetrating than statistics and numbers. Unfortunately for many, including social scientists, educational experts, state and national legislators, and purveyors of political and cultural opinions, this business of "ethos" is simply remote and incomprehensible. Commanded by the times we live in, "what is to be done" must be something palpable—a new building, a larger library, or indeed a whole department of education.

To be sure, some of the familiar proposals—to improve school facilities, better compensate teachers, or provide the opportunity for release time to teachers so they can refine their skills—are worthy of consideration and even, in some instances, support. But they are not the heart of the matter, nor can they be. The heart of the matter, for those administrators, school board mem-

bers, and superintendents who can see it—and some can—is the school's soul, the making of its character. This, not an ethereal labor, but one demanding the strong heart and will of responsible adults, is the first order of business for a school that wishes to be good. And, as is plain from the evidence, it is a labor that can be done. Often the best way to show that a good thing might work is to show that it has worked.

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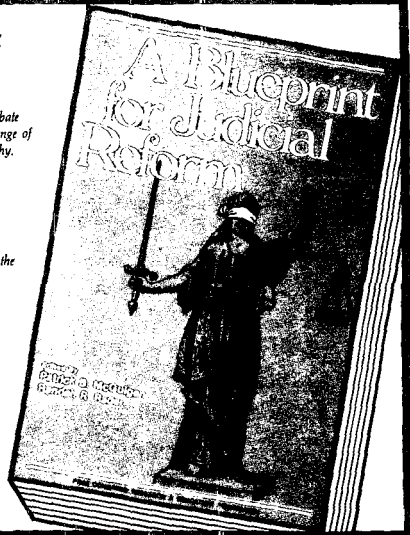
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# How the Government Evades Taxes\*

JAMES T. BENNETT and THOMAS J. DILORENZO

The “tax revolt” of the 1970s, the election of President Reagan whose commitment to lower taxes and spending at the federal level of government struck a responsive chord, and public opinion polls all reveal that American taxpayers are disillusioned with paying more in taxes and receiving less in services from the public sector. In the tradition of the nation’s founders, Americans have turned to constitutional and statutory constraints on governmental powers to limit both the size and scope of government at all levels. Since 1970, some thirty-two states have imposed legal limitations on local government taxing, spending, and borrowing powers; similar restrictions exist for a number of state governments. In an effort to restrain the fiscal operations at the federal level, thirty state legislatures have voted for a convention to adopt a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

Evidently, there is considerable faith in the ability of balanced budgets and tax/expenditure limitations to induce government to become more efficient and responsive. Unfortunately, the historical evidence on such restrictions at the state and local levels of government reveals that this faith is based on fantasy rather than fact. For nearly a century, non-federal politicians have easily evaded fiscal restraints—both constitutional and statutory—by the simple expedient of redefining the budget. Expenditures and debt controls that apply to the public sector can be ignored by “off-budget enterprises” created in great numbers by politicians. At the federal level of government off-budget operations have grown at an astounding rate in the past several years and, as pressures for a balanced budget mount, can be expected to play a major role in circumventing the taxpayer’s desires for a fiscally responsible federal sector.<sup>1</sup>

\*The authors gratefully acknowledge research support provided by the Scaife Family Charitable Trusts, the Earhart Foundation, and the National Federation of Independent Business.

1. There are other ways of evading balanced budget or spending limitation rules which are discussed below.