

Rather than throwing ever more money at turning around failing schools, face facts: Educators cannot work miracles

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States have long funneled more money to struggling school districts in the belief that doing so will help them improve. Whether that is true, however, is another story that has immediate relevance today in light of the infusion of billions being considered by various state legislatures. New York and California serve as instructive cases in point.

Although New York State ranks near the very top on per-pupil expenditures in the nation, many of its schools continue to struggle. Convinced that additional funding would turn around persistently failing schools, Mayor de Blasio established the Renewal Schools program. But after the expenditure of \$773 million on nearly 100 low-performing schools, 75% still fell short of the hoped-for improvements.

Undeterred, de Blasio now intends to direct further funding to the neediest schools. At first glance, the proposal seems eminently fair since low-income students would likely benefit as a result. But a closer look reveals that it too will fail to achieve its goals. To understand why, it's worth looking at California.

In 2014, the California Board of Education unanimously passed new rules that represented the most dramatic changes in four decades in how public schools in the state were funded. Under the plan, all schools were given an average base grant of \$7,643 per student. An additional 20% was provided for each disadvantaged student, and on top of that further support was given to schools where at least 55% of students were low-income, learning English, or living in foster care.

But California has continued to post lackluster results, with students scoring well below the national average in math and reading.

What has happened in both New York and California can be understood only by rewinding the tape to 1966. Congress had ordered a study to prove that black students attended inferior schools, which accounted for their relative underperformance — the so-called achievement gap. Many people thought the study was totally unnecessary because it would only confirm what was quite self-evident. Nevertheless, sociologist James S. Coleman accepted the job.

In 1966, Coleman released the findings of his two-year study of 570,000 students, 60,000 teachers and 4,000 elementary and secondary schools across the country. He concluded that families are a much greater influence than school quality on achievement.

It's not that schools don't matter. On the contrary, they most certainly do. But the quality of schools attended by black and white students has little influence on the *difference* in average achievement between them.

That's because schools are not Lourdes and teachers are not miracle workers. They can do only so much in addressing the huge deficits that low-income students bring to class through no fault of their own. It's why the achievement gap persists despite efforts over the years to eliminate it. Disadvantaged students learn, but the rate cannot compete with the rate of their more advantaged classmates.

Researchers have never refuted Coleman's findings. The widely publicized accounts of disadvantaged students from chaotic backgrounds who manage to succeed are outliers. These students deserve the highest praise, but they are few and far between.

(Despite the publicity given to charter schools, not all manage to report impressive results. New Orleans, which has the nation's first all-charter system, has posted "remarkably uneven" outcomes, according to the Hechinger Report. Some have closed because of "dismal performance." Other cities have been the scene of similarly mixed reports. But the media have inordinately focused on the successes, leaving taxpayers to conclude that charter schools are an unalloyed solution.)

States that follow in the footsteps of New York and California will soon learn the same hard lesson. Since the federal government began collecting trend data around 1970, a Cato Institute study found that a near-tripling of the inflation-adjusted cost of putting a child through K-12 has produced absolutely no improvement in education outcomes. Despite the policy's intuitive appeal, whatever improvements paled in light of the cost. James Traub made that clear in a January 16, 2000 cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* titled "Schools Are Not the Answer."

If Coleman and Traub are right, then shoveling more money into struggling schools will do very little to alter outcomes. Instead, the funds should be directed at the family and the neighborhood. It's there that students spend the bulk of their waking hours.