

Do You Believe in Miracles?

By [Diane Ravitch](#) on December 6, 2011 9:50 AM

Dear Deborah,

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One of the central claims of the corporate-reform movement is that poverty is not destiny and that a school staffed with great teachers can eliminate poverty. This is a very appealing sort of rhetoric because we all harbor the hope that every single person can overcome the obstacles of poverty to achieve success in school and in life.

Surely, we treasure the American dream that people who grow up in poverty may go on to achieve outstanding success in their lives (even though social science says the odds favor those who have money, education, and privilege). For some people, this trope also has the appeal that we can ignore poverty, cut taxes and spending, and just concentrate on closing schools, opening charters, giving out vouchers, putting kids online without teachers, increasing class sizes, or launching a new teacher evaluation scheme.

We know that there is a strong and undeniable correlation between family income and test scores. This correlation appears on the SAT, the ACT, the NAEP, and every other standardized test.

Corporate reformers claim that great teachers alone can close achievement gaps, and recently it has been the vogue to make bold claims for "miracle schools," where dramatic gains supposedly happened either because the school was a charter without a union or because the school was "transformed" by using federal funds to fire the staff and start over. If only it were that simple!

Earlier this year, [I wrote about three such "miracle schools"](#) lauded by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, President Obama, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush: Urban Prep Academy in Chicago, Bruce Randolph in Denver, and Miami Central High School in Florida.

Gary Rubinstein, who carefully tracks the claims of miracle schools, [has just updated the statistics on these schools](#), and he shows that they continue to struggle despite the accolades of officials in search of a miracle.

At Urban Prep, which Secretary Duncan singled out because 100 percent of its graduates were accepted to college, scores on state tests continued to be very low, well below those of Chicago district schools. [The following sentence was changed, per the author.] Only 15 percent met Illinois' Prairie State assessment standards, which includes math, reading, and the ACT. While 100 percent were accepted to college, zero percent were rated by the state as "college-ready." I believe the staff is doing its best, but it's really unwise for politicians to hold up numbers like this as a national model of success.

In his State of the Union address in January, President Obama saluted Bruce Randolph School in Denver. As Gary Rubinstein found by reviewing the 2011 state scores, it continues to be one of the lowest-performing schools in Colorado. Again, I mean no disrespect to the staff. I just wish elected officials would not politicize the difficult work of education by inflating results.

Last March, President Obama and Secretary Duncan joined with Jeb Bush to hail the alleged transformation of Miami Central High, evidence that firing staff could work wonders. Except that it didn't. Miami Central remains one of the state's lowest-performing schools and was slated for closure, but has been saved because of pleas by local officials.

There are indeed wonderful public schools that have great outcomes for almost all students. One such is South Side High School in Rockville Centre, New York. It's a diverse school in a middle-income community on Long Island (21 percent of its students are African-American or Hispanic). By watchful mentoring, tutoring, de-tracking, professional development, guidance, support for students and teachers, and constant care, **South Side High closed the achievement gap.** Reformers, take note. Go visit. It's closer than Finland.

I have said it before, and I'll say it again: There are no silver bullets in education. There are no magic feathers that enable elephants like Dumbo to fly. It's hard work to improve schools. It takes dedication, resources, and time. And the work is never done, the magic number of 100 percent is always out of reach. Just when you think that you've achieved success with this year's students, another new group arrives, each student with his or her issues. Or students leave and arrive mid-year. Or the state changes the testing program or releases new regulations requiring more paperwork. Claims of overnight or one-year transformations should be suspect on their face. It can happen, perhaps, but I'm skeptical and need far better evidence than has yet appeared.

Diane