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The Limits of School Reform

By JOE NOCERA

I find myself haunted by a 13-year-old boy named Saquan Townsend. It's been more than two weeks since he was featured in The New York Times Magazine, yet I can't get him out of my mind.

The article, by Jonathan Mahler, was about the heroic efforts of Ramón González, the principal of M.S. 223, a public middle school in the South Bronx, to make his school a place where his young charges can get a decent education and thus, perhaps, a better life. Surprisingly, though, González is not aligned with the public school reform movement, even though one of the movement's leading lights, Joel Klein, was until fairly recently his boss as the head of the New York City school system.

Instead, González comes across as a skeptic, wary of the enthusiasm for, as the article puts it, "all of the educational experimentation" that took place on Klein's watch. At its core, the reform movement believes that great teachers and improved teaching methods are all that's required to improve student performance, so that's all the reformers focus on. But it takes a lot more than that. Which is where Saquan comes in. His part of the story represents difficult truths that the reform movement has yet to face squarely — and needs to.

Saquan lands at M.S. 223 because his family has been placed in a nearby homeless shelter. (His mother fled Brooklyn out of fear that another son was in danger of being killed.) At first, he is so disruptive that a teacher, Emily Dodd, thinks he might have a mental disability. But working with him one on one, Dodd discovers that Saquan is, to the contrary, unusually intelligent — "brilliant" even.

From that point on, Dodd does everything a school reformer could hope for. She sends him text messages in the mornings, urging him to come to school. She gives him special help. She encourages him at every turn. For awhile, it seems to take.

Meanwhile, other forces are pushing him in another direction. His mother, who works nights and barely has time to see her son, comes across as indifferent to his schooling. Though she manages to move the family back to Brooklyn, the move means that Saquan has an hour-and-a-half commute to M.S. 223. As his grades and attendance slip, Dodd offers to tutor him. To no avail: He finally decides it isn't worth the effort, and transfers to a school in Brooklyn.

The point is obvious, or at least it should be: Good teaching alone can't overcome the many obstacles Saquan faces when he is not in school. Nor is he unusual. Mahler recounts how M.S. 223 gives away goodie bags to lure parents to parent association meetings, yet barely a dozen show up. He reports that

during the summer, some students fall back a full year in reading comprehension — because they don't read at home.

Going back to the famous Coleman report in the 1960s, social scientists have contended — and unquestionably proved — that students' socioeconomic backgrounds vastly outweigh what goes on in the school as factors in determining how much they learn. Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute lists dozens of reasons why this is so, from the more frequent illness and stress poor students suffer, to the fact that they don't hear the large vocabularies that middle-class children hear at home.

Yet the reformers act as if a student's home life is irrelevant. "There is no question that family engagement can matter," said Klein when I spoke to him. "But they seem to be saying that poverty is destiny, so let's go home. We don't yet know how much education can overcome poverty," he insisted — notwithstanding the voluminous studies that have been done on the subject. "To let us off the hook prematurely seems, to me, to play into the hands of the other side."

That last sentence strikes me as the key to the reformers' resistance: To admit the importance of a student's background, they fear, is to give ammo to the enemy — which to them are their social-scientist critics and the teachers' unions. But that shouldn't be the case. Making schools better is always a goal worth striving for, whether it means improving pedagogy itself or being able to fire bad teachers more easily. Without question, school reform has already achieved some real, though moderate, progress.

What needs to be acknowledged, however, is that school reform won't fix everything. Though some poor students will succeed, others will fail. Demonizing teachers for the failures of poor students, and pretending that reforming the schools is all that is needed, as the reformers tend to do, is both misguided and counterproductive.

Over the long term, fixing our schools is going to involve a lot more than, well, just fixing our schools. In the short term, however, the reform movement could use something else: a dose of humility about what it can accomplish — and what it can't.