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Democracy Dies in Darkness

ANSWER SHEET

Disrupting disruption: How 3 school districts improved with steady work

Perspective by [Valerie Strauss](#)

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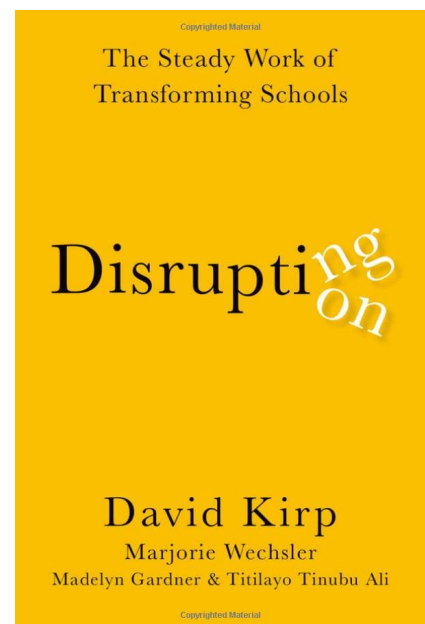
We live in an era where public school districts are routinely slammed for being hidebound and resistant to change. Some are, but others make changes all the time, sometimes with success. This post looks at a few districts that have done just that.

It was written by David Kirp, a professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley and co-author of “Disrupting Disruption: The Steady Work of Transforming Schools.” A senior fellow at the Learning Policy Institute, a nonprofit education think tank based in California, Kirp has written more than 15 other books and dozens of articles about social issues and have been focused on education and children’s policy. He was the founding director of the Harvard Center for Law and Education, a national support center and advocacy organization that offers help to people experiencing difficulty in the implementation of key education programs and initiatives.

By David Kirp

Public schools are frequently in the news these days, and seldom is the news good. The spotlight is on ideological donnybrooks over how race and gender-related topics are discussed in classrooms; the growing demand that parents, not teachers, decide what their children should be taught; assaults on the system by opportunistic politicians; and the learning loss blame game, with schools faulted for keeping schools closed during the pandemic. Some state lawmakers have proposed junking the common school and replacing it with a market-based regime.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way.



In “Disrupting Disruption,” my co-authors and I shine a light on three racially and ethnically diverse school systems: Roanoke, nestled in Virginia’s Shenandoah mountains; Union, Okla., Tulsa’s neighbor; and Union City, N.J., across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Their students don’t resemble those in highflying places like Wilmette, Ill., or Lexington, Mass., predominantly White and well-off, with their off-the-charts test scores and graduation rates, and they do not appear on any list of the nation’s highest-performing districts. But they look like much of America, where White students don’t constitute a majority, and many come from low-income families.

These districts have earned the support of their communities. Parents have not fled to charter schools because (as their surveys show) they trust their schools to do the right thing. Rather than engaging in school-bashing, local politicians take pride in generously funding their schools, and taxpayers vote for school bonds.

There’s good reason for this vote of confidence — in each instance, the graduation rate is substantially higher than in school systems with similar demographic characteristics; what’s more, the opportunity gap that in most places separates minority students from their classmates is at or near the vanishing point. In other words, they have managed to combine excellence and equality of opportunity.

There is nothing fantastical about what is taking place, no feats of legerdemain, no superman or superwoman running the show. What they are doing to overcome the demographic odds sounds dishwater-dull, no match for the livelier terminology of markets and choice. But genuine reform isn’t sexy, and the “secret sauce” isn’t much of a secret. Here’s their “to do” list.

- Meet the diverse needs of the students; don’t batch-process them.
- Make equity a priority.
- Deliver high-quality early education.
- Fixate on maintaining high-quality education systemwide, rather than islands of excellence, while constantly seeking ways to do better.
- Beware of fads.
- Help teachers become more effective through mentoring and coaching.
- Use data to drive decisions.
- Engage teachers and parents in decision-making.
- Build an administrative structure that incorporates networks of teachers.
- Forge ties with local organizations and the political system.

- Maintain stable leadership and minimize teacher turnover.

Everything on this list will be familiar to any educator with a pulse. The hard part is getting it right.

These districts have taken the time to invest in a culture of high expectations, recruit top-flight professionals and develop strong ties between schools and the community. Although their marquee programs differ — Union City has a nationally renowned bilingual education program and a state-of-the-art preschool program, Union’s pre-K-12 STEM program is as good as any in the nation, and Roanoke is a national leader in trauma-infused education and music — they share a commitment to steady improvement, success building on success.

They are constantly on the lookout for ways to do a better job. The Union City district in New Jersey, whose students are mostly Latino immigrants, offers three years of classes in Mandarin Chinese (“Fancy suburban districts are doing this,” Superintendent Silvia Abbato told us in 2019. “Why shouldn’t our kids have the same opportunity?”)

Union, Okla., introduced the community-school model in all its elementary schools after an evaluation showed that youngsters thrived in settings that went well beyond the 3 Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). Roanoke crafted a seamless partnership with the local community college to boost the college-going rate.

What these districts have in common matters more than these particulars. They have taken the same text — the same priorities, the same underlying principles — and adapted it to suit their circumstances. They are constantly on the lookout for ways to connect engaged students, talented teachers and a challenging curriculum. They have constructed systems that personalize education, devising strategies that match the individual needs of their students — what works in heavily Latino Union City won’t necessarily fly in Union, with its diverse student population.

Federal legislation requires that school systems develop IEPs (individual education plans) for students with special needs. These districts have done much the same for all their students.

Running an exemplary school system does not demand heroes or heroics, just hard and steady work. Stick to your knitting, as the saying goes, stay with what has been proved to make a difference, and keep learning. Of course, this is much easier to say than to do — otherwise there wouldn’t be an achievement gap — but you don’t have to be a genius to pull it off. The success of these deceptively ordinary districts offers a template to school systems nationwide.