ChapinHall
IssueBrief

Underperforming Schools and the Education of Vulnerable Children and Youth
By Lisa Walker and Cheryl Smithgall

Introduction

Since the 1990s, efforts to improve educational outcomes have taken shape around the firm principle, "It's about instruction and only about instruction."[1] Yet, after almost two decades of concerted efforts across the nation to raise student achievement by improving instruction, the majority of students in some schools are still achieving below standards, and these schools have been unable to improve on this record. Policies at the federal level that currently favor "turnaround" schools—those in which administrators and teachers in schools that underperform year after year are replaced—are an effort to make sure students in these schools finally receive good instruction.

Through ongoing work to inform the policies and practices of public agencies, researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago have examined the educational experiences of vulnerable children and youth in Chicago. These include children and youth who have been abused or neglected, who are placed in foster care, who are homeless, and who have been involved with the juvenile court system. We identify students as vulnerable who experience crises or disruptions in their home lives, which often go along with parental absence or inability to meet their needs, such that they are likely to become involved with public service systems. Our studies describe the poor academic progress of these students, the behavioral challenges they present to school staff, the response of schools, and outcomes at the end of high school. The text box on page 2 provides a brief description of the studies on which we draw.

The lives of vulnerable children and youth and the performance of their schools are intertwined. Chapin Hall studies suggest that the numbers of vulnerable children and youth in underperforming schools can be high. This is significant because the life experiences of these children can distract their attention from learning, and in more serious cases, lead to cognitive or

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[1] Elmore, R.F. (with the assistance of Burney, D.) (1997). *Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community School District #2, New York City.* National Commission on Teaching & America's Future: New York City.

physical impairment. In the classroom, these students may struggle with basic literacy skills, disengage from instruction, and be difficult for the teacher to manage behaviorally. When several students with this set of issues are present in a classroom, they can influence the opportunities of their peers to benefit from instruction.[2] When several are present in every classroom, their influence on school climate and achievement in that school should be of concern, especially if teachers and school leaders have not been trained to work with vulnerable children. Any comprehensive and systemic agenda for instructional improvement must take these students into account if it is to succeed in turning around underperforming schools.

Vulnerable Children Cluster in Underperforming Schools

Chapin Hall's work on the educational experiences of vulnerable children and youth has focused on Chicago, a city geographically divided by race and income, with crime, mental illness, and other poor health outcomes concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods.[3] According to a study now underway

at Chapin Hall, 20 percent of all Chicago children live in families who are or have been involved with two or more of the following public or social service systems: mental health, substance abuse, adult incarceration, juvenile incarceration, or child welfare.[4] Given that higher concentrations of these families live within high-poverty, urban communities in Chicago, it is not surprising that we find that vulnerable children are disproportionately represented in the schools in these neighborhoods.

In "The Educational Experiences of Youth in Out-of-Home Care," Chapin Hall found that, despite the fact that they were just 1 percent of the overall Chicago Public Schools (CPS) student population, children in foster care in 2002 made up 7 to 8 percent of the population in some Chicago public schools. Including official victims of abuse and neglect in Chicago's public schools—a group three times larger than those in foster care—up to 12 percent of the children in some schools had been in contact with the child welfare system. As a principal of an elementary school pointed out, these children represent just a portion of the vulnerable children in his school; others struggle with neighborhood crime and violence, domestic violence,

This issue brief draws on a number of Chapin Hall studies examining the educational experiences of vulnerable children and youth. For further information, please see:

Cusick, G.R., Goerge, R.M., & Bell, K.C. (2009). *From Corrections to Community: The Juvenile Reentry Experience as Characterized by Multiple Systems Involvement.* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Dworsky, A. (2008). *Educating Homeless Children in Chicago: A Case Study of Children in the Family Regeneration Program.* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Mayer, S. (2005). *Educating Chicago's Court-Involved Youth: Mission and Policy in Conflict.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Yang, D. & Goerge, R.M. (2005). *Behavior Problems and Educational Disruptions among Children in Out-of-Home Care in Chicago.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Smithgall, C., Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., Goerge, R.M. & Courtney, M.E. (2004). *The Educational Experiences of Youth in Out-of-Home Care.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

[2] Aizer, Anna (2008). *Peer Effects and Human Capital Accumulation: The Externalities of ADD.* (Working Paper No. 14254). National Bureau of Economic Research: Cambridge, MA
[3] Sampson, R.. The Neighborhood Context of Well-Being. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine,* 46(3), Summer 2003, pp. S53–S64
[4] Unpublished work for the Multi-Problem Families Study (Robert Goerge, Principal Investigator)

the experience of having incarcerated parents, homelessness, and other stressful life circumstances.

> I would say we have close to 250 students here at our school being raised by either grandparents or foster parents or living with other relatives— uncles, aunts. And it's a hardship on the child. There is no stability. We find that those who don't have that stable figure to relate to [in their lives] are our problem children.

When we examined the characteristics of schools where children in foster care were enrolled, the vast majority were low-achieving or extremely low-achieving.[5] The schools also had a higher percentage of low-income students, lower average daily attendance, and higher student mobility rates than the average school in the district. Thus, the vulnerable children and youth who are the focus of Chapin Hall's work attend the chronically underperforming schools of concern to the policymakers, researchers, and school leaders who make up the educational improvement community.

The Schooling Experiences of Vulnerable Children

In this section, we highlight the main findings of Chapin Hall studies with the intent of stimulating consideration of underperforming schools from the perspective of the needs of their student population. We have found that different groups of vulnerable children—those in foster care, those who have been abused or neglected but remain with their families, those who are homeless—have strikingly similar educational experiences and trajectories. This

suggests that the educational trajectories we observe for children served by public social service systems may represent the educational trajectories and chances of school success of a larger population of vulnerable children.

Disruptive life experiences

The life experiences of vulnerable children and youth become the background for understanding their progress in school. Children recently separated from a primary caregiver, abused or neglected, placed in a new foster care home, or exposed to violence in their family or neighborhood are all vulnerable to suffering psychological trauma. Disruptions in the lives of children due, for example, to foster care placement or homelessness can delay entry into school during critical early elementary grades when children develop reading skills, cause them to miss weeks of school at a time, and/or result in switching schools, even several times in a year. Parental support for these children may be limited or absent altogether. Disengagement from classroom learning or disruptive behavior in school may be a normal and adaptive response to life circumstances that diminish a child's ability to focus and distract the child's attention from learning.

Starting out behind, failing to close the gap

Chapin Hall studies have found that a pattern of being old for grade and behind academically emerges early among vulnerable children. Being old for grade in CPS has been found to be a very strong predictor of dropping out of high school. [6] Nearly one out of ten children involved with the child welfare system was old for grade in first grade, double the rate for other CPS students. By

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[5] In low-achieving schools, 25 to 35 percent of third- through eighth-grade students score at or above national norms in reading. In extremely low-achieving schools, fewer than 25 percent of students score at or above national norms.

[6] Allensworth, E. (2004, April). *Ending social promotion: Dropout rates in Chicago after implementation of the eighth grade promotion gate.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Roderick, M. (1994). Grade retention and school dropouts: Investigating the association. *American Educational Research Journal,* 31,729–759.

third grade, over one-third of these students were old for grade and this rate persisted through eighth grade. Fewer than one-third of abused and neglected children and homeless children scored at or above the median on reading achievement tests in third through eighth grades. These students also advanced in their learning at an annual rate slower than their peers.

The overall performance of the schools contributed to the struggles of these students. The learning of students in low-performing schools lagged behind students in the school system by about half a year, and the learning of vulnerable students in low-performing schools lagged behind their peers in the same school by another half year.

High rates of discipline problems and behavioral challenges

In interviews conducted as part of Chapin Hall's studies, social service professionals shared the view that some of the children with whom they work react to their life circumstances or changes in these circumstances with anger, aggressiveness, shame, or depression. These feelings lead to school-related problems such as skipping class, absenteeism, and acting out. We confirmed the presence of these problem behaviors by finding higher-than-average rates of school disciplinary code infractions among the children in our studies—one and a half to two times the rate of other CPS students. In many cases, the children were young and the offenses were serious; almost 20 percent of 6- to 10-year-old students in foster care violated the district's disciplinary code and two-thirds of these offenses were violent, such as fighting, bullying, or battery. Social service professionals were concerned that the response of school personnel to the aggressive or disruptive behaviors of these children was too often punitive:

Schools often don't have a lot of other interventions beside suspension and detention. I think that is why these kids present such a challenge. The first thing schools do when they are dealing with behavior problems is they suspend. Especially for a kid who is disconnected to school, that really does not do very much for them. (Education Liaison)

Punitive responses can reinforce the trauma to which students may be reacting and perpetuate a pattern of student behavior and adult response.[7] Over time, such patterns may increasingly restrict opportunities to learn.

Special education as a primary response to vulnerable children

High rates of special education classifications among children made vulnerable by life circumstances show up quite early—in first grade. Rates of special education classification for abused and neglected children in first grade were one and a half to two times as great as for their peers. By eighth grade, at least 30 percent of children who had had contact with the child welfare system were in special education, classified either as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed.

Our data suggest that there are higher rates of classification after disruptive, possibly traumatic, life events. Compared to all CPS students, children in foster care were three times as likely to be placed into special education during the year they entered care. Children who experienced more than one foster residence in a single year stood an even greater chance of being classified as a special education student. We see similar patterns among children when they become homeless. A determination of "emotional disturbance" is prevalent among vulnerable children and youth.

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[7] Greenwald, R. (2002). The role of trauma in conduct disorder. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 6* (1), 5–23.

Of all K–8 CPS students with a classification of emotional disturbance, an astonishing 40 percent were children who had had contact with the child welfare system.

Often teachers and professionals outside schools, such as child welfare caseworkers, believe that if a child needs more services than are available in the regular classroom, the child should be screened for special education. It is the task of school psychologists and social workers to assess the source of a student's problem behaviors and to distinguish between short-term reactions to life events and more chronic underlying conditions or impairments. Special education is intended to serve students who meet the latter criteria. However, our interviews with school psychologists and social workers revealed that they face significant challenges in making their assessments. The biological caregiver, who likely knows most about the student and his/her history, may be unavailable. The student may be a poor informant in part because he/she is in the middle of a traumatic life event. Also, if the student is new to a school, school records may not be available.

It should be of concern that a significant proportion of children in our studies continued to display serious behavioral problems at school *after* receiving a special education classification. Moreover, the vast majority of students retain their special education classification throughout their school years.

Student failure is a system failure

Given disrupted educational experiences and higher rates of special education classifications relative to their peers, both of which often start at an early point in their schooling, it is not surprising that the high school outcomes for vulnerable youth are poor. They graduate at rates substantially below their peers in a school system where the overall graduation rate, at 54 percent, is already troubling.[8] Only 30 to 40 percent of teens who had any contact with child welfare system from early childhood graduated. Of the 60 to 70 percent of students who did not graduate, most dropped out, but some left school because they were incarcerated.

The outcomes for students in special education with a classification of emotional disturbance deserve particular attention. Fewer than 20 percent of these students graduated. In comparison, a slightly larger percentage of these students were incarcerated. These numbers tell us that we are sending more of these youth to prison than we are graduating from high school.

Interviews with probation officers, education liaisons, and other professionals touched on why vulnerable youth drop out of school.

> They've had so little success in school that they've become truant. At 13, 14, they just stop going to school and then the school says well it's a truancy issue, but it's not really a truancy issue, it's probably a lack of success in school, lack of achievement. (Probation Officer)

Although they noted poor attendance and high rates of truancy and expulsion, these professionals also raised the issue of the suitability of regular high school programs for students who are significantly behind and struggling.

> They put her in [a regular CPS high school]. Then the case manager [at the school] called me and said, "Why are they putting her here? She has no credits. She has no high school experience. She's seventeen." With [the kids] that I work with … 16 and 17 and have no credits, it's not going to work for them. (Probation Officer)

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[8] Allensworth, E. (2005, January). *Graduation and Dropout Trends in Chicago: A Look at Cohorts of Students from 1991 to 2004.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

A Chapin Hall study of court-involved youth showed these youth to be further disadvantaged by school policies and practices that force them out of the regular public schools.

Although many of the public social service systems that serve children have begun to pay attention to educational needs and academic performance, these systems are designed for short-term involvement in children's lives. Public social service systems should be held accountable for supporting children's learning and working with schools to meet children's educational needs. However, the primary responsibility for improving the educational experiences of and outcomes for these children remains with the public school system.

Vulnerable Students and Educational Improvement

The educational improvement community is committed to improving educational outcomes for all students, and in the last two decades, it has targeted the quality of instruction and the organizational capacities to support instruction as the core problems of school improvement. Considerable progress has been made toward the development of ambitious instructional practices, including curricula; innovative professional development models; teaching expertise; leadership capacity for instructional improvement efforts; teaching and learning standards; assessments in support of student learning in the classroom; and accountability measures. However, the rhetoric of "all students can learn" or "all students can achieve at high levels" tends to gloss over the challenges for schools in working with vulnerable children and youth.

In a recent study, "The Essential Supports for School Improvement," the authors link high densities of abused or neglected students in K–8 schools to weak essential supports.[9] The authors identified five essential school supports for improved student learning: leadership, professional capacity, ambitious instruction, parent–community ties, and student-centered learning climate. Schools weak in most of the supports were four to five times as likely to demonstrate stagnant learning gains as schools strong in most of the supports. Schools strong in most of the supports were at least ten times as likely as schools their counterparts to show substantial gains in both reading and mathematics. Evidence of the influence of a large population of vulnerable children and youth on schools led the study authors to observe that all schools may be able to improve, but "some confront much more severe problems than others," and their improvement is rare.

Serious consideration needs to be given to the distinct problems of practice that underperforming schools face in working with vulnerable children. As one example, these schools work with students who start their schooling at a disadvantage relative to their peers and progress at a slower pace. One perspective on this problem is that the graded school—i.e., students advance through grades based on their age—will fail these students because it labels and segregates them and ultimately drives them away.[10] It is not our intent to endorse this idea, but rather to suggest that what might apply to most schools and students could work to the disadvantage of underperforming schools and vulnerable students. These schools require distinct solutions that are responsive to the needs of their student populations.

[9] Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Bryk, A.S., Easton, J.Q., & Luppescu, S. (2006, September). *The Essential Supports for School Improvement.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
[10] Cuban, L. (1989). The 'At-Risk' Label and the Problem of Urban School Reform. *The Phi Delta Kappan,* 70 (10), 780–784, 799–801.

One way to understand *vulnerable* is that social and economic resources in the family and/or community are unable to support a child's development. How can we develop strong schools not only when many students are vulnerable, but also when the schools likely will be limited by the same factors that make the students vulnerable? A finding of the study of essential school supports suggests this is possible—2 percent of schools with high concentrations of abused or neglected children demonstrated strong essential supports.

Innovation and Development

A shift is beginning to occur in the educational research community toward an entrepreneurial response to educational problems of practice. At the federal level, the Institute of Education Sciences has recently created a new research program, the Chronically Low-Performing Schools Research Initiative, acknowledging the need to develop interventions specifically for underperforming schools. As an example of the movement toward innovation in the policy area, Advance Illinois, a state-level advocacy group for educational improvement in Illinois, proposes an Innovation and Performance Fund as a way to allocate state educational funds to schools. We propose that efforts to solve the problem of underperforming schools be coupled with efforts to develop innovative school-based approaches to respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable children and youth.

Underperforming schools might find a starting point in frameworks that, while recognizing the importance of strong instruction and a strong school organization,

also include attention to the needs of students and the challenges in their lives.[11] Yet, applying these frameworks will require addressing the pernicious split in schools between the work of instruction and the work of social support. The current educational policy climate, which is focused on accountability and directs staff energies toward instruction, reinforces this split; teachers in underperforming schools in particular feel the pressure to focus on instruction.

Educators acknowledge the importance of social supports, but not necessarily their implications for the role of teachers in working with their students or for schools as educational organizations. The push for social support tends to come from social services and mental health professionals. There needs to be a shift across the field of education to recognize that behavioral problems in underperforming schools interfere with learning and that social support is not an "extra," but essential to student achievement. This means considering what teachers in underperforming schools should know about working with vulnerable children and youth and how schools should be organized to respond to them.

Over 20 years ago, Lee Shulman wrote, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching," in which he discusses the knowledge teachers need in order to teach, focusing on content and pedagogy.[12] Shulman's concepts guide teacher training programs today, and this seminal article can be a starting point to ask what *else* teachers in schools with large numbers of vulnerable children and youth need to know.

- What do teachers need to know about the effects of disruptive or traumatic life experiences on the students they teach and what these effects mean for their role?

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[11] One example is the High-Performing, High-Poverty Readiness Model proposed by Mass Insight, the educational research organization that has developed the turnaround approach, though its model could apply to any school committed to improvement. Another example is proposed by the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools. Response to Intervention provides another model for thinking about how to systematically meet the educational and social support needs of students.

[12] Shulman, L. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher,* 15, 4–14.

- What do they need to know about the instructional opportunities and challenges of working with these students?
- What instructional principles might guide them, or what practices might be effective in working with this population?

Without ideas and knowledge of how to work with vulnerable children and youth, teachers who are well trained in their subject area may find themselves as ill equipped to lead instruction in classrooms with vulnerable children. We need to identify the instructional ideas and knowledge in education today that might address the needs of these students and work on developing new ideas.

There is work to be done at the organizational level as well. Just as there has been a hard push from educational researchers, policymakers, and school leaders to improve classroom instruction, there needs to be a push to improve what is perhaps best captured by the term "school climate." In the last decade, a variety of activities and practices have been introduced in schools to focus their improvement on instruction, such as classroom walk-throughs, ongoing coaching of teachers, and use of data in instruction and school planning. All of these have meant rethinking and relearning the roles of administrators and teachers with regard to instruction. Something along these same lines needs to occur to redefine adult roles and responsibilities with regard to school climate. For example, restorative principles and practices offer an alternative approach to responding to student misconduct with punishment.[13] In its charter schools in Chicago, the Urban Education Institute has created the role of Director of Family and Community Engagement to replace the Assistant Principal role, offering a new vision for a role traditionally responsible for discipline in schools.

It would also be an innovation for professionals in education and the social services to collaborate on improving achievement and student behavior. For example, teachers could help social workers understand critical stages in learning and skill development. What reading skills need to develop in grades K–2 so that by third grade a child can successfully make the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn? Social workers could then better guide parents and caregivers in ways to support a child's schooling and also work more effectively with school staff to support a child's educational program.

Social workers could, in turn, help teachers learn how to recognize possible signs of trauma and coach them on how to respond effectively to students who may be acting out their distress in the classroom. They could work with school administrators on new disciplinary approaches and teacher training. Professionals in both systems could learn together how a disrupted life can disrupt identity development and ways to help vulnerable children connect with their life experiences. Professionals in both systems could take more of a preventive approach to misbehavior, working together to support students' healthy development through school activities or programs.

In focusing on innovation, we further suggest that educational policy priorities, such as charter schools and accountability measures based on achievement tests, be considered from the perspective of how they will benefit vulnerable children—or not. For example, the policy of turnaround schools is intended to make sure that disadvantaged children receive a high-quality education, which is critical. However, from the perspective of engaging vulnerable children and youth in school, changing an entire school staff may be yet another traumatic disruption for them and may communicate that school is not in fact a reliable

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[13] The concept of restorative practices has its roots in criminal justice and focuses on repairing harm done to people and relationships.

source of stability and continuity in their lives. Also, the replacement of a school staff leaves unaddressed the issues central to the educational experiences of this population: teacher training, instructional materials and practices, and organizational structures, policies, and norms.

Yet, turnaround efforts represent an opportunity as well. Underperforming schools tend not to be perceived as good candidates for developing and testing innovations because their conditions are not supportive enough to give innovations a chance at success. However, underperforming schools need to be the focus of development efforts if we are to identify what these schools might do to make a positive difference in the lives of vulnerable children. Turnaround schools may be an opportunity to develop and test solutions to meet the needs of the vulnerable children and youth. The key will be installing school leaders and developing entire school staffs that—with the full participation of mental health professionals and social workers—are open and committed to this purpose.

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families, and their communities.

Chapin Hall's areas of research include child maltreatment prevention, child welfare systems and foster care, youth justice, schools and their connections with social services and community organizations, early childhood initiatives, community change initiatives, workforce development, out-of-school time initiatives, economic supports for families, and child well-being indicators.

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Related Publications

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