Introduction

As America enters the twenty-first century full of hope and promise, too many of our neediest students are being left behind. We have a genuine national crisis. More and more, we are divided into two nations—one that reads, and one that doesn’t; one that dreams, and one that doesn’t. These are the words of the president of the United States concerning the educational plight of mostly urban, minority, and poor children:

• There are nearly 600 urban school districts in this nation. (An urban district is defined as one in which 75 percent or more of the households served are in the central city of a metropolitan area.)
• Over 12 million children attend schools in urban districts.
• Some 43 percent of minority children attend urban schools. (Most urban schools are predominantly—often completely—minority.)
• In most urban schools more than half the students are poor, qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches.
• Two-thirds or more of urban-school children fail to reach even the “basic” level on national tests. Urban students perform far worse, on average, than children who live outside central cities on virtually every measure of academic performance. The longer they stay in school, the wider that gap grows.¹

Sadly, too many of these children are being written off as uneducable, undereducable, learning disabled, and having special needs, along with a host of other labels used to explain why they perform so poorly in comparison with other children. When offering a reason, the explanation is often in reference to factors over which the children have no control. For example, children cannot control where they are born, the communities in which they grow up, the marital status of their parents, or the economic conditions under which they must live. Yet, all of these are used to explain (and sometimes justify) the low academic performance and adverse social behavior of these children.

What is most alarming are the stakes involved. Most urban minority fourth graders cannot read at the basic level. That is, these 10-year-olds cannot read at a level that will guarantee them any kind of real academic performance. An alarm that has been sounded, but not yet answered.

future. With little hope of an academic future, the chances of a successful social future are equally dim. Mix poverty into the equation, and the numbers reach calamitous proportions. The vast majority of poor urban children read below the basic level. Given the fact that their current level of education offers few positive options in their future endeavors, the chances are great that negative options will prevail. Perhaps this prevalence of negative options explains the reason why most prisoners in state correctional institutions do not have a high school diploma.

The truth, however, is that there is nothing fundamentally or inherently wrong with these children. They simply suffer from the failure or inability of their support systems to provide them with what they need to function effectively and successfully in society. Included in those systems is the one that exists to educate them. The critical need is an educational system that equips them to read and inspires them to dream.

An educational package that effectively educates urban children to achieve must contain three essential elements. These elements are like the three legs of a stool—all three are necessary for the stool to function properly. The three ingredients that make up an effective urban education package pertain to the school, the staff, and the student. The chart below outlines the elements of each component.

Effective Urban Schools

Effective Schools
- Clear School Mission
- High Expectations
- Instructional Leadership
- Student Assessment
- Safe & Orderly Environment

Equipped Staff
- Knowledgeable
- Motivational
- Adaptable
- Inspirational
- Instructional

Enriched Students
- Financial Resources
- Social Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Spiritual/Moral Resources

Over 12 million children attend urban schools.
Effective Schools

The **school** must be effective in that it achieves high and equitable levels of student learning. It is expected that all children regardless of their race, gender, place of residence, and socioeconomic status learn the core knowledge, concepts, and skills necessary for being productive and resourceful. Overall, the instructional program must be developed around the content of the subject matter, the context the student already knows, and the method through which the student prefers to learn. It must take into consideration what the student should know, how the student will be assessed, and how the student learns. Schools that successfully educate urban, minority, and poor children usually have the characteristics listed below.

*The questions (in italics) will assist you in determining the degree to which these correlates of effective schools are true of your school.*

**Clear School Mission**

In an effective school, there is a clearly articulated school mission through which the staff members share an understanding of and commitment to instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability. The staff members accept responsibility for students’ learning of the school’s essential curricular goals.

*State your school’s mission and the level of staff connection to the school’s mission:*
**High Expectations for Success**

In an effective school, there is a climate of expectation in which the staff members believe and demonstrate that all students can attain mastery of the essential content and school skills, and the staff members also believe that they have the capability to help all students achieve that mastery.

*Does your school believe that all children can learn?*  
Yes____  No____

List two school policies that demonstrate how staff expectations are implemented to ensure that all students can attain mastery of the essential content and school skills.

1. _______________________________________________________
2. _______________________________________________________

**Safe and Orderly Environment**

In an effective school, students learn in an orderly, clean, purposeful, and professional atmosphere that is free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning.

*How would a visitor describe the orderliness of your school and the students’ behavior?*

____ Very Orderly  ____Somewhat Orderly  
____Somewhat Disorderly  ____Disorderly

**Home-School Relations**

In an effective school, parents understand and support the school’s basic mission and are given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school achieve that mission.

*On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the level of parental involvement and support for the school’s mission from low support and involvement to high support and involvement.*  
1 2 3 4 5

List two activities that your school practices to engage the parents and promote parental involvement and support of the school’s mission.

1. _______________________________________________________
2. _______________________________________________________

**Student Assessment**

In an effective school, student academic progress is measured regularly and on an ongoing basis. A variety of assessment procedures are used. The results of the assessments are used to improve individual student performance, the instructional program, and teaching strategies.

*What kinds of formal and informal assessments does your school use?*

_________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________
Writing is a reflection of students’ diction, grammar, and general ability to articulate thoughts. Teachers in all disciplines should emphasize writing as a powerful tool for learning and an effective tool for demonstrating what has been learned.

Students should have clear expectations for learning.

Teachers must provide each child with equitable access to the necessary learning resources and to adequate learning opportunities.

Students should spend at least 90 minutes daily in reading and math.

Students should be given homework assignments that reinforce and extend academic concepts learned during the school day.

Teachers should prioritize vocabulary building and the development of effective language skills for mastery of standard English.

The curriculum must agree with and support the beliefs, philosophy, mission, goals, and objectives of the school.

The curriculum must meet the academic levels of the students.

The teachers’ guide/edition should provide clear, easy-to-follow instructions that enable even novice teachers to carry out their task with a high level of success and effectiveness.

### equipped Staff

The teacher is the key to the learning process. Therefore, the staff must be both professionally and personally trained, equipped, and able to work with the urban children who attend their schools. Like the schools, the teachers must possess six characteristics to educate urban children effectively.

As an educator, check the appropriate box to indicate whether you do each of the listed teaching components regularly, somewhat, or never.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional</th>
<th>Regularly</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
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<td>Teachers should clearly understand that it is their role and responsibility to provide effective and empowering instruction for each child.</td>
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<td>Students should be evaluated at the end of each unit in order to maintain current and up-to-date progress of student learning and to identify challenges of taking exams. Teachers should identify test-taking strategies for student mastery of test-taking skills.</td>
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<td>Teachers should be familiar with the different learning styles of students and use diverse methods and strategies to ensure the success of these diverse learners.</td>
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<td>Teachers must facilitate the maximum growth of each learner by making informed academic adaptations that match and build on the learner’s prior knowledge, experiences, skills, and beliefs.</td>
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<td>Teachers must ensure that learning outcomes are important, meaningful, relevant, and useful to each student.</td>
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<td>Teachers should employ only those teaching strategies that have a proven record of success for yielding high academic outcomes.</td>
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<td>All textbooks must be examined to ensure that materials are culturally sensitive. Do pictures and authors reflect diverse cultures and races?</td>
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<td>Teachers should be sensitive to and aware of cultural differences and the impact they have on learning and classroom behavior.</td>
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<td>The purpose of learning should be relevant to the students’ needs. The teacher must create and stimulate student interest in the subject content.</td>
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<td>Teachers should challenge every student to learn.</td>
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<td>Teachers should promote individual empowerment, self-efficacy, positive self-regard, and a belief in societal reform.</td>
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<td>Teachers should establish a classroom climate that supports and expects overall student success.</td>
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<td>Teacher collaboration and teamwork are essential for building a strong learning community. These can be accomplished through ways such as sharing teaching strategies, teaching in teams, observing other teachers’ lessons, and solving problems collaboratively.</td>
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<td>Teachers must nurture learning-support communities for each child (such as families, peers, homework hotlines, and community centers).</td>
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<td>Teachers should build positive and supportive school and classroom learning environments that are grounded in mutual and genuine respect for cultural diversity. Buildings and classroom decorum must reflect a diverse society.</td>
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<td>Teachers must value diversity as well as human commonalities; teachers should be sensitive to and aware of cultural differences and the impact they have on learning and classroom behavior.</td>
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<td>Teachers should work diligently to obtain and maintain parental support and trust.</td>
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<td>Teachers must promote a classroom climate that is built on Christ-centered principles, social justice, democracy, and equity.</td>
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<td>Teachers must build the self-esteem of students by routinely using positive reinforcement to encourage academic achievement, build Christian character, and foster desired student behavior.</td>
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<td>Teachers must hold each child to a high academic and personal standard of excellence.</td>
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The great challenge facing the schools and educators of urban children is how to educate these students to function on the same level as their more advantaged peers in nonurban schools. Addressing this challenge starts with an understanding of the children with whom we are working. Urban children possess relatively few of the resources necessary for being academically productive and successful. These resources come in many forms. Besides financial resources, there are other resources that play a vital role in the social and academic well-being of children. Underresourced children will have to be resourced in their areas of need. The reason that attempts at educating these children fail by and large is that there is a failure to recognize and address all the resource areas. Compensation must be made to fill in the needs gaps.

Financial Resources: those material goods that are developed by acquisition and that can be used productively

Cultural Resources: the knowledge of the beliefs, customs, practices, and rules of a social group—all of which can be used productively

Intellectual Resources: those human capacities (mental and physical) that are developed by education and that can be used productively

Social Resources: those relationships and contacts that are either acquired or developed naturally and that can be used productively

Emotional Resources: feelings of sufficiency and determination, both of which can be used productively

Spiritual Resources: those belief structures that provide the bases for purpose, morals, values, discipline, and self-worth and that can be used productively

The following chart demonstrates the difference that the level of resources can make in a science fair project:
As a result, in many instances the child’s grade is as much a reflection of the resources available to the child as it is of the child’s intellectual ability. The effective school, then, must compensate to the degree possible for the resource-deficient child as outlined below:

Children with a deficiency of **financial resources** must be given a quality education without tuition as a barrier. The school must set its tuition policy according to the family’s ability to pay. While every family should pay something so that there is a physical investment in the child’s education, the education should not be priced beyond the family’s affordability range.

Children with a deficiency of **intellectual resources** must be given an education that
1. Assumes that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the child and that the child has a God-given ability to learn
2. Assesses where the child is academically so as to take the guesswork out of teaching the child
3. Assigns instructional materials that best fit the child’s learning style and that take into consideration the child’s home environment (e.g., if the child has limited intellectual resources at home, the school should have a policy of not sending home any homework that requires a parent’s help)
4. Assists the students in the learning process

Children with a deficiency of **social resources** must be given an education that
1. Is taught by teachers who are culturally, racially, and socially sensitive to them
2. Recognizes the children’s limited social network and seeks to compensate for it, usually with the help of volunteers
3. Exposes them to the broader community outside their urban districts

Children with a deficiency of **cultural resources** must be given an education that includes training in and development of cultural skills. The skill training falls into three basic categories:
1. Interacting skills, such as
   - greeting others
   - talking with others
   - getting attention
   - making requests
2. Giving skills, such as
   - giving an apology
   - giving criticism
   - giving a compliment

3. Accepting skills, such as
   - accepting instructions
   - accepting criticism
   - accepting disagreement

(adapted from Teaching Social Skills to Youth, Boys Town, NE: Boys Town Press)

Children with a deficiency of **emotional resources** must be given an education that
1. Is more relational than institutional
2. Works with the parents so that the home and school form a partnership in the child’s development
3. Provides teachers who are aware of the child’s situation and are able to encourage and speak positive expectancy communications to the child

Children with a deficiency of **spiritual resources** must be given an education that
1. Is biblically integrated
2. Seeks to disciple the child in a relationship with Christ
3. Speaks to the child’s heart as well as to the child’s head

*Does your school have a procedure for identifying your students’ resource deficiencies?*

_____Yes    _____No     _____Somewhat

**FACTS**

In an effort to assist in the implementation of best practices, ACSI’s Department of Urban School Services exists to help Christian schools and educators effectively educate urban students. The department provides services and resources in five areas that are represented by the acronym FACTS:

**FUND-RAISING AND DEVELOPMENT**
Many urban families cannot afford the cost of a tuition-based school. Urban School Services provides consultation for schools in developing a contributions-based program in order to make their services affordable to economically disadvantaged families.

**ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT**
Urban schools and educators target and serve children who are academically at risk. In many instances, these children have been undereducated. Urban School Services offers professional assistance designed to assist in developing an educational program that effectively serves underresourced children.

**CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**
The curriculum is related to academic enrichment in that it is the tool that delivers the educational package. Urban School Services provides assistance to urban schools and educators in designing and developing a curriculum for urban students that is both academically excellent and socially and culturally relevant for the urban child.

**TEACHER TRAINING**
Increasingly, teachers in urban settings are culturally, socially, and racially removed from the students sitting in their classrooms. In order to be effective, teachers must know and relate to their students. Urban School Services provides consultation in diversity assessment and training for urban schools and educators.

**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**
ACSI offers nationally recognized accreditation programs for preschools, elementary schools, and secondary schools. These programs enable schools to pursue and maintain academic and spiritual excellence. ACSI also provides professional credentials for teachers and administrators.
Best Practices
for Effective Urban Education