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Beating the Odds

Michael F. Addonizio
Wayne State University

C. Philip Kearney
University of Michigan

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The authors have a forthcoming book titled Education Reform and the Limits of Policy: Lessons from Michigan, *which the Upjohn Institute is publishing. This article uses that book as a basis to discuss a recent announcement from the Obama administration. Interested readers may pre-order the book at http://www.upjohninstitute. org/publications/forthcoming.html.*

In early September 2011, the Obama administration announced that it intends to waive cornerstone requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), particularly the requirement that *all* students be prof cient in reading and math by 2014. In the words of President Obama, this waiver will "give states the freedom to set their own student-achievement goals and design their own interventions for failing schools." The NCLB waiver plan, in effect, replaces the law's current deadline for mandatory proficiency by 2014 with an approach that gives states considerable flexibility in setting their own goals and determining the shape and timing of their interventions. In exchange, the states must commit to three actions: 1) adopt standards for career and college readiness, 2) focus improvement efforts on the most troubled schools, and 3) create guidelines for teacher evaluation based in part on student performance (McNeil and Klein 2011). To set the waiver plan in motion, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has released guidelines providing additional information regarding the plan, including the specific criteria that the states and their local school districts would have to meet in order to receive the waivers (U.S. Department of Education 2011).

In this article, rather than outline and comment upon the entire NCLB waiver plan, we direct our attention to the second of the three actions identified above: focus improvement efforts on the most troubled schools. We see this aspect of the waiver plan as a promising opportunity to pursue a ready-made experiment centered on the two complementary questions of educational adequacy and efficiency. Under the second action, states will be required to develop and implement a system of differentiated recognition, which calls for the state to establish three new categories of schools: 1) priority schools—those in the bottom 5 percent in terms of academic prof ciency; 2) focus schools—those with the largest achievement gaps between subgroups, such as between racial-ethnic groups; and 3) reward schools. The reward schools, in turn, are of three types: 1) the highest performing schools in the state, the top 5 percent; 2) the highest progress schools in the state, the 5 percent with the highest rates of improvement; and 3) the schools in

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the state that beat the odds—that is, they performed better than predicted on student achievement and on closing achievement gaps.

We focus our article on this last group of schools and the lessons we as a state can learn from them. These are schools that, based on their socioeconomic and racial-ethnic characteristics, as well as their past records of low academic performance, demonstrate substantial annual improvement in student academic prof ciency far beyond what might normally be expected. In effect, these schools, despite their challenging circumstances, literally beat the odds. The

balance of this article outlines a strategy to identify the key characteristics of these exemplary schools and determine the resource levels needed to replicate their success in schools throughout Michigan.

The identification of these schools, which is required under the waiver provisions, and the rich data lode on each of these schools available from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), present a superb opportunity to explore in depth the twin and oft-beguiling questions of educational adequacy and educational efficiency. If Michigan were to apply for a waiver, researchers could plumb the MDE and CEPI data banks to identify, explore, and catalog the specific interventions—curricular and otherwise—that produce these improvements in the "beat the odds" schools, hence, addressing the adequacy question. In particular, the MDE's Office of School Improvement would help researchers identify and record the essential components in a "beat the odds" school's program design, as well as the steps the school followed in implementing its design. The Office of School Improvement also would become the primary conduit for disseminating proven practices for beating the odds to other low-achieving schools. Such a strategy could boost achievement levels across schools in Michigan, where academic outcomes lag behind those in the majority of states. As shown in Table 1, Michigan's 4th and 8th graders fall short of their nationwide counterparts in reading and math achievement, respectively, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and fall far short of the levels achieved in Massachusetts, the highest scoring state.

Tapping into the same data lode, researchers also would be able to identify

Table 1 Academic Achievement in Reading and Mathematics, Percent Proficient, NAEP 2009, Grade 4 Elementary and Grade 8 Middle School

	NAEP grade 4 reading	NAEP grade 8 math
Michigan	30	31
United States	33	34
Massachusetts	47	52

SOURCE: *Education Week* (2009).

and catalog the actual costs of the interventions that led to the improved performance, hence, addressing the efficiency question. The MDE's Office of Financial Management and its Michigan Educational Information System would provide the fnancial information—revenues and expenditures—necessary to "cost out" the specific programmatic interventions implemented in a given "beat the odds" school. The ultimate question, of course, is how much will a successful intervention cost? To truly improve academic performance in Michigan's most troubled schools, the state will need to produce a flood of "beat the odds" schools. Such costing-out studies are gaining credibility in education policy circles and in the courts, where state school fnance systems have been challenged (Koski 2011). This approach uses student achievement and expenditure data to estimate the costs of achieving targeted proficiency levels on state assessments in all schools and districts, adjusting for the additional costs faced by individual schools who educate children who live in poverty or have language or special education needs.[1]

This approach to school funding and policymaking, while enjoying growing support across the states, is not without its critics. One line of criticism asserts that costing out fails to identify specific policies, programs, and practices that lead to academic success. Answers to these important questions, however, may be found through careful case studies of the "beat the odds" schools that are initially identified through analysis of state administrative data. Both quantitative and qualitative methods would be needed to identify and analyze these exceptional schools and help export the details of their successes to other schools across the state.

A second criticism, articulated most forcefully by Stanford University economist Eric Hanushek (2007), is that these studies do not capture the true costs of attaining the target outcomes. Rather, they merely cite the spending levels of schools that may or may not be efficient. This argument rests on the concept of *economic cost*, a term often used interchangeably with *efficiency* to refer to the minimum expenditure required

to achieve a particular outcome. In the context of education and school finance, the task Hanushek poses is to establish the desired level of achievement and then determine the least amount of money needed to produce it.

In our view, no educational cost study can attain this theoretical ideal. While a least-cost method of production may be ascertained for the manufacture of a toaster or an automobile of specified quality, educational achievement is far too complex a phenomenon to reliably identify an economically efficient means of production. We find the argument of Michael Rebell of Columbia University more persuasive on the issue of cost studies in education. Rebell (2006) observes that " . . . no type of economic analysis can establish a definitive causal connection between a precise funding

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amount and a specific education outcome because the educational process as it affects any individual obviously involves an array of judgmental and environmental factors" (p. 466).

However, by identifying the proven or most promising programs and practices in Michigan schools that beat the odds, and objectively determining the resource levels needed to export them to other schools with large numbers of at-risk children, children with disabilities, or English language learners, we can move beyond the ad hoc political deal making that has characterized Michigan school funding in the past. Indeed, despite the constant clamor for improved educational outcomes in the state, Michigan's K–12 funding has been steadily eroded in recent years in real terms, refecting competing political priorities, including substantial tax cuts, with little consideration of educational

need, cost, and efficiency. Well-designed studies exploiting Michigan's substantial programmatic, financial, and student data sets can reveal the valuable lessons of our "beat the odds" schools and vastly improve the quality of our school funding decisions. We have the capability to conduct these studies. What we need now is the political will to do so—to take action to capitalize on the opportunity currently offered under the NCLB waiver plan.

Note

1. Four alternative methods have been developed by researchers to estimate the cost of an adequate education. A description of each method is beyond the scope of this brief essay. For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each, see Rebell (2006).

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Michael F. Addonizio is a professor in the Department of Education at Wayne State University. C. Philip Kearney is a professor emeritus of education at the University of Michigan.