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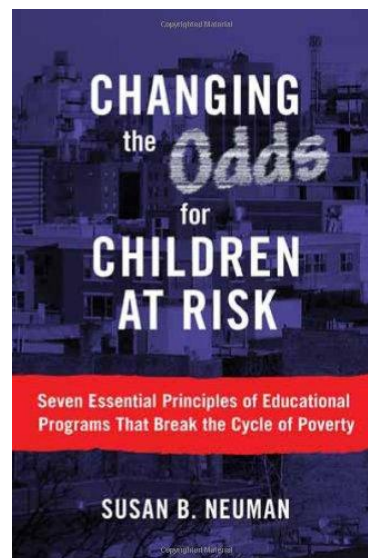
Neuman, Susan B. (2009). *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Programs That Break the Cycle of Poverty*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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In Flint, Michigan, an invisible hazard lurks on walls and in water, on the work clothes of a man named Roy who works two jobs to rent a trailer barely big enough for the first baby steps of his toddler son. “An insidious poison” is how Susan Neuman describes environmental lead. “It quite literally damages the brain” (p. 72).

“Did you get the lead results?” a social worker asks Roy’s wife on page 83. She is concerned about the blood contamination levels of the couple’s toddler son. She reminds the young mother to wash the lead off her husband’s clothes before he enters the home.



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Neuman does not dwell on the causes of the lead contamination. She does not call for the polluters to remove the lead. This is not because she supports polluters or insists upon being willfully naïve. Rather, her laser-sharp focus here is Early Head Start, a family support program that provides dozens of inter-related services, including advice on ameliorating the effects of living in a lead-contaminated community.

In its pragmatic emphasis on the immediate situation of those most affected by the problem, this story is representative of Neuman's approach. In this book, poverty is the disease and research-based interventions are the cure. Society is not sick. Poor people are the "patients". Their environments are "dysfunctional" (vii). Their families are plagued by "social pathologies" (vii). Their parenting is often "irresponsible" (11). Accordingly, Neuman's treatments aspire not to transform the world in which we live but to more efficiently and rationally direct resources towards helping our most vulnerable citizens better adapt to society as it now stands. An outgrowth of this approach is that those who live above the poverty line are generally untouched by her reforms. They are not prodded to integrate neighborhoods or to Robin Hood away some of their own children's school funding to less affluent communities. A very real and practical benefit of this approach is that those who benefit from society's current structure would be unlikely to block Neuman's reforms. In fact, her reforms provide such proven and immediate relief in such a broadly appealing manner that I found myself frustrated that they had not already been implemented.

The book focuses on interventions that occur in a wide variety of settings, almost all of them outside of schools. Some readers may thus expect reforms more sweeping than Neuman's tightly-focused prescriptions. But she adheres to non-transformative approach to problems of poverty, with a focus is best understood as 'in society' rather than as 'societal.'



Susan B. Neuman is a Professor in Educational Studies at the University of Michigan. Previously, she served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education. She worked to establish the Early Reading First program and the Early Childhood Professional Development Education Program. Susan is Director of the Michigan Research Program on Ready to Learn, which includes projects all working to change the odds for children in poverty.

That said, Neuman is not easy to pigeonhole. As Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education under the Republican administration of George W. Bush, she was at the helm during the formation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Yet upon returning to her post at the University of Michigan's School of Education, she spoke out against those who used NCLB as an excuse for "vilifying teachers" and destroying public education in order to replace it with "market forces and privatization" (Wallis, 2008). Nowhere in her book does she support the vouchers, charter schools or other market-style reforms currently popular with conservatives and centrist or neoliberal Democrats.

Her book does contain threads of both fiscal conservatism and NCLB-style calls for accountability. "Eliminate unnecessary programs" and "Consolidate" (p. x1) are among Neuman's recommendations for the government. With bullet-pointed efficiency and *A Nation at Risk*-style *sturm und drang*, her Introduction suggests that programs must "always hold themselves accountable for results" (p. x) and that "soft process measures and anecdotal reports will no longer do" (p. xi) if we are to "change the odds for this army of otherwise lost children" (p. x).

After laying out her overall philosophies in this Introduction, Neuman goes on to highlight exemplary programs on the four fronts where she fights her battle on poverty: the family, early child care and education, the community, and after-school programs. Each of these arenas gets its own treatment in chapters 4 through 7. This is the meat of the book. But Neuman first rallies research to support her reforms (Chapter 1, "The Critical Early Years for Changing the Odds"), explains how these reforms should be evaluated and funded (Chapter 2, "Changing the Odds by Funding What Works") and then elaborates upon the seven essential principles of the book's subtitle (Chapter 3, "The Seven Essentials for Changing the Odds").

Neuman's first chapter draws from a wide variety of fields including biology, sociology, neuroscience, psychology and economics. As the title suggests ("The Critical Early Years for Changing the Odds"), Neuman marshals research to provide evidence that interventions should be more like vaccines than antibiotics, in that they should

start before the problem begins. In doing so, Neuman provides the oft-heard evidence that the brain is particularly sensitive in the first three years. However, Neuman is careful to refute over-zealous early childhood education advocates whose efforts to rally support have sometimes included “wild claims” such as the idea that “the brain is ‘cooked’ by age 10” (p. 6). Neuman is more measured, quoting researchers such as John Bruer who suggest that “the ‘window of opportunity’ in the human brain, with few exceptions, is open for far more than the first three years” (p. 7).

She is more adamant in her insistence that early cultural influences help explain differences between the academic achievement of rich and poor children. She does so by contrasting poverty’s “culture of material hardship” with the middle class “culture of achievement” (p. 12): Middle class parents use story books, conversation, library visits and reasoned negotiations to arm their children with the “skills, habits and styles of thinking” that will help them succeed in school. By contrast, their low-income peers live in neighborhoods where “libraries don’t have evening or Saturday hours” (p. 16), where “grocery shopping can take four hours by the time you take public transportation to the nearest store” (p. 17) and where, in an effort to “establish some clear boundaries to protect them, parents end up restricting children’s autonomy, often favoring strict obedience and punitive measures when trying to keep them from straying too far” (p. 17).

Neuman states that this “disadvantage accumulates” as “childhood difficulties become associated with adjustment problems in adolescence and adulthood” (p. 11). Summarizing the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, she notes that schools too often compound the problem through tracking, i.e. by “sorting students into stratified classes giving them access to different levels of knowledge” (p. 19). For this reason, Neuman concludes that we need to “prevent this negative spiral before it has time to begin” (p. 24). Preventative measures should be “research-based programs that have been shown beyond a shadow of the doubt to fundamentally change the odds for how we educate our most vulnerable children” (p. 25). In Chapter 2, Neuman whips out the balance sheet as she calculates how to both pay for her reforms and build public confidence by making sure taxpayers get their

money's worth. Although more than 90 percent of school funding is generated at the state and local level, Neuman focuses mainly on federal programs, which is perhaps a reflection of the nature of her recommended reforms (many occur outside schools and are funded by the federal government) and perhaps a means to sharing expertise acquired during her stint in the U.S. Department of Education.

This is the section of the book that will perhaps most endear her to fiscal conservatives as she unquestioningly accepts economist Eric Hanushek's controversial conclusions related to the disconnect between higher funding levels and better academic performance, stating, "No wonder, then, the public's impatience with repeated calls for additional funding" (p. 29; for different conclusions, see Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald, 1994; Baker and Welner, 2011). Neuman suggests two main strategies for countering this impatience: eliminating waste and properly evaluating existing programs to ensure that they are using their funding wisely by fulfilling their goals.

To evaluate programs, Neuman suggests that evaluations stress outcomes rather than processes. Outcomes might, for instance, be how many children arrive at school ready to learn. Processes might instead focus on how many children were served. Neuman posits that well-executed evaluations can employ a variety of research designs, ranging from controlled experiments to case studies. To eliminate waste, Neuman calls for federal officials to provide stronger and clearer non-regulatory guidance. They should also reduce duplicative efforts by encouraging coordination among departments. (She stops just short of the Republican bailiwick of moving the Head Start early childhood education program from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Education.) She proposes redirecting funds from ineffective to effective programs. She calls for eradicating earmarks (but doesn't say how). Her conclusion: Members of the public have come to distrust federal programs that support low-income families, but their confidence can be regained by adapting the above strategies and by replacing the current scattershot and poorly-evaluated approach with a small set of highly-targeted priorities.

These priorities are, of course, Neuman's own seven essentials, which she describes at length in Chapter 3. Neuman states that she arrived at these essentials by "drawing on the literature from high-quality evaluations" to come up with a core set of characteristics that apply to effective programs (p. 57). They are:

1. Actively target the neediest children.
2. Begin early in children's lives.
3. Emphasize coordinated services, particularly for children whose families present multiple risks.
4. Focus on boosting academic achievement through compensatory high-quality instruction.
5. Deliver instruction by trained professionals, not by aides or volunteers.
6. Acknowledge that intensity matters, defending against any dilution of program quality as a waste of public resources.
7. Always hold themselves accountable for results and for children's achievement.

Neuman spends much of the chapter explaining the importance of each essential: Targeting the neediest is necessary because programs that try to do too much for too many end up "diluting...quality by spreading resources thin" (p. 59). Interventions should be early, but not too early. Premature interventions may "lead to inappropriate labeling or the removal of children from typical experiences" (p. 60). Opportunities are obviously lost when help arrives too late.

Intensity is about time as well as focus: Contact with children and families should be frequent, uninterrupted and focused on specific goals. Yet it should also be coordinated because learning does not take place in a vacuum. For example, a child who is not monitored for vision problems may have trouble learning because she cannot see the board.

These coordinated services should be delivered by trained professionals who win respect by answering families' questions directly rather than referring them to someone else and by demonstrating caring and commitment to the community. These professionals need to provide educational experiences that are truly compensatory in that they do not just equal the experiences of middle class children, they exceed them. Programs should focus on

specific measurable areas that target the specific weakness of low-income children. Instruction for low-income children should be faster and better than average. Finally, Neuman calls for program staff to hold themselves accountable by constantly monitoring what works so that they can change what does not. Interestingly, the one-time administrator of NCLB favors this sort of formative assessment over high-stakes systems that provide sanctions and rewards. Rewards, she writes,

...can create alliances and good will, but only if people are free to act on their own. Negative inducements, on the other hand, create a climate of conflict and, under some conditions, passive resistance. Further, negative rewards (such as in the case with No Child Left Behind where potential state takeovers of failing schools are possible) assume that the problem is intentional—the effects of intended consequences of purposeful actions. (p. 69)

Neuman does not clarify how her call to evaluate programs and shut down ineffective ones would fit with this argument against negative inducements. Would not the threat of closure or termination be a negative inducement? In the next section of the book, Neuman devotes a chapter to each of the four fronts upon which she believes the battle against poverty should be fought: the family, early childcare and education, the community, and after-school programs. Each chapter follows a basic template of presenting problems, proposing solutions, and highlighting programs that translate these solutions into action. The program descriptions are among the most engaging sections of the book, with Neuman providing portraits of program employees and the children and families they serve.

Chapter 4 begins by describing environmental factors that can be particularly challenging for children born into poor families. These include inadequate or unsafe housing, poor nutrition, and maternal depression. On page 78, Neuman presents seven strategies for attacking these problems: strengthening maternal attachment, helping mothers cope with the everyday challenges of poverty, teaching discipline strategies, providing psychological and emotional support, reducing maternal substance abuse and

smoking, making homes safer and helping parents become their children's first teachers. She then describes three programs that embrace one or more of these strategies. Early Head Start, a small federal program, begins even before children are born by matching expectant mothers with employees who see them through the transition "from adulthood to good parenthood" by providing not only social and emotional support but access to a platoon of services including healthcare, child care and education (p. 80). The Nurse-Family Partnership also begins before birth, pairing young, low-income first-time mothers with nurses who follow them through their pregnancy and beyond. Avance offers parent-child education and support to immigrant mothers.

Some of the results Neuman reports are nothing short of miraculous: half a year's growth on some measures for neediest families versus controls (Early Head Start) returns if \$2 to \$4 for every dollar investment (Nurse-Family Partnership), 100% of graduates scoring excellent or satisfactory on the Dallas school district's kindergarten test of pre-reading skills (Avance). The chapter concludes with a quotation from Florence Nightingale: "Results shown are the only test" (p. 95).

The first page of Chapter 5 includes a description of one of the poor-quality child care centers that are part of what Neuman describes as a widespread "crisis" (p. 97):

Entering a decrepit building, one presumably on Philadelphia then-Mayor John Street's tear-down list, I follow the hand-written signs to a basement. Children are held in playpens in the darkened, dank room, while two elderly women watch a program on a black and white TV. One child is picked up at a time, changed, fed, and then returned to the playpen shortly after. Silence permeates the day's activities, with no conversation other than what comes from the television program. (pp. 97-98)

Neuman then lists eight characteristics of high-quality care: stimulating activities based on children's interests, materials to help build cognitive skills, individual guidance for each child, opportunities for in-depth learning, pacing and management that permits a mixture of

child and teacher-led activities, collaboration with families, a competent staff with a low staff-child ratio and safety. Children in poverty need even more: Their early and education child care should be more intensive and focused with smaller classes, highly-qualified teachers and more accountability. Again, Neuman highlights three successful programs. The intensive, literacy-focused Bright Beginnings preschool program in North Carolina bundles resources from multiple funding sources to produce graduates who outperformed their low-income peers and met or exceeded grade level expectations. Spending resulting from the 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* school funding equalization ruling in New Jersey funded a menu of reforms that research suggests helped narrow the achievement gap between poorer and more affluent students from 44 to 15 points while increasing the percentage of low-income fourth graders reading at grade level from 25% to 75%. The Military Childcare Act of 1989 transformed the preschool programs for military dependents from a “ghetto of American childcare” (p. 119) to a high quality system that actually costs less than centers for civilians. Given the 1996 welfare reforms’ focus on putting parents to work even when their children are infants, Neuman suggests that we cannot afford to ignore the “profound” influences of child care on “developmental trajectories and long-term outcomes” (p. 124).

Chapter 6 focuses on fixing the low-income communities that Neuman describes as “demographic tsunami(s)” that are “surrounded by murder and mayhem, dilapidated housing, garbage, crime, inadequate healthcare and a pervasive sense of hopelessness” (p. 128). In one of the book’s only nods to systemic reforms that would affect both lower- and higher-income populations, she explores eliminating such neighborhoods altogether by relocating poor families to more affluent areas. However, she dismisses that idea outright, arguing that relocations would stress and isolate low-income families while causing “community and political disempowerment” by sweeping “poverty underground, hiding but not solving the problems.” Further, when it comes to the academic achievement of relocated children, Neuman posits that research results are inconclusive. (Here she fails to consider the research body suggesting that low-income children perform better in schools that are not centers of

concentrated poverty. See, for instance, Rumberger and Palardy, 2005, Kahlenberg, 2001 and Jencks and Mayer, 1990.)

As she does throughout her book, Neuman steers clear of broad societal transformation, suggesting that impoverished neighborhoods should not be eliminated because if the individuals and families who inhabit them receive resources and extra support, they will take “charge of their lives and their community’s future” (p. 131). Neuman highlights five supports. The Free Library of Philadelphia provides safe, welcoming and educational environments where people can gather and learn. It also reaches out to the community with Books Aloud, an early literacy program that sends both books and early childhood education specialists into day care centers. The Corner Clinic in Ypsilanti, Michigan is a one-stop-shopping approach to social services in that it houses physicians, social workers, nutritionists, health educators, nurses, food and household supplies. Through a nationwide program called Reach out and Read, children take home books each time they visit the doctor. Using as an example the community outreach that accompanied the children’s show *Between the Lions*, Neuman highlights the positive impact that public television can have on low-income preschoolers. Formative assessment is a theme that runs throughout the chapter. For instance, the creators of *Between the Lions* responded to real-world implementation issues by altering the curriculum and teacher training they created to go with the show. Neuman presents evidence that each of these programs has produced positive results such as higher test scores, better access to books and more visits to local libraries. Yet these isolated indicators seemed somehow inadequate in the face of the “tsunami” of challenges described earlier in the chapter. Given that the chapter focused on the community as a whole, I was looking for Neuman to provide examples of entire neighborhoods that were eventually transformed by these child-focused programs.

After-school programs are the final front upon which Neuman battles poverty. Neuman asserts that NCLB has been used to unfairly blame the achievement gap on schools. Yet children spend only 20% of their waking hours in school. Drawing upon the research of Doris Entwisle and Karl Alexander (1997), Neuman argues that

poor and middle-income children make similar gains while school is in session. The problem is that middle-income children continue to make these gains when school ends for the summer or the day. Poor children do not.

More school is not necessarily the answer. According to Neuman, schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods, stress discipline, teacher control and standardized test scores. As children reach early adolescence, many become disengaged because they chafe at such strictures. To combat this disengagement, after school programs should promote “activity-based learning” (p. 162). This means they should stress learning via real-world experiences such as volunteering at a Food Bank. Students should work with mentors to co-plan and lead activities. Cooperative learning and group activities should be emphasized. A broad array of choices encourages engagement because children can focus on their current interest. (Progressive educators may find themselves wondering why schools themselves are not advised to use these Dewey-esque strategies to combat what Neuman describes as the “ill fit between the middle-childhood years and the school environment” (p. 160). Neuman does not address this point.)

Only one of the two programs that Neuman highlights in this chapter embraces these progressive strategies. The After-School Enrichment program provides California children with an array of activities ranging from poetry to sports. The other program, Adventure Island, is an intensive, highly-structured tutoring session for struggling readers. Neuman highlights this program after recounting the results of a survey showing that low-income parents prefer after-school programs that emphasize academic learning. She adds: “(F)or children who attend highly-dysfunctional schools - schools in such disarray that districts are subject to state takeover - such extra efforts to boost children’s achievement in after-school programs may be the last stop before giving up” (p. 169). Neuman concludes by stating that a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate for after-school education: While some children need activity-based learning, others need intensive reading instruction.

In the final chapter of the book, Neuman offers six broad suggestions for fulfilling the goal stated in her title. Given

Neuman's background serving the Bush administration during the inception of No Child Left Behind, her most intriguing bullet point is her first: "Let's admit schools can't do it alone" (p. 181). In this section, Neuman compares No Child Left Behind to the "drunkard's paradox" in which an inebriated man who has lost his keys in the bushes searches instead beneath a lamp post because that's where it's light. "As a nation, we've been looking under the lamp post—school reform and No Child Left Behind—as the answer to closing the achievement gap. But the search for the 'educational reform' is actually in the bushes. It's in the early years, before children ever begin their schooling" (p. 180). In critiquing educational reforms that focus exclusively on schools, Neuman also offers criticism of her former boss:

Historically, schools were designed to educate students already provided by their families with the essential building blocks of learning and motivation to succeed in school. Contrary to what you might hear from the Bush administration, most teachers are highly capable of successfully educating these children. (p. 181)

Next, Neuman asserts that "Providing equal resources to unequal groups will never close the achievement gap" (p. 183). She laments the fact that 90% of all schools receive money through Title I, suggesting that this and other federal funding sources have been rendered impotent because they are spread too thin. With her third solution, Neuman returns to No Child Left Behind-style accountability by calling for state and federal agencies to "monitor programs relentlessly" (p. 183). Perhaps idealistically, she suggests that such monitoring provide immediate feedback without imposing endless paperwork. Neuman suggests that this can be accomplished via greater local control.

Neuman's fourth and perhaps least controversial solution is to make government programs and policies more transparent in the hopes that this will encourage members of the public to view them as "something they might contribute to and understand" (p. 184). Her fifth proposal again embraces local control, in the form of federal block grants controlled by states. Her sixth and final solution is to demand better research designs for evaluating federal programs. Specifically, Neuman bemoans the use of IQ

scores. Because they were not designed to measure achievement, they tend to show that the effects of early interventions fade out as children age, misleading policy makers about the programs' levels of effectiveness. Neuman also urges evaluators to account for the fact that programs adapt the "treatment" they are measuring in response to real-world issues and dilemmas and that such adaptations should be studied to better understand the conditions under which a program might be successful. Neuman's optimistic conclusion is that if government adopts the cures she has prescribed, "the bleak cycle of poverty and disadvantage that has until now appeared so intractable can be broken forever" (p. 188).

Upon finishing the book, I found myself wishing that I could recommend it to policymakers as well as billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg. Neuman's insistence on targeting the neediest of the needy means her reforms are limited enough in scope to be implemented in a significant way by a term-limited politician or a single philanthropist. Further, they have track records supported by research. They do not swing on the coat tails of sexy political trends or rely on the charisma of a single leader. Many—like the Nurse-Family Partnership—are quiet work horses that have been around for years. Too often, philanthropists and politicians embark upon new or exciting reforms with naïve hopes that they will transform the universe. While perhaps less exciting, Neuman's proven programs are more likely to make a difference even if they do not fulfill her promise to eliminate poverty forever.

This book is written to appeal to a broad audience. Although Neuman embraces some federally-funded, War on Poverty-style reforms that provide federal dollars for programs for the poor, she is conservative in her insistence upon fiscal and programmatic accountability and efficiency and in her support for greater local control. Her time-saving bullet points and blunt style should appeal to those from the business and political worlds. Additionally, students looking for a starting point for their research or learning can benefit from her emphasis on broad, well-known studies and literature reviews. Neuman's journalistic vignettes personalize her policy recommendations, making them both more comprehensible

and more likely to hold the attention of casual readers. Her writing is engaging, clear and virtually free of jargon.

While education scholars are unlikely to gain new knowledge from this book, Neuman does a masterful job of repackaging what we do know for those new to the topic, and she generally does so without sacrificing complexity, evidence or nuance. We need more people who can so eloquently and accurately translate the research world for the real world.

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About the Reviewer

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