

Improbable Scholars

The conventional wisdom, voiced by everyone from Bill Gates to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, is that public schools are so terrible that simply reforming them won't do the trick. Instead, they must be "transformed," blown up and then rebuilt, if they're going to offer students a good education. We relish stories about electrifying teachers like Jaime Escalante, who made math whizzes out of no-hoper teenagers in East LA, or inner city charter schools like the KIPP academies. But success in the public schools of an entire city—a poor, crowded city, with more than its share of immigrant Latino youngsters, the kind of kids who elsewhere will likely drop out or flunk out? That sounds as elusive and improbable as the Loch Ness monster. But no school district can be all charismatic leaders and super-teachers. It can't start from scratch, and it can't fire all its teachers and principals when students do poorly. Great charter schools can only serve a tiny minority of students. Whether we like it or not, most of our youngsters will continue to be educated in mainstream public schools. *Improbable Scholars* shows that there's a sensible way to rebuild public education and close the achievement gap for all students. Miracles aren't required—instead, we need to make smart use of what we already know can work. This is precisely what's happening in a most unlikely place: Union City, New Jersey. What makes Union City so headline-worthy is its ordinariness, its lack of flash and pizzazz. The school district has ignored trendy, blow-up-and-rebuild reforms in favor of old school ideas like top-drawer early education, a word-soaked curriculum and hands-on help for teachers. When good new strategies have emerged, like using sophisticated data-crunching to generate pinpoint assessments of the help that particular students need, they have been folded into the mix. A generation ago, Union City's schools were so bad that state officials threatened to seize control of them. But the situation has entirely turned around. Here's the reason to stand up and take notice—from third grade through high school, Union City students' scores on the high-stakes state tests approximate the statewide average. In other words, these inner city kids are achieving just as much as their suburban cousins in reading, writing and math. This is no one-year wonder-year after year, from 1990 onward, the students in Union City have steadily improved. In 2011 every senior passed the state's exit exam and received a diploma, and nearly 60 percent of those graduates enrolled in college. The best students are winning national science awards, Gates Millennium Scholarships, and full rides at Ivy League universities. These schools are not just good places for poor kids. They are good places for kids, period. They pass the Golden Rule Test— you'd be pleased if children you love were educated here. *Improbable Scholars* will change your mind about the possibility of reviving public education.

In this book, David L. Kirp challenges the conventional wisdom about public schools and education reform in America through an in-depth look at Union City, New Jersey's high-performing urban school district. In this compelling study, Kirp reveals Union's city's revolutionary secret: running an exemplary school system doesn't demand heroics, just hard and steady work.

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