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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

24/7 School Reform

By PAUL TOUGH

In an election season when Democrats find themselves unusually unified on everything from tax policy to foreign affairs, one issue still divides them: education. It is a surprising fault line, perhaps, given the party's long dominance on the issue. Voters consistently say they trust the Democrats over the Republicans on education, by a wide margin. But the split in the party is real, deep and intense, and it shows no signs of healing any time soon.

On one side are the members of the two huge teachers' unions and the many parents who support them. To them, the big problem in public education is [No Child Left Behind](#), President Bush's signature education law. Teachers have many complaints about the law: it encourages "teaching to the test" at the expense of art, music and other electives, they say; it blames teachers, especially those in inner-city schools, for the poor performance of disadvantaged children; and it demands better results without providing educators with the resources they need.

On the other side are the party's self-defined "education reformers." Members of this group — a loose coalition of mayors and superintendents, charter-school proponents and civil rights advocates — actually admire the accountability provisions in No Child Left Behind, although they often criticize the law's implementation. They point instead to a bigger, more systemic crisis. These reformers describe the underperformance of the country's schoolchildren, and especially of poor minorities, as a national crisis that demands a drastic overhaul of the way schools are run. In order to get better teachers into failing classrooms, they support performance bonuses, less protection for low-performing teachers, alternative certification programs to attract young, ambitious teachers and flexible contracts that could allow for longer school days and an extended school year. The unions see these proposals as attacks on their members' job security — which, in many ways, they are.

As the fall campaign and a new school year begin, both the unionists and the reformers find themselves distracted by the same question: Which side is [Barack Obama](#) on? Each camp has tried to claim him as its own — and Obama, for his part, has done his best to make it easy for them. He reassures the unions by saying he will reform No Child Left Behind so teachers will no longer "be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests," and he placates reformers by calling himself a "strong champion of charter schools." The reformers point to his speech in July to the [National Education Association](#), during which he was booed, briefly, for endorsing changes to teachers' compensation structure. The unionists, in turn, emphasize his speech a week later to the [American Federation of Teachers](#), during which he said, "I am tired of hearing you, the teachers who work so hard, blamed for our problems." On blogs and at conferences, the two sides have continued to snipe at each other, all the while parsing Obama's speeches and policy pronouncements, looking for new clues to his true positions.

It's possible, though, that both camps are looking in the wrong place for answers. What is most interesting and novel about Obama's education plans is how much they involve institutions *other* than schools.

The American social contract has always identified public schools as the one place where the state can and should play a role in the process of child-rearing. Outside the school's walls (except in cases of serious abuse or neglect), society is seen to have neither a right nor a responsibility to intervene. But a new and growing movement of researchers and advocates has begun to argue that the longstanding and sharp conceptual divide between school and not-school is out of date. It ignores, they say, overwhelming evidence of the impact of family and community environments on children's achievement. At the most basic level, it ignores the fact that poor children, on average, arrive in kindergarten far behind their middle-class peers. There is evidence that schools can do a lot to erase that divide, but the reality is that most schools do not. If we truly want to counter the effects of poverty on the achievement of children, these advocates argue, we need to start a whole lot earlier and do a whole lot more.

The three people who have done the most to propel this nascent movement are James J. Heckman, Susan B. Neuman and [Geoffrey Canada](#) — though each of them comes at the problem from a different angle, and none of them would necessarily cite the other two as close allies. Heckman, an occasional informal Obama adviser, is an economist at the [University of Chicago](#), and in a series of recent papers and books he has developed something of a unified theory of American poverty. More than ever before, Heckman argues, the problem of persistent poverty is at its root a problem of skills — what economists often call human capital. Poor children grow into poor adults because they are never able, either at home or at school, to acquire the abilities and resources they need to compete in a high-tech service-driven economy — and Heckman emphasizes that those necessary skills are both cognitive (the ability to read and compute) and noncognitive (the ability to stick to a schedule, to delay gratification and to shake off disappointments). The good news, Heckman says, is that specific interventions in the lives of poor children can diminish that skill gap — as long as those interventions begin early (ideally in infancy) and continue throughout childhood.

What kind of interventions? Well, that's where the work of Susan Neuman becomes relevant. In 2001, Neuman, an education scholar at the [University of Michigan](#), was recruited to a senior position in [George W. Bush's](#) Department of Education, helping to oversee the development and then the implementation of No Child Left Behind. She quit in 2003, disillusioned with the law, and became convinced that its central goal — to raise disadvantaged children to a high level of achievement through schools alone — was simply impossible. Her work since then can be seen as something of a vast mea culpa for her time in Washington. After leaving government, Neuman spent several years crisscrossing the nation, examining and analyzing programs intended to improve the lives of disadvantaged children. Her search has culminated in a book, "Changing the Odds for Children at Risk," to be published in November, in which she describes nine nonschool interventions. She includes the Nurse-Family Partnership, which sends trained nurses to visit and counsel poor mothers during and after their pregnancies; Early Head Start, a federal program, considerably more ambitious than Head Start itself, that offers low-income families parental support, medical care and day-care centers during the first three years of the lives of their children; Avance, a nine-month language-enrichment program for Spanish-speaking parents, mostly immigrants from Mexico, that operates in Texas and Los Angeles; and Bright Beginnings, a pre-K program in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina that enrolls 4-year-olds who score the lowest on a screening test of cognitive ability and manages to bring most of them up to grade level by the first day of

kindergarten.

Neuman's favorite programs share certain characteristics — they start early, focus on the families that need them the most and provide intensive support. Many of the interventions work with parents to make home environments more stimulating; others work directly with children to improve their language development (a critical factor in later school success). All of them, Neuman says, demonstrate impressive results. The problem right now is that the programs are isolated and scattered across the country, and they are usually directed at only a few years of a child's life, which means that their positive effects tend to fade once the intervention ends.

This is where Geoffrey Canada comes in. He runs the first and so far the only organization in the country that pulls together under a single umbrella integrated social and educational services for thousands of children at once. Canada's agency, the Harlem Children's Zone, has a \$58 million budget this year, drawn mostly from private donors; it currently serves 8,000 kids in a 97-block neighborhood of Harlem. (I've spent the last five years reporting on his organization's work and its implications for the country.) Canada shares many of the views of the education reformers — he runs two intensive K-12 charter schools with extended hours and no union contract — but at the same time he offers what he calls a “conveyor belt” of social programs, beginning with Baby College, a nine-week parenting program that encourages parents to choose alternatives to corporal punishment and to read and talk more with their children. As students progress through an all-day prekindergarten and then through a charter school, they have continuous access to community supports like family counseling, after-school tutoring and a health clinic, all designed to mimic the often-invisible cocoon of support and nurturance that follows middle-class and upper-middle-class kids through their childhoods. The goal, in the end, is to produce children with the abilities and the character to survive adolescence in a high-poverty neighborhood, to make it to college and to graduate.

Though the conveyor belt is still being constructed in Harlem, early results are positive. Last year, the charter schools' inaugural kindergarten class reached third grade and took their first New York state achievement tests: 68 percent of the students passed the reading test, which beat the New York City average and came within two percentage points of the state average, and 97 percent of them passed the math test, well above both the city and state average.

Obama has embraced, directly or indirectly, all three of these new thinkers. His campaign invited Heckman to critique its education policy, and Obama has proposed large-scale expansions of two of Neuman's chosen interventions, the Nurse-Family Partnership and Early Head Start. Most ambitiously, Obama has pledged to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in 20 cities across the country. “The philosophy behind the project is simple,” Obama said in a speech last year announcing his plan. “If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community. And we have to focus on what actually works.”

Obama has proposed that these replication projects, which he has labeled Promise Neighborhoods, be run as private/public partnerships, with the federal government providing half the funds and the rest being raised by local governments and private philanthropies and businesses. It would cost the federal government “a few billion dollars a year,” he acknowledged in his speech. “But we will find the money to do this, because we can't afford not to.”

It remains to be seen, of course, whether Obama will convince voters with this position, and whether, if elected, he will do the heavy lifting required to put such an ambitious national program in place. There are many potential obstacles. A lot of conservatives would oppose a new multibillion-dollar federal program as a Great Society-style giveaway to the poor. And many liberals are wary of any program that tries to change the behavior of inner-city parents; to them, teaching poor parents to behave more like middle-class parents can feel paternalistic. Union leaders will find it hard to support an effort that has nonunion charter schools at its heart. Education reformers often support Canada's work, but his premise — that schools alone are not enough to make a difference in poor children's lives — makes many of them anxious. And in contrast to the camps arrayed on either side of the school-reform debate, there is no natural constituency for the initiative: no union or interest group that stands to land new jobs or new contracts, no deep-pocketed philanthropy devoted to spreading the message.

The real challenge Obama faces is to convince voters that the underperformance of poor children is truly a national issue — that it should matter to anyone who isn't poor. Heckman, especially, argues that we should address the problem not out of any mushy sense of moral obligation, but for hardheaded reasons of global competitiveness. At a moment when nations compete mostly through the skill level of their work force, he argues, we cannot afford to let that level decline.

Obama's contention is that the traditional Democratic solution — more money for public schools — is no longer enough. In February, in an interview with the editorial board of *The Journal Sentinel* in Milwaukee, he called for "a cultural change in education in inner-city communities and low-income communities across the country — not just inner-city, but also rural." In many low-income communities, Obama said, "there's this sense that education is somehow a passive activity, and you tip your head over and pour education in somebody's ear. And that's not how it works. So we're going to have to work with parents."

In the end, the kind of policies that Obama is proposing will require an even broader cultural change — not just in the way poor Americans think about education but also in the way middle-class Americans think about poverty. And that won't be easy. No matter how persuasive the statistics Heckman is able to muster or how impressive the results that Canada is able to achieve, many Americans will continue to simply blame parents or teachers for the underperformance of poor kids. Obama's challenge — if he decides to take it on — will be to convince voters that society as a whole has a crucial role to play in the lives of disadvantaged children, not just in the classroom but outside schools as well.

Paul Tough is an editor at the magazine. His book, "Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America," will be published next week.

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