

Mike Casserly keeps the faith in school progress

A review of The Enduring Promise of America's Great City Schools

By David Coleman

One of the toughest obstacles to school improvement in America is exhaustion — the sense that all manner of ideas and investments have already failed. That feeling of fatigue has been especially sharp since the covid pandemic, which accelerated an already alarming decline in student learning.

Michael Casserly's invigorating new book, The Enduring Promise of America's Great City Schools, injects a welcome dose of optimism into the debate over education, reminding us that schools get better when leaders stay focused.

"The improvement of urban public education is possible," Casserly insists. "The nation's big-city schools are worth the nation's time, attention, and investment."

Casserly makes his case with data and deep experience. He served as executive director of the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) for nearly 30 years. There are precious few people in American life who have worked more ardently for the good of large urban school districts striving to deliver opportunity at scale. Casserly is, as Arne Duncan describes him in the foreword to the book, "a savvy, clear-headed thinker with an optimistic slant."

That optimism is grounded in careful analysis of both student performance and student characteristics. Large urban school districts serve a student body that is more diverse, lower-income, more likely to be learning English as a second language. Any fair reading of performance data, Casserly argues, must account for those underlying realities. The question is not whether big-city schools perform as well as their suburban peers on raw test scores; they don't. The question is whether they perform the vital mission of bringing opportunity to students in the most challenging circumstances and elevating their talents.

"Do urban schools add value?" Casserly asks. "Do Large City Schools do a better job at mitigating the effect of poverty than other schools? And are Large City Schools getting better at overcoming these effects?" On those markers, the pre-pandemic years offer plenty of cause for hope. By highlighting progress in districts like Miami-Dade, Dallas, and Long Beach, California, Casserly aims to show that leadership matters and that small-scale policy changes can add up to meaningful improvement.

He wants policymakers to focus on big-picture student performance; invest in teacher development; use assessments to drive learning; and avoid any temptation to soften standards in the wake of the pandemic. None of that is simple, and no single approach can solve for the disadvantages that many students face long before they walk through the schoolhouse door.

But above all, The Enduring Promise is a ringing call against complacency. We know progress is possible, Casserly says, because we've seen it happen. "Instead of blowing up the system, as some would propose, I am suggesting a return to the fundamentals of why and how school systems can work better on behalf of their kids," he writes. "Keep it simple and tune out the noise."

Mike, himself an extraordinary leader, calls on all of us to lead on the path he has blazed.