MINORITY STUDENTS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY CONCENTRATED IN urban school districts. During the 1990–91 school year, 40 of the 57 districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools reported student populations in which minority students composed the majority. By the 1997–98 school year, the number had risen to 46 districts. Though there are 15,000 school districts in the United States, ten big districts educate 19 percent of all African-American children, and six educate 21 percent of all Hispanic students. Students in these urban districts are likely to be poor and to attend school with others who are poor. According to Education Week, 53 percent of students in urban districts attend high-poverty schools, compared with 22 percent of students in nonurban districts.

A Nation at Risk didn’t have much to say to these school districts and their students. Its prescriptions made sense for students whose basic preparation for school was sound and for school systems that had the capacity to respond to pressure by offering more rigorous courses. But raised expectations alone are not a remedy for the problems of children who enter school unprepared to do the work that is normally expected. Similarly, requiring that schools teach more challenging materials is not sufficient for schools that cannot provide competent instruction. Nor is the prescription to raise standards for new teachers necessarily helpful to schools and districts that are the least attractive employers.

The gaps between minority and white achievement are as wide now as at the time that Risk was released. Moreover, gaps in “authentic” indicators like rates of high-school completion and college entry continue to be very large.

by PAUL T. HILL, KACEY GUIN, AND MARY BETH CELIO
In 74 urban districts studied by *Education Week*—districts where many if not a majority of the students are minorities—less than 50 percent of the freshmen entering high school in 1990 graduated four years later. Post-Risk reforms were intended to decrease academic failure, but in situations where standards are raised but instruction is not improved, they might in fact increase the dropout rate. Russell Rumberger of the University of California, Santa Barbara, suggests that some high schools might “push out” students who are expected to get low test scores. Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago and Eric Camburn of the University of Michigan have also shown that students drop out due to their fear of not being able to complete all required credits. They suggest that large, impersonal high schools and poor elementary- and middle-school preparation lead to early failure in key courses and thence to dropping out.

**Quelling Entrepreneurship**

Clearly, in our existing public education system, raised expectations are not sufficient to drive universal improvement. High expectations are necessary, as long as they are a reflection of what children really need to know rather than a utopian vision of what every child in a perfect world would know. But they need to be coupled with fundamental changes in the education system, especially in large urban systems.

A common observation among social-service workers and heads of philanthropic foundations is that big-city public school systems are the toughest and least malleable bureaucracies they deal with. Moreover, public education has little capacity to invest in new ideas. The vast preponderance of money in K–12 schools goes for salaries. Certification rules and the provisions of union contracts control employment. Even when government increases education spending, unions make sure that most of it is used for salary increases. When there are new investments—like California’s recent efforts to reduce class sizes—they are allocated via political entrepreneurship and bargaining, not according to what works.

These facts make it difficult for new ideas and new people to penetrate public education. Public schools allow small-scale innovation by individual teachers, but these innovations are usually limited to one classroom or school, leading to complaints among educators about the futility of “random acts of innovation.” There is no mechanism for a promising idea to capture a wider market, nor is there any incentive for other teachers or schools to adopt a promising idea.

Big-city school systems are constrained by rules and the individual ownership of jobs. Districts can do anything that their funders and regulators (including courts with which they have consent decrees) will permit. In practice, the aggregate effect of these constraints is to make any action outside the status quo risky. Almost any reallocation of time, money, teachers, or students is likely to generate objections. Teacher union contracts in most cities also prevent schools from choosing teachers and assume that “fit” does not matter: teachers are interchangeable, and schools are created only by assembling standard parts. This attitude ignores the reality that schools with inferior or mismatched parts, such as less capable teachers, will likely produce inferior results.

Rules also limit the ability of public school systems to use civic resources in the schools. Our cities are treasure houses filled with human talent and great institutions—museums and universities, orchestras, religious institutions, and foundations, all of them dedicated to learning. But the way we now run public education has kept these institutions on the sidelines. They can give money and moral support, but they cannot create or operate public schools, nor can their musicians, scientists, writers, and artists teach students, except before and after school hours or as volunteers.

This combination of inflexibility and distance from the rest of society gives many cities a much weaker and less effective public education system than they could have. Even school superintendents, generally cast as defenders of the systems they run, are often candid about their school systems’ inability to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children. In interviews, big-city superintendents consistently say that making schools effective for poor minority children will require reallocating money and personnel. They dream of creating all-literacy primary schools, offering reading-focused preschools to...
poor children only, establishing ungraded primary schools to eliminate the stigma for children of being held back, offering back-to-basics and charter schools, extending the school year for disadvantaged students, and even creating boarding schools for children in abusive or dangerous homes. Rather than relying on learning goals or professional development—stock solutions that do not perturb the current system—these superintendents talk tough about reading instruction, longer school days, and giving extra time to the kids at greatest risk. For them, control of money is the core issue. “You need to be able to change how every dollar is spent,” said one. “You have to try to get hold of the central office. This requires getting hold of the money it now controls.”

The Money Gap
The high negative correlation between poverty and student achievement is well known. What is less known is that the schools serving the poor often get less money, even within districts. In a path-breaking analysis of real-dollar funding levels in a sample of big-city districts, Marguerite Roza and Karen Hawley Miles found that per-pupil funding in schools can vary by as much as a factor of three, and that elementary schools in low-income areas receive from 10 to 30 percent less per pupil than higher-income schools in the same districts. These differences are offset slightly by funds from state and federal programs targeted to the poor, but these amounts at best equalize spending rather than, as advertised, supporting higher per-pupil spending for children who need the most help.

This is largely the result of low-income schools’ having the least-experienced, and thus lowest-paid, teachers. Under union contracts, teachers with even one or two years’ experience have some say over where they teach, and the vast majority of teachers with any choices avoid the most challenging schools. These schools, in turn, are forced to hire mainly younger and lower-paid teachers. As a result, there is significant variation in average teacher salaries within districts. As Roza has found in several large western school districts, schools in wealthier neighborhoods can receive more than 100 applications for a teacher vacancy, while schools in poor neighborhoods might receive only two or three. For schools serving the poorest children, this means three things: they have almost no choice of whom they employ; classes there are always taught by green teachers and those who have no alternative; and the academic year begins every fall with a new group of teachers who have never worked together.

The consequences for the education of the poorest children are dire. Their schools experience the highest rates of teacher turnover, ensuring that whatever teachers learn on the job will move elsewhere with them. Schools that consistently lose in the market for experienced teachers often have annual teacher turnover rates above 50 percent. Such schools are turbulent and difficult to lead. They are also impenetrable for parents, who cannot build stable and mutually confident working relationships with teachers and principals.

Schools and school districts need to become problem-solving organizations whose job it is to find the best possible way to educate the children entrusted to them. Schools need to have the entrepreneurial freedom to find the best combination of people and technologies for the children they serve. Parents and taxpayers also need to know exactly how individual schools and districts are performing, and they should have the power to move children from stagnant schools to better ones. Low-performing schools also need investments, so they can attract excellent people and replace ineffective methods with effective ones. Finally, teachers and administrators need to join other Americans in gaining benefits—pay and job security—from good performance and jeopardizing those benefits when they underperform.

—Paul T. Hill is a research professor of public affairs, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington, and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. Kacey Guin is a research assistant and Mary Beth Celio is a demographer and data analyst at CRPE.