

Kelly Brownell:

Welcome to Policy 360. I am Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today we welcome Helen Ladd, known as Sunny, back to the program. Welcome, Sunny.

Helen Ladd:

Happy to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

Sunny is a long-term faculty member here at Sanford, and she has produced some of our most meaningful research related to schools, particularly how to make sure our schools are set up to help children succeed. And today, I want to talk with Sunny about something that you call, Sunny, Lessons from London. Since the late 1990s, the academic performance of many students in London has risen dramatically, so much so that they now exceed national averages.

The improvement is due largely to big gains in the 13 districts of Inner London, places with the greatest concentration of low income and minority students. You recently spent a month in two of these boroughs of London in order to identify the policies that have driven this change. Describe for us where you were and what were the boroughs like that you were studying.

Helen Ladd:

As you say, I spent a month with my husband, Ted Fiske, the former education editor at The New York Times, and we were based at something called the Institute for Fiscal Studies, but we spent a lot of time in two specific boroughs: Tower Hamlets, that's where the Tower of London is, and Hackney, which is just north of that. These two boroughs were of interest to us because in the mid to late 1990s, they had the greatest proportions of disadvantaged, low-income residents and students and large proportions of immigrants.

The students were performing very poorly on national tests at the high school level and at the end of primary school. We chose to focus on students at the primary school, that's elementary school level, in these two boroughs, because we learned that success at the secondary level, at the high school level, reflected big successes of the younger students. We went in to try to find out what was happening in these two boroughs, interviewed borough leaders, visited schools, talked to other national leaders who knew about the policies that might be affecting these two parts.

Kelly Brownell:

So at first glance, what struck you about the school?

Helen Ladd:

Well, both boroughs had quite a bit of funding. These are disadvantaged boroughs. But under the various national governments and the funding for schools in England comes from the national government. That differs from this country. Between 1997 and 2010, the labor government put a lot of money in to education in general, and a lot of that targeted toward boroughs or districts with large numbers of disadvantaged students. But these boroughs had money back in the mid '90s and were not succeeding.

Money isn't everything. You have to use it well. And that's one of the things that came up over and over again in our investigation.

Kelly Brownell:

Let's talk about how they use the money well. Because I understand, you noticed a lot of things in your observations, but boil down what you were seeing into three specific strategies and I'd like to talk about them one by one. The district, as I understand, had a big role in making the changes. What did the district do?

Helen Ladd:

These are district leaders or borough leaders, and it was really striking. A strong new education leader came in in Tower Hamlets in the late '90s. The leadership change was a little slower in Hackney. It didn't come in until 2002. In both cases, these leaders had a clear vision for what they wanted education to be in their borough, and this vision had two parts. Every student can learn, regardless of the background of the student, provided we give them the supports they need they had some funding to provide for those supports, but every student can learn.

That was the first part. And teachers and principals, they call them head teachers, had to buy into this throughout both boroughs. And then the other part was we're all in this together. Everyone has responsibility for all children in the district or in the borough. We're not interested in having one terrific school over here. We should be judged as a district by the quality of our lowest quality school. They had principals, called head teachers, collaborating with other principals all toward this shared vision. It was exciting.

Kelly Brownell:

You also noticed that they had a very specific accountability system. Could you describe that?

Helen Ladd:

Yes. They do test their students at various ages, so there are some national tests. But the main accountability system is an inspection and review system, it's called Ofsted in England, and inspectors come and look at schools every three or four years and write reports on how the schools are doing. Now, also in the late '90s, and this is crucial to the improvement in these two boroughs, Ofsted also wrote a review of the quality of the education improvement services district wide or borough wide. And that was really important.

Let me just give you an example. In Tower Hamlets, that report came out in September 1998. They had a new leader who just came in. That report gave her the challenge to move forward and she got all the political council members behind her. They worked with business leaders and other community people in part because they all thought, well, our education system's doing okay. Student test scores aren't all that good, but we have lots of disadvantaged students.

What this report made clear both to the education leaders and the political leaders and to the business community was there were lots of things that they could do a lot better. And so then they started doing that. That was at the district wide level, but then there were all these reports on individual schools. That was useful. These are external reviewers coming in, but that was useful for the leaders in the school, because they could say, "Look, you can do better. You can't be complacent with what you're doing."

You need to push this notion of the shared vision and get all your teachers on board and work with the students who are struggling. It was useful all the way around. And the nice thing for me as a researcher is that I have all of these reports over time. So I could document that the quality of the

schools were improving over time, and I could link that up with the change in the timing of the school leadership.

Kelly Brownell:

This is an argument it sounds to me in favor of doing evaluations regarding the teaching and learning practices in the school, rather than doing standardized testing as occurred in the US with No Child Left Behind. Is there any research comparing the two approaches that would suggest one's better than the other?

Helen Ladd:

Yes and no. Let me start with what we do know. A lot of studies of the test-based accountability in the US, which was pushed under No Child Left Behind for 15 years, there is not dramatic success. In fact, the studies show in the US that there may be some small effects here and there. But interestingly, when you look at the NAEP scores... NAEP is the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It's like the US country's education report card.

Those test scores went down in 2015. And during the whole period of No Child Left Behind, they didn't go up very much. The trajectory didn't go up in math and reading scores have been positive. There's not good evidence that test-based accountability works.

Now, there are some examples in the US, and I would pinpoint Massachusetts as a good one, where there was a whole reform effort starting in 1993 that included the testing and a better test than they'd had before, but it included a lot of other reforms, capacity building for teachers, preschool programs, that has probably contributed to Massachusetts students doing extremely well, much less evidence on what we know about the inspection system.

Some evidence saying it has positive effects, but it's a lot harder to evaluate because it's a comprehensive package. It's not the sort of thing that technical researchers can get a handle on quite as well, but lots of countries have used it and have done better in some of the interna... Their students have performed better internationally than US students.

Kelly Brownell:

Returning the discussion to what you observed in London, you found that school administrators implemented a very specific strategy for disadvantaged students. You alluded to this earlier. You mentioned that having supports in place for the disadvantaged students were important. What sort of things do you mean by supports?

Helen Ladd:

Well, lots of different types. Each school that we visited, and these were elementary schools, would have a parent liaison person who would go out and understand what was going on in these students' families. And even before the children came to school as four-year-olds, some of these people would go out and visit the families and say, "What are the strengths or weaknesses of your child? We want to build on their strengths as they come in." Now, the schools themselves had worked with other groups.

Often they have afterschool programs and school breakfast programs, and then they paid attention to the health of the kids. And then they did use a lot of formative data. The teachers were strongly encouraged to pay attention to the progress of individual students, not just through testing, but by looking at their report, and then giving them the assistance they need maybe over lunch hour to sort of get back on track. There was just a lot of discussion.

And the one final thing that I love is they had kids outside a lot, rain or shine. They had classrooms set up outside some of the time. There might be some type of shelter over them, but they understood that kids need time to play and just to get fresh air.

Kelly Brownell:

Do you think that school systems in the U.S. could implement the kind of things you saw in London?

Helen Ladd:

Sure. It's going to take strong leadership and area wide leadership. Leadership played a big role. It's leadership at the borough or district level in the U.S., and then that needs to be carried through to strong leaders at the school level, who all buy into this notion. My own view, in the U.S. we've been saying a lot of negative things about teachers for the past several years, but school principals, school leaders play an important role in how well teachers can do. You've got to have leadership at all levels.

One interesting thing about the leaders in the English context, they talk about education as a moral imperative. We heard that word over and over again. We don't hear that at all in the U.S., but they understood the importance of having all children get a good solid education, especially in these early grades.

Kelly Brownell:

One thing that strikes me about what I'm hearing you say is that you're an outstanding empirical scientist and a big believer in using data, but it's also interesting how much you learned just by going and observing and talking to people.

Helen Ladd:

Well, it's important to combine the two. I've done a number of projects with Ted Fiske, my husband, and he's a journalist and a reporter. He knows how to interview much better than I do, but we combine the two. We always have data and we have the context and we play off each other. I'll give him data to take into a school and ask them about it, and he'll come back and give me new ways of interpreting the data that I have.

Kelly Brownell:

Sunny, I understand there are some big changes in the wind with respect to education policy in the United Kingdom. Could you explain what's happening?

Helen Ladd:

Yes. The U.K. has something called academies. Those are very similar to charter schools in the United States. They're autonomous schools that receive public funding. The government has just announced that by 2022, that's coming right up, every single school in the country will have to become an academy, either a freestanding academy, like a freestanding charter school, or part of a chain working together with other academies.

This is a real change and inconsistent with everything I was talking about. I was focusing in my remarks on the power of place-based or area wide strategies of schools working together. Now within the chains, they can work together, but it's not clear what the role of the local authorities is going to be.

Kelly Brownell:

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Well, you'll just have to make more trips to London and to England to study these things. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. Helen Ladd is Professor of Public Policy and Economics at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.