



Clearly, the social context of schools matters. Indeed, the authors found that community factors accounted for most of the difference in stagnation rates among schools. For instance, schools in communities with weak religious participation were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities with strong religious participation. Schools in communities where people did not believe they had the ability to make a positive change were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities where people believed they could. This pattern held true for social indicator after social indicator.

Still, despite tremendous obstacles, a handful of “truly disadvantaged” schools did improve. Over the seven-year period, 15 percent of “truly disadvantaged schools” showed significant academic improvement. While low, these improvement rates didn’t differ significantly from those of schools in predominantly minority communities, which had much lower rates of crime and child abuse and higher median family incomes.

The small group of truly disadvantaged schools that “beat the odds” and improved suggests that community context matters, but only so far as it affects the likelihood of developing certain organizational structures that the authors found were vital for improvement. Whether in advantaged or disadvantaged communities, very well organized schools improved and very poorly organized schools stagnated, the authors found.

In short, in communities where there are few viable institutions, where crime, drug abuse and gang activity are prevalent, and where palpable human needs walk through the school doors virtually every day, robust efforts are necessary to ensure schools are organized for improvement. The hopeful news is that even truly disadvantaged schools *can* be organized for improvement.