

Connecting Community Development and Public School Reform

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Introduction

Underperforming schools are a public education crisis that disproportionately affects African Americans and Latinos. It is a crisis spawned by the interplay of structural racism and classism operating within the context of underdeveloped and distressed urban neighborhoods.

These are places characterized by joblessness, low-incomes, poverty, poor housing, blighted and unkept physical environments combined with violence, crime, health risks, limited recreational facilities, numerous single-parent families, weak social networks, anger, cynicism, hopelessness, and an overall pessimistic view of life. These urban places are the new epicenter of structural racism in the United States.

This presentation argues that a schism exists between community development and the school reform movement and that the problem of

underperforming public schools can only be solved by building a bridge that connects the two movements. The central theme is that a new vision of public school reform must be developed that integrates schooling to the radical reconstruction of underdeveloped and distress urban neighborhoods.

The presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part makes the case for connecting community development and school reform, while the second parts discusses a community development model of public education in a k-8th grade neighborhood school in Buffalo, New York. The third part consists of a power point presentation that illustrates the approach being developing. After the presentation, the floor will be opened for questions and comments.

The Case for Connecting Community Development and Urban School Reform

It is ironical and paradoxical that both the current crisis in public education and the problem of underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods were triggered in part by the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

After 1954, the desire among whites to circumvent the Brown decision helped to fuel a race-based suburbanization movement that reconfigured the racial landscape of the metropolis and that spawned an intra-urban migratory process that led to the development of a new separate but unequal school system. This resegregation process was completed twenty year later in the case of Milliken v. Bradley.

In this case, the Detroit Public School System adopted a desegregation plan that not only included the city, but also 53 outlying school districts. In July 1974, The U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5 to 4 decision, overturned this plan. The Court held that the Detroit metropolitan desegregation plan was “*wholly impermissible*” and not justified by *Brown v. Board of Education*. In essence, the Court said that only a “*Detroit-only plan*” could be used to achieve school desegregation in the metropolitan region.

The *Milliken v. Bradley* decision turned the boundaries separating the central city from the suburban region into an impregnable Maginot-line. By simply crossing that line, whites could avoid sending their children to integrated schools. Race-based suburbanization, then, transformed the outlying region into a racist paradise for those seeking to thwart efforts to integrate the public schools.

These events took place at a time when millions of African Americans and Latinos were moving into central cities in the northern, southern, eastern and western United States and when economic restructuring and globalization were eliminating jobs almost as quickly as people of color obtained them. At the same time, many businesses and industries joined the trek to the hinterland and big suburban shopping malls and strip plazas replaced downtown as centers of retailing and commercial vibrancy. In the decades following the *Brown* decision, both population and economic growth shifted from the central cities to the suburban regions.

Thus, white flight joined with central city disinvestment to turn the inner city into a hypersegregated social geography characterized by dilapidation, concentrated poverty, joblessness, people living on the edge, violence, shattered dreams, and streets of hopelessness. In 1965, when the black scholar, Kenneth B. Clark, referred to Harlem as a *Dark Ghetto*, he was talking about the emergence of underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods as the new epicenter of structural racism and classism in the United States. In this setting, Clark argued that institutionalized socioeconomic problems not only are self-perpetuating, but also they spawn other socioeconomic problems that continually produce havoc in the lives of residents.

These powerful winds of negative change hit the public school system with sledgehammer force. Shifts in academic focus and public policy decisions, new budgetary priorities at all levels of government, and triage urban planning and economic development rendered the public school system impotent in the face of the new challenges posed by the emergence of underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods. White flight, economic disinvestment, structural racism and classism combined to produce the crisis of underperforming public schools.

The New Urban Context

Underperforming schools are situated in the midst of these underdeveloped and distress neighborhoods and are one of the main symptoms of this distress. Consequently, underperforming schools cannot be transformed and inner city students cannot become high academic achievers without the

radical reconstruction of the communities where the schools are located and the students live.

The community development movement was supposed to turn underdeveloped and distress neighborhoods into great places to live, work, and raise a family. The community development movement was supposed to build safe, healthy, and lively neighborhoods with excellent schools and a way of life that celebrated knowing and learning. The community development movement failed to achieve this goal.

Not only this, but over time the community development movement fragmented into a series of disjointed and uncoordinated activities in which the sum is much less than the whole. Rather than becoming a radical agent of change, the community development movement devolved into a series of discrete activities, such as enterprise zones, community development corporations, neighborhood housing services, community economic development, community building initiatives, social capital efforts, faith-base movements, and comprehensive community initiatives. *Such a splintered movement cannot possibly radically reconstruct underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods. It is helpless in face of the powerful economic, political, and social forces that continually reproduce distressed communities and their colored and poor white populations* (Katz 2002).

This fragmentation is caused in part by the absence of a coherent national urban policy, the lack of a national strategy of neighborhood development, and the failure of policy makers at all levels of government to understand the

importance of a comprehensive, coordinated approach to community development that is based on the principle of citizen participation.

This failure of insight and vision resulted in the establishment of a plethora of federal agencies that administer housing, labor, health, education, and business programs for residents of distressed communities and that work in near total isolation from one another. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sponsors such programs as the Community Development Block Grant, housing subsidies, and aid to the homeless. Three other cabinet agencies—the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services—help residents of distressed neighborhoods enter the labor market by training them, educating their children, and strengthening their families. The Small Business Administration and targeted minority business programs are run by the Commerce Department.

Although these agencies have interrelated missions, there is very little communication among them. Even within agencies, there is little communication across departmental lines.¹ This same style of work is found in local government and in distressed neighborhoods. At the neighborhood level, the very organization of communities frustrates communication. For example, organizations are established along sectorial lines, and they rarely communicate, coordinate, or collaborate across organizational and institutional boundaries. Moreover, many educational, health, and businesses do not even consider themselves part of the neighborhoods in which they are located. So, their

participation in the community development process is minimal, if they participate at all.

The greatest failure of the community development movement, however, was its separation from the school reform movement. Historically, in the African American community, the battle against school segregation was also a fight for quality education. As long as they were trapped in inferior public schools, blacks knew they would never achieve racial justice and equity. Hence, they made the fight for quality education the centerpiece of the struggle against racism. Then, during the early 1960s, when the civil rights movement shifted northward, the struggle against racism increasingly focused on attacking conditions inside rapidly decaying neighborhoods. In this era, community development was connected to public school reform as blacks fought to control the process of changing their neighborhoods.

Concurrently, as community development gradually supplanted civil rights as the focal point of the struggle of African Americans, school integration and busing became the main tools for desegregating schools and achieving quality education. Even after the disastrous 1974 Supreme Court decision, stress on school integration and busing persisted, and the school reform movement was *severed* from the community development movement.

In this new setting, the idea emerged that high performing inner city public schools could be developed without altering the conditions of life found in underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods. Moreover, school integration and busing turned school reform into a non-spatial movement imbued with an

amazingly *introspective quality*. As a result, the school reform movement constructed a “building centered” model of public education instead of constructing a bridge to community development.

The “building-centered” model bases school reform on what happens inside the building and pays only scant attention to world outside. Within this conceptual framework, the strategy for improving public schools consists an array of programs such as parent involvement, site-based decision-making, shared leadership, curriculum reform, and in some instances, community involvement.

These reforms are driven by the belief that the academic gap between blacks and Latinos and whites can be closed without changing inner city neighborhoods. Such thinking is nothing more than an urban legend. The reality is that neighborhood life and culture significantly influence the learning process and can construct huge barriers between teaching and learning. Thus, any school reform movement not linked to the radical reconstruction of underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods is doomed to failure.

The community school movement represented an important first step in the quest to connect school reform to the community development. Although models of community schools vary, the basic idea is to bridge the gap between school and community by turning schools into places that not only teach, but also function as community hubs that provide education, health and human services. Community schools are opened at non-traditional hours, view themselves as beehives of community activity, and provide a range of services for residents.

Although a giant step forward, the community school model does not go far enough. It still falls within the “building centered” genre of school reform. For example, in “community schools” the focus is on service delivery rather than the radical reconstruction of neighborhoods and the objective is to instill in students the *liberal civic ideal* of service, rather than the *radical democratic ideal* of neighborhood transformation. So, then, while the basic elements of the community school model should be retained, it nevertheless must be expanded and further developed.

The time has come for use not only to rethink efforts to reform public schools, but also to reimagine the community development movement itself. Such a refashioned community development movement would be led by residents and stakeholders and would be informed by a comprehensive and coordinated approach to rebuilding neighborhoods. Most significant, this new community development movement would incorporate school reform and make it a major focal point of its activities.

The Community Development Model of Public School Education

In Buffalo, New York we are building such a model of community development. Within this framework, we are creating a model of public education that builds on the principles of the community school movement. In our model, however, stress is placed on building linkages between schooling and neighborhood development and it is informed by the theory of “proper education,” espoused by the black scholars, Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois.

Both Woodson and DuBois believed that education had a higher purpose than preparing people to get a job and quietly take their place in the social order. In a world tainted by racial, social, and economic injustice, education must be used to prepare young people to build a new society-- a place where ghettos and injustice can only be seen in the history museum. The great Brazilian educator Paulo Friere advocated a similar theme in his discussions of linking education to the struggles for liberation.

The community development model is based on the simple premise that without fighting to change underdeveloped and distressed neighborhoods, we cannot destroy the forces that continually thwart the educative process in inner cities. As Jean Anyon (1997) argues, the ultimate goal of educational reform ought to be the elimination of the effects of the destructive ghettoization of cities and their poorer residents and the reduction of the political and economic isolation that produces such ghettoization. The point is this: without removing these socioeconomic barriers, we are not going to develop inner city schools that routinely produce high academic achievers.

By connecting community development and urban school reform, schools can be turned into dynamic learning environments that encourage students to develop skills and insights that can be used to make their neighborhoods better places to live. In such venues, students can be taught that an empowering relationship exists between knowing and changing their communities.

The idea is to break the *Harriett Tubman model of inner city education*. According to this approach the purpose of education is to enable one to escape

the ghetto in much the same way that Harriett Tubman escaped slavery. Once liberated from *ghetto life and culture*, one has the responsibility to go back and help someone else escape.

The community development model of public education offers a different scenario. Here, the goal is not to escape the ghetto, but to radically reconstruct it. This is what Woodson meant by a “proper education.” In the **Miseducation of the Negro**, he argued that

When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary (xiii).

Without the proper education, Woodson continues, one can easily “learn to follow the line of least resistance rather than battle against the odds for what real history has shown to be the right course.” The “right course” that Woodson references is one that places the radical reconstruction of inner city neighborhoods at the top of the urban reform priority list. The objective here is to instill in students a value that says the purpose of education is *to equip them with the skills needed to earn a living and to create a world worth living in*.

To get a “proper education,” students must not only have the appropriate worldview, but also they must have the necessary skills. Poor academic backgrounds and limited cultural exposure create the barriers to learning and knowing among inner city students. Consequently, the community development model stresses traditional skills development and critical thinking, as well as the application of knowledge to neighborhood problem solving. Therefore, tutoring,

mentoring, after school centers, enrichment activities, and summer programs are also important elements of this approach.

By connecting student motivation with neighborhood engagement and skills development a powerful synergism is created that produces a whole much greater than the individual parts. In other words, students who want to change the world will be motivated to bolster their skills and broaden their cultural horizons. In turn, skill development and a cosmopolitan worldview will make these students more effective agents of change

The Futures Academy Initiative

Though a partnership with Futures Academy, a K-8th grade neighborhood school, the UB School of Architecture and Planning Center for Urban Studies is implementing a model of public school education that fuses schooling and neighborhood development.

Connecting schools to the community development process and creating learning environments that nurture and motivate students is a difficult and complex process. First, and most critical, it involves building a trusting and collaborative relationship with the principal, who must be committed to the importance of connecting schooling to community development. Also, it involves bonding with teachers and building a collaborative relationship with a core, who are willing to take the lead in developing and implementing community orientated school activities. Second, it involves building collaboration among other non-

public school professionals, stakeholders, and residents who are interested in public school reform.

Lastly, the community development model of public education means developing activities that give students an understanding of neighborhoods as built environments that can be changed and that can give them experiences using their talents and skills to do just that. Toward this end, over the past two years, we have developed a program that consists of the following activities: neighborhood planning, a community garden, a neighborhood-clean-a-thon, the Sim City Initiatives, and a community art project being driven by the Locust Street Art Gallery. Next year, through a partnership with the UB School of Social Work, the Department of Geography, and the Buffalo Museum of Science, these programs will be expanded to include an extensive tutoring program, mentoring, and an after school and summer enrichment program. To illustrate the community development approach, I will briefly describe the neighborhood planning initiative, the Sims City Project, and the Futures Garden Project.

In the spring of 2001, the Center for Urban Studies launched a comprehensive neighborhood-planning initiative in the Fruit Belt neighborhood, where Futures Academy is located. This project gave us an opportunity to connect faculty and students at Futures to the community development process. We had a twofold objective. First, we wanted the students to share their ideas about the revitalization of the neighborhood with the planning team. Second, we wanted them to place Futures Academy within the Fruit Belt's urban mosaic. By getting students to situate the school within a neighborhood context, we hoped

they would see the connection between Futures and the community building process.

To get their input into the neighborhood development process, a group of students in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning worked with seventh and eighth graders. These students took digital pictures of places they liked and disliked in the neighborhood. The pictures were numbered, and the students were asked to share their views about these places with the planning team. These activities, and other analyses by the children, gave us insight into their ideas about the neighborhood. Such information helped the planning team understand the Fruit Belt as a place, and their interpretation of the attitudes and viewpoints of the students informed the neighborhood plan. Likewise, the planning process encouraged the students at Futures to think critically about their neighborhood and what could be done to improve it.

To deepen the students understanding of neighborhood planning and to give them insight into “built environment” concept, the Sim City project was initiated. Sim City is part of a national competition for seventh and eighth graders. It is designed to help them discover and foster interest in math, computers, science and engineering. From our perspective, by having students transform a serene and untouched landscape into a thriving metropolis, the competition also created an opportunity to teach them about city building. Over the past two years, the Futures team has won prizes for solar energy and the best urban design. One parent, reflecting on the project’s impact, said, “I have never seen my child so happy and motivated.”

Lastly, I want to briefly describe the Futures Community Garden Project. This initiative was based on the simple idea that neighborhood context matters. It is difficult to make children believe that knowledge gives them the power to control their destiny when the communities in which they live are dilapidated and rundown. Back in 2001, unkept vacant lots and an abandoned commercial structure fronted Futures Academy, symbolizing the neighborhood's powerlessness, and seeming to say to the children, "You are a worthless person and no one cares about you. And there is nothing that can do about it."

The vacant lots and abandoned building were the last things the children saw when they disappeared into Futures Academy each morning, and the first thing they saw when they left school at day's end. It is hard to make children believe education makes a difference when their teachers and parents cannot even clean up the environment in which the school is located.

The goal of the community garden project was to change this symbolism by transforming the vacant lots into a community garden and by tearing down the abandoned building. The idea was to work with students to design, build, and maintain the garden. By transforming the unkept vacant lots and the abandoned building, which occupied a city block, we wanted to demonstrate to students and teachers alike that it is possible for them to improve conditions in their community.

The project went through several phases. In the first phase, the students studied the urban design of the Fruit Belt and how Futures Academy and the vacant lots fit into the scheme of the neighborhood historically. The students

surveyed the vacant lots and then designed the community garden. The next step involved the complex task of actually gaining control over the land and lastly, constructing the garden itself. After completing the garden, a school wide "Name the Garden" essay contest was held and students design trash containers for the garden. Currently, the students are designing a neighborhood flag and sign, which will have the garden's name "Futures Academy" inscribed on it. Finally, seventh and eight grade students are responsible for maintaining the garden, which includes planting flowers each year.

The community garden project has been a huge success. Not only has it transformed the symbolism of the park, but also it has become an important source of community pride. People do not litter or vandalize the park. Moreover, no one has removed the trash containers. This is significant because in many inner city neighborhoods, the only way to keep trash containers from disappearing is to lock them to poles or some other immovable objects. The activities described above incorporate Carter G. Woodson's notion of purposeful education and Paulo Freire's pedagogy of hope. By showing the students that their knowledge can be used to change their community, they may begin to view education as a useful problem-solving tool, rather than a vehicle of flight and escape.

In conclusion, the key to linking school reform to the neighborhood revitalization movement is to create a *process* that enables principles, teachers, students, parents, neighborhood residents, key stakeholders, and school partners to design and implement innovative programs and activities that connect

the school to the neighborhood development process. Once the creative talents of residents, parents, students, teachers, and principles are unleashed, both the school and community will *crackle with the excitement of doing, experiencing, and discovering which results in the development of powerful new pathways for learning and self-expression.*¹

¹ Community Schools: Partnerships for Excellence, Coalition for Community Schools, 2000; *Report of the Task Force on Integrating Schools and Community*, Michigan State Board of Education, June 13, 2002.