

**Are Community Schools Effective Pathways Out of Poverty: A  
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The question, “are community schools still effective pathways out of poverty?” is an extremely important question because it forces us to define more precisely the goal of the community school movement. Elsewhere, I have argued that underperforming public schools cannot be transformed and inner city students cannot become high achievers without the radical reconstruction of the communities and regions where the students live and where the schools are located. This model of education is based on the notion that schooling and community transformation and interactive and mutually reinforcing activities.

This is where the ideal of building effective pathways out of poverty comes into play. Instead of using the concept of constructing pathways out of poverty, I would argue that our goal of poverty alleviation be placed within the larger context of the fight to achieve the higher freedom and participatory democracy. Why is this reformulation of the question so important? The concept of *pathway out of poverty* carries overtones of individualism with it. By this means, it

suggests that while poverty will continue to plague the lives of people in the United States, a pathway will be constructed that allows some folks to escape. This way of thinking is similar to what I call the “Harriet Tubman” approach to education.

Tubman’s goal was not to end slavery, but to help people escape from the misery and suffering caused by slavery. She would go into the slavery territory and rescue slaves via the Underground Railroad. In the Harriet Tubman approach to education the goal is to get people out of the ghetto and their responsible is to go back and get someone else out. I believe the goal should not be to get people out of the ghetto, but to transform the ghetto into a great place to live, work, and raise a family. Likewise, I think placing emphasis on the construction of individual pathways out of poverty should be not the goal of the community school movement. Rather, our aim should be poverty alleviation and the achievement of the higher freedom, which Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the United Nations.

The notion of a *higher freedom* embraces the idea that people not only should have the right to elect their own leaders, freely speak, and move throughout society, but also they should be *free* from the ravages of poverty, underperforming schools, crime and violence and that they should have access to good housing, high quality medical care, and food that allows them to have the type of diet and eating habits capable of sustaining an active and healthy life.

I believe this approach is critical because under-performing schools are just another symptom of the malady of distressed, underdeveloped urban places;

another facet of the urban predicament, which includes poverty, unemployment, bad housing, blighted, unkept physical environments, and family instability.

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 transform underperforming schools that routinely produce high academic achievers. This is also why I believed that community schools are the most important vehicles for transforming communities and the regions of which they are apart. By carefully defining the goals of this movement, we will take a step forward in moving the community school movement to the next level.

The reason is simple: the purpose of education is not only to equip students to earn a living but also to create a world worth living in. Consequently, our model of community development must stress not only the development of traditional skills development, including critical thinking, quantitative analysis, and writing, but also the application of these skills to analyzing and solving the problems of neighborhood development. So, we are not just talking about students who become higher achievers, but also students who are engaged in the process of building a better society. Viewing community schools vehicles for poverty alleviation and the transformation of communities can move the community school movement in this direction.

The university can and must play an important role in the quest to build community schools that are capable of transforming neighborhoods and regions. Here, I want to speak very briefly about one particular dimension that the university can bring to schools. We can bring the broader vision to schools and then work with teachers and administrators to connecting this vision to curriculum and community building activities. In other words, the university can expand the scope of activities within the school, while simultaneously strengthening existing activities. In this sense, the university becomes a catalytic force within the school.

Let me say a few words about two projects that we are involved with at the Center for Urban Studies, which are designed to achieve these goals by linking schools to the neighborhood revitalization and community development process. Because of time constraints, I am only going to highlight the activities that we are involved with. My work has been involved with K-8 grade students, with most of the activities occurring with seventh and eighth graders. We are involved with two schools: one is a traditional public school and the other is a charter school, which is linked to a community center, which is involved in the broader task of community development and revitalization. Our work in these schools is still in their infancy. So, we have a long way to go and much to learn. The approaches that we are employing are very different.

The first school is Futures Academy, which is a K-8 grade and a traditional public school. Our specific goal in this school is to link the schooling process to neighborhood engagement and community development. Here, we are striving

to get teachers and students to see a connection between the things being taught in class and ways to change the community around them. There are four main activities that we are engaged in to achieve this goal.

1. The community art project
2. The community garden project
3. The Neighborhood Clean-A-Thon
4. The Futures City Project

The second school is the Martin Luther King Charter School, which is part of the activities of the King Urban Life Center. My participation with this project years ago brought me into contact with Ira, when their journal did a special edition of the work we were doing in Buffalo. (Discuss the evolution of this project).

This represents a unique opportunity to construct an entire community around a school and community center and then to use the energy created by this experience to work toward the transformation of an entire section of the city. To transform schools, and turn them into exciting learning places where students will become the best that they can be, we must connect schools and the learning process to the transformation of those distressed, underdeveloped neighborhoods where students and their parents live. Everyday, those marginal, distressed, underdeveloped, and forgotten communities teach students that education does not matter and that nothing but drug money, luck, or the New

York State lottery will change the realities facing them, their parents, friends, and neighbors.