



# Whose Child Left Behind?

# WHY?

Faith-Based Reflections on Visits to Public Schools in Cleveland, Ohio;  
Phoenix, Arizona; Hartford, Connecticut; and Wartburg, Tennessee

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Final Report of the United Church of Christ Public  
Education Task Force



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# **Whose Child Left Behind? Why?**

## **Faith-Based Reflections on Visits to Public Schools**

**Cleveland, Ohio; Phoenix, Arizona; Hartford,  
Connecticut; and Wartburg, Tennessee**

Final Report of the United Church of Christ  
Public Education Task Force  
2001-2005

### *Dedication*

*We dedicate this volume to the memory of Mary Grant, mentor to the United Church of Christ's Harambee Youth. Mary died in February 2005. She was a valued member of the Public Education Task Force.*

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## Introduction

In July of 2001, the United Church of Christ General Synod 23 passed a resolution, “Access to Excellent Public Schools: A Child’s Civil Right in the 21st Century,” that asked Justice and Witness Ministries to establish a cross-covenanted ministries Public Education Task Force.<sup>1</sup> The resolution charged the Task Force to, “identify systemic barriers to excellent public education and to recommend strategies to address those barriers.”

During the following winter Justice and Witness Ministries convened a Task Force of approximately 20 lay leaders, clergy and staff, representing local churches, all geographic regions, the Covenanted Ministries, the Council of Racial-Ethnic Ministries, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Coalition, the Disabilities Ministries and youth. While we represent many parts of the country and a wide variety of experiences, we have learned that our convictions about public schools are strongly shared. Not quite three months after President George W. Bush signed the mammoth *No Child Left Behind Act*, we first met in Cleveland, Ohio in April, 2002. Serious civil rights and funding concerns around the *No Child Left Behind Act* that have been unfolding during the tenure of the Task Force have become both the backdrop of our work and a subject for serious discussion and exploration. Our challenge has been to name these and other factors that limit opportunity for vast numbers of children and adolescents in the United States.

The United Church of Christ created a task force with many angles of vision and many voices for the very purpose of challenging the members to see and hear in a new way as we visited public schools, for, “Unfortunately, we have been conditioned to see only the things we have always known as a result of a very thorough socialization process.”<sup>2</sup> When a group as diverse as the Task Force visits public schools, the members bring their eyes, ears and life experiences with them, and the reflection weaves a tapestry of many points of view. Now, having worked together for four years, our task force challenges the church to experience the realities of public schools from our many perspectives. We further challenge the UCC in all its settings to find ways to engage with public schools, to support schools through partnership and to speak for institutional justice, because “... evil is not so much the work of a few degenerate people or groups of people as it is the result of the indifference and negligence of the many.”<sup>3</sup>

Our methodology has been through action-reflection, in our case school immersion followed by discerning together. At four meetings at four locations across the United States we have spent one day together visiting public schools and then additional meetings listening to people in each of the school communities. Each site visit was chosen for a special focus in addition to our general exploration of school operations, funding concerns, and issues of welcome for children and their families.

### **Cleveland, Ohio, April 2002**

In April 2002, the Task Force visited seven high schools in Cleveland, Ohio and six of its eastern suburbs—from the inner-ring to the wealthier outer suburbs. We visited East Tech High School in Cleveland, Shaw High School in East Cleveland, and Euclid, Cleveland Heights, Shaker Heights, Mayfield and Beachwood High Schools. Cuyahoga County is divided into 31 school districts, in what the US Census identifies as one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. Here we were interested in exploring racial and economic segregation and inequities across a range of contiguous school districts. The Task Force divided into small groups in which every participant visited two high schools, each for a half day. By choosing high schools for this visit, we hoped to observe the impact of education on the trajectories of these late adolescents.

### **Phoenix, Arizona, November 2002**

In late November 2002, the Task Force visited schools in five of the thirteen elementary school districts in Phoenix, Arizona: Alhambra, Isaac, Creighton, Phoenix I, and Roosevelt. In all five districts more than half the students are English language learners. Elementary schools in Phoenix have a variety of configurations: some of these schools encompassed grades K-8, while others included K-3, or K-5 or 4-8. Each of our small

groups visited two schools. While some visited schools in two different Phoenix districts, others visited one Phoenix public school and either the Maricopa County, *Thomas Pappas School for Homeless Children*, or the *Gila Crossing School*, a Bureau of Indian Affairs school on the nearby Gila River Reservation. Our special focus in Phoenix was to examine the ways schools welcome or reject children who are English language learners in a state that has passed one of our nation's three English-only constitutional amendments. We sought to learn whether and how particular schools serve children who are not of the dominant culture, while Arizona law now mandates rapid linguistic assimilation. Because in southern Arizona we were close enough to a Native American reservation that two groups could visit for a half day at the Gila Crossing School, we were fortunate to be able to broaden our consideration of the interface of school with children's language and culture at an American Indian school where staff have paid close attention to these issues. Our visit to the Pappas School for homeless children helped us think about the interface of home culture and institutional culture from a very different perspective. We shared a Saturday morning panel and conversation with members of Phoenix area UCC congregations and experts: Hon. Ben Miranda of the Arizona State Legislature; Dr. Elsie Szecsy, Southwest Center for Education Equity and Language Diversity at Arizona State University; Mr. Gilbert Innes, Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University; Ms. Cindy Gattorna, Stepping Stone Foundation Preschool and Literacy Program; Mr. Randy Mettler, Arizona Quest for Kids, a mentoring and scholarship program; and Rev. Lori Souder, Stardust House, a learning resource center in the Roosevelt School District.

### **Pre-Synod Event, Minneapolis, Minnesota, July 2003**

To further explore the ways schools respond to students' native languages and cultures, the Task Force welcomed nearly 100 participants in July 2003 to a pre-General Synod-24 event in Minneapolis, Minnesota, featuring James A. Banks, father of multicultural education and professor at the University of Washington. Banks warned: "A curriculum that incorporates only the knowledge, values, experiences and perspectives of mainstream powerful groups marginalizes. . . students who are members of racial, cultural, language and religious minorities."

### **Hartford, Connecticut, January 2004**

A January 2004 visit to metropolitan Hartford, Connecticut was an obvious choice, since Elizabeth Horton Sheff, our co-chair, is also the mother of the lead plaintiff in the Connecticut *Sheff v. O'Neill* case that for fifteen years has sought better funding for schools in impoverished Hartford and area-wide racial integration through formation of inter-district magnet schools. Our Hartford deliberations centered around the role of an on-going equity and civil rights case when justice continues to be deferred; the school funding inequities that can occur even in a geographically small state when there are enormous disparities in personal wealth and community taxing capacities; and the implications, beginning to emerge by early 2004, of the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in an urban area. Small groups spread out to visit four Hartford elementary schools, Thirman L. Milner School, Dr. James H. Naylor School, Maria C. Colon Sanchez School, and Frank T. Simpson-Waverly School; the West Woods Upper Elementary School in suburban Farmington; and three regional magnet schools designed to integrate voluntarily city and suburban children: The Metropolitan Learning Center (A Global Studies and International Affairs Magnet School), the University of Hartford Magnet School (A Multiple Intelligences Magnet School), and the schools of the Learning Corridor at Trinity College (Montessori Magnet, Magnet Middle School, Academy of the Arts, and Academy of Science and Mathematics). Our school visits and deliberations were supported by a Saturday morning community conversation with leaders in Connecticut UCC congregations and leaders from the school district, the magnet schools and civic government.

### **Wartburg, Tennessee, September 2004**

In late September 2004, the Task Force visited Morgan and Cumberland Counties in Tennessee. Our hope was to learn about the challenges for rural and small town schools, to think about the implementation of the

*No Child Left Behind Act* in rural America, and to learn more about rural poverty from Rural Cumberland Resources, an agency that has been addressing the need to raise community academic expectations and at the same time organize parents to advocate for their children. Our school visits provided an unusual opportunity to visit Central Elementary School, Central Middle School, and Wartburg Central High School, all three levels in one town, Wartburg, Tennessee, a community of 890 people on the eastern edge of the Cumberland Plateau. These schools are three of the eight schools spread across the Morgan County School District. Our visits were followed later in the day in nearby Crossville with an opportunity to listen to the school concerns of a group of parents convened by Rural Cumberland Resources and on Saturday to reflect with school administrators of the Cumberland County Schools and residents of the UCC's Uplands Retirement Community in Pleasant Hill, many of whom volunteer at the nearby elementary school.

### **All-Denominational Survey<sup>4</sup>**

As one of the mandates of the 2001 General Synod public education resolution, a survey was conducted by the UCC's Office of Research Services in conjunction with the Public Education Task Force. Surveyed during the summer of 2002 were pastors, public school educators identified by their pastors, leaders of social action committees, members of Conference staffs, youth leaders, and youths. Over 2,500 responses arrived from all thirty-nine UCC Conferences to identify concerns about public schools, name educational priorities, and identify what members across all settings of the UCC believe to be the appropriate role of the church in response to the needs of public schools in the United States. We heard back from one-fifth of UCC pastors, more than 800 public school educators, and staff from over half of the UCC's Conferences.

Information from the survey as well as written comments from UCC pastors, social action committee chairs, and the public school teachers who fill our congregations' pews on Sunday morning are included in many parts of this report. One set of findings is particularly important for the introduction. The survey asked respondents to prioritize twenty possible public school roles —ways schools can benefit students and in several instances thereby shape society as a whole. Table 1 portrays the order of priority in which respondents rated what turned out to be the nine top roles for public schools.

**TABLE 1**

**Educational Priorities**

(Percentage Who Ranked Each Function as Very High or High Priority)

Providing basic literacy in core subjects	89%
Creating a positive learning environment	88%
Preparing responsible citizens	84%
Instilling a love of learning	83%
Providing every school with enough money	81%
Preparing students for economic self sufficiency	80%
Holding high expectations for all	79%
Involving parents and guardians	79%
Providing support for students who are behind	75%

Significantly, while respondents could have rated any number of school functions as "not a priority at all," none of the possible roles for public schools was rejected by any category of respondents. The survey results indicate that people in all settings of the UCC continue to hold very broad, ambitious expectations for what public schools should accomplish across a multiplicity of roles. Within our denomination there is surely no consensus that our society could or should economize by eliminating any of the many functions we have come to expect of public schools.

## Biblical and Theological Reflection

**“...justice is the community’s guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to be a participant in the common life of society.... If we are, finally, brothers and sisters through the providence of God, then it is unjust to treat people as though they did not belong. And it is just to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation.”<sup>5</sup> —Rev. Philip Wogaman**

**“The church is the place where justice begins and ends. It teaches and lives the common ground and community.”—All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Rhode Island Conference**

**“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ... If you remove the yoke from among you... and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; and you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” *Isaiah 58: 6-12***

Our faith speaks to public morality and the ways a nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life. Surely this call to justice is relevant to needed reform in America’s public schools, for public education is the largest civic institution in the United States, an institution with 90,000 schools enrolling nearly 50 million children and adolescents. Alarming achievement gaps among groups of children alert us to inequities in schools within communities, within states and across the fifty states. Simply put, in a society that depends upon information, some American children are given better access to education than other children; inequity in educational opportunity is a significant injustice because education is the gate keeper to opportunity. Educational injustice is difficult to rectify, however, because it is embedded into the very structure of an enormous system.

Public schools operate as they do because of laws and regulations and traditions, at the intersection of social attitudes, culture, economics, politics, public finance and ethics. While the operation of our system of education reflects the attitudes and ethics of the individuals who make laws and who work in schools, it is far more complicated than the actions of a mass of individuals. According to theologian Marcus Borg, “Social systems are among the factors beyond the individual that deeply affect people’s lives. Seeing this is the key to understanding the Bible’s passion for justice. Social systems include political systems, economic systems, and systems of convention, by which I mean cultural attitudes and values enshrined in society. These can be, and often are, oppressive.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact most Americans report that they would like public schools to be more equitable, and many express surprise that we cannot simply proclaim that no child will be left behind and insist that justice be done. A recent academic study of inequity across our nation’s public schools pointed to the moral dimension of the achievement gap: “Americans want all children to have a real chance to learn, and they want all schools to foster democracy and promote the common good, but they do not want those things enough to make them actually happen.”<sup>7</sup>

It is at the place where public and private intersect that many American parents find themselves ill-equipped to explore the moral implications of their individual choices for the greater community. Because education is so highly valued, privileged Americans use their means and their influence to secure what seems best for their own children. Few parents with means understand their decision to move into the suburb with the best funded schools as a moral choice. Perhaps believing that affluence derives from their own diligence and attributing their success to virtue, some parents even justify their choices by imagining that parents with less resources are not as deserving for their children’s education. About complicity in unjust systems Rev. William Sloane Coffin writes: “Rarely do Americans see privilege as a form of theft.”<sup>8</sup> Systemic injustice results at the juncture of school district jurisdictional boundaries, overreliance on local taxes, and a mass of parents’ personal choices. Here is Rev. Jim Wallis’s assessment: “Because education is so key... to rob low-income families of the one thing that would most liberate their children is especially cruel and evil. The truth

that nobody wants to really say is that affluent American parents would simply never tolerate the disastrous public schools to which so many poor families are forced to send their children. And it is simply not a coincidence that the vast majority of the children in those schools are children of color—mostly black or Hispanic.”<sup>9</sup> Nobody intentionally sets out to create systemic injustice, but neither is it a coincidence.

As a people of faith, we are called to do justice, for the bible defines morality not only as a private matter but also as a public responsibility. The people of ancient Israel are challenged by the prophet Isaiah to undertake social justice as their expression of their covenant with God, rather than expressing their faith through the hollow trappings of personal righteousness. “Loose the bonds of injustice.” “Remove the yoke. “Satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” Poorly funded education in schools that limit the curriculum to rote learning and basic skills is a yoke for the children whose inadequate education will curtail their later employment opportunities. Spending one’s childhood and adolescence in dreary, leaking buildings, in overcrowded classes, and without art, music, sports, or other enrichments is an affliction. Jesus calls us to remove the stumbling blocks before children<sup>10</sup> and reminds us that nations will be judged by how they care for their most vulnerable members.<sup>11</sup> Today in the twenty-first century United Church of Christ, we are called to do justice as a public expression of our love for God and all the children whom God has created because, “The God of love is also the God of justice. The two are related, for in the Bible justice is the social form of love.”<sup>12</sup>

## **What did we learn? What are the systemic barriers that are leaving so many children behind?**

General Synod 23 charged the Public Education Task Force, “to become educated about and work to eliminate systemic barriers to excellent public education for all.” In the summer of 2001 when the Task Force was given its charge, there was not a federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, whose mechanisms were to command that achievement gaps be eliminated and to punish the schools and school districts unable to raise achievement quickly as measured by standardized tests. The hundreds of sequential mechanisms and regulations of this massive federal act, signed into law in January of 2002, have begun to be triggered during the same period our Task Force has been deliberating. While members of the Task Force would affirm the important goals of the *No Child Left Behind Act*—that educators hold high expectations and envision a bright future for children in all demographic groups and that achievement gaps be closed—we believe our society must set about far more than merely demanding that schools improve, testing students to see if they are improving, and punishing the school districts that cannot seem to improve. While the goals of the law are important, Congress cannot declare that no child be left behind without taking major steps to improve the experience of schooling for the children who have long been left behind, without addressing institutional racism and discrimination against poor children in non-dominant groups, and without directing significant financial resources to these ends. The systemic barriers that have been so apparent to members of our Task Force continue to matter. We must confront them as a church and demand that society address them as well. There are no shortcuts.

- Segregation matters. Race matters. Poverty matters.
- School finance matters.
- Civil rights cases in the courts matter and are still necessary.
- Rural isolation and rural poverty matter.
- A child’s language, culture, and identity matter. How the school’s culture and the child’s culture are folded together matters.
- Good teaching matters. Respecting and supporting educators matters.
- Congregations supporting public schools matter.

### **Segregation matters. Race matters. Poverty matters.**

**“The vast majority of intensely segregated minority schools face conditions of concentrated poverty, which are powerfully related to unequal opportunity. Students in segregated minority schools face**

conditions that students in segregated white schools seldom experience.”<sup>13</sup> —*Harvard Civil Rights Project*

**“We need to recognize that the psychological scars of enslavement, Jim Crow, and institutional racism may create financial, social, and psychological barriers to educational achievement for children and a barrier that may block parents from feeling empowered to advocate for their children.” —*Mary Grant***

**“Almost 50 years after Brown, there is extreme segregation in a metropolitan area where there are 31 school district jurisdictions. There is evidence in all-African American schools of unequal resources and therefore unequal facilities, curricular offerings, books and supplies, and technology. Jurisdictional boundaries and politics make it very difficult to deal with the big justice issues.” —*From group reflection on visits to greater Cleveland’s high schools***

Having visited schools for four years, members of the UCC’s Public Education Task Force are troubled by the diagnosis of America’s school woes that we read in newspapers and hear on the news. To listen to America’s current school reform conversation is to hear about the structure and management of schools. School size is said to be an important variable. Holding staff accountable for student outcomes is said to be key. Test scores and adequate yearly progress on standardized tests are our nation’s primary focus. Reformers tell us that since external factors cannot be controlled by the school and its staff, society must instead concentrate on the accountability and school structure issues that school districts can control. If we work hard enough on within-school factors, we are told school can make up for the other things outside of school. In our visits to schools we have become convinced, however, that it is not possible to reflect on schooling without considering the societal factors that touch our schools. Race and poverty and segregation still matter in all the schools we visited and in every place where we met with people from the school community. Speaking about public school justice in America without speaking about race, poverty, and segregation is a matter of denial.

In its report on the high schools of metropolitan Cleveland, Ohio, our group reported that a school’s location and the sense of the type of community it symbolizes have a great deal of influence on the character of the school. It isn’t just a matter of funding. Different communities have a different sense of entitlement — programs they expect to be offered to their children and the way they expect their children to be treated. The perception about the district matters in many ways. Some of this has to do with economics; part of it has to do with race and culture. Differences associated with racial and economic segregation were immediately apparent to our groups that visited seven high schools ranging from those in the city and its poorest inner suburb across the eastern suburbs to the high school in one of the wealthiest school districts in Ohio. Differences are apparent even in the simple descriptions of the seven high schools as reported out by each of our groups; the details tell not only about the schools, but also the communities—their means, their expectations and their aspirations for their children:

- “There were indications of funding difficulties such as large classes — an English class of 45 students — and empty shelves in a poorly stocked library. The architecture has left the halls somewhat dark. Our group was made aware of security, with extensive cameras and screens.”
- “Established goals for the year as reported to our group include: decreased drug use, increased attendance, emphasis on graduation, and increased state proficiency test scores. We saw evident security including a closed campus, no study halls, security cameras, and some ‘evidence of turf disputes.’ Students wear uniforms. A member of our group commented that the school felt ‘locked down.’”
- “Our group observed a comprehensive program and wide variety of courses at this large high school of 2,000 students. Despite security in this district— guards in uniform, a security booth at the entrance, and one uniformed police officer—security was not the first thing our group noted in the atmosphere. Instead we felt the warm welcome, the caring staff, the murals in the hallways and the framed quotations to inspire... The school was noted to offer wide and varied courses and a wide range of co-curricular activities.”
- “Even though it is in a suburb, this school is in some ways like a big urban high school. It is located on

a busy corner with small retail establishments, with the football field sandwiched between the school and a main street. The building was built in the 1920s, and has been added onto at several times. But our group noticed the range of AP offerings in biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, American history, government, economics, music theory, Calculus AB, Calculus BC, French, Spanish, German, and World and British Literature. We were also aware of the tech ed program in auto mechanics and pharmacy. Security personnel were dressed in street clothing, and staff in the security office seemed friendly and supportive rather than projecting a punitive attitude. We would describe the atmosphere in the halls and in the office as friendly.”

- “Members of our group were struck by the affluence of the community surrounding this high school, where several schools are clustered near each other in a parklike setting. We noticed the very open atmosphere, where students seemed to feel free to be in the hallways in a relaxed way. This school has a wide variety of academic and co-curricular offerings.”
- “With 1,600 students, this high school, located in a large area off the main street, has a college campus kind of setting. The newer building has sections separated by courtyards. The school is racially homogenous but ethnically diverse, with a large number of recent immigrants who are primarily Russian (many Jewish), Italian, and from other European countries. There seems to be much support within the community and among parents for academic achievement. There is an academic booster club supported by parents that raises \$20,000 annually for academic letter jackets and for the academic wall of fame. Classes are small, capped at 20 students.”
- “This 600-student high school felt very small, approximately one fourth the size of the larger school we visited in the morning. It reports a graduation rate of 100 percent, with 99 percent entering college and 75 percent eventually graduating from four-year colleges. It reports that 95 percent of its teaching staff hold a masters or a doctoral degree. Teachers’ salaries here average \$70,000 per year; the district reports very little staff turnover. While it is much smaller, this high school offers the very same range of AP courses, even without the economies of scale that make those offerings possible. This school feels very open as a building, due to the presence of many of the central office functions housed in offices with glass walls to the central hallway. It has an open campus, meaning the students can come and go freely during the day. Many students have cars.”

Our group also observed segregation during a visit to elementary schools in Phoenix, Arizona. The five elementary districts we visited were overwhelmingly Hispanic. We must conclude that white, dominant culture children are also segregated to varying degrees in others of the more than fifty school districts in Maricopa County, and the thirteen elementary school districts in Phoenix itself.

We observed a different kind of segregation in Phoenix, as two of our groups visited the Thomas J. Pappas School maintained by Maricopa County to serve 800 homeless children in grades K-8. The Pappas School, more than any school we visited, makes explicit the myriad needs of children in extreme poverty, needs that can easily become invisible at a large public school. Every day the school’s transportation director arranges a complicated new bus route to serve children who may live in old motels, in shelters, or even in boxes or under bridges and whose families may move every few weeks. The school provides a health and dental clinic, breakfast and lunch, and a clothing cupboard. The school’s services should not mask the fact, however, that the school’s mission segregates it by extreme poverty. While members of our group appreciated efforts by staff and volunteers to meet the personal needs of the children, they questioned whether the focus on serving the children’s life needs might not be crowding out attention to raising academic expectations. Our group noticed also that the school connects with the students’ status — poverty — but not in significant ways with their cultures or language. In its final deliberations in Phoenix, the Task Force wrote: “A key question for Maricopa County and Pappas School is: Are public officials in the county and the school trying to find ways to put this school out of business? Eliminating homelessness should be the overall goal, after all. The Pappas School raises important concerns for the church about the role of charity and the need for justice work.”

## School finance matters.

**“In the entrance to the school office the principal stopped to note awards and trophies of school successes. He said, ‘This school is a hidden treasure in this city!’... The symbol for the school is a scarab. I asked one of the staff, ‘Why a scarab?’ Her answer: ‘It comes out of the dust and survives.’” —Rev. Fidelia A. Lane, reflecting on visits to greater Cleveland’s high schools**

**“Establishing justice will require allocating additional funding for the districts with the greatest challenges. There is an important difference between equal and equitable funding.” —Elizabeth Horton Sheff, reflecting on visits to greater Cleveland’s high schools**

**“It seemed to me that the day’s visits demonstrated once again that the economic status of the community correlates highly with the quality of education that its children will receive. The physical plant, the grounds, the programs, and the staff quality all seem dictated by an economic determinant.” —Dr. Manford Byrd, Jr., reflecting on visits to greater Cleveland’s high schools**

**“While I celebrate the efforts and the education the school is providing, I was struck by how the school’s excellence depends on the ability of its principal-leader to be able to raise special funds and build relationships with business and community. Does this put schools in competition with each other for basic educational programming? Does it require specialized training for principals in grant-writing and public relations?” —Teresa Campbell, reflecting on a visit to a Phoenix elementary school**

**“I visited the Milner School and the University of Hartford Magnet. What a contradiction. While both schools had dedicated and committed administrative staff and teachers, at Milner it was clear they were making do with second rate facilities and equipment. While the magnet school had brand new Smart Screens and a computer that operates as an overhead projector, Milner had a room full of refurbished computers donated from Aetna, a local insurance company. This was a very generous donation and greatly appreciated, but it seems to me there has to be a way to level the playing field.” —Cecile Gilson, Connecticut Conference Staff**

While the *No Child Left Behind Act* focuses primarily on demanding better educational outcomes, members of our Task Force have been struck again and again with inequality in inputs from one place to another. Vastly unequal investment will inevitably deny opportunity for the children who attend poorer facilities, in larger classes, and with less investment in teachers’ salaries and ongoing training. The inequitable distribution of resources we observed within the metropolitan areas of Cleveland and Hartford and the inadequate funding levels in Arizona and Tennessee undermine opportunity for children in the poorer schools. The lone Senator to oppose the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the late Paul Wellstone wrote, “We cannot close the achievement gap until we close the gap in investment between poor and rich schools... It is simply negligent to force children to pass a test and expect that the poorest children, who face every disadvantage, will be able to do as well as those who have every advantage. When we do this, we hold children responsible for our own inaction and unwillingness to live up to our own promises and our own obligations.”<sup>14</sup>

The Task Force’s all-UCC survey, which measured attitudes about public schools, asked respondents to prioritize their concerns about America’s public schools. The urgent need for adequate funding and for distributing public funds fairly ranked as the highest concern of all categories of respondent. According to a social action committee chair in the Central Atlantic Conference, “I believe Jesus would have sent his kids to public school ...Equitable funding, however, is not considered a U.S. Constitutional guarantee. State-by-state work and intra-county work is needed here.”

As the Task Force visited schools, the funding gap was very evident in the high schools on Cleveland’s East Side. Our group concluded in its final report that the higher the funding the lower the class size. Arts education programs are unequal among districts. Curricular offerings are unequal among districts. Enrichment activities are unequal among districts. Access to technology is unequal among districts. When there is less access to technology at home, it affects the expectations for students at school and the level of the exposure to technology at school. Because schools in Ohio depend heavily on local property taxes, the

passage of school levies in elections is easier in communities with higher property values and where residents have higher disposable incomes.

Similarly in Hartford, after visiting neighborhood schools in the city, a wealthy suburban school, and three of the inter-district magnet schools created to attract students voluntarily across district boundaries, the final report concluded that some schools obviously have abundant resources. Neighborhood schools in the city have far less, even though teachers are working well and hard. Disparities can be perceived in the physical architecture of new magnet schools and the tired neighborhood schools; in the location of schools and their relation to the rest of the neighborhood; in the amount of time and relaxed opportunities for teachers to interact and connect. From the gorgeous new 16 acre campus of the Learning Corridor that includes performance venues, top science and academic technology, and a facility and playground designed according to the Montessori philosophy, to the \$32 million Metropolitan Learning Center with a focus on international affairs, world languages and communications technology, to the University of Hartford Magnet's 2001 building designed to enhance multiple-intelligences, to the \$26 million, months-old school for fifth and sixth graders in suburban Farmington, the physical structures convey optimism, innovation, and an orientation to an expanded future for the children enrolled. Hartford's neighborhood schools are clean and well maintained, but they had not been updated. Clearly Hartford does not have as much local money to invest in its neighborhood schools as Farmington or as the state and the Capitol Region Education Council are able to invest in the magnets. Students in the magnet schools benefit in many ways as does the region, but the fact of inequity remains.

In early 2004, as we visited Connecticut and as implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* entered its third year, we were aware of the federal law's meaning in this city that has been actively struggling with educational inequity. In Connecticut, where there is so much disparity in resources and so much competition for scarce funding, it seemed to members of our Task Force that the *No Child Left Behind Act* only reinforces and exacerbates all the other problems. Reports of our groups that visited Hartford as well as suburban Farmington, would indicate that we observed what data demonstrates: high achievement test scores follow family wealth and public investment. *No Child Left Behind's* ranking of schools only encourages families and educators to seek out the successful places, instead of improving the schools left behind. The federal law further pits one group or school or town against another. The schools with the fewest financial resources are most likely to be penalized by the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which puts far more pressure on the schools in Hartford's poorest neighborhoods and less pressure on the school in suburbs like Farmington or the magnet schools. Because the *No Child Left Behind Act* comes without enough funding, it is a law that mandates accountability without equity.

In Arizona, the disparity in resources among Phoenix elementary districts reflects at least in part local budget overrides that some local districts have been able to pass for specific purposes such as capital needs, maintenance and operations, or K-3 operations. While Arizona's investment in public education is second to last among the 50 states and the District of Columbia,<sup>15</sup> some local districts, essentially some neighborhoods in Phoenix, have been able to inspire local voters to provide additional support. One district had what our group described as, "gorgeous and impeccably maintained buildings," while in another a principal stated that to save money, the district is operating at state-maximum class size when, "Arizona's standard for class size is much too large." In another district a library featured an encyclopedia set dating from 1969. In another district, our group noticed para-professionals in some cases teaching classes, due to a shortage of teachers, and our group commented on very large classes. We observed significant variation among the elementary schools in this city where over-dependence on local taxes is disequalizing.

The three school facilities in Wartburg, Tennessee are new, bright, polished and well equipped. But our group noticed other indicators of funding troubles. At the high school, chemistry, physics and Calculus are not regularly offered each year; at the middle school foreign languages are not part of the curriculum. We learned that Tennessee, a state without an income tax, funds its schools primarily with a sales tax so regressive it applies even to groceries. A large part of the local share of school funding is supported by property taxes, and at the same time the responsibility for funding schools has shifted from businesses onto residen-

tial property owners. Only because of the resolution of the *Tennessee Small School Systems v. McWherter* Case in 2003 have teachers salaries been equalized and increased across the state.

We observed in Tennessee as in all the other locations we visited that innovation and enrichment are overly-dependent on the capacity and vision of administrators to secure grant funding. The environmental, place-based education program at Central High School is funded through a Rural School and Community Trust Annenberg Challenge Grant, and this high school depends upon the following additional funding sources: Water Education Team Grants, a Department of Energy Grant, Eisenhower Grants, Lockheed-Martin Corporation Foundation Grants, Tennessee Humanities Council Grants, a National Parks Service Grant, an Appalachian Educational Laboratory Grant, and others. Just as the Gila Crossing school at the Arizona, Gila River Indian Reservation had done, Morgan County Schools, at the elementary level have secured a 21<sup>st</sup> Century After School Program through a rigorous, competitive federal program. Everywhere we were aware of a system in which those who know how to access money through public and private competitive grants can help children thrive. Members of our Task Force believe this dependence on the initiative of individual educators raises a serious theological question about a supposedly public system that exacerbates inequity by incorporating funding streams that help some children and not others.

### **Civil rights cases in the courts matter and are still necessary.**

“... a friend asked me to attend a meeting in her stead. At the time, I was vice president of the tenants’ association for Westbrook Village, a public housing development in the far northwest corner of the city... What I learned at that meeting changed my life... The lawyers highlighted the growing racial and economic isolation, and resulting disparities in educational outcomes faced by children in the Hartford public school system. They reviewed the Connecticut Mastery Test scores that gave statistical proof of those disparities, including the one that still burns in my mind: in 1989, 74 percent of students in the eighth grade in Hartford public schools needed remedial reading services. For me, this meant not that 74 percent of the students were failing, but rather that the system was failing 74 percent of our children.”<sup>16</sup>  
—*Elizabeth Horton Sheff*

“...an attorney with the NAACP’s Legal Defense fund, observed that ‘*Sheff* sends a message that you have to conceive of the people of a metropolitan area as being in the same boat, and you can’t draw a line around an inner city and say, ‘survive or die on your own.’ The case applied not only to the Hartford area but also to the entire state of Connecticut.” —Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*<sup>17</sup>

“Everything I observed about this school serving 373 pre-Kindergarten-Grade 5 students in a brand new multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art facility was impressive. The hard-driving, no-nonsense, creative principal and her young, talented staff were impressive. I know these descriptions might appear to be excessive, but the University of Hartford Magnet School is a magnificent school. One could only dream of a day when every child in America attended a school so well organized.” —*Dr. Manfred Byrd, Jr.*

“I was impressed that teachers were honestly grappling with how to serve highly motivated children who had not been offered the prerequisites in their neighborhood schools. This was not a set of schools aimed at the Connecticut Mastery Test. The Learning Corridor schools embody the expectation that children will be trained at a level that puts Harvard into the possibilities. The challenge is offering such opportunities to far more children.” —*Jan Resseger*

“Why is it that all schools aren’t receiving the resources available for the magnet schools we have observed? All children deserve what the magnet schools provide. Now that Connecticut has demonstrated the effect of this kind of education, how can we lift the voice of the church to help all schools seek the funds to provide excellence? Can we find a way to bring the educators in the schools that have so much to talk with educators in the schools that have less?” —*Rev. Ray Reid*

The courts have been one avenue by which Americans have been able to address racial segregation and school funding inequity. For over fifteen years now, a Connecticut court case has addressed both injustices together. In fact one of the primary reasons the Task Force traveled to Connecticut in January 2004 was to

observe the role of the long-running civil rights and school funding lawsuit, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, named for Milo Sheff, lead plaintiff and son of Task Force Chair, Elizabeth Horton Sheff. The *Sheff* lawsuit has sought to force the state to ameliorate the under-funding of Connecticut's urban school districts and what all agree is extreme racial and economic isolation among the school children of Connecticut.

Filed in 1989, the case finally reached the trial stage for eleven weeks in 1992. In 1995, the trial judge decided *Sheff* for the state defendants — ruling that the state was not legally bound to fix segregation because the state had not created it. A year later, the state Supreme Court overturned the trial decision, ruling that even though the state was not itself actively responsible for having created a separate and sharply unequal system, under Connecticut's constitution, the legislature must desegregate the state's schools.

The chosen mechanisms for achieving integration were to be regional interdistrict magnet schools in addition to the continuation of Project Choice, in which suburban districts offer places to Hartford's children. Progress was slow, however, and the plaintiffs returned to court repeatedly to demand compliance. On January 22, 2003, after six months of intense negotiation and pointing to a handful of very popular and successfully integrated magnet schools, the plaintiffs and the state reached an agreement that the state would build eight additional magnet schools by June 2007, two per year. In August of 2004, the plaintiffs, back in court, filed a motion accusing the state of breaching the 2003 agreement and demanding that enforcement now be accelerated. The state was already far behind schedule in building the promised magnet schools; it was also hundreds of students short of enrolling 2,400 children in magnet schools by the opening of school in fall 2004.

Without *Sheff*, there is no reason to believe Connecticut would have integrated its schools or begun to reduce vast school funding inequity. Accomplishments of the *Sheff* Case, however incomplete to date, are interdistrict magnet schools like the ones we visited, expanded seats for Hartford children in neighboring suburban schools through Project Choice, the accreditation of three Hartford high schools whose programs had slipped, funding for early childhood education in Hartford, and a long list of social and arts programs, encompassing Hartford and its suburbs, designed to bring together students of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Here are the injustices, knotted together through segregation and school finance inequity, that the *Sheff* Case has continued to force the state to address. In 2004, while Connecticut spent more on public education than many other states, the distribution of educational opportunity across the state remained unequal because schools are overly dependent on local taxes. The state is 49 out of 50 in the state's percentage contribution to school taxes. "Although Connecticut targets a fair amount of that state aid toward property-poor districts, when state and local funds are both considered, its wealth-neutrality score indicates lingering inequities in the distribution of funding based on property wealth."<sup>18</sup> Schools that are unequal are also racially separate. In the state's most affluent school districts, the demographic distribution of students averages 94 percent white and only 6 percent minority; in contrast in the high-poverty districts, the distribution averages 82 percent minority and 18 percent white.<sup>19</sup> According to the Education Trust, "Districts with the highest minority enrollments have \$408.31 fewer state and local dollars to spend per student compared with the lowest-minority districts. That translates into a total of \$10,207.75 for a typical classroom of 25 students."<sup>20</sup>

*Sheff* has not been easy. Our groups visiting neighborhood Hartford schools, the new magnet schools, and a school in an affluent suburb could see so clearly the layers of injustice, the variables, the choices and the trade-offs that become part of addressing injustice in a real world setting. At a Saturday community forum in Hartford, Tim Nee, the principal of the Montessori Magnet School at the Learning Corridor, remarked that without the court case there would not have developed the political will for equity. His concern, however, continues to be expanding justice: "In Hartford's magnet schools, we have beautiful models. The issue is how to replicate these models on a far greater scale. All kids deserve our facilities at the Learning Corridor."

In their final report on the Connecticut trip, Task Force members reflected: "*Sheff* is about pushing outside the envelope. There are many paradoxes embodied in school reform created through voluntary integration in

magnet schools. The opportunities create real diversity which is desirable for all students—students from many school districts actually learning together and learning from each other. How can we effectively advocate to help all children in Hartford’s schools find the kind of opportunity in the magnet schools? This means creating political will for public generosity through funding.”

## **Rural isolation and rural poverty matter.**

**“Well, it’s just that at school, there isn’t supposed to be any prejudice. Whether you’re rich or poor, everybody is supposed to be treated exactly the same. When you see teachers treating others completely different from you, it makes you upset and you don’t want to do nothing.” —“Michelle’s Story,” *Bridging the Gap: Stories from Our Neighbors Who Did Not Finish High School*, Louise Gorenflo, editor (Crossville: Rural Cumberland Resources, 2004)**

**“Unfortunately, we live in a society which stereotypes rural people. Many of us, sadly, have had too much of a “Beverly Hillbillies”/“Mayberry” lens when looking at Appalachia or other rural areas. Yet this segment of God’s people loves their children no less than any other, wants quality education for them no less than any other. Shall we, as a church, make sure that rural society is not neglected in the struggle for just education?” —Ken Brown**

**“I was shocked to see the homogeneity of the students. The sheer lack of diversity startled me. There were no students of color.” —Elizabeth Horton Sheff**

**“Presently there is one foreign student and one African American student attending this school. They make no apology for their lack of diversity in the staff or the student body.” —Rev. Janie Johns**

**“In Philadelphia, we are working so hard because of our diversity. A diverse school has to work harder, and we are stronger for it. I never thought of it that way before.” —Sol Cotto**

**“The toughest question asked by one of our group was, ‘Where do the children go from here?’ The first answer was that some go to the small Caesar Chavez high school, but neither Maricopa County or the Bureau of Indian Affairs is mandated to provide a high school on this reservation, so the answer really is, ‘If they can get there, they can go to a high school off the reservation.’” —Rev. Fidelia A. Lane, reflecting on a visit to the Gila Crossing School in Laveen, Arizona, Gila River Indian Reservation**

## **Schools in Rural and Small Town Tennessee**

Facilitating an evening of reflection on school visits in Wartburg, Tennessee, Teresa Campbell asked each person to begin by thinking about surprises. What emerged was the realization for each of us that what we expect depends on that to which we are ourselves accustomed. While according to the Rural School and Community Trust, “In 2002-2003, 27 percent (12.5 million) of public school students attended school in communities of fewer than 25,000 and 19 percent (8.8 million) attended school in smaller communities of fewer than 2,500,”<sup>21</sup> most members of our Task Force are familiar with schools in metropolitan areas. For many of us, rural looks different, and our reactions to what we saw reflect our own kinds of isolation. Because the racial homogeneity that surprised us in the Morgan County Schools would likely not surprise the residents of many small towns, we were forced to consider once again that the diversity of our nation has many faces. As outsiders, however, perhaps we are able to make some observations about the Morgan County Schools that would likely be less visible to the residents of Morgan County.

Wartburg’s public schools, including a brand new middle school on a hill top, were the most beautiful buildings we observed in the town. The facilities proclaim that this town values education. One person commented, “It didn’t seem like what I thought a rural school would be like. It was more sophisticated, clean and exciting.” The size of the high school, approximately 500 students, creates naturally the kind of school atmosphere being advocated in the research literature about the advantages of small schools, in contrast to the large urban and suburban facilities and consolidated rural county high schools that have

become the trend across America. We noticed a sense of connectedness among school and community in a small town where families live in the very same school district as they work and their children go to school. In Wartburg many of the administrators and many teachers have lived in the community all their lives and know the parents and children personally. These are meaningful and long-standing relationships. At the high school, students behave well during class change, and it appears that orderly behavior is embedded into this school, which displays values of community, courtesy, and affection among the adults and students. At all levels this district is “growing its own” educators whose “rootedness” in the community is part of their understanding of their vocation.

Another very exciting surprise was the “place-based” program this high school has been developing in conjunction with an Annenberg Challenge Grant from the Rural School and Community Trust. The high school boasts an environmental program through which some students are engaged in authentic field research, including a current project where students are testing people’s well water for contaminants as they explore the impact of strip mining on the water table. An outdoor ecology laboratory area of several acres contiguous to the school grounds connects with the Cumberland Trail and also includes an outdoor amphitheater used for student dramatic productions and multi-age programming that brings together elementary and middle school children with older adolescents. The week we visited, students were traveling to Big South Fork National Park to pursue work growing from another regional heritage strand of the place-based program: story telling and crafts such as quilt making. These programs have led staff creatively to use what is available in the region for little cost as a way to teach the curriculum. It seemed that these hands-on, authentic learning experiences have brought excitement to the high school.

In some ways the questions and concerns of members of our group are simply another side of the same issues our group named as the strengths of public schools in this small town. Members of our group raised questions about education in a circumscribed setting where the people have known each other in many cases for generations and where traditions are well entrenched without the pressure of evident change or diversity. Despite the beautiful facilities at the middle school, members of our group were surprised by the limited curriculum that lacked foreign languages, art and even pre-algebra except as an elective for a handful of students. Visitors to the high school reported only four students in high school physics. The biology teacher is also the chemistry teacher. Chemistry, physics, and Calculus are not offered every year. We could not decide how and whether the place-based science investigations fill this hole, and whether, for example, graduates from this high school are prepared for the rigors of college or university. We were not able to find out exactly how many of this high school’s graduates matriculate at institutions of higher learning, and how many for whom a high school diploma is a terminal credential.

Many in our group, from urban settings themselves, were surprised, even shocked, by the racial isolation of white children in Wartburg. Our members worried about the feelings of isolation of the one or two students of color they observed. Visiting schools here reminded us of the truth of what demographic research demonstrates: white children remain the most racially isolated children in American schools.<sup>22</sup> Our group challenges the church to ask ourselves how we can do a better job of helping children across our nation understand people who are different from themselves.

A serious concern in rural Tennessee is the ways schools are meeting or failing to meet the needs of students living in extreme poverty. One member of our group noted that she sees real parallels between the small town schools and those in inner-city poverty areas. She heard a staff person at the middle school worry that, “Too often the language we use at school is not success-oriented.” One of the parents gathered to speak to us at Rural Cumberland Resources echoed the same concern: “The biggest problem is that in a high poverty school the language used by educators and the curriculum is poverty-oriented. Kids need to be groomed for success by using the language of success.” Another member of our group wondered, “In a place where there is generational poverty is anyone working with staff to cause them to rethink unconscious assumptions it would be so easy to make about a child if you had yourself grown up with that child’s parents and even grandparents? How can a kid get a fresh start when so many on staff know so much family history?”

Concern about entrenched attitudes about families in poverty has been the subject of on-going research and community organizing at Rural Cumberland Resources in nearby Crossville. To help parents explore the

ways they may themselves be handing down to their children negative attitudes from their own childhoods, this organization has published a volume of stories by high school dropouts. Rural Cumberland Resources has developed anti-bullying programs and has been helping parents in the Cumberland County Schools consider how to pressure schools to break some of the traditions that hurt them when they were students, especially the continued use of paddling. The question underlying this work is: how can expectations be raised in a small town setting?

We were left with what felt like a mass of paradoxes as we reflected on the schools of small town Tennessee. Students are not anonymous in a stable, small community; they and their families are sometimes well-known and appreciated and in other cases known in ways that might limit educators' expectations for the children. An enriched place-based science and heritage culture program helps adolescents connect through several academic disciplines to their own region, but at the same time the core curriculum is limited. Finally, our group noticed that in a more isolated and racially homogenous setting, educators may be likely to pay less attention to things like diversity, the challenges for English language learners, sensitivity to different religious backgrounds apart from Christianity, the isolation of gay and lesbian adolescents who are closeted and invisible, even special education students. "In a big city," commented a Task Force public educator, "because of all the different definitions and misunderstandings, it is so much more complicated. Schools that acknowledge their diversity have to work harder, and we are better for it."

### **Rural Education at the Gila Crossing School in Laveen, Arizona**

Some members of our Task Force were privileged to visit a rural school during the 2002 trip to Phoenix, Arizona: the Gila Crossing School in Laveen, Arizona, on the Gila River Indian Reservation twenty miles outside of Phoenix. This school serves exclusively children of the reservation—with an extraordinary program including computer literacy, horticulture, Pima culture, Maricopa culture, and instruction in two heritage languages. The trip of some of our members to Gila Crossing School gave us only the briefest exposure to issues for Native American children, whose circumstances vary widely in America, as some are scattered across schools in cities and towns, and many attend a variety of reservation school settings including boarding schools, schools managed by Indian nations, and schools managed by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Gila Crossing School, a licensed charter school in Arizona for several years, is now a BIA school. Our biggest concern at Gila Crossing School was what we learned about uneven access to schooling itself. Until a former principal built the exemplary program that has more than doubled the enrollment in ten years, many of the children were reported to have been at other inferior sites or in many cases not in school. A staff person explained to one of our members that incentives do not exist for public truant officers from Maricopa County to locate the children on the reservation or to insist that they attend school. Members of our group were shocked to learn that no public jurisdiction is set up as the high school destination for the students who graduate from Gila Crossing's eight-grade program, nor is any jurisdiction required by law to provide transportation for these children to area high schools. Students can be enrolled in Phoenix area public high schools, but it is up to the Gila Crossing School staff and the parents to help each child locate a high school and figure out transportation. As a result, eighth grade teachers were scheduling field trips to expose their students to several high schools in the area, and the Gila Crossing School has begun developing its own high school.

The invisibility of children who are not sought out by truant officers and for whom no natural path is provided to a public high school continues to trouble many of us. Even though the federal mandates of the *No Child Left Behind Act* apply to the Gila Crossing School, the rights of rural children on the reservation are not being guaranteed by any level of government. We must emphasize that we observed a place in America where the right to schooling is falling through the cracks between the jurisdictions of the county, neighboring cities and towns, the reservation and the BIA. This would seem to be the embodiment of institutional injustice.

## **A child's language, culture, and identity matter. How the school's culture and the child's culture are folded together matters.**

**“Viewing knowledge as something that is constructed from many perspectives, angles, and realities will, if such a vision can ever be fully implemented, make our schools very different than the schools we have right now. The realization of this vision would be very exciting.” —Rev. Geoffrey Black, at pre-Synod event on Multicultural Education**

**“In my opinion, as a second language learner myself, the new mandate that no child can be exempt from the standardized Connecticut Mastery Test, even if they are geniuses in their own native language but do not know English, or if they have a severe learning disability, is especially demoralizing. The school gets penalized for “below basic” scores, which may not truly reflect a child's abilities.” —Olga Agosto**

**“Maria Colon Sanchez School reflects the Hispanic culture of the neighborhood. Most of the students, teachers and the principals are Spanish-speaking. There is a lot of school pride. Though a minority population in Hartford, the Hispanic children who attend Maria Colon Sanchez School are not a minority in the school.” —Mary Kuenning Gross, reflecting on a Hartford elementary school**

**“This school serves mainly Hispanic, poor children many of whom are new immigrants, yet, to me it exuded an atmosphere of promise and excitement... Teachers (and the principal) we met were almost all bilingual, and while they were teaching in English, they could and did supplement this with Spanish and spoke both languages to each other... The parent coordinator described her program that encourages parents to come to the school, to use Spanish with their children, and to make use of school resources and programs.” —Laura Jean Gilbert, reflecting on a Phoenix elementary school**

**“A task force member asked the principal what services were available to lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-questioning (lgbtq) students. The principal showed surprise that the question was even asked, and said that nothing was offered. A similar reaction was received from the guidance counselors, who stated that the school had enrolled one gay student a number of years earlier. A further conversation with one teacher who had worked with a young man who had come out illustrated the need for basic, general information for staff about affectional orientation and gender identity. This teacher was surprised to learn that 10 percent of the population is lesbian or gay, and paused to consider exactly how many students that might be in this particular high school. This indicates just how invisible lgbtq students are at this school, and how difficult it may be for them to come out at all.” —Tim Brown, reflecting on a Greater Cleveland high school**

Among the most difficult times of shared reflection among members of the Task Force took place after visits to schools in Phoenix, Arizona, where our focus was to be on language and culture. We intentionally chose a politically charged site where language and culture have entered public policy through a recently passed English-only state constitutional amendment that bans bilingual education in a state where nearly a third of school children speak Spanish as their native language. In visits to schools in five elementary school districts, we observed a wide range of interpretations of this law. The school districts had distinct cultures, even though they were all in the same city and located in neighborhoods that look similar in terms of the housing stock, landscaping, and neighborhood businesses. The school district's culture as created by its educational leaders was clearly having a profound effect on the experience of the children and families. The interface of family culture and institutional culture matters.

Members of our Task Force recognize that Proposition 203, Arizona's English-only amendment, has serious racial overtones, and its passage was interpreted by many in our group to mean that, “Arizonans are hostile to Latino-Latina people, the dominant minority.” One person expressed, and several agreed that, “Based on the passage of Proposition 203 and the fact that Arizona was the last state to pass the Martin Luther King Holiday, one can conclude that many Arizonans wish to practice cultural genocide by excluding those who are perceived as different.” The group agreed that in the context of the English-only constitutional amendments passed in California and Massachusetts in addition to Arizona, “The church can and should speak to the issues in such public debates, which involve racism, xenophobia, and public morality.”

It was apparent as our groups reported out that districts are quite varied in the way they are accommodating Proposition 203. Everywhere we saw the impact, but even within the confines of this law, some educators seemed to find latitude for vision and leadership. All of the best-functioning schools were using bilingual educators as leaders and as the key to their success in reaching children and families. While in one district educators told members of our group that they were not permitted to mention to parents the option that they can sign a waiver to exempt their children from English-only classes, in another school we observed a newcomers' classroom where children were enjoying a time to read from a large and beautifully displayed library of Spanish language and English language picture books. On several occasions educators expressed serious concern about growing reliance on standardized tests in English that pose terrible problems for children who have not learned English but who are progressing academically in other ways. Hon. Ben Miranda, who addressed the Task Force at the Saturday morning forum, worried that, "In an area that is overwhelmingly bilingual, we haven't produced a bilingual teaching staff. We have failed to plan for the reality that we face today in the Phoenix area."

Language is a gift of God. It is how we express who we are as a people. Members of the Task Force were very moved to observe schools where staff had found imaginative and complex ways to affirm the culture and language of the children and families. We visited several schools that have become true neighborhood schools and community centers because they embrace the culture of their students' families.

When the Task Force sponsored a pre-synod event in Minneapolis in June of 2003, the purpose was to invite the broader church to explore further with us the very heated concerns around culture and language. Consultant James A. Banks, considered the father of multicultural education, warned that political efforts like the one in Arizona to ban minority languages and cultures from school are not likely to accomplish the sponsors' intention that students will rapidly assimilate into the dominant culture. "Educators often try to help students develop strong national identifications and attachments by eradicating their ethnic and community cultures and making students ashamed of their families, community beliefs, languages, and behaviors. Individuals can develop a clarified commitment to and identification with their nation-state and the national culture only when they believe that they are a meaningful part of the nation-state and that it acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural group and them as individuals." A public school teacher from the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota affirmed Dr. Banks' observation that, "history is so often taught from the European-Anglo point of view, with little real Native American history being taught even on the Reservation." Participants affirmed that when knowledge is shared from the point of view of many racial-ethnic groups, the presence of many cultures is among the blessings of diverse public schools.

Clearly in addition to affirming children's family culture, acceptance of their gender identity and sexual orientation are important as students move through school. We did not observe staff at any school comfortably and openly discussing the ways the school supports students who may be questioning or openly gay or lesbian. Our observations only confirm what research demonstrates: in most public schools across the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth remain closeted and often isolated.

The degree to which schools were supporting students with disabilities was something we tried to notice as we could, although short school visits are a hard way to explore the extent or nature of special education programs, which may be located in particular buildings or even housed in one school district for a consortium of school districts. Laura Jean Gilbert, who represented the Disabilities Ministries on our Task Force, repeatedly inquired about such programs and the extent of inclusion of disabled children in mainstream programs. Our observations generally would confirm that because federally mandated special education programs are vastly under-funded at the federal level, the quality of special education programs, like the quality of mainstream programs, differs extensively from school district to school district because of the disparity of funding across states and among local school districts.

## **Good teaching matters. Respecting and supporting educators matters.**

Education is a human endeavor of caring that depends on the dedication of teachers, principals, and other school staff. Learning best takes place in an environment where teacher and child have developed a personal relationship that makes each child feel valued. When Rural Cumberland Resources convened a group of parents for a conversation with the UCC Task Force, the facilitator asked parents about the greatest strength in their child's school. Again and again when these parents spoke about what was going well for their children, they spoke about the primary relationship between their child and the child's teacher. We were reminded that the single most important activity any church group can undertake to support public education is to find ways to nurture the primary positive relationship between child and teacher.

The mechanisms of the *No Child Left Behind Act* cast doubt on the quality of teaching in public schools. The law requires that all teachers become "highly qualified," the assumption being that many teachers are not well prepared. The law also reforms so-called "failing schools" where educators have been unable to raise scores progressively over a period of years, by allowing children to transfer away from those buildings to schools that are presumably more successful. Another option is for the "failing schools" to be reconstituted, which means that the staffs in those schools are reassigned or terminated and a new set of teachers brought in to rebuild the educational program. While it would be silly to pretend that all teachers are excellent, or even that there is such a thing as a perfect teacher, members of the UCC's Task Force reject the notion that achievement gaps can be blamed solely on school teachers. We have, after all, pointed out that we believe segregation, race, poverty, school finance, rural isolation, and the interface of a child's language and culture with the culture of school are among the causes of achievement gaps. In greater Cleveland high schools, Phoenix area elementary schools, an Indian Reservation school, neighborhood and magnet schools in Hartford, and the schools of Wartburg we observed dedicated, qualified, hard-working public school educators. A member of our group wondered, "How can society alleviate the pressure on teachers in schools where so many unnamed factors make it difficult for children to be high achievers?" Interestingly UCC public school teachers responding to the all-denominational survey also worry about pressure — from their point of view as they watch it affect children. Among UCC public school teachers, the greatest concern expressed was about the growing impact of standardized testing.

### **The Public School Teachers of the UCC**

Many UCC public school teachers responded to the all-denominational survey. These statements of witness by public school educators tell the story of professionals who hear their calling and generously give of themselves day-by-day, year-by-year. While several shared that very appropriately, because of their deep respect for religious liberty as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, they do not share their religious faith with their students, these teachers describe their faith as the grounding that makes their work possible. As members of the Public Education Task Force we celebrate the sense of vocation as shared by UCC public school educators:

**"Looking at a student means seeing beyond that person as a learner and thinking of the development of the whole child. It means considering all aspects of a child's personality 'works in progress.' It means showing them love and gentle guidance and acceptance. My faith calls me to be the most positive part of the day for many children."**—*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Illinois Conference*

**"My faith in God has allowed me to be confident in the classroom and perform at a high level."**—*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Penn West Conference*

**"Christian love teaches that everyone is deserving of our best. I am a teacher, so my students deserve the best I have to offer."**—*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Central Pacific Conference*

**"I believe that all children can learn, regardless of their ability level. I also pray continually for God's guidance and patience each day."**—*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Ohio Conference*

**“I try to use my faith to remind me to be patient, kind, and tolerant of my students as well as their individual situations.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Southern Conference*

**“I believe that children are a gift from God. As a teacher I am given the opportunity to work with God’s gifts to help them reach their potential.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Wisconsin Conference*

**“My faith gives me the fundamental belief that we are all equal in the sight of God. Love and kindness to all people is right, fair and just. Diversity is a blessing.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Iowa Conference*

**“I always have looked for the good in people and prayed about what I did and saw in schools.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Missouri Mid-South Conference*

**“As a special education resource teacher, my faith is completely intertwined. I don’t think I could do my job without the weekly reflection time of Sunday worship and the support and compassion of my church family.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Washington-North Idaho Conference*

**“I try to practice what I preach. To encourage parent involvement I’m involved. I attend students’ activities to model what I expect of parents and to be supportive of students. I tutor students and work with parents to help them learn how to help their students learn. Being an advocate for my students is one way to help parents learn to advocate.”** —*All-Denominational Survey, Public School Educator, Nebraska Conference*

### **Reflections on the Role of the Principal**

After a day of observing Greater Cleveland’s high schools, members of our group found themselves focused on the importance of a school’s leadership as they reflected on the seven high schools our members had observed. Strong leadership, everyone agreed, can help a school overcome inequities in community economics and school finance and can help a community raise academic hopes for its children. Because education is relational, the quality of interaction among staff, staff and students, and students themselves affects the reality of each of the hundreds of adolescents in a high school. Many of our comments focused on the character and personal qualities necessary for a person to work every day with a large staff and hundreds, in some cases thousands, of students. Concern was expressed for principals as persons in the context of the myriad demands of balancing the needs of so many people and so many responsibilities, particularly with the added external stress being placed on principals by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

For our group, the most important quality seemed to be the principal’s capacity to imagine a bright future for each student, whatever the student’s race, gender, income, status or special giftedness/special needs. We agreed that the principal’s leadership is of utmost importance, for in all the schools we visited the principal set the tone. Among the qualities of an excellent principal is that he or she acknowledges and trusts the potential of each student and accepts every student with unconditional positive regard. As a faith community, we would phrase this another way: An excellent principal accepts each student as a child of God. We believe that in these times when it is being commanded that all principals “be accountable,” it is especially important for us in the church to name and celebrate the gifts of excellent principals. This is a very demanding profession.

### **Congregations supporting public schools matter.**

The all-denominational survey asked respondents to evaluate ways churches can be engaged in supporting public education. Responses to this section of the survey call the church to a variety of activities ranging from support and service to advocacy for institutional justice.

Table 2 demonstrates that members of UCC congregations believe churches should support educators, schools,

and students in their communities, and especially those educators and students in their pews. Two-thirds of all respondents believe that churches are needed to advocate for public education as a civil right for every child, for financial equity in school systems, and for respect at school for diversity and multiculturalism. Respondents to the survey overwhelmingly reject disengagement by churches from public education issues, and over half agree that churches are needed to protect and strengthen public education as the foundation of democracy.

**TABLE 2**

**The Church's Role in Public Education**

(Percentage Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the Church Should Assume Each Role)

Churches should support parents, students and educators in their congregations.	95%
Churches should support parents, students and educators in their communities.	90%
Churches should engage in tutoring, mentoring, partnerships and after-school programs.	83%
Churches should work on what causes poverty for families and children.	77%
Churches need to teach members how faith informs opinions on public policy.	76%
Churches should advocate for diversity and multiculturalism in schools.	69%
Churches should advocate for public education as a civil right.	68%
Churches should advocate for financial equity.	65%
Churches should strengthen public education as the foundation of democracy.	59%
Churches shouldn't be engaged in public education issues.	17%
Public education problems are so overwhelming that churches cannot impact them.	12%

The survey further asked respondents to answer the question: "How Does Your Faith Affect Your Beliefs about Public Education?" While we asked all respondents to share how their faith shapes their attitudes about public schools, their advocacy, and their work in schools, the question for pastors was a little more complicated: "In what ways does faith impact your congregation's beliefs about public schools?" Some pastors were apologetic or unsure: "I'm not sure if it has that great an impact right now, but I'm working on it (Illinois)." Worried pastors will perhaps find the survey results reassuring, for across the wider church, as reflected in page after page of testimony, respondents understand this sensitive constellation of issues through the lens of their faith.

The responses of pastors and social action committee chairs articulate a clear sense of theological grounding for broad work to support public education and expand access to quality schools for all children. "We know that learning and teaching was important to Jesus. He exemplified our call to the importance of education... (New York)." "Everyone is a treasure child of God; all are loved and deserve the best; giving and sharing of ourselves is a vital part of faith (Penn Southeast)." "Our congregation believes strongly in the...baptismal promise to love, care, and support children both in the congregation and in the community (Ohio)." "Every child needs to develop his or her God-given mental/social potential (South Central)." "We have been called by Christ to 'let our light shine' and that is a call to all God's children (Vermont)." "Education provides the ability to have a relevant and intelligent foundation for faith (Penn Northeast)." "Basically it is the concern, which is biblical, about what of significance should not be lost through the generations (Kansas-Oklahoma)." "Public education is a ministry to which some are called and all are called to encourage, empower and equip (Illinois South)." "In our church we understand God to be the God of all people and not just some people (Michigan)." "Faith motivates our community to improve all our lives together (Northern Plains)."

## Recommendations

As the UCC Public Education Task Force concludes its work, we revisit our original charge from the General Synod 23 Resolution, “Access to Excellent Public Schools: A Child’s Civil Right in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” The resolution charged the Task Force to, “identify systemic barriers to excellent public education and to recommend strategies to address those barriers.” This report has presented our conclusion that our nation cannot simply command that no child will be left behind, and then force educators quickly to raise student achievement as measured by standardized tests. We have identified systemic barriers that contribute to achievement gaps, barriers that are neither new nor unknown to the church— race, poverty, segregation, school finance inequity, the continued need for legal action, rural isolation, challenges at the interface of school culture and the family’s language and culture, and the disrespect of public school educators.

As we recommend strategies for addressing these barriers, we must begin by recommending that the United Church of Christ continue being the church in the way that Task Force member, Rev. Carl Wallace described when he presented the 2001 public education resolution to General Synod 23: “Here at the welcome table, when the invitations were mailed out that all men are created equal and women didn’t get an invitation, our church rose up... When the invitations were mailed out and slaves could only cook the meal and serve the meal, our church rose up. .. When the invitations were mailed out to straight people and gays and lesbians didn’t get an invitation, our church rose up. Now here at the welcome table of educational privilege where only a select few are invited and many of our children can’t even read the invitation, it’s time for our church to rise up. It’s a civil right issue.”

We urge you to engage with a local school, to support educators, and to work for systemic change in your community, your state, and our nation. There are many entry points for your congregation, and many ways UCC congregations are supporting public schools and working for institutional justice.

**Support the teachers and other school personnel in your congregation.** Choose a special Sunday and use the litany from the National Council of Churches that is on page 24 of this booklet. Hymn #359 in the New Century Hymnal celebrates the vocation of teaching. Pray for the public school educators in your congregation. Pastors, be aware of the need for pastoral support for professional educators.

**Partner with a school.** There are so many ways members of congregations can help. During our Task Force visit to Tennessee, residents of the Uplands Retirement Community told us about tutoring, assisting with art and music, providing a vision enhancement program, attending athletic events as a cheering section, providing a two-week camp one summer, and developing a conflict mediation program at the nearby Pleasant Hill School. Members of this group are also involved in advocacy against corporal punishment in the Cumberland County Schools.

UCC congregations everywhere support school-church partnerships. We know of tutoring programs for all ages as well as mentoring programs for adolescents. We know of a church that houses an after-school program and built a computer lab to enhance the program. One church raises funds to enable its partner school librarian to purchase appropriately leveled books for each child as gifts for summer reading. Another raises funds to pay for an artist-in-residence every year at its partner elementary school. The possibilities will fit with any congregation’s budget and are as wide as your imagination. However your congregation partners with a school, we urge you to involve the volunteers in on-going reflection about the meaning of their experiences. What are the volunteers learning about themselves, about the school, about the teachers and children, and about the system itself? Think about what your reflection tells you about needed future action, and use the guide, “Experiencing Public Schools...,” that is the back cover of this resource.

**Visit a school and reflect on your experience.** We urge you to adopt our school visit process to acquaint yourselves a school or schools in your area. Use the guide, “Experiencing Public Schools...,” that is the back cover of this resource.

**Work as agents for justice by advocating at the local, state, and/or federal levels.** One way to move toward doing justice is to partner with a school or to visit schools and then to spend time in reflection. What steps to you feel called to take in prophetic advocacy because of what you experienced? You may eventually consider collaborating with ecumenical, interfaith and/or secular partners. Again we suggest you consult the guide, “Experiencing Public Schools...,” that is the back cover of this resource.

For support, for guidance in setting up school visits, or for help with facilitating the reflection time that should be an integral part of the work you are doing to support public education, contact Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness, UCC Justice and Witness Ministries, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115-1100 (866-822-8224) (216-736-3711) <ressegerj@ucc.org>.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>This group follows in the footsteps of a smaller group convened in 1999 by the American Missionary Association and the Commission for Racial Justice that visited public schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Portland, Oregon area and rural eastern North Carolina. That group published a report, *Separate and Unequal*, in April of 2001, which may be accessed at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/matter4.htm> .

<sup>2</sup> Mary Alice Mulligan and Rufus Borrow, Jr, *Daring to Speak in God's Name: Ethical Prophecy in Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed analysis of this research survey, see the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries *2003 Message on Public Education*, pp. 1-3. The Task Force and the Office of Research intended that a second phase would survey Christian educators, parents and guardians. It was also intended that extensive data analysis would follow to break down the information by Conference, region, and demographics such as rural-urban-suburban, race, culture, age, and gender. Sadly, Sheila Kelly, the director of the Office of Research, died after completing the initial analysis, and reduced staffing of the research office has made it impossible to complete the later stages of the project. Sheila Kelly's initial analysis, however, confirms wide support for raising the church's prophetic voice to speak for justice in America's largest civic institution.

<sup>5</sup>J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics, Revised and Expanded* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 216-217.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup>Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 2005), p. 223.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew 18: 6.

<sup>11</sup>Matthew 25: 32-46.

<sup>12</sup>Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>13</sup>Harvard Civil Rights Project, “Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare,” January 2004, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup>“Wellstone on Testing: A Harsh Agenda,” *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 2002-2003, Vol. 17, No. 2.

<sup>15</sup>*Education Week Quality Counts 2005*, Vol. 24, No. 17, January 6, 2005 p. 109.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Horton Sheff, “Sheff v. O'Neill: The Struggle Continues Against School Segregation and Unequal Opportunity,” in Annenberg Institute for School Reform, *Voices in Urban Education*, Summer 2004, pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p. 172.

<sup>18</sup>*Education Week, Quality Counts*, Jan 8, 04, p. 129

<sup>19</sup>Connecticut State Department of Education, Division of Evaluation and Research, *Research Bulletin: Connecticut Interdistrict Magnet and State Charter Schools: Evaluation Highlights School Year 2003-2004*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Education Trust, “Education Watch, Connecticut,” Winter 2002-2003, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup>Jerry Johnson and Marty Strange, *Why Rural Matters 2005* (Arlington: Rural School and Community Trust: 2005), p. v.

<sup>22</sup>Erica Frankenberg, Chungmei Lee, and Gary Orfield, “A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?” Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project, January 16, 2003, p. 5.

# A Litany for Education and Schools <sup>1</sup>

**LEADER:** *Will the teachers, school administrators, counselors, school volunteers, support staff, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers, and all others who work in our schools, who are able, please stand at this time.*

Today we remember the children and youth of this congregation and those involved in their education. The call to be involved in education is a high calling. Those who teach our children help shape the future. We give thanks to a gracious God for the teachers, school administrators, counselors, school volunteers, support staff, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers and all others in our congregation who work in our schools.

**PEOPLE:** **We celebrate your calling and pledge to support you and others in our communities who are involved in the education of children and youth.** (Educators may be seated.)

**LEADER:** *As we recognize those who teach in schools, we recognize as well those who teach at home. Will parents or guardians of our children and youth in school, who are able please stand.*

Education involves a partnership between school, home and community. The support of parents and guardians is essential to a child's success. This morning we recognize you for the support you give the students in your home. We hold in prayer all those in this congregation who have children and youth in school and pray that all homes will be a place where learning is valued and encouragement offered.

**PEOPLE:** **We pledge our support to parents and guardians. We pray that our ministries will encourage and strengthen those in our church families who provide care for children.** (Parents and guardians may be seated.)

**LEADER:** *At this time I would like to invite our youth and children in preschool, kindergarten, elementary, junior high, or high school, if you are able, to stand.*

Your church family believes that each of you is a gift from God filled with potential and possibility. We pray that as you learn and grow, you will develop caring hearts and minds that think clearly. We believe in you and care about your education.

**PEOPLE:** **As your faith community, we pledge to be with you on your educational journey. We affirm that each of you is a precious gift from God. We will do all that we are able to ensure that your schools are positive places filled with hope and the resources necessary for learning.** (Children and youth may be seated.)

**LEADER:** Let us pray—Gracious God, we lift up to you all those involved in education in this community and in all the communities in our nation and world. Guide us, great God, that we will know the best way to show our interest and support for our students, teachers and all those involved in education.

**PEOPLE:** **We pray for wisdom and strength to make a positive difference in the lives of those in school. We pray for courage to explore new ways of supporting the people and institutions that teach our children and youth. We pray in the name of the great teacher, Jesus. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>This litany was created by the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy. It is posted on the United Church of Christ website in a ready-made bulletin insert format at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/litany.pdf>.

# Experiencing Public Schools . . .

## A Process of Immersion and Discernment

This guide for visiting schools was created by the Public Education Task Force as a short resource for General Synod 24. It is reprinted here in a slightly updated form. The original is available on the UCC's website at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/eps.pdf>.

*“The visits to schools reinforced a realization from my own experience: the challenge of working for the best public education possible is a multifaceted task. We must strive for proper funding, as well as engage students in programs that build self-esteem; we must support educators—helping to offset the burnout that can so readily manifest itself in the profession—as well as assist parents in their interaction with the schools and their children’s educational process.”*  
—Ken Brown

*“Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!”*  
Isaiah 43:8

Loving our neighbors as ourselves means learning to understand neighbors in all the corners of God’s neighborhood. The United Church of Christ’s Public Education Task Force encourages you and a group from your church to do some traveling right in your own community—to your neighborhood elementary school—to your middle or high school—maybe in small groups to a number of schools. Then follow your visit with carefully guided discernment to help you learn more about the school, more about your own assumptions and attitudes, and more about your community and its hopes and dreams for children.

The Task Force has visited schools in Ohio, Arizona, Connecticut, and Tennessee. We have learned about strong principals, dedicated teachers,

public finance, and institutional bias.

Our discernment has also taught us about ourselves and each other.

Experiences at public schools have forced us to discuss some of the deepest injustices of our time — institutional racism, white privilege, systemic resource inequity, and blaming the victim, whether that victim is a child or a public school teacher.

### Different ways of knowing . . .

Each of us learns from experience and from what we read or see on T.V. But our way of knowing also reflects the limits of our experience and study. Travel is one way to extend those limits. If we travel with a group and then listen, there are more surprises, for we realize how our mutual experience was seen, heard, smelled and felt by others. Each person’s perception of a place or an encounter reflects the reality of the traveler as much as the place visited.

Churches model this process all the time. You’ve heard of mission trips, cross-cultural exchanges, justice camps, site visits and truth tours—taking groups to different parts of our country or other nations with different cultures. Sometimes the goal is service, but an important part is always the learning by experience that is planned for the travelers themselves. They are really the subject and to a large extent their learning is the goal.

This resource is to help you travel in your own community and to guide you as you learn to better know yourself, the members of your congregation, and the public schools that are primary institutions in your community and every community across the United States. Go with God’s blessing.

### What will you look for?

- Before you visit, think together about the following questions and others you might ask. While you are visiting the school, try not to make value judgments but instead begin by simply observing.
- How does the building look? Is it in good condition? Are the entrance and the office welcoming? How does the inside of the building look and smell? Is it maintained? Is it light or dark?
- Are bathroom facilities clean and in working order? Is there soap and toilet paper?
- Does this school have security personnel? Does the school feel orderly? Are students on-task?
- What do you notice about how students get along? What about adults and children?
- Can you learn anything about how parents are involved?
- Are classes large or small? Ask about the number of certified and uncertified teachers.
- If this is an elementary school, do the students have opportunities for field trips? If it is a middle school or high school, are there opportunities to participate in activities? Does the school have a gym, a library, an auditorium, a lunch room?
- Does the school have art and music? If it is a high school, are there advanced classes and vocational programs?
- What are the demographic characteristics of the students? What percentage of students have been identified for special education? What percent are held back each year?
- Would you want your child to attend this school?

### Setting up your visit . . .

Setting up a school visit can be a source of anxiety for a pastor or a lay leader. In reality it is an opportunity to establish a supportive relationship with the superintendent, community relations staff, or principal. Assure him or her that the United Church of Christ has historically advocated for the needs of public schools. Share that members of your church are not coming to criticize the school or undermine the staff and that your members wish to become better informed about the school's needs and challenges. Remember to be gently persistent. Public school staff may be overworked, and their first priority is to educate the children. If you are unable to arrange a visit to one particular school, try calling another school. And consider dividing your group and arranging visits to several schools.

*Now discern . . . “the eyes of your hearts enlightened” Ephesians 1:18*

Your group has visited at school. Now listen and learn about your community, your schools, your children and yourselves. The questions below are designed to stimulate reflection about the school, about the attitudes that pervade the school, about your community's hopes and dreams. There are no right or wrong answers. If your church already has a partnership with a school, involve the volunteers and tutors in reflection about their experiences.



- Surely our role in the church is to be constructive. How can your group celebrate the school's strengths and at the same time encourage improvements?
- Some schools seem to focus on expectations for order and safety while others focus on high academic expectations. What is valued in the school you visited? Are members of your group comfortable with the emphasis of the school?
- Members of the Public Education Task Force have noticed that a school's location and the sense of the type of community it symbolizes influence the character of the school. What can you say about how the community's perception of itself is expressed in the school? Every school has a hidden curriculum—the lessons the children learn that are never spoken. These messages may reflect attitudes about authority, attitudes about ways of learning and knowing, and attitudes that identify some students or cultures as more or less desirable. What is the hidden curriculum at the school you visited? What messages does the school convey to the students about expectations?
- What did your visit tell you about school funding? How do you think this school would compare with others in the region? Think about the question: How much is enough? How does funding affect academic expectations?
- Can you observe the effect on this school of the No Child Left Behind Act? Do members of your group agree about the effect of the law on this particular school?
- Reflect on the challenges for the teachers. How can the church be affirming of public school teachers?
- Now that you have visited at school and reflected on your visit, what steps will you take to be supportive and to advocate for justice?

*“United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries”*

**Imagine**  
Another World Is Possible