

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. 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?

- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?**

“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, Member of the Public Education Task Force



Experiencing Public Schools... A Process of Immersion and Discernment

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, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Oregon. 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

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

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.

Systemic Injustice...

Will You See Evidence of These Realities?

Communities across the United States support almost 15,000 public school districts with over 90,000 public schools. Surveys continually show that while many people worry about the overall quality of public education, they express satisfaction with their own community schools. Here are some realities, however, that belie the comfort we may have come to feel with is familiar and traditional:

- Fifty years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, our nation has been rushing backwards in continuous resegregation since 1990. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University identifies a substantial group of American schools as “apartheid schools,” “where enormous poverty, limited resources, and social and health problems of many types are concentrated.”²
- White students continue to be the most segregated group in public schools in the United States.³
- Independent studies (using different methodologies) conducted in Maryland, Wisconsin, and New York to calculate the cost of supporting high academic achievement among children in high-poverty schools all demonstrate the need to allocate two times more funding for districts serving concentrations of very poor children. This amount is far more than the actual funding policy adopted by any state prior to 2002.⁴
- Across the United States there are dismaying gaps in educational attainment among racial and ethnic

“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.”¹

groups of children and among the children of upper income and lower income families. The United States Department of Education reported that from 1990 until 1999, the racial gap in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress widened significantly with “the average black 17-year-old reading only about as well as the average white 13-year-old.”⁵

- “Rural America is far poorer than metropolitan areas. Of the 66 poorest counties in America, 59 are rural. Close to 14 percent of all rural children live below the poverty level.”⁶

¹.Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 4.

².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.

³.Erica Frankenberg, *et. al.*, p. 4.

⁴.Kevin Carey, “Education Funding and Low-Income Children: A Review of Current Research” (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, November 5, 2002), p. 10.

⁵. “Racial Gap Widens on Test Scores,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 25, 2000, p. 1.

⁶.Elizabeth Beeson, “Why Rural Matters 2003,” Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program, February 2003.



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 judgements but instead simply to observe.

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?

Would you want your child to attend this school?

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?

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.

If your church already has a partnership with a school, involve the volunteers and tutors in discernment about their experiences.