

The Role of Community Schools in the Pursuit of a Democratic Public Education System

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In a democratic society in which all students are equally entitled to quality education, school choice is equitable only when the first choice available to every student is a quality school within reasonable distance from her or his home.

The panoply of school choice and school options offered to families in low-income communities of color has exacerbated, rather than reduced, the societal inequities perpetuated by generations of inequitable schooling in America. The avoidance strategy of offering school options and choice instead of confronting root causes of longstanding inequities in children's opportunities to learn violates in multiple ways the democratic principle of equal rights for all: 1) many magnet programs and some charter schools require students to travel long distances from their own communities in pursuit of quality schooling, while students in more affluent have access to quality schooling in their own communities; 2) options or school choice programs often overlook or dismiss assets in low-income communities of color, which can be harnessed to enhance schooling for their youth; 3) options and choice programs, by design, serve a few select students while leaving large numbers of other students behind; 4) options and choice schools frequently divert resources away from public schools in low income schools of color, leaving those schools further weakened. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in July 2017, in issuing the results from nationwide study of schooling in the U.S., concluded, "even the best charters are not a substitute for more stable, adequate and equitable investments in public education."

Community schools recognize that, although rigorous curricula and the practice of evidence-based pedagogies are essential elements of quality schooling, conditions in communities contribute to the quality of education available to children. Community conditions also contribute to students' readiness to learn. Therefore, community schools are committed to creating a level playing field of conditions on behalf of all children, regardless of the socio-economic status of their communities. Community schools recognize the necessity of working to mitigate inequities in communities, as well as those in schools. Rather than continuing traditional school practices and policies that attribute disparities in student academic outcomes to erroneous perceptions of the intellectual inferiority or moral turpitude of residents in low-income communities of color, community schools focus on creating community conditions that all children need to thrive and learn. Community schools call for a departure from schooling that has given privilege to middle class or affluent White students, while systemically denying other students their rights.

Past reform efforts have focused mainly on conditions inside schools, without adequate attention to conditions outside the school that have significant influence on children's growth and development. Although some schools and districts have created relationships with entities in their communities or serving their communities, overall, schools have viewed low-income communities of color as impediments to students' readiness to learn, offering few assets. Relationships between individual schools and communities, particularly in low-income communities, remained tangential, fragmented, and often temporary with little impact on students' opportunities to learn. Meanwhile, middle class and affluent communities retain their capacity to support quality schools and the children who attend them.

Community-school partnerships operate from an understanding that meeting the basic physiological, emotional, social and intellectual needs common to all children is essential to children's wellbeing and development. Needs identified in Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (1943, 1962, 1987) remain widely accepted as common to all humans, thus affirming the truism that all people are created equal and entitled to equal rights, regardless of economic, cultural or racial differences. Although all children require air, food, shelter and water, these basic needs are not equitably met in all communities. Neither do children in some communities experience safety, which Maslow also identifies as a critical factor in all humans' wellbeing.

Research has demonstrated that the stress associated with extreme poverty reduces a child's ability to think (Berliner 2013). Children growing up in under-resourced communities are more likely to experience repeated exposure to environmental hazards, community violence, changes in the dynamics of family life, job loss, instability and economic deprivation (Evans, 2004), (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Maholmes & King, 2012; McEwen et al., 2015, cited in Lipina, J. & Evers, K. 2017, January). Children are affected by these experiences. Community schools attribute many of these events in children's lives to systemic discrimination in housing, health care, employment, wages and housing; thus, they work to eliminate these root causes.

A Stanford University's Graduate School of Education study involving more than 200 million test scores found a high association between districts with large numbers of low-income students and their lower academic performance. Using 16 different measures (Rabinovitz, 2016) found racial difference combined with the proportion of students who are poor to be a critical association leading to large disparities in students' opportunities to achieve academically. Reardon's (April 2016) research links racial segregation to unequal allocation of resources among schools. In schools where over 75 percent of the student body is eligible for free and reduced lunch, academic performance is embarrassing low. Heuer and Stullich (2011) found that 48 percent of high poverty schools receive less money in their local school than do low poverty schools. Reardon (cited in Rabinovitz, 2016) suggests that racial segregation is inextricably linked to unequal allocation of resources among schools. Policies that do not address this root cause of nearly permanent inequities will fail to remedy racial inequality.

Decades of data on multiple measures demonstrate a relationship between academic outcomes and conditions in students' communities. Students growing up in middle class and affluent communities where they experience adequate health care, access to nutritious food, adequate housing, safe streets and family income adequate to meet their families' needs, on average outperform students whose communities are not able to provide these resources. They attend schools that offer preparation and access to advanced classes, college admission and college completion. Schooling in these middle class or affluent communities places these students on a life trajectory of position, wealth and decision-making power that is passed on from generation to generation. In this sense, schools reproduce the social order (Bourdieu, 1990). For instance, the median wealth (assets accumulated over generations) of White households was 13 times the median wealth of Black households in 2013. Similarly, the median wealth of White households is now more than 10 times the median wealth of Hispanic households (Kochhar & Fry, December 2014).

Partnerships in community schools engage businesses, talented individuals, natural resources, technology and communities themselves harness a variety of resources to provide the conditions necessary for children to thrive and learn. These partnerships have the potential to change the national discourse on education from what is wrong with children of color and low-income families to what can go right with all children under the appropriate conditions for advancing their human potential. Perhaps the national discourse on education can shift from notions of an achievement gap to an understanding of the opportunity gap.

Improving conditions for learning presents a democratic and humane alternative to overdoses of remediation and intervention programs, which have demonstrated limited effectiveness and reinforced faulty perceptions about people of color and people from low income communities.

Partnerships on behalf of the common good elevate and reframe communities to a status comparable to the Great Community that Dewey (1927) considered an essential element of a democratic society. They value the community for its assets despite the many challenges they face of high unemployment rates, generations of inferior schooling opportunities, low wages, inadequate health care and mass incarceration of their youth. They are often rich in culture, resiliency, hard work and love for their children. Cultivating these assets can give rise to the Great Community that Dewey (1927) described as the place where interactions among its members allow residents to make their wants and needs known and work together to create the conditions that support every child's right to learn.

Partnerships between schools and communities strengthen parents' ability to hold schools accountable for implementing policies and practices that meet standards of excellence on behalf of all children. Moreover, when families, schools, religious organizations, child care and other entities close to the child work collaboratively they increase their individual impact on children to a powerful collective impact (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). The community schools' concept of building multiple partnerships to support children's multiple needs is consistent with studies that show surrounding children with multiple and varied supports increases their access to learning. Research in the neurosciences and social sciences demonstrate that children's

readiness to learn can be optimized through innovative interventions in child-care centers, schools and homes working together.

Community schools take measures to enhance conditions in communities as a critical element of improving schools. They advocate opening school facilities beyond school hours and partner to provide wrap around academic, social/emotional and health supports that often extend to the entire community. After-school programs, internships and community service opportunities enable students to develop rigorous cognitive skills within the context of their own communities(LPI). They learn to love their communities and see themselves as contributors to it.

Findings from a study of existing community schools conducted by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) (Oakes, J.; Maier, A.; & Daniel, J. (June, 1017) shed light on some of the early outcomes associated with community schools. In Cincinnati, which implemented community schools districtwide, the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap shrank from 14.5 percent to 4.5 percent. One school in Baltimore Results show that schools in Cincinnati shrank the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap from 14.5 percent to 4.5 percent. A community school in Baltimore moved from a ranking of 77th in the city to second. The state of Kentucky moved from one of the worst performing states to outperforming half of all states. The findings demonstrate the efficacy of family and community collaborative engagement with schools; integrated supports to students and their communities; collaborative relationships around teaching and learning; and extended school hours for learning inside and outside the school walls.

This brief review of the merits of community school partnerships and practices carries a caution. The ideology of *separate and unequal* has become so normalized in U.S. society that it is difficult to detect the many ways it affects communities and schools - even partnerships designed to eradicate it. School choice, currently in vogue, is in many ways, the current version of avoidance and substitution practices. Further, attention to communities and conditions for learning does not substitute for students' rights to well-resourced public schools where all students experience teachers well prepared to teach students from racially, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; rigorous and culturally rich curricula; and research-and evidence-based pedagogy. Guaranteeing this right requires rethinking how schools are structured around funding, use of time to ensure that redefinition of parent, teacher, student and administrator roles within the context of the school. Hopefully, adoption of the community school model is a step in that direction.

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