

Getting to Equity

**Broaching the Subject:
How to Have a Conversation about
Equity and Excellence**

Linda Powell Pruitt and Kenneth W. Jones

**Honesty, Scholarship, and Dialogue:
Going to Scale or Cultural Transformation?**

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**First Ask the Students:
A New Lens on Equity and Excellence
in Public Schools**

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**Coming Together:
Looking across Sectors for Answers to
the Dropout Question**

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**The Role of National Organizations and
the Federal Government in Promoting
Equity and Excellence**

Michael Holzman

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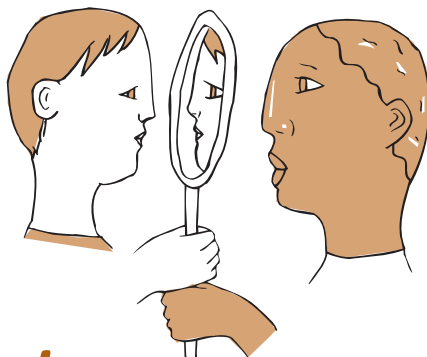
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New Ways to Talk about Equity

Robert Rothman

To someone listening to public officials and educators talk about their vision for American education, the twin goals of equity and excellence appear to be top priorities. The national education goals for 2000, set by the nation's governors and President George H.W. Bush and enacted into law, called on the United States to be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement and for all students to demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter. More recently, federal law calls for "leaving no child behind" and for ensuring that all groups of students demonstrate adequate yearly progress. And schools and school districts routinely declare that "all children can learn."

The evidence is clear, though, that even if we espouse these ideals, we are far from reaching them. The continued existence of wide achievement gaps and the large numbers of dropouts, among many other indicators, suggest that we have attained neither excellence nor equity. As Ruth Simmons, the president of Brown University, said at a recent forum on equity held by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the nation has continually set the goal of attaining both equity and excellence, but "we're here because we haven't achieved that goal."

In part, we are in this position because we do not necessarily know *how* to achieve those twin goals. It is always easier to set goals than to figure out how to reach them, as the framers of the national education goals learned. But the goals of equity and excellence

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are especially difficult because they cut close to our values and our self-definition as a nation. We have tended to define excellence in a fairly superficial way – usually by looking at test scores alone – and we have rarely articulated what equity would look like.

Equity and excellence are also difficult challenges because they require people to face some uncomfortable truths and to involve others who might not always agree on solutions. Getting to equity requires people to talk in new ways. People must face up to inequity, something that is not easy to do. And we must listen to those who have been treated inequitably and who have ideas about how to turn things around. Frank dialogue and broad inclusion are rare in education.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* examines some new ways to talk about equity and excellence and considers some of the steps involved in realizing our stated goal of attaining those elusive aspirations. The authors offer suggestions, based on experience, about what it will take to approach our vision.

Linda Powell Pruitt and Kenneth Jones consider ways to hold a constructive discussion around the topic, which many people would rather avoid.

Jonny Skye Njie addresses the ways that school systems can tackle issues of equity and excellence through honesty, scholarship, and dialogue.

Adam Levner shows how involving youth in discussions of education can contribute to equity and excellence.

Members of Rhode Island's Racial Justice Task Force Subcommittee on Education – Monica Teixeira de Sousa, Michael Évora, Tonya Glantz, Brother Michael Reis, and Mike Capalbo – discuss the role of community agencies and organizations in reducing dropouts.

Michael Holzman draws on data about graduation rates and special education placements to suggest a role for the federal government and national organizations in achieving equity and excellence for African American males.

These articles make clear that the issues of equity and excellence are multifaceted and will require committed efforts by the broader community. All segments of the community have a stake in the goal, and all need to be part of the solution.

But the first step is recognizing that the problem exists and giving it a name. Then, people can consider their responsibilities to act on it.

The floodwaters that followed Hurricane Katrina swept away any illusions we might have held that the problem is solved. Inequity and a lack of excellence are pervasive. It is long past time to face the uncomfortable truths, talk the true talk, and invite the broader community to roll up their sleeves and walk the walk.

Broaching the Subject: How to Have a Conversation about Equity and Excellence

Linda Powell Pruitt and
Kenneth W. Jones

Equity and excellence are hard issues to discuss. Framing a conversation about these issues that will move participants to action takes careful planning and facilitation.

In February 2006, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform held a forum to examine issues of educational equity and excellence at scale. The goal of the meeting was to elicit participants' experience and knowledge about equity and excellence and develop a richer and more articulated understanding of the complexities of bringing each to scale in urban education systems.

The meeting was facilitated by Linda Powell Pruitt and Kenneth Jones. Both have extensive experience in organizational and group dynamics, as well as expertise in issues of educational equity.

Voices in Urban Education editor Robert Rothman spoke with Powell Pruitt and Jones about the challenges of organizing and conducting a conversation around these critical issues.

Why is it so difficult to have discussions of equity and excellence?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: Partly it's because Americans, as a group, have very little practical experience talking about things like race and gender and class. They are not common things in our schooling; they are not necessarily common things in our families; they are not common conversations professionally. Who knows how to do it? Who knows how to do it *well*? There's such a fear of offense. People lose their jobs if they say the wrong things. This is very, very sensitive territory. That's one reason: we don't have the skills or experience or practice.

Linda Powell Pruitt is an educator, organizational consultant, and psychotherapist who has been working with groups and individuals on issues of power and change for thirty years. Kenneth W. Jones, an organizational psychologist, is president and owner of KJ Associates, an organization development consulting firm.

KENNETH JONES: In terms of excellence, we know what it looks like. We can all point to examples. However, excellence in education is extended to only a privileged few. But if you want to have excellence at scale, you must include the notion of equity. You cannot have excellence at scale without equity at scale. This is where the conversation becomes difficult.

"Taking Money Away from My Children"

I think people have a difficult time talking about equity because the notion of equity flies in the face of our capitalistic society. Our society socializes people to get everything they can get for themselves. It's not about being your brother's keeper or creating wealth or

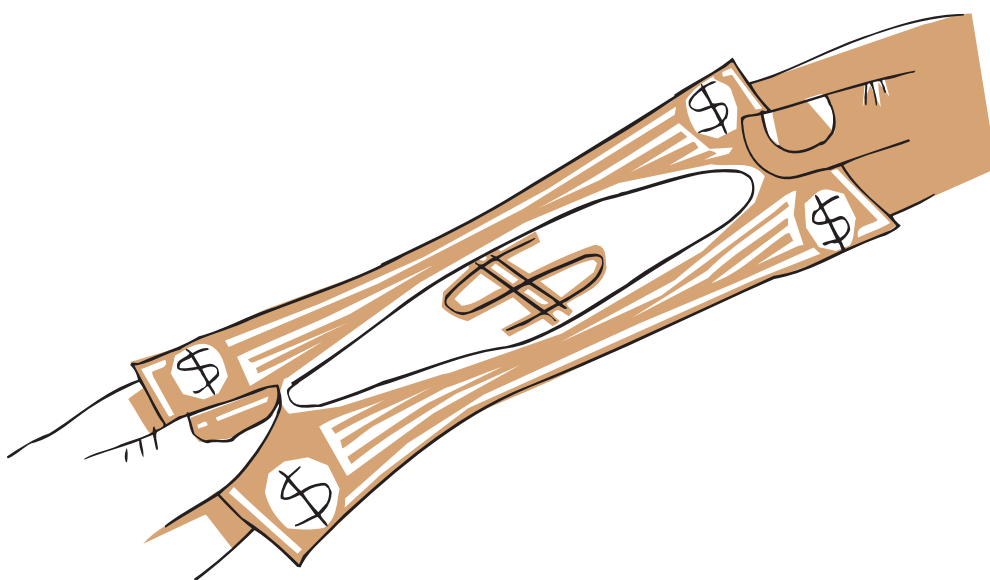
success or happiness for society. It's about creating it for *you*, individually, and your family. We are not socialized to think about creating equity for all.

Another reason that discussing equity is difficult is because it's an issue of power: power and resources and money. For people to discuss or deeply examine the issue of equity, they have to suspend their own belief in individual gain over collective gain and the power that's associated with it. So those who are in power and make decisions that impact others believe they have to give something up in order for equity to be achieved. And that, again, flies in the face of our capitalistic society.

Let me give you an example about the issue of loss. When I first went to the Gates Foundation and Bill Gates created the Gates Millennium Scholarship, which was a \$1-billion scholarship – \$50 million a year for twenty years – targeted at African American, Native American, Asian American, and Hispanic

American students, there were literally attorneys trying to sue Bill Gates to keep him from doing that because there was a perception of loss within the White community around this money. It was not theirs in the first place; it was Bill Gates's money, and he could do whatever he wanted to do with it. I had several White people come up to me and ask me, literally, "Why is he taking this money away from my children?" Part of my response was, "It wasn't your money or your children's money in the first place. It's *his* money. He can give it the way he wants. He's not *taking* it from anyone."

For those who have been privileged, those who have power, those who have influence, the whole notion of equity creates the feeling within them that something is being taken away – not that something is being added to help others. It's literally being taken away from them. That's one of the reasons it's so difficult to have this conversation.



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LINDA POWELL PRUITT: In my work over the last twenty years, I have seen it cross people's faces that it wasn't "accidental" that they went to a great high school. It has come to them that they were players in this game. My experience is that I went to a *tremendous* high school. My parents figured out where they wanted to buy a house so that I could go to a great high school. It wasn't accidental. There weren't that many great high schools to go around, and they navigated it so that I could go to that one. But that's something that people have to struggle with.

We've all got these experiences in us when we start talking about equity and when we start talking about excellence. We're implicated. Each of us who is fortunate enough to have a college degree, or even some advanced work, was formed by this system that is filled with inequity and misunderstood definitions of excellence. It would be easier to not talk about it. It would be easier just to talk about something else (and something that's a little more distant) like test scores or something like that.

KENNETH JONES: You'll notice that most of the time the conversations about equity are held by those who have been treated inequitably, not those who have been privileged throughout their lives. Those are the people we need to engage in this conversation, so that they can begin to understand the issue of inequity. It's very foreign to them.

Getting Started on a Conversation about Equity

Once you've decided that that's what you want to talk about, how do you get started?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: Have people talk about their own experience, either as a student or as an educator or as a parent, which will really get you incredible stories. Have people start by talking about some experience of their own where they were worried or there was a possibility that equity was an issue.

I've heard it all. I've heard people talk about their own experiences as students being told that they weren't college material. There are a lot of superintendents in this country who got motivated because somebody told them that they were not college material.

This is where you start. I'm convinced that this is the *only* place you can start, because people have to find it in their own life and work.

KENNETH JONES: I would keep it depersonalized, initially. I think the personalization of it is what frightens people, because they begin to perceive things in terms of a loss.

One way to get started is to have people create a definition of equity and have them look at what equity means, outside of themselves – to make it fairly objective – then move into how *you* have experienced equity or inequity. I just think the concept needs to be developed objectively first and then personalize it. However, as Linda said, when people begin to talk about their own experiences, you get incredible stories, and this frees others to open up to themselves and to others.

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: When people talk about their own experiences, very often what happens – and this is the “aha” – is that people who don’t think they know anything about this, or people who don’t think they had any experience with it, can have their eyes opened. I do an exercise sometimes if the group is more than twenty or so, where I have people stand on one side of the room and cross over if the statement applies to them. I did it at the

Harvard Education School, and I had about a hundred people, and I said, “If there has ever been a racist incident in your district, cross over.” Ninety-five crossed over. And it was a powerful moment, because the ninety-five said, “If this is happening everywhere, then I’m not such a bad person. I don’t feel so alone. And, also, why aren’t we talking about this?” And the five people on the other side said, “What am I missing? Is there something about my district that I’m not thinking about?”

Using Conversations about Equity as Learning Opportunities

Once you get started with the conversation, how do you organize the conversation around equity and excellence so that people learn things and build on what they know?

KENNETH JONES: That’s where I think the concept and the experience come in. As people begin to discuss their experiences around equity and inequity, they consider: What are the positive and negative experiences related to the concept of equity that you have identified? And then you move people into a conversation around the question: How do you maximize the positive experiences that we would consider equitable, and how do we minimize or eliminate the possibility of experiences that we have said are negative in terms of inequity?

So, if I have experienced *x*, and it was a wonderful experience that I would relate to the concept of equity and excellence, then what do we do to generalize those experiences and make them more accessible to people? And, once we have identified what we would term *inequitable* experiences, what are the things we can do to limit those inequitable experiences?

We don’t learn by reading things.

We mix it up with each other.

We question each other. We find

out who we disagree with.



LINDA POWELL PRUITT: There is a thing called “meeting design.” It’s not accidental; it’s not thrown together that we sit at tables, that we work in small groups, that the groups are a certain size, and that they have certain assignments.

Sometimes people say, “We don’t want panels. We don’t want to be talked at.” And that’s really an underlying request for a different way of doing the meeting, a different way of trying to build knowledge. People know that the old-fashioned way – I call it old-fashioned, but it’s a specific way – of having one smart person talk at us for a long period of time, and then we ask that smart person questions, is only *one* way to do a meeting.

Kenneth’s and my work is based on a couple of bodies of research. One has to do with how adults learn and adult-development theory. Another has to do with small-group dynamics versus large-group dynamics. Another has to

do with creativity and innovation. And when you stir all that together and you bring a group of people together, that’s what you’re trying to manage. You’re trying to manage the dynamics of the group – who talks a lot, who thinks they’re right. But most adults learn by trying things out. We don’t learn by reading things. We mix it up with each other. We question each other. We find out who we disagree with. That’s the purpose of smaller groups: so that more voices have an opportunity to be heard.

Then the whole creativity and innovation question has to do with keeping people in spaces where they go deeper, where they trust each other, where they take some risks.

There is “meeting planning” and there is also “experiential learning” and planning for that. People said to me, “Oh, that made it more interesting.” Yes, hopefully it does make it more interesting than a lecture. But, more than that, we think it’s how people discover new things. They stumble across things they hadn’t thought about before. Someone says something that

they hadn't quite heard that way before. It happened a couple of times at the forum, where somebody said, "Aha! I just thought of something!" That "aha moment" is what we're designing to get to.

KENNETH JONES: In this process we try never to do anything for an individual that would harm the group and, likewise, never to do anything for the group that would harm an individual.

Balancing Focus with "Taking on the Whole World"

One of the things we saw at the forum was that once people started the conversation, it would grow and involve all the inequities there are in society. Because there are so many, the discussion got very expansive. People wanted to take on the whole world. How do you place some boundaries on the issue so that people can focus on what they can affect?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: This is one of those interesting things about group dynamics. My experience is that people need some of that. When you don't have many opportunities to talk candidly about some of these issues, once you have a chance, among like-minded people, you do need some kind of blow-up, blue-sky, expansive conversation.

One way to begin to focus is to identify where we, individually, can have some type of influence and where our coordination of efforts can have even more influence.

At some point – and this is the facilitator's job – it becomes necessary for the energy of the group to try and set some boundaries and focus people on what's doable. There are a lot of ways to do this, depending on the group. One way is to look at immediate short-term and long-term possibilities for action. We discovered some things at the forum that people could do immediately in their networks.

But I think we don't realize what pressure we are often under to not talk about these things. So when you get a chance, you've got to let people be expansive for a while, and then invite them to narrow it down, and then to focus.

KENNETH JONES: Linda made a very important point. As a part of a participant's journey, sometimes they must have that "expansive conversation," which some may view as a waste of time or a "bird walk." However, this conversation contributes to the building of a common database of information that will inform everyone's wisdom around the issues being discussed. Our job as facilitators is to recognize this, allow and even encourage it, and then to know when and how to focus the group.

One way to begin to focus is to identify where we, individually, can have some type of influence and where our coordination of efforts can have even more influence. That's the way you enlarge it – working cooperatively with other organizations or other entities, looking at your spheres of influence and seeing where you have some leverage.

We can't individually go out and change George Bush's administration. I'm not going to run to Washington and try to get an audience with George Bush. But we *can* help people have a deeper conversation about where and how they can actually be effective. And

we can help create models and processes to help them transform their thoughts and experiences into doable actions.

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: At the forum, we were lucky. The people who attended were activists in their orientation anyway. So, even while we are having these expansive discussions, they are looking for things they could do. They're seeing ways it can enrich their research; they're seeing things they can take back to their advocacy organization. That's terrific. They're narrowing and focusing, even if they're not sharing it with the group.

Having had this experience, when the group meets again, how do you think the conversation will be different?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: There are a couple of things, in my experience. One, you never get the same group together twice. There will always be some old people, some new people. After you rebuild a sense of group cohesion, I think a couple of things happen. One, we only barely got started with this, but people have to learn to fight. They have to learn to disagree. They have to learn to stop each other when they think they've talked too long. But I think that the basic bonds of that were started. So we have what I would call a stronger group. The group can get to work more intently, more quickly.

I think the other thing is that people can start to plan collaboratively. They can consider moving off of their turf. They can more easily not see a question as something they own. "This is the way I do it; this is the way I propose it or think about it."



Using Collective Wisdom to Move to Action

How do you move from discussion to action?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: I don't completely know the answer to that. We could probably generate a number of answers. But I know that, underlying those answers, people need to have a sense of support. We're not heroes and mythmakers anymore. It's not like looking for St. Benedict, as one philosopher said; we're not all looking for the one person with the one right idea. We're not really doing that. We're looking to build communities of people who can effect change.

In the leadership literature, so much of it is on finding the one right person who can lead. That's not where we are in addressing the questions that we're trying to do something about. We move from discussion to action, I think, not by finding the one right person, but by building the groups that can support one another and move forward. Leaders get picked off. You can look at any district and watch the superintendent and see that happen. So we're trying to build larger structures: networks that are more connected, that can come up with right ideas, not right people.

When we decide to move into action, we find unexpected obstacles. And we don't necessarily understand that those obstacles *are* the work. That's what is worth doing.

KENNETH JONES: Getting people to move from talk to actually behaving differently is probably the most difficult piece. As you know, we've had many, many conversations around these issues, and when the conversations are over, people go back to business as usual.

Getting people to behave differently goes back to that whole concept of capitalism. I think people need to create some intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. I don't mean money, necessarily, but people tend to move when there's something in it for them.

How do you create value for my behavioral change? That value may simply be the intrinsic feeling that I did something wonderful. So help people identify for themselves what's the value that you can get out of doing this. What would you like to see? If you're going to do something differently, what is it going to take?

Our society does not create many totally altruistic people – "I'm just doing this for the good of society." There are some, but in our society people have to make a living, and people have to take care of families, and people have obligations. These tend to be the priorities, before any thought is given to the notion of equity.

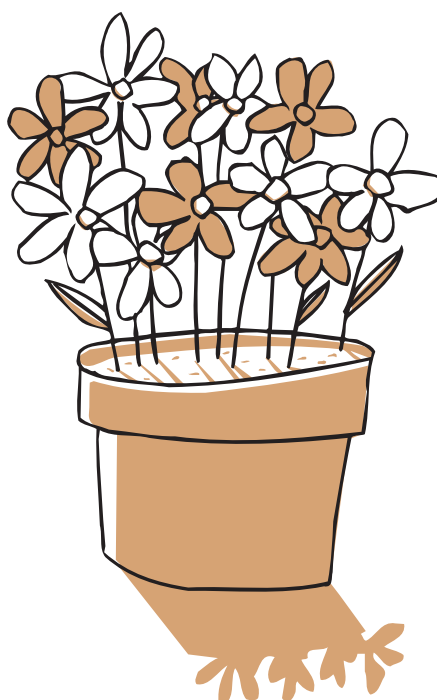
Another issue is around the environment. Individually, I may believe this is valuable for me to do, and it creates some type of intrinsic reward, but when I go back to the environment where I do my work, that environment doesn't support the behavioral changes that I am trying to exhibit. Therefore, it will not allow me to be successful. Then, we need to look at how we can influence the environment and really engage people in that conversation also. Have people investigate: What things can you change in your environment to help support you and actually reward you for this behavioral change?

LINDA POWELL PRUITT: I got a call today from a billionaire who wants to do something about public education. So he set up a small foundation and he went to the three local districts – it's a pretty big town, and there are three big districts. He was appalled at how the districts keep out innovation and that the boundaries around each district are so thick and impermeable that no good idea could get in. And so what he decided to do was look around the country for programs that he could run.

I asked him, “Why don’t you try, instead, to do something about the impermeability around the districts?” That’s the issue. That’s the problem. If he wants to make a difference, the bureaucracy is the first thing he needs to think about, not the creation of these sweet but marginal little programs.

And that’s what becomes our problem between discussion and action. When we decide to move into action, we find unexpected obstacles. And we don’t necessarily understand that those obstacles *are* the work. That’s what is worth doing, not, “Oh, that’s hard; let me do something else.”

KENNETH JONES: I believe the wisdom about these issues lies within the individuals. It’s not that I myself or Linda can come in and tell people, here’s what you need to do when you go back to your work site or your organization or your school or your district or wherever. Our skill is asking the right questions to uncover and combine the collective wisdom of those in the room and to have them, eventually, agree on an approach for action. We work to allow the wisdom to emerge from within them. They have it; they just have to be asked the right questions to bring it out.



Honesty, Scholarship, and Dialogue: Going to Scale or Cultural Transformation?

Jonny Skye Njie

Empowerment of all members of a school community is essential for equity. Empowerment requires frank and open discussion of values and how they affect day-to-day decisions.

As a reformer, I have been working from the premise that young people are the most compelling lever of change in schools. Students are the best advocates for reform – they are the most honest and they are savvy sociologists. They understand the inner workings of their school culture, can describe the power dynamics, and articulate their own condition, as well as feel for the condition of their peers. Young people speak about their experiences and what they mean. Students also make up the majority of any school community. They bring enormous capital to school reform, as long as they have sincere adult allies, know what the possibilities are, and have not simply a voice, but a legitimate role, in the reform process.

Based on this premise, I have concluded that it is only through the empowerment of *all* members of a school community that the static social ethic in urban public schools, deeply rooted in the regeneration of inequity, will be lifted. Framing reform with values of empowerment – honesty, scholarship, and dialogue – is essential for meaningful and sustainable change at scale to be possible. The irrelevant industrial imprint of order, hierarchy,

and silence keep the solutions, many of which can be found in schools and the central office, from being realized. The answers to growing rigorous, high-performing urban schools are not the privilege of administrators or parents, the superintendent, or students, but rather will be found when *all* perspectives are allowed to generously interact and speak from their hearts in chorus.

The Need for Honest Dialogue

The realization of excellence and equity in urban public education requires a frank examination of our society's values, the ways they imprint on our individual decisions, and how we work with one another in schools and the central office. How is our range of abilities or level of willingness to talk about race and class impacting our work? How does our American social ethos inform what we talk about, who is talking to whom, with whom, and who gets to talk at all?

Having that deep, honest dialogue will be difficult. We need inspiration. We need purpose. Until we see schools as sites of social change, as sites with the potential to seed a truly integrated society built on the basic human need for dignity, as sites where generosity, respect, belonging, and achievement are understood to be co-dependent, we will

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not have the will to take on the daunting social and personal interrogation necessary to interrupt our behaviors – the very behaviors that keep us from the realization of excellence and opportunity for our youth (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Brockern 1990).

Even at our best, when we are all working perfectly together, the peeling away at meaningful and sustainable system reform in urban education is a long-term project. Moving any good work to scale requires consistent and comprehensive grease to the gears of reform, a thriving culture, so that change is not dependent on energetic and entrepreneurial educators, students, or community members alone – so that ideas can be contagious and success can be infectious (Gladwell 2000). A healthy culture activates the broad scope of stakeholders – students, teachers, administrators, support staff, custodians, secretaries, community organizations, parents, business, police, higher education, and government – and articulates their interdependence in order to move toward meaningful change. If we aren't interacting more profoundly, if we aren't even living near each other, what is it going to take for us to integrate in the complex social environment of schools?

The Disempowering Environment

Schools do not operate outside of American society's expectations, judgments, or fears. As a result, barriers to meaningful reform are strengthened by our weaknesses and biases – by the way we frame our hopes and deal with our misunderstandings.

Our public schools are mirrors and amplifications of society. The faculty lunchrooms are as segregated as our communities. Tables are organized by language, immigration status, and class

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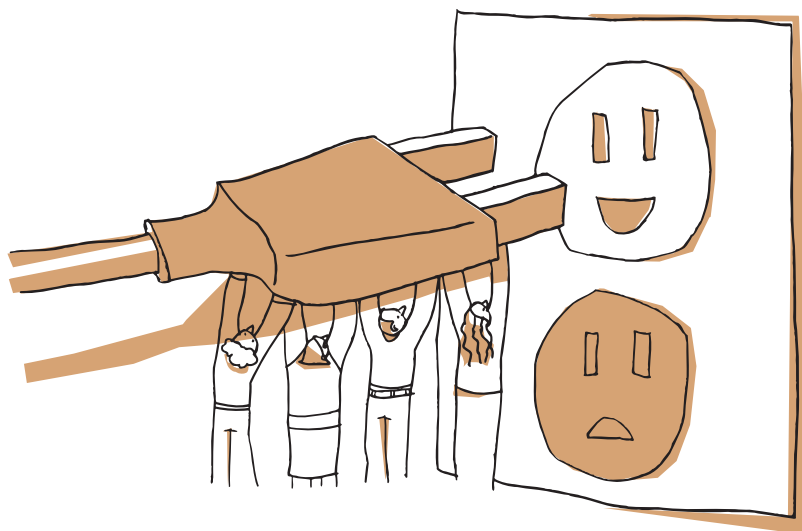
and stand separate from student cafeterias. The central office is very quiet. Meetings are rarely locations of rigorous dialogue. Only a few can actually make decisions, and speed, efficacy, and creativity are worn down by layers of bureaucracy. Students feel uninspired and cautious. The reality of their lives and their struggles are not given voice in school, so they seep out in defiant behavior and disconnection from their studies. How can we expect to sell hope to our young people if we aren't feeling hopeful? *It's all been tried before. It's these kids. It's the teachers. It's these families. It's poverty. It's immigration. It's the principal. It's downtown. It's testing. It's the union. I can't possibly make a difference.* These attitudes, so prevalent in our schools, are profoundly *disempowering*.

Disempowerment is generated and replicated through daily interactions. It is very hard to talk about this. It sounds like an indictment. Oppression implies a well-thought-out conspiracy and purposefully bad-hearted people. Most people are good and most of us in education are driven to contribute positively, not to hurt and disempower. We know, though, that abuse can be the result of

neglect, not just deliberate violence. In the case of education, we hurt our students and inevitably our outcomes by neglecting to engage all members of the school community and central office in the hard work of honest and generous dialogue. We must build and maintain a thriving and connected culture driven by the understanding that all students can learn and that their realities are not an excuse for our failures but, rather, information essential to crafting relevant and sustainable solutions.

Making the Connection

In order to break down those barriers, one has to be very conscious and reflective. This takes work. Who is the oppressor? It isn't one decision, person, policy, or institution. Our values are transmitted through the culmination of interactions every day between adults and young people, between adults and adults (Delpit 2002). When we fail to model honesty, dialogue, and the respect for intellectual curiosity, we teach our youth that their condition is normal and should be accepted.



When we fail to model honesty, dialogue, and the respect for intellectual curiosity, we teach our youth that their condition is normal and should be accepted.

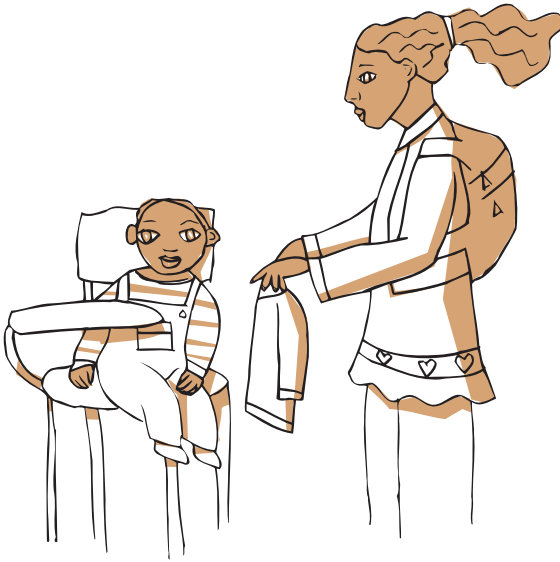
I have spent ten very active years with the Providence public schools working on behalf of young people and their families from a variety of vantage points. I have taught in, partnered with, built programs around, and collaboratively designed reforms within schools and currently work in the central office. I have struggled to gain credibility. I have never been a principal. I am “young.” I speak too much in meetings. I don’t have all the answers. I didn’t follow the prescribed path to the central office.

But I have learned through my work with students that the broad human condition of urban communities and schools impairs their ability to impact decision making. If students don’t feel like they are understood, how are they going to feel connected to school? If teachers aren’t feeling listened to, why should they listen to students? If administrators feel like their hands are tied around important decisions like staffing and budget by the central office, why should they support teacher flexibility and an entrepreneurial spirit? If the central office is plagued by union wrangling and city, state, and federal politics, how can it listen sensitively and respond to building leaders?

Change at any time is difficult. As Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz (2002, p. 27) put it, “Habits, values, and attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one’s identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.”

But change in an urban public education system is particularly daunting. The challenges in an urban public school system often seem insurmountable, even immobilizing. Everyone copes with varying degrees of ineffectiveness, due to a complex recipe of conditions. Change is slow. Leadership is fleeting. Ideologies are in constant battle. There isn’t enough time. Confronting the reality of student failure threatens one’s ego, disrupts the calculation of power and upsets political maneuverings that are fueled by overwhelming pressures to convince people that we are, in fact, tacking the ship – that we are “accountable.” In this climate, how can empowerment happen? Collaboration becomes exposure, honesty depends on whom you trust, tensions between those inside the system and those outside it seem real, and very little is being read.

Yet, most people have an idea about how things can get better. Most people are also working really hard. I have yet to put my hands on a piece of



research that doesn't support ideas that are being articulated by members of a school community. It may be simply that it is the clerk's idea or a student's idea – voices that are not being heard and, therefore, cannot be integrated into decision making. Utilizing the wisdom of the collective requires working with one another honestly through transparent processes, in a climate of dialogue, with an emphasis on and respect for scholarship. This is easier said than done. Interrogation of self, particularly in the context of our work, requires bravery; it is messy and it makes us feel vulnerable. But, most important, it challenges our individual and professional identities, which have been crafted in an ineffective institution and a society built on disparity.

We are simply and profoundly missing a single lever – a culture of empowerment. Empowerment breeds equity. Disempowerment protects inequity. Empowerment simply means that all people working in, learning in, and interacting with schools have a role and an opportunity to engage in dialogue about their roles in a generative, reflective process driven by a higher aim – crafting a society that mirrors and resonates with our ideals of humane and dignified living. Dialogue, after all, “cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (Freire 1970, p. 70). Voice and power, voice and equity, voice and the successful pursuit of excellence are inextricably intertwined.

From Engagement to Empowerment

There are successful urban schools where the effects of poverty, immigration status, and family circumstance are leveled. A dynamic body of research exists that proves this. We know what the components are, what the process looks like, how to organize the resources, even who the players need to be – now we need to take on the struggle of how to work with each other and build a clear articulation and practice of the values that drive us.

We have recognized the need to transform the classroom from what Paulo Freire (1973) described as a banking experience of deposits and receipts to one of engagement and dialogue and demonstration. How would the reform of urban public education be affected by applying the same notion to schools and central offices? Educators and organizers understand engagement as a process beginning with building consensus and developing community-wide definitions. But will this kind of engage-

ment lead to empowerment? Are the interactions sustained beyond a set of activities and scheduled conversations? Did Malcolm X hold focus groups? Did Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. develop a needs-assessment report?

There are core values that describe all of our aspirations for a dignified life in a democratic society, embedded in equity and excellence. The work of building a thriving, empowered culture in urban public school systems will shift our conversation from going to scale to engineering a cultural transformation.

In a recent Annenberg Institute forum, Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale, our final task was to develop the top priorities of a new system in which equity and excellence were simultaneously realized. It was to be a creative task – to pull the minds in the room “outside of the box.” Mel King¹ set the tone by methodically rounding the room to imprint the first priority on each table’s chart paper – “LOVE” – poignant, but, by educational standards, not measurable. What would the indicators of success look like for an urban public school system driven by a priority like “LOVE”?

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¹ Mel King is the director of the Technology Center at Tent City, whose mission is to train people who have been excluded from the technological revolution. King spent twenty-five years as director of the Community Fellows Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has been a state representative, a mayoral candidate, and executive director of the New Urban League of Greater Boston.

First Ask the Students: A New Lens on Equity and Excellence in Public Schools

Adam Levner

A project in which students, through photography, document “the best and worst” in their schools and classrooms demonstrates the benefits of youth engagement in education reform – both to the students and to the reform effort.

The movement to secure excellence and equity in public education all too often deprives itself of one of its most valuable resources – the very students it seeks to help. Students not only provide the moral grounding and urgency for our work; they also have the ability to show us the truth about our schools, tell us what is really important, help shape our priorities and agendas, and build a significantly broader, stronger movement. In depriving this school reform movement of all that students have to offer, we are also depriving the students of the educational opportunity offered by the movement itself.

These beliefs form the underpinnings of Critical Exposure, an organization committed to empowering students to strengthen the movement for excellence and equity through art and advocacy. Founded in 2004, Critical Exposure provides thirty-five millimeter cameras and training in documentary photography to middle and high school students, beginning first in Baltimore and, recently, expanding to Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas.

Students take their cameras to school and document what they believe is important for the public to know about their schools, capturing images of both conditions in serious need of repair and positive developments taking place despite those conditions. Students write captions for their photographs and exhibit their work at art galleries, libraries, community centers, and other public spaces, which generates media attention and increases public awareness of the conditions facing students in public schools.

And the students don't stop at raising awareness. They use their images and testimony as advocacy tools, taking them directly to the decision-makers in a position to address their concerns. The initial success of these strategies speaks to the need to provide students with more opportunities to take active part in the movement, for both their own sake and the sake of our collective struggle to improve public education.

What Students Can Contribute

Students have a great deal to contribute to our collective efforts to create a truly excellent and equitable public education system in the United States. To begin with, they can provide a

Adam Levner is co-director of Critical Exposure, a youth empowerment and advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C.



remarkably accurate compass to guide our work. Students see, with striking clarity and enviable simplicity, what is happening in their schools and how those factors impact their education. Students know which teachers are engaged, what it takes to create classes that challenge and inspire, and whether the facilities provide the necessary conditions in which to learn. They know which extracurricular activities and administrators build their self-esteem and which ones tear it down, which aspects of their schools make them proud and eager to learn and which aspects cause them to shut down or drop out.

The photographs taken by students through Critical Exposure reflect this understanding and thoughtfulness. Students have captured images of bright, smiling teachers at the front of their classrooms and written about how important it is to have caring, capable adults in charge of their education. They've also photographed television sets and worksheets that, in some cases, have become their de facto teachers. There are photographs of trophy cases and student artwork proudly displayed

in school hallways and photographs of bathrooms in which soap dispensers, stall doors, and even toilet seats are conspicuously absent. Students show their peers hard at work and at cheer-leading practice or standing next to broken radiators in the classroom and mousetraps in the cafeteria. These striking images and captions, in their simplicity, reveal basic truths about our current public education system – truths all too often blurred during discussions of per pupil spending and the geographic-cost-of-education index.

By providing a clear insight into the day-to-day realities of their schools, students can help us to map the schools' assets and liabilities and develop an accurate assessment of the starting point for subsequent reform efforts. Beyond just taking stock, students can help to set our priorities by telling us what is really important to them. This prioritization is essential, given that most schools do not have the luxury of setting sail anew – they must shift their course with an existing load of passengers in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime journey. Moreover, even the most starry-eyed of optimists recognize that building truly excellent and equitable public schools will take time.

So, while current students will not benefit from all of the improvements in public education we collectively hope to generate, they should at least have some input in which changes do happen within the span of their years in public schools. Who has more right – and more credibility – to tell us where to start our efforts than the students who, at this very moment, suffer the inadequacies and inequities of our current educational system?

Beyond providing school reformers with vital data and judgment, students have a number of additional attributes we desperately need. They increase exponentially the movement’s stock of passion, energy, and motivation by bringing their own and infecting others as well. They bring resourcefulness, time, and, often (though not as often as should be the case), a focus unfettered by the stresses faced by adults. They bring idealism, though this has too often been dishearteningly tempered.

They bring numbers by getting involved themselves and through their ability to recruit hard-to-organize adults, beginning with their parents. And they bring virtually unassailable credentials in terms of their integrity as expert witnesses, credentials that the public seems to debate when it comes to the opinions voiced by another constituency of expert witnesses – teachers. Because students’ self-interest is recognized as being synonymous with the purpose of public education, they are granted latitude only dreamed of by teachers unions and advocacy organizations, which are often viewed as “interest groups,” in the pejorative sense.

After a group of Baltimore City Public School System students took their photographs to Annapolis and showed them to legislators debating a bill to put additional funding into school facilities, one state senator said, “As a legislator from Baltimore City, I believe that the compelling photo-



graphs and testimony from students working with Critical Exposure were an important factor in convincing my colleagues to support increased funding for public schools. In fact, we were able to triple the amount of money we received this year in Annapolis, thanks in great part to their efforts.”¹

What Students Stand to Gain

In adding these tremendous attributes to the movement for equity and excellence, the students themselves stand to gain a great deal. Beyond reaping the obvious, but presumably gradual, benefits of improved public schools, students participating in the process will receive an invaluable, immediate education consisting of real-world skills and insights – the type of education students often cite as one of their top priorities.

The first step – asking students for their opinions – helps to increase their confidence and sense of self-worth. Engaging students in the process of assessing and evaluating their schools and setting priorities fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Working with students to develop strategies for pursuing a collective school reform agenda requires deepening their understanding of the structures and processes by which decisions that affect their lives are made. Building public and political support to implement these strategies will utilize students’ resourcefulness and teach them skills in expository writing, public speaking, communications, and media relations. According to one high school student who worked with Critical Exposure, “It feels good to get out into the big world with the big people and the big events. It feels good to be heard. It feels good to have an outlet

¹ E-mail from Maryland state senator Nathaniel McFadden, July 15, 2005.

“As a legislator, I believe that the compelling photographs and testimony from students... were an important factor in convincing my colleagues to support increased funding for public schools. We were able to triple the amount of money we received this year in Annapolis, thanks in great part to their efforts.”

and hit the real world with my voice and my experience and to have that affect the future as it will affect more and more students.”²

And all of these steps have additional benefits. Students become more invested in their education; establish connections with concerned adults; develop an appreciation for the hard work of countless individuals and organizations committed to working for change; and find a productive outlet for the anger, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness that our schools and society instill in many of our youth.

Moreover, we are enfranchising the disenfranchised, the untold rewards of which will ripple out for years to come. Not least among these ripples will be the creation of an engaged, vocal, politically savvy generation of education activists. The lessons students stand to gain from their involvement and lead-

² E-mail from participating student, age 15, February 28, 2006.

ership in the movement also extend far beyond the education arena, yet they are lessons that are rarely taught.

As adults, it is our job to educate the younger members of our society. We must never lose sight of their youth and inexperience, and sometimes we must be justifiably paternalistic in our conviction that students do not always know what is best for them. After all, what child would voluntarily sign up for measles inoculation? However, this recognition should not cloud over the fact that students also have a wealth of experience and insight that can be used to benefit not only themselves, but all of us.



How to Involve Students

There are many ways to give students the opportunity to contribute their invaluable perspectives on public education. Traditional tools to ascertain students' opinions include surveys, interviews, and the inclusion of students in committees or organizations focused on education and other issues affecting young people. Innovative approaches often incorporate youth media, providing students with the skills and equipment they need to channel and amplify their voices through techniques such as documentary film, photography, drama, or youth-run publications and radio programs.

Each of these tools and approaches boasts numerous examples of successfully utilizing the power of students' voices to shed light on the realities of public schools. Here are two such examples:

- A recent report released by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation presented a significant challenge to accepted academic notions of which students choose to quit school and why. Rather than finding that the students who fail to graduate, as was previously thought, are those who simply “can’t make it,” unable to cope with the traditional system of public education, this study found that almost two-thirds of dropouts were doing well enough to graduate and chose to leave for other reasons, often including boredom, lack of external motivation or inspiration, or personal reasons such as needing income, becoming a parent, or having to care for a family member.

What enabled these researchers to cast an oft-examined problem in a new light? They asked the dropouts themselves. And, in doing so, these

researchers not only challenged prevailing assumptions about problems of retention and attrition, they helped begin to develop an alternative and strategically targeted approach for addressing one of the most confounding and problematic aspects of our public education system (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison 2006).

- In Denver, Colorado, a parent organizing group, Padres Unidos, was interested in addressing major educational problems at a local high school. Recognizing that, as a first step, they needed to better understand the problem, they began surveying the students during lunchtime. The simple act of being asked for their opinions galvanized several of the students to form their own organization, Jóvenes Unidos. The student group took over the survey, gathering the input of over seven hundred classmates at their school.

But the students didn't stop there. With the support of Padres Unidos, they conducted research into successful education strategies both locally and around the country. They visited other schools and saw firsthand how different public education could be from what they had experienced. They issued both a comprehensive report of their findings and a reform plan outlining a series of concrete changes that they believe will help make their school a school of

excellence. And they are working to implement their proposed reforms by organizing and seeking to collaborate with students, parents, teachers, administrators, school staff, and community members (Center for Community Change 2004).

These examples serve to highlight several key strategies for involving students. The first step is simply to ask the students to share their viewpoints. The extent to which and the form in which students are subsequently involved in the overall project will vary, but important gains are made regardless. Another key strategy is to empower students to look critically, often for the first time, at the institutions in which they spend a large share of their waking hours. While they may not have formulated conscious thoughts about these conditions previously, it is important to recognize that the conditions affect them anyway, both through the quality of education they receive and through the implicit but powerful messages that students internalize about their value.

Students involved in Critical Exposure have found that photography gives them a way to express sometimes-inchoate thoughts about their school experiences. "It's great. It gives you a way to say something without actually having to use words," Sahara Scott, a fourteen-year-old student from Baltimore, told the *Baltimore Sun* (Daemmerich 2005).

The first step is simply to ask the students to share their viewpoints. Another key strategy is to empower students to look critically, often for the first time, at the institutions in which they spend a large share of their waking hours.

A third strategy is to open students' eyes to the alternate realities that exist in other schools. Like all of us, students are limited by what they know – most of them have never seen the other end of the educational spectrum. Students in excellent schools are rarely aware of the tremendous advantages they receive, and students in low-performing schools often have no concept of what truly excellent schools even look like (beyond what they see in television shows, which they have long since learned do not depict the lives they lead). For students to develop their own definitions of excellent and equitable schools – definitions that will be an invaluable asset to the movement – we must expand their awareness of what already exists.

This broadening of students' horizons is essential for those students currently receiving a low-quality education – those on the losing end of our two-tiered system of public education. These are the children and youth who can speak from experience about what they need and how to prioritize it, who have the most to gain from the struggle to optimize and equalize public education, and who have the passion and urgency of direct self-interest for which there is no substitute.

However, it is critical to involve students across the educational spectrum. Students attending excellent pub-

lic schools can be particularly powerful allies. When those who, arguably, benefit from inequity publicly recognize the disparity, speak out against it, and renounce the unfair advantage which they have been given, it creates a very compelling message capable of disarming many of the movement's opponents. The passion for justice that is so often eroded by age remains strong across the lines of class and race that divide our public schools, and it is a mistake to assume that the beneficiaries of this divide are not willing to fight for educational justice.

Making the Commitment

The success of these approaches is both heartening and frustrating. It is heartening because it presents a relatively simple and straightforward, if time- and labor-intensive, strategy for gathering valuable data that can be used to inform our methods and priorities for improving public education, while at the same time swelling the ranks of those working in a concerted manner toward reform. It is frustrating because, frequently, youth continue to be conspicuously absent from the table – despite the fact that countless individuals and organizations have made the involvement of youth in education reform an integral part of their work, if not their life's work, and despite the proven positive impact this work has had on the students involved and their communities.

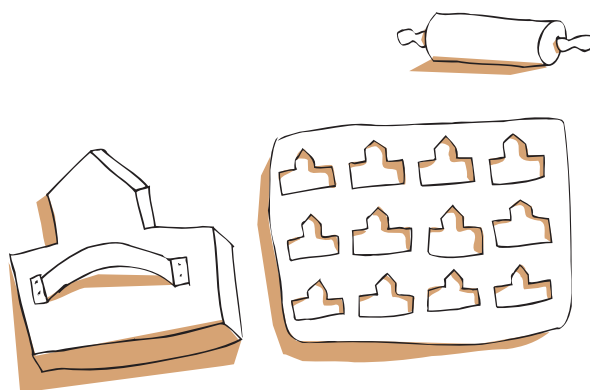
How many workshops and forums on school reform have we all attended at which someone commented that the missing perspective was that of students? This suggestion, so ubiquitous during postconference evaluations as to seem obligatory, is inevitably greeted by a general murmur of assent that always appears simultaneously sincere and half-hearted. The truth is that school

Youth continue to be conspicuously absent from the table – despite the proven positive impact this work has had on the students involved and their communities.

reformers are ambivalent about including students, and our ambivalence reflects the presence of the same corrosive elements underlying so many of the problems in our public schools: an underestimation of the intelligence and insights of youth and a reluctance to engage in the difficult but essential work of meaningfully engaging the students in true education, rather than the cookie-cutter, drill-and-kill exercises that so many students in this country suffer through.

If our true *goal*, rather than simply a common *value*, is to produce citizens who are not just capable of, but practiced in critical thinking and problem solving, then we can achieve significant progress by taking the first step of involving students in the process to create schools designed to achieve that end. In this way, we will not forsake the current generation of students in our efforts to create better schools for the next.

It is worth acknowledging that referring to “students” or “young people” as a singular entity is an oversimplification. As in public education itself, the movement for equitable and excellent public schools must develop age- and culture-appropriate strategies to reach individuals where they are and help to develop experiences that are satisfying and enriching for each person. However, as is also true in public education, that challenge cannot and should not prevent us from trying – and from having higher expectations for all students’ capacity to contribute. After all, while committing to the importance of youth voice and development is a far cry from developing the infrastructure and know-how to do so effectively, the commitment is itself significant.



A More Powerful Movement

The movement to secure excellent, equitable public schools has at its disposal an inexhaustible supply of committed, energetic, and knowledgeable people waiting only for an invitation to contribute their skills and expertise. By reaching out to students and committing to include them in the struggle, we stand to build a powerful movement the likes of which has not been seen in decades. By strengthening the movement, our goal of ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education becomes a much nearer and more attainable goal. And, simply by beginning that process, we will help provide students with vital aspects of the education they are being denied – an investment that will benefit us all.

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Note:

More information about Critical Exposure and a selection of student photos are available online at <www.criticalexposure.org>.

Coming Together: Looking across Sectors for Answers to the Dropout Question

Monica Teixeira de Sousa, Michael D. Évora, Tonya M. Glantz, Brother Michael Reis, and Mike Capalbo

A coalition of lawyers and social welfare officials in Rhode Island is looking into the roots of the dropout problem and the ways that agencies and organizations outside of education can work with schools to solve it.

Since 2004, a group of legal-aid lawyers, social workers, social service providers, and educators in Rhode Island have been meeting regularly to gather data on dropouts in the state and enlist others to join them in working to address the issue. The group, known as the Racial Justice Task Force Subcommittee on Education, grew out of a colloquium held at Roger Williams University School of Law that focused on issues of racial inequities.

Voices in Urban Education editor Robert Rothman spoke with five members of the subcommittee – Monica Teixeira de Sousa, Michael D. Évora, Tonya M. Glantz, Brother Michael Reis, and Mike Capalbo – about the reasons students in Rhode Island drop out of school and ways that agencies and organizations can collaborate to address the problem.

Tell me about the Racial Justice Task Force Subcommittee on Education – how it got started, what it does.

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: The Roger Williams University School of Law held a racial justice colloquium two years ago. Their intention was to examine issues where there was a racial disparity. They selected four issues: housing, criminal law, immigration, and education. At that time, four groups were developed, four subcommittees. The education subcommittee began meeting on a monthly basis. We started to look at the different issues within the field of education that we could address as a group. We decided to focus

on the students we felt were the most vulnerable pupils. These are the students who are dropping out of our schools in tremendous numbers.

Rhode Island's Dropout Crisis

We know that Rhode Island has the highest dropout rate in New England. And we know that our graduation rates in Rhode Island's core cities were 62 percent for Providence, 65 percent for Pawtucket, 72 percent for Woonsocket, and 75 percent for Central Falls. These are the official numbers; many of the people who are on the ground actually suspect that the graduation rates are much lower. But even if you look specifically at these numbers, with Providence having a graduation rate of only 62 percent, that means we're losing almost

Monica Teixeira de Sousa is a staff attorney for Rhode Island Legal Services. Michael D. Évora is executive director of the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights. Tonya M. Glantz is a clinical training specialist at the Child Welfare Institute, School of Social Work, Rhode Island College. Brother Michael Reis is president and Mike Capalbo is vice president, education and human resources, of Tides Family Services. All are members of the Racial Justice Task Force Subcommittee on Education.

40 percent of students from the time they begin as freshmen to the time their cohort graduates from twelfth grade. This is not only a significant number of students; this is a crisis. It's a matter that requires urgent attention. And, with our work in this subcommittee, we are hoping to be able to bring attention to the issue and take some immediate action to remedy it.

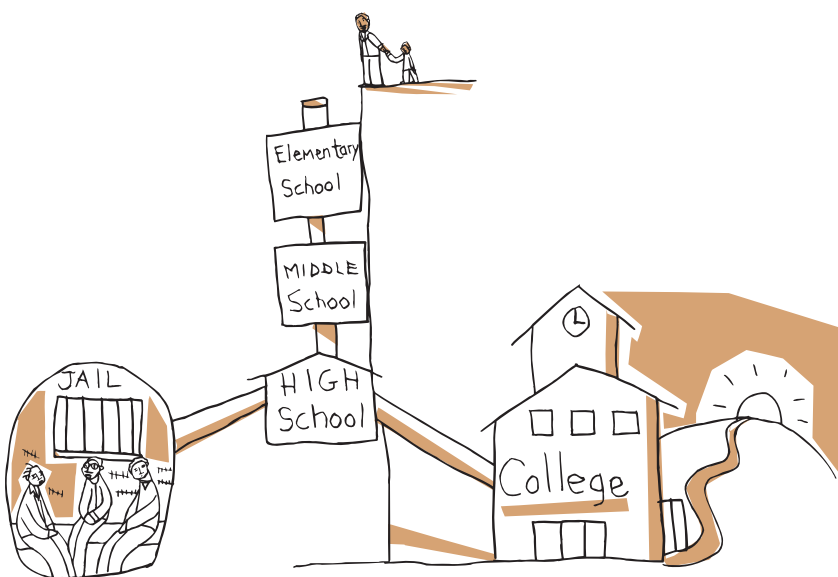
What are some of things you plan to do to raise awareness about the issue?

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: We compiled some of the existing data and went around meeting with people from different organizations that work with youth here in Rhode Island to convey the urgency of the situation to as many people as possible and to get folks from different sectors working on this issue. We don't want to leave anyone out of the equation. We want to work with students, of course; we want to work with parents; we want to work with educators and administrators in the public schools; we want to work with university professors, researchers, advocates, lawyers – all the front-line people working in community-based

We're losing almost 40 percent of students from the time they begin as freshmen to the time their cohort graduates from twelfth grade. This is not only a significant number of students; this is a crisis.

organizations who see these problems in a very real way as they work with individual students. We want to work with business leaders, because this is very much a fiscal inefficiency of vast dimension that is taking place. Taxpayers are being asked to pay a tremendous amount in terms of social services that are being put into place to support this population of students because we're not putting the initial investment into education.

BROTHER MICHAEL REIS: The Children's Policy Coalition is a coalition of thirty-five agencies and individuals who advocate on behalf of kids, particularly



kids involved with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. It's clear that one of the issues we see is that dropouts and "throwaways" are clogging our system. They're clogging it with teen moms and teen pregnancies, delinquency, youth referred to our training school, and, ultimately, our solution is to wind up putting these kids, when they get old enough, in the Adult Correctional Institution.

The myth is that when a youngster drops out of school, and we don't help that youngster get that high school diploma, that we're saving money in the school departments. The reality is, we're paying a terrible price when we place them in institutions and their children grow up in poverty. We're creating this system that is very expensive and, ultimately, at \$38,000 a bed in prison, is a very expensive way to get to a final solution to deal with this kind of problem.

Bringing Youth Organizations Together for the First Time

MICHAEL ÉVORA: It's fair to say that a good chunk of the time from when we got started was educating ourselves. Before going out and telling the community what the problem was, we needed to learn, bringing people together like

the people who are around this table now, who never previously had been together. The Commission for Human Rights doesn't have much dealing with Tides; it doesn't have much dealing with Legal Services. But, initially, people who were interested in education got together for these subcommittee meetings and asked, who are you, and what do you do, and how does this relate to what I do?

You all come from outside of education. What roles do your various organizations and the community play in this issue that most directly affect education?

TONYA GLANTZ: The first time I heard about this was at a presentation of the Children's Policy Coalition with Monica and Brother Michael. The thing that struck me as a social worker in the area of child welfare was, they're talking about our kids. They're talking about so many of the kids who either come into child welfare, never to leave, or kids who come in as adolescents because of truancy or other status offenses. Lack of education is correlated with poverty, which is correlated with other challenges with families.

For me, what I've seen in sixteen years in child welfare is a real fragmentation in how systems function. This is a great opportunity for us to look at all the other systems that are involved and at how they come to play a role in education. If you don't successfully complete high school, what kind of quality of life are you going to have for yourself or any family that evolves as a result of you? This is an opportunity to show that it's not just an education issue, but one we all need to stand up and own, whether as a private citizen, as a social worker, in school systems, or in community-based organizations. We have to own what we have done to contribute to our children and adoles-



This is an opportunity to show that it's not just an education issue, but one we all need to stand up and own. We have to own what we have done to contribute to our children and adolescents being put in such a vulnerable position in schools.

cents being put in such a vulnerable position in schools. We need to come together and harness the resources that exist and make the most of them.

This is an opportunity for us to see Rhode Island's children as all of our children and to give them the same opportunities that we would want to give our own children.

The Link between Poverty and Dropout Rates

MIKE CAPALBO: I come from a public school background, as a special educator, and was there when high standards came into play. It was apparent at that time that substantial pressure was going to be put on lower-functioning kids, poor kids, and disadvantaged kids to achieve those standards and that this pressure would eventually cause the dropout rate to go up.

When they initially came out with the concept of high standards, aligned with it was the idea of setting up a variety of functional educational and social safety nets. And the idea was good, but the reality was that the costs involved became prohibitive and, in fact, these safety nets never got put into place. The end result, as I have seen it, is that this has caused so much pressure on these families and kids that dropping out of school becomes a viable alternative to the constant negativity

they receive, day in and day out, in the school systems. At this point, I don't see an end to it. The pressure increases, the test scores have become the be-all and end-all, teachers are working to the test scores, and it's advantageous to keep the lower-functioning kids away from the tests in order to show that you're improving the instruction that has, theoretically, been provided.

MICHAEL ÉVORA: Prior to coming to the office of human rights, I spent a year as a public defender in the juvenile division. I spent a year defending kids who got into trouble with the law and it became very clear, very quickly, for someone who had just recently graduated from law school, that there was a pretty direct correlation for many of my kids between their presence at family court and their relationship, or lack of relationship, in their schools.

As a technical matter, the Commission for Human Rights has no jurisdiction over elementary and secondary education. It's the state's antidiscrimination law-enforcement agency. We investigate charges in employment, housing, public accommodations, and credit. But I believe there is a link between this population we're talking about – dropouts and pushouts – and individuals who end up in cycles of poverty, teen moms, and all of that,



individuals who are likely to be the victims of discrimination in all of the areas that we cover. These are the individuals who find themselves in lower-paying jobs that are non-union, or who find themselves in housing situations in which victimization is most likely. And, until we attack one problem, we're most likely not going to solve the others.

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: We provide legal services to low-income individuals. I work with kids who are in need of the special education services that Mike was talking about, trying to make sure that schools provide them with initial evaluations, provide them with IEPs. I also work with teenagers who

We want to work with districts as much as possible – not to just criticize, because we feel that's not a constructive approach, but to assist and to help pinpoint the specific policies and practices that are perhaps encouraging students to leave.

have been unlawfully excluded from school. So I see a lot of these students who we're talking about. And many times what happens is, by the time that I see the student, for instance, if they're seventeen and still in ninth grade, even if we believe they have a right to be in school, sometimes I can't convince the student to exercise that option.

So, I have found that my role solely as a lawyer is very limited. If I am really going to be able to assist my clients, I need to partner with all of the individuals that are here today, as well as the other individuals that we have in the subcommittee and who may not be on the subcommittee yet but, hopefully, we can form partnerships with.

BROTHER MICHAEL REIS: It is a racial issue. We've got to come to grips with that. Minority youth are really taking the heat on all this. There's very little advocacy. If you don't have two or three thousand dollars to put up for a lawyer, the school systems run over you. They know the law. That's what's upsetting about it.

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: Just to add to Brother Michael's point: We do want to focus on this collaborative approach. We want to work with districts as much as possible to get this information out there, to find out under what circumstances students are exiting the system – not to just criticize, because we feel that's not a constructive approach, but to assist and to help pinpoint the specific policies and practices that are perhaps encouraging students to leave. And, if we can make significant recommendations as to how those policies and practices can be modified in order to maximize our attention to this population, we think that's going to be a very effective strategy.

There are so many excellent people in the school system who have the same

concerns that we have, and we have set up dialogues with many of them around the issue. I think that oftentimes what happens is that we are each in our own individual profession or each in our own individual agency, on our own side of the table, and we never set up that dialogue that I think is essential to find out if we have these common beliefs and ideas and goals. We want a goal of 100 percent high school graduation here in Rhode Island. We want to make sure that every child is being given the opportunity to get at least a high school diploma.

The Role of Race and Ethnicity

This effort started with a colloquium on racial justice. To what extent is race a cause of this problem or associated with the problem?

BROTHER MICHAEL REIS: It's very heavy in our data. When you look at our data, who's being referred to us, you can see, in the urban areas, it's very clearly a racial issue.

MIKE CAPALBO: Most poor and disadvantaged families simply don't know how to navigate the educational system. Their only experience is negativity. It simply drives them underground, and they end up accepting the fact that their kids are not going to be successful in school and it becomes a real problem.

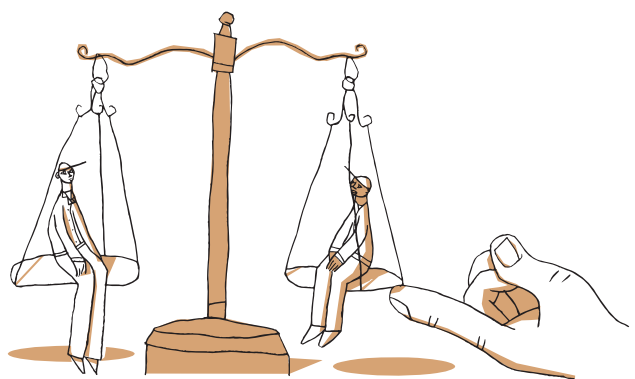
TONYA GLANTZ: There's also the issue of families for whom English isn't a primary language. I've seen it with friends and colleagues who are in education. They jump to the assumption that because parents aren't involved or aren't responding to something that's sent home, the parents don't care about their children's education. That further demoralizes their relationships with the students.

In fact, when you look at what's happening in Cranston, you have a bunch of families, families affected by poverty, many families of color, who have recognized the deficits in the Providence school system and have illegally snuck their children into the Cranston school system because they *do* value education.

There are so many ways, because of challenges around navigating systems, or just challenges being from a different culture, that I feel that these families and these kids end up getting taken advantage of. I don't think it's intentional on the part of the educator, but there's such a demoralization of professionals in these large systems whose needs aren't getting met, and it trickles down to the students and it trickles down to the families, and you have this cycle of people oppressing each other where no one can stand up and try to do the right thing because we're looking at families and children and issues through this very skewed lens.

Does this racial and class dimension make it more difficult to get a solution or get the public to pay attention to it and act on it?

BROTHER MICHAEL REIS: I think it does. I think people expect it of Providence. Unfortunately, they say, "Oh, it happens there." You're more likely, if you come to West Warwick or



other areas where there are White poor people, to react more quickly. I hate to say it, but I think that's the reality of the world we're living in.

Inequitable Access to Resources

MIKE CAPALBO: Access to resources within school departments also is inequitable, meaning families that have money have the ability to access additional services. Poor families don't. So they have to take whatever's available to them. That's one of the more important factors the safety nets were intended to address. Without them, these kids come with fewer skills, in many cases, and there aren't the resources there to improve those skills.

Working at Tides, I go out with trackers into the homes of some of these kids. And the poverty is striking. Just the lighting: when you walk into some of these homes at night, you couldn't possibly study by it. There's no structure in the household; there are dishes all over the place; there are clothes all over the place. How one could expect these kinds of kids to come in the next day ready to learn amazes me at times. And how unaware the schools are of some these problems is also amazing to me.



TONYA GLANTZ: Do you think that goes to the fragmentation? As systems that are interacting with each other, we really need to have more awareness, because we end up penalizing the child because of that fragmentation.

MIKE CAPALBO: Right. If I put additional pressure on the teacher to achieve test scores and rate his or her ability as a teacher based on the test scores, how long do you want to work with those less-functioning kids after a while?

TONYA GLANTZ: It's not just in the middle schools. People I know who are teaching kindergarten are prepping them for tests ahead of time. What message does that give to those kids, especially the ones who aren't going to perform? At the age of five, they're already getting the message: you aren't going to be good enough. You're not going to make it. We're setting kids up at a younger and younger age, despite the good intentions behind the standards.

MIKE CAPALBO: That's what I was talking about. If I have money, my kid goes to preschool. My kid gets all of this training before he enters kindergarten. By the time he enters kindergarten, he can pretty much do kindergarten work. If I'm poor, I cannot access a lot of those services, so my kid goes in behind the eight ball from the get-go.

And then you've got year after year after year of real or perceived failure. By the time you hit ninth grade, you just want out, because it's going to get more difficult, if you look at the standards and what you have to do to get a high school diploma. You want to escape from the system. That's tempting.

TONYA GLANTZ: You also have teachers in those schools, in Pawtucket and Providence, who struggle every day to go in and deliver a quality product

without paper, without textbooks, and they're being held to the same standards as schools in Barrington [an affluent suburban district]. It's a cycle. It's so vicious.

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: We do believe the teachers need more support. With pressure for high-stakes tests and standards, it's putting a great pressure on the teachers to provide almost a standardized education. And we know that not all students fit into that model, and then it's no surprise that we're losing 40 percent of our kids in Providence, because these are the kids who don't fit that standard education model. If we want teachers to be able to provide that individualized support and attention, to be able to be flexible to their students who are coming from the backgrounds we're discussing where there are different challenges present, then they need to have the support to do that. Those are the things that we need to look at and why we feel there's such a need to study this further, to be able to document the specific things that are happening that are encouraging these students to leave.

The Will to Change

BROTHER MICHAEL REIS: One of the problems is that the schools are never going to do it alone. There are all these other factors we're talking about: what's going on in the home, et cetera, et cetera. We have to start looking at it as all of our problem, and start coordinating resources. The schools will tell you, "Oh, we can solve the problem; just give us money." The reality of it is, they can't. What are they going to do, create a whole other system? There's a naiveté about this. The kids we're most concerned about are tremendously needy kids and we've got to break down barri-

ers. I think it's got to come from the governor on down. It's got to be mandated: You people are going to have to operate this way.

That's why we need data – so when people come at us and say, "No, we can do it, give us the money," we can say, "No, you can't." It's nice to say we're going to collaborate, but we all know that systems don't want to change. And I think we need to collect good data so that we can go forward with this and move on this issue to create a change. And, again, everybody will tell you what their mission is. You know what? We've got to say our mission is the kids and families, and everything else is secondary. We've got to refocus back and help these kids.

MONICA TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA: That's why we've got to make sure that there's the will to do it, and we've got to develop that will. We do need people to take leadership on the issue. We know that, around the country, around different issues or populations, the governor or mayor will have an office dedicated to particular groups or issues. In Rhode Island, we need something like that for the "MVPs" – the most vulnerable pupils. Because this is a group that gets ignored. They're not voting, and oftentimes their family members are not voting. We need to pick up the slack and we need to make sure that people in very high positions of power here in Rhode Island have this group on their agenda as a top priority. We don't want to let this group get neglected any longer.

The Role of National Organizations and the Federal Government in Promoting Equity and Excellence

Michael Holzman

Data on disparities in graduation rates and special education placements clearly show the inequities in American schooling for African American males. National organizations and the federal government have an important role to play in addressing these disparities.

Education is among the most local of concerns. This local nature is epitomized in much of the country by the neighborhood school and by imagery ranging from parents walking hand in hand with their children to the first day of kindergarten to Saturday night football games.

Yet, education in the United States today is also national. Virtually every local organization – teacher and administrator associations, parent groups concerned with various matters affecting their children, citizen groups – has a national counterpart. And the federal government has, increasingly, played a strong role in education. The role of national organizations and the federal government is vital in the promotion of equity and excellence, particularly for the hardest case: male African American students.

Government's Failed Commitment to Education

The role of government in promoting equity and excellence was not in question in the thought of the founders. John Adams inscribed this role as an imperative in the Massachusetts Constitution, where he wrote of government's responsibility for the "spreading of the

opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people," which is an eighteenth-century version of our phrase "excellence and equity." (Although, of course, the "different orders" in the eighteenth century did not include slaves or women.)

On the federal level, this role of government in education is embodied in the mission of the United States Department of Education itself, which, under the Department of Education Organization Act (Public Law 96-88 of October 1979), among other things, is to:

- strengthen the federal commitment to assuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual;
- supplement and complement the efforts of states, the local school systems and other instrumentalities of the states, the private sector, public and private nonprofit educational research institutions, community-based organizations, parents, and students to improve the quality of education.

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That is clear enough. The federal government is committed to assuring access to equal educational opportunity, and it has a mission to work with other governmental and nongovernmental entities to improve the quality of education.

The federal government has failed – as government at all levels has failed – in a peculiarly systematic way. The “opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people,” now vary with the wealth of those parts of the country and the wealth – and race – of the different orders of the people. This is now sufficiently familiar that it is taken as natural; everyone knows that family income and the educational level of parents, particularly mothers, determine the educational achievements of their children. And everyone *knows* that race has something to do with it. After all, most African American male students do not graduate from high school, do poorly on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, take fewer Advanced Placement examinations than their peers, and so forth. Family income, social status, and race are taken as a determinant of education outcomes. This is the reverse of what Adams envisioned.

Poverty, community values, and local, racial, and ethnic cultural variations are not the *reasons* for the failure of the federal government to accomplish its mission and meet the imperative laid down by John Adams; they are the *consequences* of that failure. To explain the failures of the education system by appealing to those variations themselves is to turn Adams’s arguments on their head and to disregard the plain meaning of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Unequal Access to Success for African American Boys

When thinking about the efficacy of public education, Dr. Rosa A. Smith (2002) of the Schott Foundation for Public Education has argued that the educational achievement of African American male students represents a “litmus test”; if efforts are made to improve education for this most vulnerable group, education for all other groups will necessarily also improve. It is, therefore, of interest to look at the current readings of that litmus test.

Consider graduation rates, one of the most important signs of health of an education system. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Dept. of Ed. IES NCES, n.d.) and state and local sources (Holzman, forthcoming), the four-year cohort graduation rate for African American male students, nationally, is below 45 percent, while that for White, non-Hispanic students is slightly above 70 percent. Yet the rates vary widely from state to state (see Figure 1).

State	Estimated Graduation Rate 2003/04 African American Male	Estimated Graduation Rate 2003/04 White Male	Gap
<i>States with Highest Percentages</i>			
New Jersey	70%	92%	22%
Rhode Island	66%	71%	5%
Massachusetts	61%	79%	18%
West Virginia	61%	71%	10%
Connecticut	59%	82%	23%
<i>States with Lowest Percentages</i>			
New York	38%	76%	38%
Indiana	38%	71%	33%
Wisconsin	38%	84%	47%
Nevada	32%	53%	20%
Florida	31%	54%	23%

Figure 1: State graduation rates, by race, in the five highest and five lowest states for African American males (U.S. Dept. of Ed. IES NCES, n.d.; Holzman, forthcoming).



An African American male student whose family moves from New York State to New Jersey or Rhode Island is enormously more likely to graduate from high school than one whose family does not do so. An African American male student whose family remains in Florida rather than moving to Massachusetts has half the chance of graduating from high school as one whose family does make the move north. On the other hand, a White, non-Hispanic male student whose family is in Wisconsin would have less of a chance of graduating from high school in all but one of the states best serving African American male students. Wisconsin, New York, and Indiana can graduate White, non-Hispanic male students with fair success and yet seem unable to do the same for African American, non-Hispanic male students.

It seems unlikely that the students themselves – or their families, culture, income, and home life – vary much between, say, New York and New Jersey. It is more likely that it is the educational systems themselves that vary. It is notable, in this regard, that the states with the worst educational outcomes for African American male students have the largest gaps between those outcomes and the outcomes for their White male students: the average gap for these states being *twice* that of those doing comparatively well in this regard. This may be an indication of what is wrong.

Turning to the district level, Figure 2 provides graduation rates for African American and White, non-Hispanic male students in the top and bottom five districts (enrolling at least 10,000 African American male students) from the point of view of the graduation rates of African American, non-Hispanic male students.

District	Estimated Graduation Rate 2003/04 African American Male	Estimated Graduation Rate 2003/04 White Male	Gap
<i>Districts with Highest Percentages</i>			
Baltimore County	78%	80%	2%
Montgomery County, MD	64%	83%	19%
Prince George's County, MD	61%	57%	-4%
Boston	60%	71%	11%
Cumberland County, NC	56%	63%	7%
<i>Districts with Lowest Percentages</i>			
New York City	26%	50%	24%
Chatham County, GA	25%	46%	20%
Cincinnati	25%	43%	19%
Pinellas County, FL	21%	42%	21%
Indianapolis	21%	22%	1%

Figure 2: District graduation rates, by race, in the five highest and five lowest districts for African American males (U.S. Dept. of Ed. IES NCES, n.d.; Holzman, forthcoming).

Here, again, simply the accident of residence is an overwhelming correlate of the opportunities for success in school that are available to African American male students. A family can increase the chances of their sons' graduating from high school three- or fourfold by moving from Indianapolis or New York City to Boston or one of the large Maryland districts. Cincinnati parents can double the opportunities for their African American sons by moving to Fayetteville, in Cumberland County, North Carolina. And if the better-performing districts are more affluent, that, too, points to problems in the education system: it is the goal of good practice to overcome such factors.

These results of Dr. Smith's litmus test thus indicate that, as everyone knows, there is something profoundly wrong with American public education. It also indicates that this is more evident in some places than in others – that the government's responsibility for "spreading of the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people" has not been adequately discharged.

Pressures to Maintain the Status Quo

A nation's public education system is, essentially, part of its political system. It is, perhaps, essential to that political system; it is the way by which political and social structures and roles are passed from one generation to another (Althusser 1971). The way systems of public education work – their structure – is enormously resistant to change. To cite one of the more famous examples, the English custom of sending the male children of wealthy parents to private

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boarding schools when those children were as young as seven was seen for nearly two centuries as essential to the structure of the Empire; as the saying goes, battles were won on the playing fields of Eton.

Britain's boarding schools and the public schools they fed (and the two ancient universities that received their product) were just part of the system. Other essentials, for example, were that female children did not have that experience and that, until remarkably recently, only 2 percent to 5 percent of Britain's children attended universities. The exclusion of the many was as essential to the structure of the system as the inclusion of the few. The result, of course, was a society that supported this system – a society in which a few

District	African American Male Enrollment	Number Classified as Mentally Retarded	Percentage Classified as Mentally Retarded
<i>Districts with Highest Percentages</i>			
Indianapolis	12,185	915	7.51%
Cleveland	25,185	1595	6.33%
Orange County, FL	22,355	1245	5.57%
Richmond, VA	11,475	585	5.10%
Birmingham	17,135	870	5.08%
St. Louis	17,010	850	5.00%
Cincinnati	14,995	725	4.83%
Richmond, GA	12,310	570	4.63%
Hillsborough County, FL	20,080	895	4.46%
Pinellas County, FL	10,645	470	4.42%
Caddo Parish, LA	13,635	565	4.14%
<i>Districts with Lowest Percentages</i>			
Oakland	11,315	170	1.50%
Virginia Beach, VA	11,135	160	1.44%
Clark County, NV	18,285	205	1.12%
East Baton Rouge Parish, LA	22,790	245	1.08%
Los Angeles	45,135	445	0.99%
Baltimore County	18,515	180	0.97%
Prince George's County, MD	52,975	475	0.90%
New York City	188,195	1,660	0.88%
San Diego	10,700	90	0.84%
Montgomery County, MD	14,800	120	0.81%

Figure 3: Districts with the highest and lowest percentages of African American males classified as mentally retarded, in districts with large African American enrollment (U.S. Dept. of Ed. OCR, n.d.).

thousand families owned much of what was worth owning and tens of millions lived on the brink of starvation – until the system was dismantled in the 1940s in one of the lesser known, but most thorough and successful revolutions of the last century (Clarke 2002).

To turn back to the beam in our own eye, the complacency with which we view a system in which the quality of education varies with the wealth of neighborhoods served by particular schools mirrors – and helps reproduce – a system in which wealth is increasingly concentrated and increasingly hereditary: exactly the system against which Mr. Adams and his colleagues had committed their “lives, fortunes and sacred honor.”

It has been noted that it is difficult to change public education in this country – noted, and sometimes wondered at. But systems of this type – pillars of society – are not kept passively in place by people who need only to be informed concerning their deficiencies in order for them to work toward change. They are actively supported and reinforced by government at all levels, by national and local organizations, and by influential individuals and groups, which resist change.

Disproportionate Classification as Mentally Retarded

Why are the results for these vulnerable students so poor, and why are there such wide variations among states and districts? The findings of follow-up studies concerning the High/Scope Perry Preschool study are illuminating in this regard (Holzman 2005). The Perry Preschool experiment operated from 1962 to 1967 in a poor, predominantly African American section of Ypsilanti, Michigan. Randomly assigned low-income African American children

The complacency with which we view a system in which the quality of education varies with the wealth of neighborhoods served by particular schools mirrors – and helps reproduce – a system in which wealth is increasingly concentrated and increasingly hereditary.

received either first-rate preschool instruction or no preschool at all. The theory was that changing part of the system – providing quality preschool to children who would not otherwise have access to it – would result in systemic change: more excellence and equity. Follow-up studies took place as the children reached ages 11, 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40.

The most recent study shows profound differences in long-term educational outcomes for African American men and women. Although the high school graduation rate for female participants in the program was remarkable, there was no significant difference in graduation rates between the males who went to preschool and those who did not. By this most basic indicator, the system did not change for male African Americans: excellence and equity were not found. Why? One important reason is that, while the girls went to mainstream classes and were promoted regularly from grade to grade, African American boys who had attended the preschool, despite testing as well as the girls, were more frequently retained in grade and assigned to special education programs. They were removed from the mainstream, their access and opportunities minimized.

The Perry students were not unusual in this regard. African American students, particularly male African American students, are most significantly overrepresented in those special education programs serving the mentally retarded (and least well-represented in those serving gifted and talented students). The mental retardation category of special education applies to students with IQs under the 70 to 75 range, which is defined as about 3 percent of the population. About two-thirds of that group are so severely handicapped that it would be inappropriate for them to be in public schools. About 1 percent of the nation's White, non-Hispanic public school children, according to the survey of the 2002–2003 school year by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (U.S. Dept. of Ed. OCR, n.d.), are classified as mentally retarded (slightly more boys than girls). But 2 percent of African American, non-Hispanic girls and 3 percent of African American male students are classified as mentally retarded: two and three times the rate for White students.

As with graduation rates, special education overclassification varies from place to place (see Figure 3). A handful of districts with large African American enrollments classify 1.5 percent or fewer

of these students as mentally retarded. These districts include New York City, Los Angeles, San Diego, Virginia Beach, and three districts in Maryland: Montgomery, Baltimore, and Prince George's counties. However, most other states and districts with large African American enrollments classify their African American male students as mentally retarded at much higher rates. Those with the highest percentages are Indianapolis (8 percent) and Cleveland (6 percent). As Mike Rose (1989) has made clear with characteristic eloquence, such labeling has the potential to be damaging. It can be particularly damaging in a society that increasingly values intelligence and its outward signs and historically has stigmatized African Americans, specifically African American men, as unfit for intellectual occupations.

The overclassification of African American male students as mentally retarded is not a random event. Teachers identify African American boys as possibly mentally retarded; school and district staff evaluate them following policies developed and approved by district administrators and boards of education. Variations in these classifications at the state level point to similar loci

of actions having these dire results at state administrative and policy levels.

Inappropriate mental retardation classifications are a particularly vivid and troubling example of a constellation of factors limiting educational opportunities for African American male students. Recent studies by Walter Gilliam (2005) at Yale University have shown that similar issues appear in preschool. NAEP has found that there are no states or large districts in which more than half of the African American students in grade 4 read at or above the basic level. The College Board tells us that African American participation in Advanced Placement testing is much lower than that of White, non-Hispanic, and Asian students. This is not *why*, it is *how* equity and excellence in American education are limited. It is a matter of policy and practice.

What National Organizations and the Federal Government Can Do

There is much variation around the country in all these measures. This is, in a way, good news. If the results of the education system with regard to the education of African American male students were everywhere and in every aspect dismal, it would be far more difficult to identify the composition of the mixture of factors leading to that result, far more difficult to approach solutions at the national government and organization level. The differences among states and districts in graduation rates and classification rates certainly reflect a variety of factors. However, we can make one first cut through the Gordian knot of educational reform: we know it is not the fault of the children. Nor is it the fault of their parents and communities. Solutions are most likely to be found on the same site as the problems.

National organizations could take the lead in applying lessons for promoting equity and excellence from other fields, such as industrial management, athletics, and science, to education.

The federal government and national organizations have a particularly important role to play in bringing about those solutions. For example, in the matter of overclassification of African American male students as mentally retarded, the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) collects the data. It would be consistent with the department's mission if OCR would systematically challenge states and districts that engage in such overclassification (and underclassification in gifted/talented programs) and pursue remedies. Such initiatives would be appropriately supported by national organizations of many types – from those advocating in the special education field, to civil rights organizations, to those concerned with the proper use of public funds.

Similarly, national organizations could take the lead in applying lessons for promoting equity and excellence from other fields, such as industrial management, athletics, and science, to education. The policies and management systems that need to be in place to ensure high-quality education for all students are well known. They are taught as a matter of routine at Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, and elsewhere. The question is why they are not universally applied. National organizations (and foundations) might well use the variations in excellence and equity among our schools to identify exemplary (“benchmark”) schools, districts, and states, then, having analyzed their practices, publicize, disseminate, and reproduce those that are best. Benchmarking for success from the point of view of those least likely to find success in our school districts is the most efficient lever for raising the whole system.



It is not difficult to find states that have policies that are bearing fruit – policies that if not best, are, at least, better. In the matter of appropriately classifying African American students for special education, Georgia, for example, has done much good work. Nor is it difficult to find districts like Baltimore County, which have implemented policies of the type needed to ensure high-quality education for all students, such as data-driven decision making, budgeting determined by needs, professional development, and a strong focus on closing achievement gaps. Individual schools can similarly be identified – not those led by unique, charismatic leaders, but those operating

in accordance with well-known policies that foster excellence and, for one reason or another, are not stymied by countervailing factors. The Education Trust, among other organizations, has attempted to do just that.

It is difficult to see – and to talk about – policies that tend to reinforce the status quo, to limit excellence and equity, as these policies are rarely cast in such terms. They range from the local financing of schools where there are wide local variations in taxation resources to efforts to reduce taxation as a good in itself to policies that minimize professional education for teachers that might equip them to keep boys in preschool rather than seek to have them removed and challenge students in the early primary grades to learn at higher levels, rather than consigning them to failure (or to special education). In a society such as ours, with a history of racism, policies that enforce the status quo are inherently racist; ultimately, policies that do not actively seek to implement equity along with excellence in education are also racist.

And if an end to racism is not a sufficient reason to change such policies and the structures they support, consider the economic reasons: the damage to our economic future caused by foreclosing the educational prospects of a significant segment of the population will be severe. Whatever the reason – ending racism or securing our economic future – we must act now, and national organizations and the federal government can lead the way.

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