

# Urban Education Reform: Recalibrating the Federal Role

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*Federal policies should address community engagement and equity in order to build “smart education systems” that improve outcomes for urban children and youths.*

**T**he brief economic boom of 1990s brought an infusion of hope and energy to urban communities. The well-being of children and families in urban America were buoyed by an expanding, though increasingly stratified, labor market, housing redevelopment, and the entrepreneurial spirit brought by a new immigrants from Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, and the remnants of the former Soviet Union. During the 1990s, federal and state policies also began to treat cities more like catalysts for social and economic development, as opposed to indigent kin. As a result, urban communities experienced a brief renaissance marked by declining rates of teenage pregnancy, infant mortality, crime, and violence and rising incomes and population growth.

Public policy during that period was marked by an alliance between the public, on the one hand, and the political, financial, and business establishments, on the other. Together, these groups pushed an agenda that empha-

sized the wisdom and effectiveness of the private sector while dismissing the benefits of government and the public sector. The pursuit of excellence was extolled over the pursuit of equity in every sector, including education. Moreover, individual (private) accomplishment was privileged over community (public), with the latter perceived as an impediment to innovation and growth.

The recent economic bust has effectively destroyed the public’s trust in the establishment and called into question these public policy assumptions. The nation has now experienced, if not completely learned, the harsh lessons of individual gain untethered from community well-being, as we witness home foreclosures, job losses, withered pensions, and an uncertain future that once seemed filled with promise, even if it was only attainable for a few.

The recent economic recession – for the poor, it’s a depression – threatens to slow the pace of improvement in central cities that were beginning to reestablish themselves as founts for economic, cultural, and community renewal, where families seeking opportunity and inspiration joined with others to transform their lives and to forge a new society (Annenberg Institute for

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School Reform 2001). As this recession has painfully revealed, the transformative power of urban life is tapped more deeply by some and remains beyond the grasp of far too many. High proportions of low-income African American and Latino youth in urban areas continue to have their progress impeded by high rates of incarceration, displacement created by gentrification, and the lost opportunity caused by being on the wrong side of the achievement gap, the new “track” demarcating the fate of privileged and disadvantaged communities. These forces weaken and obscure the pathways to success available for disadvantaged youth as they seek to become more productive and engaged members of society, a task made more daunting in urban school systems, whose halting progress in closing the achievement gap is threatened by the loss of tax revenue caused by the downturn.

### ***The Standards Movement: Reshaping the Federal Role***

*A Nation At Risk* engendered a significant shift in the federal role in education in a manner unseen since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. The *Brown* decision, while groundbreaking in significance for African Americans, followed a historical path of asserting federal involvement to address equity by eliminating legal barriers to access and/or by allocating resources to support specific groups. Traditionally, the federal government has left decisions about educational quality for all students, such as academic standards, assessment, curriculum and instruction, and school design, largely up to states and school districts (Ogletree 2005;

Fuhrman & Lazerson 2005). The *Brown* decision, after all, mandated integration with the expectation that greater access to schools would ensure greater quality. But the decision stopped well short of requiring the government to ensure that equity fostered quality, as the intervening years demonstrated so strikingly.

*A Nation At Risk* changed that dynamic. It inspired the standards movement, and the federal legislation it spawned (e.g., Goals 2000, the Improving America’s School Act, No Child Left Behind) used federal Title 1 funds and other resources as leverage explicitly to improve quality by encouraging states to adopt voluntary national standards; embed these standards in accountability systems; and intervene in failing schools so that all students would receive the supports they need to meet national goals and standards.

While the deadline for meeting these goals and standards has shifted from the year 2000 to NCLB’s 2014 deadline, the emphasis on all has



remained constant, while acceptance of an increased federal role has gained wider acceptance. The debate instead has turned to *how* the federal government should exert its influence, not *whether or not* it should. Moreover, with the recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the federal government has taken unprecedented steps to increase funding for states and districts as it reshapes its approach to how the funds should be used.

### ***Gaps in the National Agenda: Community Engagement and Equity***

ARRA's incentive grants focus on key levers for change – educator quality, data systems, innovation, technology, more rigorous core standards and assessments, and improvement of low-performing schools. Yet, this comprehensive technical agenda has two troubling oversights – a lack of attention to the need for community engagement, coupled with an implied, rather than explicit, emphasis on equity.

#### **Community Engagement**

Despite President Obama's background as a community organizer, the strategies outlined in ARRA proceed as though education reform occurs in a political,

social, and cultural vacuum, as if communities take up reforms based on clear and objective results alone. This belief that success sells itself represents what Paul Hill and his colleagues would call a “zone of wishful thinking” – an implied assumption that is usually held despite abundant evidence to the contrary (Hill, Campbell & Harvey 2000).

This belief that successful results compel widespread adoption has undermined the efficacy of too many research-based designs/strategies/programs and What Works clearinghouses to name here. Coburn's (2003) seminal article on scale emphasized the importance of building ownership both inside and outside the system as a key ingredient for taking reform to scale – a point underscored in Paul Hill and colleagues' case studies of districts whose reforms were weakened or undone by leadership instability and/or opposition from forces threatened by change (Hill, Campbell & Harvey 2000). If states and districts pursue the agenda outlined in ARRA but ignore the need to garner community ownership, they will find themselves vulnerable to resistance or



skepticism sparked by poor communication and a failure to obtain prior involvement. Predictably, this resistance often comes from groups that the reform is intended to help the most – communities whose students’ performance lies on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Their concerns, however, are often left out of early planning and decision-making tables where the agenda is *set*, as opposed to *announced*.

Undoubtedly, ARRA’s priorities were guided by research and informed by extensive meetings with elected officials, commissioners and superintendents, researchers, union leaders, the philanthropic community, and leaders of Washington-based think tanks and advocacy groups. And, given the constricted timeline for moving from planning to action, little effort was devoted to garnering knowledge and ownership beyond civic and political elites to involve those most dependent on urban systems for their children’s and community’s well-being: low-income families, African Americans, Latinos, and recent immigrants.

As a result, as usual, these critical constituencies will be asked to support reforms designed by “others” rather than participate in their development (Stone et al. 2001; Hirota and Jacobs 2003). The frustration, lack of knowledge, and distrust produced by this engagement gap positions poor parents and communities of color as an untapped and vulnerable resource that can be mobilized to oppose promising innovation based on poor political execution and unintended consequences overlooked by elites lacking in-depth knowledge and experience of the challenges and assets that exist in these communities.

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#### **Equity – Where Art Thou?**

In addition to diminishing political support and overlooking valuable assets, shortchanging the engagement of low-income families and communities of color in the reform of school systems their children attend, ARRA also repeats the reform movement’s mistake of pursuing solutions intended to work for all students. This approach, while admirable, obscures the fact that urban districts, in particular, need help in delineating and developing supports that work for particular groups of students that are present in large numbers – English language learners, students with disabilities, recent immigrants, over-age and under-credited students, and students challenged by early parenthood, childcare and work responsibilities, previous incarceration, violence,

health concerns, and other factors that contribute to the achievement gap and a lack of engagement.

While some of the Obama administration's agenda reflects an understanding of the particularly needs of urban communities – especially the “Promise Neighborhoods” initiative, modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone – the need for differentiated supports should be a priority rather than an afterthought in efforts to redefine standards, design new assessments, and turn around failing schools. Rather than lying on the periphery, equity as well as excellence should be a design principle that guides work both on what Richard Elmore calls the technical core of education – curriculum, instruction, and assessment – and on the supports students need to develop the social, cultural, and other forms of capital they need to become active participants in their own learning (Gordon & Bridgall 2005).

Unfortunately, the failure to address the both the engagement and equity gaps has been a recurring theme in recent accounts of reforms in districts such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans – communities whose districts are operating a mix or portfolio of schools, with some being operated and supported by the district (and/or state, in the case of New Orleans), and some operated by organizations with charters or agreements waiving some district policies and practices (Aspen Institute and Annenberg Institute 2006; Gold et al. 2007; Cowen Institute 2008). Grassroots and civic leaders in these communities, as well

as many educators in the schools, often lament the lack of attention paid to local values and traditions in the design of new schools and programs. They also express concerns that the new approaches replicate previous patterns of privilege due to a failure to consider basic issues such as transportation, access to information, and differentials in power, status, and fiscal resource that, if left unaddressed, reinforce old inequities.

Each of these reports underscores the importance of dealing with equity and community engagement as a top priority to ensure that system improvements or reinventions have the capacity to provide supports that can be differentiated – for example, more time for greater outreach to inform planning and decision making; targeted interventions for students with disabilities, English language learners, and over-age/under-credited students; supports for struggling, as well as highly effective educators; and curricula that embrace local aspirations as well as national ones. For instance, the absence of resources and strategies to support arts, culture, and community service are a prominent critique of existing reforms, a fault that ARRA seems to share rather than ameliorate.

### ***Equity, Excellence, and Community Engagement: Interdependent Factors***

The interdependence among equity, excellence, and community engagement is demonstrated in *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, an Annenberg Institute report summarizing the outcomes of organizing efforts in seven communities (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2008). The results of this seminal study offer promising signs that organizing fosters improved

student outcomes by increasing youth engagement and aspirations; building a climate of trust among students, parents, educators, and administrators; and informing district efforts to design, target, and distribute fiscal resources, new facilities, curriculum supports, data indicators, and professional development efforts, among other tools.

The Annenberg Institute's support for the Coalition for Educational Justice in New York, the Urban Youth Collaborative, and community efforts to analyze the efficacy of central office policy and practice further provides an expanding portfolio of examples of elite-grassroots partnerships that span the gaps between research, policy, and practice while strengthening reform by building political will.

In addition to building political will, broadening participation in research, planning, and decision making to include communities with students enrolled in urban school systems also corrects a flaw inherent in approaches that rely on the perspectives and values of elites. Too often, the elite view focuses almost exclusively on the need to redesign the nation's education system in order to prepare students for college and the workplace. Few would argue that these represent primary goals of our educational system, but throughout our nation's history communities have also argued and fought for schools that prepare students to:

- contribute to civic life;
- form and strengthen families;
- value and contribute to the arts;
- respect local culture and traditions while becoming part of the mainstream.

Policy-making and reform tables dominated by elites often fail to hear voices that emphasize these goals.



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Worse, as the policies generated by elites reach local communities that are more diverse, complex, and challenged than originally perceived, the gaps between policy and local capacity undermine the credibility and impact of national goals and strategies. For instance, NCLB's 2014 deadline for getting all students to meet standards in an era when urban schools have been chronically underfunded by the very states responsible for intervening in failing schools and districts presents a contradiction that might be clearer when viewing education from the bottom up than it is when looking and planning from the top down. Similarly, policies that exhort districts and schools to make annual improvements in literacy and math test scores

in cities while being silent about rising unemployment and economic stratification, increasing youth violence and homicide, and increasing proportions of new immigrants are tantamount to planting powerful ideas in ground that lacks essential nutrients.

While the Annenberg Institute's work over the past ten years demonstrates that urban school systems can and should do more to redesign schools and central office supports to advance learning and development and that there are numerous schools and school districts that beat the odds, many of the groups that inform our work ask why the odds must continue to be so great against low-income students and communities of color. If ARRA fails to help local education reformers and advocates – particularly those working in diverse and rapidly changing urban communities – develop partnerships that foster excellence while also addressing equity, the results produced by this unprecedented infusion of fiscal and intellectual resources will once again fall short of the goal.

In our view, community-centered education reform can provide the political, social, and moral capital required to counter forces that derail and delay the succession of reforms tried since *Brown v. Board of Education*. The existence of the standards movement has clarified one important aim for community engagement – that is, communities should act to ensure that all students and schools receive the supports needed to meet high academic standards. In addition to this central aim, we believe that effective community-centered education reform should be guided by the following tenets.

- The specific needs of students, schools, and families are best understood and addressed when the local context is treated as a potential resource for development rather than solely as a neutral or negative condition.
- Building capacity for incremental or radical reform requires, but goes beyond, securing additional funding for schools or gaining support for new school/district policies and practices; it also entails revitalizing communities so that families and entire neighborhoods can offer the supports children and youth need to achieve the full range of positive outcomes (e.g., academic, health, emotional, social, spiritual).
- Broad-based coalitions of “communities” are formed not just to increase participation in the work of education reform, but also to engender a productive ecology for school reform. Thus, the inclusion of underrepresented groups becomes a primary objective and not a secondary outcome.
- Enhancing the capacity of “communities” to accomplish their work involves an examination of fundamental issues of power, race, class, and diversity that have traditionally undermined the efficacy of urban school reforms and muted the voices of students and their families.
- Researchers, practitioners, and advocates must acknowledge the multidisciplinary nature of schooling and explore the intersections of teaching and learning, community engagement, youth development, economic revival, and college readiness.

- Efforts to link education reform and reinvention to community engagement and development school be guided by research and evidence-based practices.

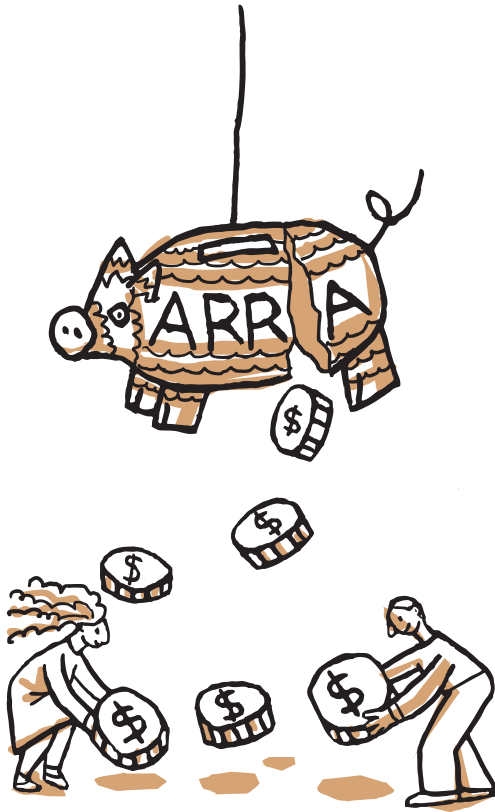
### ***A Smart Education System***

These principles require a significant shift in thinking about urban school districts and their relationship to the settings in and around them. A community-centered approach to reform underscores the need for school systems to develop “community” within schools, among schools, and in relationship to the neighborhoods and cities they rely on to support students’ learning and development not just fiscally, but social, physically, culturally, and morally as well. This approach represents a departure from strategies that treat families and neighborhoods narrowly as clients or simply as sources for homework support, but as part of what the Charles Stewart Mott

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Foundation's Time, Learning, and After School Task Force called a New Day for Learning (Mott Foundation 2007). In their view, this would require systems, families, and communities to:

- expand the definition of student success to incorporate twenty-first century competencies that emphasize creativity and problem-solving, among other skills and dispositions;
- use research-based knowledge to design and integrate new learning supports;
- provide educators with new opportunities for leadership and professional development.

To meet these aims, we believe the resources furnished by ARRA should be leveraged to convert districts into organizations that function in concert with municipal agencies, cultural organizations, businesses, higher-education institutions, community-based organizations, and advocacy groups, rather than in isolation from or in opposition to this broad network of potential partners and resources. ARRA could encourage state and local education agencies to become part of what we call a smart education system by emphasizing the need for state education agencies and local education agencies to:

- maintain multiple and substantial cross-sector partnerships that provide a broad range of supports to young people and their families;
- achieve a broad set of positive outcomes – including, but not limited to academic achievement – for students, families, and communities and gather evidence of progress;
- develop indicators, measures, and processes that foster shared accountability across partner organizations and groups;

- create a systematic approach for bringing the work to scale;
- develop strategies for managing power differentials, for example by creating meaningful roles for all stakeholders and shifting partner relations away from the standard grassroots–grassroots conventions.

While ARRA is supportive of New Day for Learning and smart education system principles, they tend to be implicit rather than explicit themes in the priorities outlined in ARRA, with the exception of the call for Promise Neighborhoods. However, Promise Neighborhoods are treated more like a demonstration project than an overarching strategy for rebuilding the nation’s education system in urban areas. Elevating the conceptual underpinnings of Promise Neighborhoods from a project to a major strategy would enhance the coherence of an array of initiatives and make their whole greater than the sum of their parts. To further this aim, the Department of Education itself must also examine how to integrate and align the fragmented bevy of programs, offices, and funding streams that reinforce the programmatic divides between equity and excellence, school and after-school, school and community, pre-K and K–12, and lower- and higher-adult education. Simply saying “pre-K to 16” doesn’t create a system that makes it happen without concerted effort across the layers of institutions and agencies that support the learning and development of our nation’s children and youth.

The recent economic crisis and the pain it has brought have created a brief unity of focus. As we consider new ways to transform the nation’s economic, housing, health, transportation, and fiscal infrastructure, we must not forget the need to create a new education infrastructure as well.

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