

Expanding Education Opportunities in Birmingham: A New Kind of Urban Community

Dennie Palmer Wolf

With a federal grant, community and education leaders in Birmingham, Alabama, have developed a bold plan to revitalize a twelve-block neighborhood in the city's center by expanding educational opportunities in the area.

Throughout the nation, advocates for children and youth are describing the guarantee of high-quality public education as a civil right. All children, regardless of who they are or where they live, deserve the kind of education that ensures they can live productive lives as individuals, family members, workers, and members of a community.

But, even as we have gained clarity about the absolute necessity of equitable schooling, we have come up against a second realization: it is unlikely that schools alone, powerful and important as they are, can provide the full range of opportunities to learn that all children need. To meet increasingly high standards, to understand how to gain and apply knowledge in the world outside the classroom, and to learn how to pursue an interest, talent, or gift, regardless of circumstances, children also need extended learning opportunities of the kinds that occur in after-school programs, clubs, teams, apprenticeships, and supervised free time.

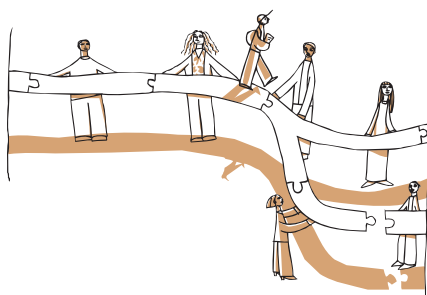
Rethinking Equitable Opportunity to Learn

When it is of high quality, extended learning can be a major source of the cultural and social capital that often

divides historically underserved children from their more privileged peers. But, like access to high-quality public schools, extended learning opportunities are often unevenly available to children.

Most cities have a substantial number of learning opportunities to offer: after-school programs, clubs, libraries, science centers, museums, Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, parks and recreation programs operating year-round, all-city band and orchestra, church youth groups, and more. But these supplementary programs, while technically available, can be hard to actually participate in – unless someone in a family has disposable time, connections, a car, and the money for fees and materials. If a child gets excited about science or music or athletics, linking him or her to opportunities to

Dennie Palmer Wolf is director of Opportunity and Accountability at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.



develop interests and skills demands know-how, grit, and resources. As one city parent put it, “Oh, there’s opportunities all right, just try getting to them.”

To understand how this system plays out, it is helpful to look at “diary days” (see opposite page) from two fourth-grade girls growing up in typical large city in the United States.¹ The girls live in the same neighborhood and both attend public school. Both are capable and energetic. Either could grow up to be a doctor, school board member, theater director, or mayor – depending on the opportunities she has.

To be sure, this snapshot of two girls’ lives does not tell us all we want to know about the resources available to them or how they are used. But even a cursory reading of the two diary days makes a strong case that these two girls – both potential parents, workers, jury members, and voters in their community – are growing up with very different opportunities. The two girls’ experiences differ in:

- the range of adults who know and can support them;
- the frequency of their interactions with those adults;

- the ratio of investment to instrumental activities (i.e., ratio of lessons, clubs, and practices to meal preparation, baby-sitting, etc.); and
- the time spent in the roles of agent versus more passive roles of witness or consumer.

These differences are far from trivial. They occur in precisely those areas we know to be critical to youth development: respect for one’s own identity and agency; the ability to form relationships; and the courage to take constructive risks (e.g., seek new opportunities outside an established community, attempt crossing the barriers of race and class).

It is easy to imagine a skeptic, or a strong proponent of a free-market or “ownership” society, rejecting the proposition that there is any kind of broad public responsibility to equalize children’s extended learning, much less out-of-school paths for their interests and talents. In the market view, such paths are up to individual families. Those who have the capital are entitled to spend it as they will. Those who lack that capital should be willing to do the work of piecing together the necessary connections and scholarships, put in the hours of travel, and save up for the fees.

But there is another perspective. If cities want to address their increasing bifurcation along lines of race and class; if cities want citizens disposed to vote, volunteer, and “give back”; and if cities want diverse knowledge workers who understand what needs to be improved in schools, social systems, parks, or products; then an education system, composed of strong public schools and equally strong and available extended learning, is the investment to make. As one city planner remarked, “Young people are twenty percent of our population, one hundred percent of our future.”

¹ The development and evolution of this diary day methodology as a way of examining students’ opportunities to learn has been funded through a range of projects focused on in- and out-of-school learning. The funding has come from the Packard Foundation, for its School Arts Program; the Ford Foundation; and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to Dallas ArtsPartners.

To create these diaries, an interviewer worked with an individual child as that child narrated her activities from the previous day. The students dictated the information. They also coded the value of the experience for them (1 – none, 2 – necessary or important, 3 – helps me to become the adult I want to be), following a discussion of the categories with the interviewer.

One-Day Diary, Student 1				
Time	Value to Me	Setting	Activity	Comment
7 am	1	Home	Get up, dress, eat	Have to do
8	1	Bus	Look out the window	
8:30	1	School	Reading class	Practice with questions
10	3	Outside	Recess	Four-square with my friends, played good
11	1	Math	Doing problems	Hard, didn't understand
12 pm	3	Lunch	Outside	With my friends
12:30	1	Social Studies	Doing questions in the book	About Indians
2	1	Tutoring	Reading practice and questions	
3	1	Bus		
3:30	1	Home	Take care of my brother, watching his baby TV programs	Boring
5	2	Home	Watching my programs	He was bothering me
6	1	Home	Help with dinner	Setting, washing
7	1	Home	TV	My sister's programs
8	1	Home	Do some homework reading	OK
9	1	Home	Go to bed	Sleep

One-Day Diary, Student 2				
Time	Value to Me	Setting	Activity	Comment
7 am	2	Home	Breakfast, watch the news with my mom	
8	3	Bus	R. and me work on our choir songs	We learned the words
8:30	3	School	Reading	We work on our interviews of somebody with courage; read Jesse Owens story.
10	3	Recess	Stay in to work on courage	R stays in to do hers too
10:30	3	Math	Measuring problem of the week	How to measure how much water in jar
12 pm	2	Outside	Lunch	OK
12:30	2	School	Science	Reading about rocks
2	3	School	Free Reading	More Jesse Owens
3	2	Bus	Tired	
3:30	3	Community center	Choir	With R, it was good because we know all the words
5	3		My mom's choir	Stay to listen
6	2	Home	Dinner	Eat and help
7	3/2	Library	Choose more courage books Do homework	Library person helped
8:30	2	Walk home		
9	3	Bed	Read new books some	

Birmingham: A Potential Site for Building an Education System

In Birmingham, Alabama, a story is unfolding that illustrates both the importance – and the complexity – of building an educational system that embraces both in-school and extended learning.

New housing is going up only blocks from the main library, the downtown Y, the art museum, and the courthouse. It consists of low-rise townhouses linked by shaded “green” streets reserved for pedestrians. At one side rises historic Philips High School with its gracious entryway, theater, and reading room. Just across the street is the Y’s new citywide youth center.

This is the site of Park Place, a twelve-block stand of mixed-income housing squarely in the city’s historic and cultural district. The effort is widely acknowledged to be a major investment of private and public dollars in the possibility of mixed-race, mixed-income neighborhoods in a city where this has yet to be achieved.

This new community could also be the city’s first instance of what Hal Smith (see the article “Using Community Assets to Build an ‘Education System’” on pages 5–11) has called “an education system”: a community-based web of learning opportunities for children and families that focuses its activity and resources squarely on the development of the human capital of all of its residents. This includes the well-being and curiosity of infants and preschool children, the academic achievement of its students, the job skills of its young adults, and the cultivation and sharing of its elders’ wisdom and history.

Energized by a \$35-million grant from the federal Hope VI program to rebuild distressed public housing in the downtown area, a local real estate developer, a cluster of cultural and civic organizations, and presidents of the relevant neighborhood councils began to discuss ways to support and enrich the public schools that would serve the new housing and its integration into surrounding neighborhoods. Participants in these discussions also included the superintendent of Birmingham City Schools, his staff, representatives of the School of Education at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and other Birmingham educators.

In the fall of 2002, staff of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform joined this group to support their process of planning not only a school, but also a larger network of learning opportunities for children, youth, and families. Throughout the 2003–2004 school year, this coalition of individuals and organizations met to envision a blueprint for their collective efforts.

The result is the Birmingham Learning Initiative – a plan to create a broader education system, incorporat-

The Learning Initiative is envisioned as a public-private partnership in which both streams of funding create a new kind of community. In this community, education is the engine.

ing school-based and extended learning opportunities for the children and families in the neighborhoods around Park Place.

Like the housing at Park Place, the Learning Initiative is envisioned as a public-private partnership in which both streams of funding create a new kind of urban mixed-race, mixed-income community capable of generating and supporting equitable living, working, and learning opportunities. In this community, education is the engine.

Major elements in the envisioned education system include:

- an early day-care facility built and endowed by a local foundation, with care for newborns to three-year-olds and supports for families;
- a connected set of small public schools housed in the former Philips High School, including an early-learning center for children aged three to five, a small elementary school, and a middle school designed to serve equal numbers of students with and without disabilities;
- a pre-K–8 curriculum enriched by the staff, methods, and content of a network of participating cultural institutions, including the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Jazz Hall of Fame, and the Civil Rights Institute;
- family learning programs that occur in each of these institutions;
- community schools programs offering extended learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults, operating 7 am to 7 pm six days a week;
- professional development for educators, from principals through paraprofessionals, provided by area universities;
- community-based skills and job training for youth (as tutors, mentors, apprentices, etc.);
- family support services (including degree programs for adults, finance



and educational planning, and job training);

- the use of the auditorium and library in Philips High School as venues for community meetings and cultural events;
- creation of a model to be duplicated in other areas of the city.

The goal is that, by 2008, the children and youth of Park Place and the surrounding neighborhoods will be living in an educational system where both their schools and their extended learning opportunities guarantee they will have the critical and creative skills to become contributing members of their immediate and broader communities.

An Urgent and Fragile Vision

Through an initial planning process, the architects of the Learning Initiative have come a long way in thinking through the kinds of strategies that will be necessary for realizing its vision. They have also articulated some of the most difficult issues, outlined in this section, in taking such a plan from blueprint to reality.



Facing, not erasing, history

Park Place is bringing new residences, pedestrian streets, and reconfigured families to what was once a block of low-income units. But this is new construction on top of old history – history too long and too discriminatory to be paved over. It is history that surfaces in every decision.

Many people have searing personal memories of the costs of “separate, but equal.” The wide steps of Philips High School, the handsome building that flanks one edge of Park Place, were the site of violent attempts to keep Black students from integrating what had long been the city’s premier White high school. The community and schools at Park Place could be a starting point for a different chapter in that history.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the discussion for the attendance zone for the schools to be housed in Philips. Some voices in the planning process urge that the schools should be open to any family that lives or works in downtown Birmingham, arguing that this is the only strategy that will guarantee integration. Other voices argue that integration is less important than quality for neighborhood children. They argue that the schools must serve the immediate and adjacent neighborhoods well, preparing students for entry to high school, including being able to enter selective high schools and compete for scholarships to area independent schools. Looming large in the debate is the fact that the institutions created by Black residents during the Jim Crow era no longer exist.

Any plan that concentrates resources in a single neighborhood raises deeply rooted concerns about historic and current inequalities. Board of Education members want guarantees that Park Place and its schools won’t

create a one-neighborhood enclave with special privileges and services that will never be available to children and families throughout the city.² Long-standing residents of the North Side communities, for their part, want to know whether their neighborhood, long ignored by downtown interests, and their children, will benefit from the plan, or whether the initiative is simply designed to attract two-income middle-class families to a renovated downtown.

The initiative offers Birmingham a chance to face its history directly. Are the city's leaders and residents willing to do so? Will the entryway at Philips be redesigned to tell the story of the struggle for equal education? Will it feature the personal histories of North Side families? Will the new schools teach the Civil Rights Institute's curriculum on human rights? Will middle school students, mentored by high school students and community members, become actively involved in researching how their education and opportunities measure up?

Balancing innovation and equity

The designs for the schools and programs proposed in Birmingham build on research demonstrating the effects on student outcomes of early education, challenging and enriched curriculum, and extended learning. More specifically, cultural partners, Annenberg Institute planners, and educators from other communities like New York and Chattanooga have encouraged Birmingham to invest in an enriched curriculum that includes history, art, and music; learning outside the classroom; and community-based projects where students apply their learning.

² It is important to note that Alabama has no legislation allowing for charter schools.

This is new construction on top of old history – history too long and too discriminatory to be paved over. It is history that surfaces in every decision.

But none of that research was conducted in Birmingham or in Alabama. Who is to say that the approach will work for the children of Park Place and the nearby neighborhoods? In light of the mounting accountability pressures of No Child Left Behind and the numbers of Birmingham schools struggling to make adequate yearly progress, realists are right to ask whether the schools ought to feature a clear focus on reading and mathematics and laser-like attention to the basic skills featured on standardized tests, rather than the broader program the planners envision. After all, it is the children, the schools, and, ultimately, the status of the Birmingham system, not outsiders, who will feel any consequences from state and federal mandates.

The best way to address this issue is through the use of data. Data that follow the children and their siblings and families, looking at a wide range of indicators (health, attendance, grades, scores, the use of outside activities, engagement with school, investment in learning outside of class, etc.), need to

There is an urgent need to plan to avoid these inequitable outcomes with the same level of intent and investment that goes into parking and plumbing.

be discussed regularly with families and with providers. Midcourse corrections to improve outcomes for children have to be at the center of those discussions.

Designing engines, not amenities

Residents returning to or entering Park Place and their North Side neighborhoods include large numbers of African American families, including some who have been able to build comfortable lives and others who have not had the educational and employment opportunities they deserve. While holding the highest expectations for their children and grandchildren, many residents are very clear that they want schools that can, as one grandmother put it, “yield something you can count on, given that college isn’t going to be for everybody.” They want the initiative to serve as an engine for equitable opportunity for all.

Many of these residents are less convinced that the amenities planned for Park Place – a parking structure, a landscaped park, pedestrian streets and the like – will lead to equitable outcomes. They are fearful that young, middle-class families will come for the downtown conveniences and the early

day care and then leave once their children reach school age. They worry that the surface diversity might actually mask segregation within schools and classrooms.

There is an urgent need to plan to avoid these outcomes with the same level of intent and investment that goes into parking and plumbing. In short, the community has to be “wired” for equity. Although there are ideas on the table, Birmingham could learn from the experience in other cities, such as Chicago, that have faced similar dilemmas.

Creating civic support

Park Place is a HOPE VI project, funded by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and supported by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Those funds provide one-time dollars for the replacement of distressed, low-income public housing with mixed-income units.

But there are no dollars for the ongoing programs, staff, or materials of the kind required by the dual-focus education system that is envisioned for the families and children in Birmingham’s North Side neighborhoods. At the same time, Alabama’s tax code dramatically underfunds public education; even existing community-school programs in Birmingham are being cut back. Unless the Birmingham Learning Initiative can build substantial and ongoing public and private support, the program proposed for Park Place and the surrounding neighborhoods faces the same threat as landscaping in public sites in times of budget cuts – a beautiful plan, an initial burst of color, then dry grass.

The challenges are clear. While there could be an initial wave of support from local and regional foundations, possibly even from individual local donors, such funds do not consti-

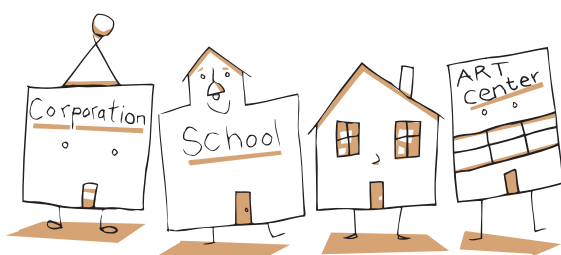
tute an ongoing stream of support. Institutions like the art museum, the university, the McWane Science Center, or the Civil Rights Institute can make an initial donation of expertise, but their own budgets could not sustain year after year of staff time. If the dual school day and extended learning programs are to carry all the attending children to successful entrance into high school, the programs will have to be of high quality, improve continuously, and stay consistently coordinated. This is not the work of volunteers; it demands skilled staff over and above what schools can usually provide.

What would convince the mayor and his successors to step forward with public funds? What would convince county commissioners that an investment could spark educational improvement throughout the region? Without these kinds of commitments, it is hard to imagine the proposed education system thriving and enduring.

Birmingham Is Not Alone

In the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, it was easy to think of Birmingham as an outlier – and outcast – city where it took violent struggles to desegregate public schools. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth tried to escort his own children through the doors at Philips High School, only to be beaten back. Then it turned out that Birmingham was not unique. Boston, with its century of abolitionist and Underground Railway history, also erupted over busing plans designed to integrate public schools.

A quarter of a century later, keenly aware of their history, Birmingham residents are thinking through strategies that could equalize additional opportunities to learn – this time, the kind of learning that occurs after school, on weekends, and in the summer. Again,



A quarter of a century later, keenly aware of their history, Birmingham residents are thinking through strategies that could equalize additional opportunities to learn.

Birmingham is not alone. In cities across the country, on any given afternoon, some girls wait out the hours while others go on learning, whether it is in choir or libraries or lessons. The Learning Initiative is an effort to name and to change these differences in children's opportunities. Translating the Initiative from a blueprint to lived fact will be charged, hard, and imperfect, but absolutely crucial in Birmingham – and everywhere else.