

# Through Many Voices, an Idea Is Born

Robert Rothman

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When the Annenberg Institute for School Reform agreed in 2002 to create a quarterly publication to address issues in urban education, the goal was to bring to bear the Institute's strengths as a convener to inform and help shape the national dialogue. The Institute had held a number of conferences and meetings that brought together disparate voices – many of whom often disagreed – with the hope that a discussion on neutral ground could lead to common ground. Through the magazine, we hoped to do the same in print and on the Web.

*Voices in Urban Education* has succeeded in bringing together disparate voices. Authors have included students, parents, education practitioners, community leaders, researchers, district and state officials, mayors, and even a top official from Her Majesty's government in England. Many of these voices are seldom heard in national education policy discussions.

As we intended, the voices did not always agree. Community leaders, for example, sometimes spoke of their frustrations with district officials who appeared resistant to community involvement; district officials, for their part, spoke of community groups' narrow interests. Issues of race and class often reared their heads.

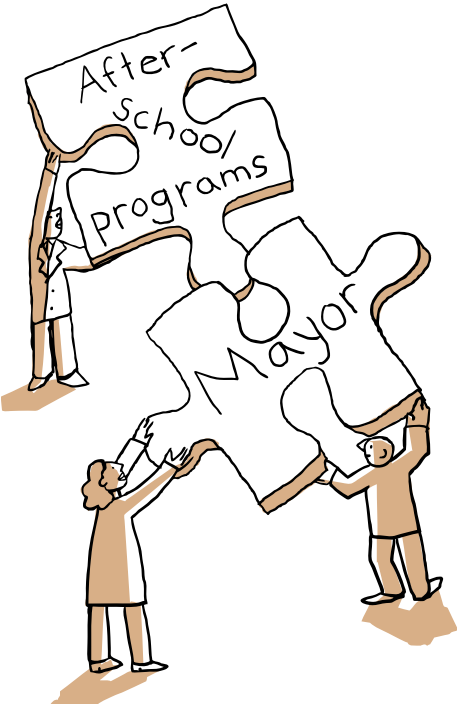
Yet, as we hoped, these disagreements also created opportunities for common ground. One instance comes to mind. In an issue on community engagement, Norm Fruchter and Richard Gray (2006) of the Community Involvement Program (then at New York University, now a part of the Annenberg Institute) wrote of the role of community groups in organizing

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parents and community members. In the same issue, Donald McAdams (2006), a former school board member from Houston and the director of the Center for Reform of School Systems, wrote that school boards should take the lead. Yet, in an interview for the *VUE* Web site, Fruchter and McAdams saw virtually eye to eye. What appeared to be a conflict paled in comparison with the common ground.

*VUE* has also had some success in meeting the Institute’s goal of informing the national dialogue. Although our data on its impact are limited, we know that we have received numerous requests for copies from district and community leaders holding meetings, professors leading classes, and, we’re proud to say, from the Obama Administration’s transition team developing policies for the new President. *VUE* articles have been cited in other journals and publications, and the Web page is the most-visited section of the Annenberg Institute’s site.

These accomplishments have been enormously gratifying. Yet *VUE* has also produced another accomplishment that the Institute might not have anticipated when we launched the publication: the development of an idea for a new kind of education



system. This idea, which the Institute calls a “smart education system,” is now the focus of its work. This issue of *VUE* examines the notion through a range of articles that represent highlights from the first twenty-five issues.

Simply put, a smart education system links a high-functioning school district with a web of supports for children and families that collectively develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students’ lives – at school, at home, and in the community. Such systems actively engage youths and community members in the development and implementation of services, to ensure that they meet community needs. Community members provide pressure and support; districts and service providers are accountable to the community for improving a broad range of outcomes for children and youth.

This idea has gained prominence in the education reform debate nationally. Policy-makers from across the political spectrum have increasingly recognized the importance of linking improved schooling with supports for learning and development outside of schools. Other organizations, such as the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education agenda and the Time, Learning, and Afterschool Task Force, a panel convened by the Mott Foundation, have outlined similar ideas.

This issue of *VUE* describes some of the components of a smart education system, from a range of perspectives.

- Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom, and Lori Chajet, in the first issue, draw on youth voices to challenge some of the assumptions in education reform policy. Engaged and organized students are key to smart systems, because they bring perspectives that adults seldom see. According to students, the authors found, the physical and instructional conditions in schools make it impossible to achieve the ambitious goal of ensuring that all students learn to high levels. At a time when districts, states, and the federal government were

seeking to hold schools accountable for student results, the students made clear that governments need to be accountable for providing the means for students to succeed. (*Rethinking Accountability*, *VUE* 1, Spring 2003)

- Glynda Hull and Jessica Zacher, in an issue on adolescent literacy – one of the best-selling issues – broaden the definition of literacy to encompass higher-level abilities that schools seldom address, and they suggest that after-school programs might be ideal settings for helping develop such abilities. By analyzing a digital poem written by a fifteen-year-old student from Oakland, Asia Washington, Hull and Zacher show how the student’s after-school program helped her develop the digital literacy skills that are increasingly vital in what the authors call the “visual age.” The *VUE* Web site includes Asia’s digital poem. (*Adolescent Literacy*, *VUE* 3, Winter/Spring 2004)
- Michael Grady, Ellen Foley, and Frank Barnes, in an issue celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, consider the role of districts in promoting the twin goals of equity and excellence. Although smart education systems take into account students’ learning outside of school, schools remain central to the vision. And “smart districts” are essential to ensure that all students have the opportunities and resources they need to succeed. The authors suggest that strengthening the effectiveness of school districts can help fulfill the promise of *Brown v. Board*. This issue of *VUE* was cited as one of the top reports of the year by the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy. (*Beyond Brown v. Board*, *VUE* 4, Summer 2004)
- Bill Purcell highlights the critical role of mayors in smart systems. Much of the writing about mayoral involvement in education focuses on mayoral control of school systems. But Purcell, then the mayor of Nashville, notes that mayors who do

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Go to [www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/spring04/video.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/spring04/video.html) to watch Asia’s video.

not control schools can wield a great deal of influence by mobilizing parents and community members. In Nashville, Purcell's efforts to organize "first day" celebrations and make the system more transparent helped strengthen public support for the schools – and led to a substantial increase in funding. (*Engaging Communities*, VUE 13, Fall 2006)

- Joanna Brown highlights the role of community organizing in supporting educational improvement. In the case of Chicago, the community organizing group not only pressed for better schools, but also developed a unique resource by preparing parents to be teachers. This article highlights a major tenet of smart education systems: that community organizations and agencies bring to bear assets that can enhance educational opportunities for children and youth. And as a six-year study conducted by Annenberg Institute researchers later found, community organizing yields real improvement in educational outcomes. (*Skills for Smart Systems*, VUE 17, Fall 2007)
- Warren Simmons urges federal policy-makers to consider equity and community engagement to ensure that system improvements have the capacity to deliver supports that can meet the needs of *all* students. He outlines the principles of smart education systems and suggests that policies that support these principles will result in improved outcomes for all children and youth. (*The Evolving Federal Role*, VUE 24, Summer 2009)

While all of these elements are critical, the goal is to create a smart education *system* – a coherent organization that ensures that all young people have access to the services and supports they need. So far, this goal has remained elusive – although Great

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For more information about this study, conducted by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister, and to download reports from the 2009 case study series *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, which present the findings, go to <[www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/OrganizedCommunities.php](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/OrganizedCommunities.php)>.

Britain, highlighted in *VUE* 21, an issue not represented here, comes close with its Every Child Matters agenda (Rothman 2008). The interest in the concept suggests that communities on this side of the Atlantic might approach that goal in the next few years, and future issues of *VUE* will highlight them.

The success of *VUE* has been personally and professionally gratifying to me. As I leave the editorship, I want to thank the Annenberg Institute for its strong and unwavering support for the publication; the communications staff, designers, and illustrator for their tireless work in producing consistently high-quality publications and Web sites; the authors, for their professionalism and willingness to add their voices to the conversation; and the readers who make the conversation happen. I look forward to joining your ranks.

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