

The Promise *of* Urban Schools

prepared by the Senior Fellows in Urban Education



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

In 1998, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform invited a small group of committed scholars and successful urban educators to think creatively together about the unresolved issues facing our nation's urban schools. These eight Senior Fellows in Urban Education shared an understanding of education as a complex, nested enterprise whose reform entails work across a variety of environments and academic disciplines.

Under the Institute's auspices, the Senior Fellows collaborated on a two-year, self-defined program of research and development. After considering the ways in which social, political, economic, and cultural systems interact to influence schooling in urban settings, the group agreed upon a joint effort to showcase aspects of urban education that can serve as models of educational excellence for schools throughout the United States. *The Promise of Urban Schools* outlines the framework for the Senior Fellows' individual and collective work.

The eight Senior Fellows in Urban Education, drawn from both the education and academic worlds, were selected for their demonstrated commitment to improving the academic performance of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Since the formal conclusion of the program at the end of 2000, the Fellows have continued their individual research or practice agendas to promote the promise of urban schools.

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The Promise *of* Urban Schools

Grim pictures of life in urban schools have had a profound impact on shaping the national discourse around urban school reform. Rarely has the conversation surrounding urban schools been framed in terms of the benefits they can and should offer. Yet, urban schools share important elements and concerns with all schools: issues of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, administration, and parent and community involvement are universal. How these issues are addressed in the urban school context, however, presents unique and important challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning that are not present in suburban and rural school contexts. To understand their importance, it is necessary to understand the role of urban-ness in shaping a civil society.

Cities are civilizing forces. The word *urbane*, from the word *urban*, refers to sophistication, refinement, and elegance. Cities bring together vital aspects of social, cultural, aesthetic, political, and economic activity. Can we imagine the United States without its great cities? Where would we see first-rate performances of plays and concerts? Where would we observe great works of art? Where would our children go to visit zoos, aquariums, and museums? Where would we access rare and large collections of books and other library materials? The rich mix of races and ethnicities, languages and cultures, makes cities also centers of intellectual and artistic energy and creativity as well as catalysts of

social change. Urban schools are an integral part of this richness and promise, and they cannot be left to languish.

What Is Education For?

Throughout the history of education in the United States, there has been tension between a narrow notion of school as preparation for work and a broader conception of public education as a vehicle for creating a more democratic and just society. This tension has played out in the educational struggles of many social groups as well as in large historical shifts in education. For example, it is reflected in the long history of African Americans' struggle for education for liberation versus schooling geared to second-class status; it is reflected in Native American conceptions of education for community development versus schooling that promotes deculturalization by uprooting children from their community. And in the early twentieth century, it was reflected in debates that raged between reformers who saw mass public schooling as a vehicle for socializing and assimilating waves of immigrants into the industrial work force and those who saw education as a means of extending democracy.

This same tension exists today. The U.S. Department of Labor SCANS report calls for schools to prepare students for participation in the global, postindustrial economy. But for many urban students who are low-income and children of color,

this means preparation for low-paid jobs in the service sector, which will leave them with little ability to control the course of their lives in the ways that are the promise of democracy. A broader vision of public schools posits that they should prepare all students to actively participate in making and acting upon the decisions that affect their lives and the life of their community and the broader society.

Looking Anew at Urban Schooling

The intent of the Annenberg Senior Fellows program has been to develop greater understanding of the ways high-quality urban education enriches all aspects of public life and serves as a powerful expression of democracy. Building on and informing their individual work in different types and levels of urban schools, the Fellows have created a set of vantage points through which they illuminate, explicate, and inform the salient issues and dialogues surrounding urban educational reform.

Believing that new language and new multifocal lenses are needed to describe, critique, and facilitate the promise of urban schools, the Senior Fellows developed five analytical lenses to guide their work. These five lenses (coded AEIOU) are focused on the opportunities and challenges of developing human Agency to bring about Equity and social justice through effective and culturally sensitive links between Instruction and curriculum and their actual as well as potential Outcomes and impacts, with a particular emphasis on Urban conditions and contexts.

Agency

The Senior Fellows believe that a central purpose of schools in a democratic society is to prepare all students to be active participants in public life. For democracy to be invigorated, young people must have the intellectual tools and the sense of responsibility and confidence that can help them, together with others, shape a more just and equitable future. At the core of this vision of schools is the personal and collective agency of students and adults in the school and its community.

Agency is the power to understand, act on, and effect positive change in one's personal and social contexts. Agency also embodies a sense of hope and possibility (grounded in an understanding of social reality) that one can make a difference in one's own life, family, school, and local community and in the broader national and global community.

The Power of Students and Adults

At the core of student agency is the development of a positive cultural and social identity and an understanding of one's own history and relationship to the broader society. Successful urban educators find ways to connect construction of knowledge in the classroom with the language, music, poetry, and other cultural forms that students use to express their lives. These educators also ground the curriculum in intellectual, political, and artistic contributions of their students' racial, ethnic, and religious communities. Such empowering experiences are in sharp contrast to the deep alienation that many urban students feel when confronted with a curriculum that is unrelated to their lives and

which diminishes and distorts their history, language, and culture, rendering them invisible or marginal.

Agency also implies the ability of both teachers and students to examine knowledge critically and think independently. This stands in sharp contrast to the notion of student as customer or consumer: for education to be empowering, students must come to see themselves as *producers* of knowledge. Questioning texts and received “truths,” testing ideas against one’s own experience, considering more than one standpoint – these are necessary intellectual tools for students to develop their own perspectives. This requires educators to look at knowledge critically themselves and to create strategies for learning so that knowledge becomes something students own.

Students also need experiences in using knowledge purposefully to effect change in real-world situations, as when a mathematics educator of an urban African American high school class enabled students to use mathematics to analyze zoning patterns in their city and then propose changes to reduce the disproportionate proliferation of liquor stores in their neighborhood.

Agency grows out of these kinds of experiences in acting with others to influence the contexts in which they live. For students, this begins with opportunities to participate in, and contribute to, the democratic life of their schools. Schools can be places in which all students are encouraged to voice their concerns. There should be structured opportunities for all students to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. Fundamentally, a democratic school culture presupposes respect for students, as well as their families, and it provides appropriate opportunities for students to exert independence and self-regulation.

Unfortunately, in too many urban schools, especially those serving low-income students and students of color, control and punishment are the priority. Students’ lives are dominated by hall passes, a profusion of rules and restrictions, searches, lock-downs, and lack of respect. Even older youth, many of whom shoulder adult responsibilities outside school, have little voice or opportunity for self-direction. This dehumanizing school culture is clearly disabling rather than enabling. It is paradoxical that while many urban schools are requiring students to be more active in their communities through community service, the culture of their schools teaches them that they are powerless and that their participation is not valued.

Change Agents

For students to demonstrate empowered behaviors, teachers and parents must act as change agents in schools. Teachers demonstrate agency when they take responsibility for the learning of every child and act as advocates for children against the pessimism that surrounds discussions of urban education. While educators should be held accountable by the communities they serve, for educators to work in the interest of children they also need the authority, in collaboration with families, to adapt curriculum and instruction to students’ learning needs, cultural identities, and strengths. Unfortunately, teacher initiative and decision making is undermined by the increased regulation of teachers’ work in urban school systems, contributing to a disabling climate of despair.

Unions, administrators, and other policy makers cannot be the sole arbiters of what teachers think and do. To transform schools into spaces of meaningful adult and student participation, teachers need to be actively involved in debates and actions in their schools and cities about the direction and

purpose of urban education. Parent participation is equally critical. Parents embody agency when they act as change agents in their children's schools and engage school boards to enact policies that will promote agency and equity in urban schools.

A democracy has no real substance without the energetic and thoughtful participation of all its members. The cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of urban areas is a rich source of energy and diverse talents and perspectives that can help revitalize civic culture and democratic debate. To fail to promote the agency of youth and adults in urban schools is not only ethically wrong, it weakens U.S. society as a whole. We cannot afford to waste the diverse talents and perspectives that can be the source of the energy and direction to transform not only cities but our society as a whole. Urban schools can be models of participatory democracy and centers where adults act together to nurture the efficacy of all students. A key aspect of the work of the Senior Fellows has been to identify ways teachers, parents, and students can develop the intellectual, cultural, economic, and political tools of agency.

Equity & Justice

The Senior Fellows believe that urban schools offer an important laboratory for democracy if they can function as equitable, just, and humane communities. A central focus of the work of the Fellows is to comprehensively critique obstacles to equity and justice in urban schools and to concurrently document and showcase schools and communities that cultivate democratic ideals through equitable and just teaching and learning.

The principle of equity is one of the best indicators of whether or not individual freedoms and the public good work together to support democratic ideals. Equity recognizes the multiple positions we all occupy simultaneously as individuals and members of groups. Equity is also an indicator of a society's compassion and will to create a "good society."

Equity Is Not Equality

Unfortunately, the concept of equity often has been conflated with the concept of equality, which connotes sameness. There can be tensions between equality and justice, since some opportunities and distributions may be equal but not fair. This is why we emphasize need, equivalent outcomes, democratic participation, and actions based on the highest ideals of commitment to every student.

There are many instances in our educational history where schools and other institutions have embraced equality but produced inequitable results. For example, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was an attempt at equality through equal access to schooling. The *Brown* decision recognized that racial segregation

created a condition of unequal educational opportunities. The two school systems that were established (either de jure or de facto) meant that resources, both human and material, were unfairly distributed, contributing to the achievement gap between whites and students of color. However, *Brown* became a mathematical and legal solution to a social problem. By manipulating the percentage of students who attended a particular school, school authorities claimed that equality existed. But was it equitable?

A number of scholars have called attention to the downside of school desegregation for children and families of color, pointing to, for example, the numbers of African American teachers and principals who were demoted or fired, or detailing ways that local autonomy and community engagement were lost in desegregated schools. Additionally, the day-to-day realities for particular students in urban schools reveal many other painful inequities. Too many urban schools operate with a “lock-down” mentality, where the school seems organized and structured to control students rather than to liberate, enable, and inspire them.

Recently, some legal scholars have begun to illuminate both *restricted* and *expansive* notions of equality. Restricted notions reflect only surface levels of equality, where individuals have the same basic rights and opportunities, but they do not consider whether prior conditions afford advantages to some groups. The expansive notion of equality is designed to insure that equality of opportunities produces equality of outcomes. This notion is more controversial, since it addresses the privileges some groups enjoy just because of their status.

Equitable outcomes at the pre-K-to-12 level have yet to be achieved. Urban schools have been ravaged by a series of social, economic, and political events. White (and middle-class) flight from urban centers has left urban schools with a shrink-

ing tax base. Educational research has shown that tying school funding to property taxes automatically creates inequities that are nothing short of immoral. In some states, urban students spend the day in schools that have barely enough heat to meet building codes, while their suburban counterparts take advantage of expensive modern facilities with high-tech equipment and spacious grounds.

Inequity in human resources also is apparent between urban and suburban schools. Both the number and qualifications of the teachers in these two settings are very disparate. A student in an urban school has a 50 percent chance of having a mathematics and/or science teacher who is not certified to teach those subjects.

In this era of school standards, the one standard that has failed to garner a lot of support is the “opportunity to learn” standard. While it may be commendable to talk about improving the academic standard by raising the scholastic bar (which many of our children continue to meet), we must ask: What opportunities do many urban students have to reach the bar? Can students be expected to perform at the same level as their suburban counterparts if they do not have well-equipped science labs, up-to-date materials, functioning computers, and well-qualified teachers? A focus on equitable outcomes would insist on these kinds of equal opportunities and access for all students.

Educational Justice

The Senior Fellows believe that it is important to pair the issues of equity and justice. Justice in educational reform means provision of appropriate resources and support mechanisms according to need and fairness, rather than according to power, influence, or affluence. Fair and appropriate distributions and treatments in schooling depend upon

the empowerment of all participants and their development as advocates and change agents. Democratic participation and problem solving in schools is necessary at all levels. Schools are more equitable and just when they recognize and embrace the contributions of all families and their communities. The economic stability of empowered surrounding communities, through sustainable economic development, helps to assure equivalent impacts of outcomes and equitable participation among all stakeholders in the educational system.

Educational justice means that all children can achieve in school, regardless of their own or their community's race, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, or economic status. School policies and practices must implement principles of equitable and just access, opportunity, and outcome so that every student develops her or his potential. Educators and policy makers at the local, district, state, and national levels are responsible to children and their parents. They must demonstrate their commitment by providing innovative, effective, and caring ways to engage all students in meaningful and successful learning. That is a key component of educational justice. Teaching is a moral commitment to care for all children within an atmosphere of respect, dignity, and trust. Treatment, distributions, and outcomes will be more just when based on such commitments.

Equity is a key issue with respect to urban education; however, it often is not reflected in the practices in urban schools. The Senior Fellows believe that serious attention to issues of equity and justice can produce better-qualified, committed citizens who strengthen our democracy. School equity goes hand in hand with social and economic justice and the development and stability of surrounding communities.

Instruction & Curriculum

Like schools in all communities, urban schools must be held to high standards. Standards provide high expectations for all students and teachers. Content and performance standards ensure that all students are held to the same benchmarks of quality, regardless of the neighborhood school they attend or the teacher to whom they are assigned. A key role for standards is also to have an ameliorative effect on the overall quality of instruction. Standards must guide and shape instruction and curriculum. The community must have a role in their development and implementation, and urban schools and districts must have the resources and offer the opportunities to learn so that students can meet the standards.

Powerful Learning Experiences

If students are expected to meet high standards, they will have to have access to quality instruction. What does good instruction look like? Powerful learning experiences have much in common. They are highly challenging for learners, even at the risk of failing. They allow learners to explore and build upon their own, nascent ideas and knowledge. And they are bolstered by the caring attention of a teacher – be it a school teacher, a parent, a mentor, or a friend.

Powerful learning is an expedition, a journey conducted for a definite purpose by individuals employing a range of skills and talents. A team of Red Cross doctors and nurses aiding in a disaster relief effort, an oceanographer charting undersea mountains, or a group of Peace Corps volunteers

teaching in a village are all involved in physical expeditions that demand qualities and skills of intellect and character. Likewise, a group of students conducting a long-term investigation of a pond and producing a field guide, or a group of students studying World War II, interviewing veterans, and then writing, directing, and performing a play about it are also involved in challenging, discovery-based expeditions.

Teachers guide students on expeditions of learning. If first-grade students bring in a toad on the first day of class, for example, a teacher sees an opportunity for a new expedition. First, the teacher understands (as educational research suggests) that asking the right question at the right time can move children to peaks in their thinking that result in significant steps forward and real intellectual excitement. Second, the teacher also understands that children can raise the right question for themselves if the instruction stimulates multiple learning possibilities. Once the right question is raised, students are moved to tax themselves to the fullest to find answers.

Noticing how observant and curious her students are about the live toad, the first-grade teacher encourages each one of them to generate questions about all the things they want to know about toads. In a flurry of questions, the students decide what they want to know: “Do toads live on land or underground?” “Can toads eat a bee?” “Do toads say *rib-it*?” “How high can toads jump?” “How come toads give people warts?” “Do toads go to heaven?” With the questions placed all around the room as sign posts, the children set out on their investigations. They consult science books to learn about the habitat and physiology of toads. They read stories that have toad characters. They measure the size and dimensions of toads. Throughout the inquiry, the fuel that keeps the students going

is their own questions, their own interests, and their own connections.

The teacher’s role is to identify and direct students to resources, to provide shared opportunities to build background knowledge and skills, and to assist children to learn from one another and to remain focused on the questions they generate individually and as a group. Each student learns the answers not only to his or her particular question, but to all the questions raised by all the students. The teacher and students take the time to explore this (for them, uncharted) domain of toads. This is one example of a powerful learning experience.

Powerful Pedagogies

Model teaching practices in some urban schools offer other examples of powerful learning experiences. In one high school, a computer science teacher, a math teacher, and a physics teacher pool their collective thinking and create a learning expedition – “Location: Where in the World Are We?” With grounding in vectors, Kepler’s laws, and electromagnetics, the students are divided into research groups charged with developing and carrying out a project. One of these groups (the Robotics group) designs a robot’s arm in order to prove mathematical theorems and relate them to real-life applications.

At another school, students in geometry and computer-aided design classes are divided into four fictional architectural companies, each of which designs a deck. The students combine math concepts and design skills using the same computers and software that actual engineering firms use. In support of this effort, students in the English III and business computer application courses create advertising firms to help promote the various deck proposals. The entire student body votes to decide which of the four deck designs to construct.

As these examples illustrate, powerful instruction includes the same general elements: a theme or topic that is broad enough to generate questions and allow for a number of disciplines to be addressed, but narrow enough to coherently define the scope of work; guiding questions created by teachers and students to drive inquiry and exploration; clear standards for student work and plans for assessment; and individual and group projects that allow students to meet standards through the full expression of their individual strengths and talents. Quality instruction requires students' deep engagement. Because it also includes fieldwork and service, a purposeful and physical connection to the world is threaded throughout. Because the goals and criteria for student work are explicit and reflect their input, students can begin to accept and internalize responsibility for their own learning.

By centering instruction first on what is close by – a pond, a vacant lot, a museum, a nursing home – students can begin to connect the details of their lives with the larger, essential themes and questions of life and society. The Senior Fellows feel that when educators center the curriculum in young people's lives (their cultures, everyday experiences, and histories) and help them develop a deeper understanding of who they are in relation to the broader society, students not only develop new-century perspectives and skills but also an invaluable sense of their own significance and the meaning of their own lives. When educators link literacy to the language, poetry, music, and other cultural forms through which students express their lives, educators validate the power of students' voices and the importance of their stories. For working-class students and students of color to appreciate their own potential, the curriculum must also explore the historical and current contributions

of their people to the construction of society and to the creation of knowledge.

This approach to instruction requires educators to look at knowledge critically and to make the curriculum “problematic.” When educators open up the curriculum to connect to students' backgrounds and interests as well as to stimulate questions and challenges and promote classroom discourse characterized by inquiry and debate, classroom knowledge becomes something students own. Students develop a sense of agency as creators and arbiters of knowledge.

Effective classroom teaching practices are directly influenced by the degree to which the adults in schools are encouraged and supported to develop professional resource and learning communities. This is an issue of educators' agency and of equitable allocation of resources to urban schools to support sustained, high-quality professional development and professional working conditions. Adults working in schools must be intellectually challenged (in the content areas as well as over issues of pedagogy and school and classroom structure) in conjunction with students learning to work collaboratively and think critically.

Outcomes & Impacts

Outcomes and impacts are connected to the purposes of education as well as to publicly stated and commonly agreed-upon student learning goals. Assessment strategies that provide accurate indications of outcomes and impacts of instruction must work not only for determining levels of learning but also for revealing specifically why and how students are not learning. As a result, assessment strategies (as distinct from standardized testing) must provide a wide variety of ways for students to represent their knowledge as creative, caring, responsible, and active participants in a democratic society.

Since the Senior Fellows envision outcomes and impacts as multifaceted, they believe that exhibitions of student achievement should include multimodal and multimedia demonstrations and student-generated publications as well as text-based evaluations. Using these methods, students must be prepared to ask questions, make sound decisions, problem solve, collaborate with others, and contribute in various ways to their communities.

The concept of accountability, often used to shape the agenda of school reform, links teacher responsibility to student learning outcomes. While this way of thinking about accountability has its merits, its limitations invite a stance that often becomes one of blame. Educational policy makers and elected officials also must be held responsible for student learning outcomes by providing equitable resources and opportunities to learn for all students, especially those urban students who have historically borne the brunt of racial and economic inequality in schools. This means that federal, state, and local officials are accountable to urban communities to publicly advocate for and provide

the necessary material and human resources and relevant curricula and professional development to enable urban educators to educate all students to high standards. In urban school districts, teachers, administrators, and students are held accountable for student performance on high-stakes tests, and they face severe consequences for failure. Yet, all too many schools lack all-day kindergartens, reading resource teachers, science labs, small classes, art and music, state-of-the-art books and materials, culturally relevant curricula, and other important material and human resources for an enriched and engaging education.

The Senior Fellows believe that accountability should, in fact, be part of a process of action learning – a process that engages parents, educators, students, and business people along with other community members in a “cycle of inquiry” through which together they make the most informed decisions leading to action – and not simply a tool used to bludgeon one group or another. Action learning by nature is a social enterprise that never ends, so the conclusions can always be refined, refocused, or adjusted in the next cycle of inquiry. This kind of learning also values the perspectives and experiences of each member in the learning community. Rather than knowledge being seen as universal and immutable, it is understood to be contextual and changing, and its social construction is the responsibility of all members of the learning community. This kind of learning requires a commitment at all levels to ensure the necessary allocation of resources, especially time, for creating the context in which outcomes and impacts can be assessed and long-term collaborative inquiry can happen.

As a community of learners themselves, the Senior Fellows have developed and promoted a conceptualization of outcomes and impacts that fluidly integrates their planning and assessment into every aspect of engaged teaching and inquiry-based learning.

Urban Conditions & Context

Urban schools are characterized by both opportunities and challenges. Public education in the United States has historically been viewed as a gateway out of poverty and a place where vast differences in race, ethnicity, and social class could be acknowledged and mediated. Although that promise has not been achieved evenly across populations, urban schools have nevertheless provided a hope for success for many children of diverse backgrounds and circumstances. As such, they present enormous opportunities and strengths for children, teachers, community residents, and the public at large. In fact, it can be argued that the hope for the future of all U.S. cities lies in the children who live and learn there.

Yet urban schools are also characterized by tremendous challenges. At a time when commitment to public spaces and institutions is being abandoned, the young people who need the greatest support to obtain a high-quality education are facing unparalleled rejection by a public that has become disenchanted with urban schools. The growing gulf between the haves and have-nots is nowhere more palpable than in urban public schools. Because they are for the most part attended by children whose families do not have the means to support the high cost of quality education, many urban schools are in disrepair and suffer from low morale and low expectations. As a result, for many who inhabit them, urban public schools have become sites of despair and frustration.

At the same time, there are urban schools that stand as beacons of rigorous, engaged, relevant, and joyful learning. And, in most urban schools, there are individual teachers who engage their students in powerful and caring learning experiences. There are also examples of parents, teachers, students, and community members working together to make schools centers of learning and democratic community development. These “successes” – achieved under conditions of tight resources, inadequate professional support, unjust and disabling conditions – point to what would be possible in urban schools if there were the public commitment and political will necessary to reconstruct the present reality.

The dual realities of urban conditions and contexts present unique challenges and opportunities for our society. The only way to restore public confidence and support for public education in urban centers is to transform urban conditions and contexts. The Senior Fellows believe that this transformation can – and, indeed, must – take place in order to support the development of children and families and to enhance their engagement in public life. Accordingly, the Senior Fellows have explored ways to address the challenges (e.g., shrinking public support for schools; increasing child and family poverty; deteriorating public services; and the social, racial, and economic Balkanization of people) while building on the opportunities inherent in the cultural richness of the city, its pluralism and physical resources, and its possibilities for social and economic transformation.



Investing in a Well-Educated Citizenry

Reforming urban education toward a vision of schools that prepare all students for active participation in the decisions that affect their lives, their community, and the broader society is not missionary work; it is an investment. Its ultimate payoff is an improved civic culture produced by well-educated citizens who play an active role in their cities. In their individual research and through their public advocacy, the Fellows are continuing to seek solutions to vexing and enduring problems facing cities and their schools.



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