New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 26
Issue 1 *Special Issue on Education*

Article 11

9-22-2014

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Mark R. Warren
University of Massachusetts Boston, mark.warren@umb.edu

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Recommended Citation
Warren, Mark R. (2014) "Transforming Public Education: The Need for an Educational Justice Movement," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol26/iss1/11

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Transforming Public Education: The Need for an Educational Justice Movement

Mark R. Warren
University of Massachusetts Boston

Nearly fifteen years after the passage of No Child Left Behind, the failures of our educational system with regard to low-income children of color remain profound. Traditional reform efforts have sought improvements solely within the confines of the school system, failing to realize how deeply educational failure is part of and linked to broader structures of poverty and racism. A social movement that creates political and cultural change is necessary to transform the racial inequities in public education itself and to connect this transformational effort to a larger movement to combat poverty and racism. The seeds of a new educational justice movement can be found in the rise of community and youth organizing efforts, in the development of teacher activism, and in the recent creation of new alliances at local, state, and national levels like those combating the school-to-prison pipeline. Many activists and educators have begun to offer a program for school transformation that connects to a broad agenda to combat racial segregation and economic insecurity, to improve housing, public health, and safety, and to reform immigration laws.

At the time he was nominated to be the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan declared that education "is the civil rights issue of our generation."[1] That phrase has become widely adopted, yet its meaning is seldom fully explored. If education is indeed the civil rights issue of our time, what would it take to address it as such? The last time our nation confronted deep-seated racial inequality and injustice, it took a civil rights movement to transform race relations and create deep and lasting change.

We face a similar situation today: our educational system is profoundly marked by racial and class inequality tied to broader structures of poverty and racism. We live in a society in which half of all black and Latino children grow up in or near poverty, often in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty with high rates of violence and inadequate services. They attend under-resourced schools which fail them at high rates. As a result, in many cities half of all black and Latino boys fail to graduate from high school. Most will be condemned to lives of poverty and imprisonment. Fully two-thirds of black men without a high school degree will serve time in prison at some point in their lives.[2]

Low-income children of color are at the epicenter of injustice in our society, and it will take nothing short of a social movement to break this cycle and transform our schools and communities. Yet reformers seldom think in movement terms. Rather, most reformers take either a technical or an organizational approach to improving public education. Technical approaches pay attention to improving curricula or better training for the teaching force.

Mark R. Warren is an associate professor of public policy and public affairs in the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. *He would like to thank Luke Kupscznk, who conducted research on the movement against the school-to-prison pipeline and contributed to the ideas on movement-building around educational justice developed in this article.*

Organizational approaches concentrate on the manner in which education is delivered by school systems with some advocating for charter schools or voucher systems as alternatives to traditional public school systems.

These approaches have made at best marginal improvements; overall the results have been disappointing. If we accept standardized test scores as our measure of improvement, educational outcomes have increased only slightly. Since the launch of the current era of school reform with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have barely budged. Very modest gains have been made in elementary school, but the scores of seventeen-year-olds have stagnated.[3]

Meanwhile, whatever we think about the current controversy over charter schools, the scholarly consensus seems to be emerging that they educate children on average no better than traditional public schools, even as they educate fewer English language learners and special needs children and even while they contribute to greater racial segregation. Vouchers have not proven to be a significant way to improve public education for low-income children either.[4]

The Problem: Quality versus Inequality

Technical approaches to education reform identify the problem as one of quality and set out to improve the quality of education offered to children. Although we do certainly need to improve the quality of education offered to low-income children of color, our nation does know how to educate children well. We succeed in education when we devote significant resources to public education, where school systems are held accountable for providing good education, where schools reflect the culture of the families they serve and schools and communities work together, and where children grow up in families and communities that are well resourced. These conditions hold in many of our white, middle-class communities and those children do well in school. In my view, the more fundamental problem in public education is not quality but inequality, along interconnected lines of social class and race.

For example, though much is made of the fact that the average scores for U.S. students lag behind those of our competitors on international tests, a different picture emerges if we account for the exceptionally high rate of childhood poverty in the United States. In the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), fifteen-year-old students were tested in math, science, and reading across sixty-five countries. U.S. students scored below average in math and only about average in reading and science relative to comparable countries. Perhaps more disturbing is that a greater number of countries are scoring higher than the United States since the last time the test was administered so that now twenty-nine countries outperform U.S. students on math.[5]

Martin Carnoy and Richard Rothstein analyzed the data for the 2009 PISA tests, however, and found that social class drove the results: the United States has a relatively large proportion of students growing up in poor or low-income families compared with other countries, and such students score much lower on these tests. If the U.S. scores were adjusted to account for these differences, they reported, "average reading scores in the United States would be higher than average reading scores in the similar post-industrial countries we examined (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) and average math scores in the United States would be about the same as average math scores in similar post-industrial countries."[6]

Poverty and Educational Failure

Educational outcomes are highly linked to poverty across national contexts. In these same international comparisons, low-income children in the United States score particularly poorly. Some analysts have shown that the higher a country's proportion of children growing up in poverty, the lower the scores on international comparisons. With 23.1 percent of its children growing up in poverty, according to UNICEF, the United States has the second highest rate among economically advanced countries, just behind Romania. The U.S. rate is distinctly higher than that of most comparable countries. For example, the child poverty rate in the United Kingdom is about half that of the United States, at 12.1 percent.[7]

Meanwhile, the "achievement gap" between high- and low-income students is growing in the United States, and it is 75 percent bigger than when baby boomers attended school.[8] Poor children are likely to grow up in low-income communities and attend schools with fewer resources. Since Jonathan Kozol exposed the "savage inequalities" of U.S. public education, we continue to fund our schools in highly unequal ways. As a result, schools serving large numbers of students of color have fewer qualified teachers, larger class sizes, fewer and older textbooks, less advanced curricular material, older facilities, and fewer computers than schools serving more affluent, white students.[9]

The most distressed schools, however, suffer from more than a lack of funding. Charles Payne has shown the myriad ways in which institutional dysfunction at every level affects distressed, under-resourced schools.[10] More funding is necessary but may not be sufficient if schools and school systems are not held accountable for their effective use of funds and the provision of high-quality education more broadly. Lack of accountability is a result of the profound lack of power held by low-income communities of color. Pedro Noguera has characterized these communities as "captured populations," to whom school administrators act with remarkable impunity.[11]

Race and Educational Failure

It has become easier to talk about poverty than race in the United States today. Yet, the problems affecting public education are closely tied to race. The crisis in education affects low-income children of color, especially black and Latino children (the focus of this article), but also native American and some Asian American children, with particular intensity.[12]

First, black and Latino children are more likely than white children to grow up in poor or low-income families. More than a third of all black children grow up in poverty in the United States, while roughly 10 percent of white children live in poverty. If we consider low-income families to include those living on less than 150 percent of the poverty line—or less than thirty-four thousand dollars a year for a family of four—then fully half of all black and Latino children grow up poor or near-poor in the United States. Meanwhile, far greater proportions of African American and Latino children than white children grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods. Nearly half of poor black children grow up in such neighborhoods, which suffer from multiple problems, from crime and violence to environmental degradation and blight. These conditions profoundly affect children's ability to learn and grow in healthy ways.[13]

Second, there are persistent racial inequities in our education system. An important and clear example is in school discipline. Black students are suspended or expelled at three times the rate of white students. Black students make up 16 percent of public school students but over 31 percent of those suspended or expelled. This is no small problem. Twenty percent of black boys and 12 percent of black girls are suspended every year.[14]

The problem is deep and widespread. A 2010 report found that 75 percent of black students in the state of Texas had been suspended between seventh and twelfth grade. Harsh discipline practice starts now in elementary school and even preschool and follows a racial pattern. Black students represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but 48 percent of those receiving more than one out-of-school suspension.[15]

Students who are suspended are much more likely to drop out of school or be expelled and therefore fail to graduate from high school. Although there has been some improvement recently, very high proportions of black students continue to fail to graduate from high school. In some places as many as half of black students fail to graduate with their peers and this in an era when college graduation, let alone high school completion, is a virtual necessity to support a family and fully participate in our democracy.[16]

The consequences of educational failure for black and Latino students, especially boys, are particularly severe. As noted earlier, two-thirds of black young men without a high school degree will end up in prison at some point their lives. At any one time, one-third of all black men without a high school degree are in prison or jail.[17]

Many analysts have characterized these high prison rates as mass incarceration. Michelle Alexander has gone so far as to label the system the "new Jim Crow" because once people have a felony conviction, they are subject to losing many of their civil and human rights. Employers can legally discriminate against them; public housing authorities can deny them a place to live; and in many states felons lose the right to vote, sometimes for life. In Florida, one in four African Americans cannot vote because of a felony conviction. In some Chicago neighborhoods, 80 percent of black men have criminal records and are typically unable to get a decent job, live in adequate housing, or participate in democracy. Most will end up back in prison.[18]

Structural Racism: Interlocking Systems of Oppression

The phenomenon of harsh and racially inequitable disciplinary procedures in schools tied to high levels of incarceration has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a particularly striking example of the interlocking system of oppression facing low-income children of color. The system itself, however, involves a large range of institutional dynamics. Scholars of structural racism have shown how racial dynamics combine and interconnect across a range of institutions to produce the profound racial inequities that exist in the United States. This scholarship has shown how patterns of residential segregation connect to educational underfinancing and economic disinvestment to concentrate poverty and disadvantage and profoundly limit access to opportunities for children of color in low-income communities.[19]

In other words, racial inequality is geographically structured. It matters tremendously where a child grows up. Low-income neighborhoods typically have higher levels of violence, unemployment and pollution with less access to decent housing, medical facilities, stores offering healthy foods, and arts programs.[20] These processes tend to compound their effects and restrict the ability of children to learn in school, whatever organizational structure, pedagogy, and curricula are offered. Indeed, one study found that growing up in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood was the equivalent of missing an entire year of school, and another found that 25 percent of the racial achievement gap could be attributed to differences in child and maternal health.[21]

In the words of Jeffrey Duncan Andrade, schools are struggling to "grow roses in concrete." Low-income children of color have tremendous talents and potential, but they suffer from the consequences of a physical and social world shaped by structural racism and

concentrated poverty. The social and emotional consequences of trauma often experienced by children in these situations profoundly affect their ability to learn in school and grow into healthy adults. Severe trauma includes experiencing or witnessing physical or sexual violence, sometimes by family members, but can also include verbal abuse and bullying. Up to half of all children in child welfare services and over 80 percent of children living in neighborhoods of high violence experience trauma. A quarter of all U.S. children have witnessed violence, while one in ten has seen family members assault each other. Teachers are typically ill-prepared to deal with these issues and schools do not often address them well. Indeed, harsh disciplinary responses to behavioral problems that arise from trauma contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools need to do better; but it is also unfair and unrealistic to expect teachers and schools to overcome all of the consequences of the profound racial and class inequities in U.S. society, inequities that concentrate their effects on our most vulnerable group, our children.[22]

While the origins of structural racism often lie in intentional efforts to segregate black people, the current perpetuation of the system does not necessarily require such efforts in all arenas. There is a complex dynamic between intentional racial design and decisions or actions that unintentionally produce racial inequity. Why do black children attend schools that are relatively under-resourced compared with those of white children? A key part of the reason is that we fund public education primarily through local property taxes, a historic development that originally had little or nothing to do with race. But black children disproportionately live in urban or rural districts with lower tax bases, and that has everything to do with race. Federal housing policy steered loans to white suburbanizers and allowed banks to redline black inner-city communities, denying loans to maintain housing quality. Real estate practices like block-busting and white resistance through restricted covenants and sometimes physical violence worked to keep blacks in deteriorating urban areas, out of white middle-class neighborhoods, and out of the suburbs that received the "white flight" from the cities.[23]

As a consequence, black and Latino children are likely to go to schools where most of the children are poor. In the metropolitan Boston area in 2010–2011, schools with a majority of students of color contained 72.3 percent low-income students, even more intensely segregated schools enrolled 83.7 percent low-income students, and so-called apartheid schools enrolled 81.3 percent low-income students. Meanwhile, after some years of progress in the sixties and seventies, racial segregation in public schools has been increasing: the proportion of majority minority schools in metro Boston more than doubled in the past twenty years while intensely segregated schools more than quintupled.[24]

Two implications flow from this analysis. First, addressing the profound inequities in public education requires a broad approach that addresses racism, poverty, and power in the United States. It is not surprising that approaches that focus solely on changes within the four walls of schools can have only partial effects on educational achievement. As Jean Anyon argued ten years ago, school reform has to be combined with or integrated into a broad agenda to combat racial segregation and economic insecurity, to improve housing, public health and safety, and to reform immigration laws.[25]

Second, even within the world of public education, racism plays a key role in perpetuating unequal outcomes for children of color. No one would argue that large ranks of America's teachers are intentionally discriminating against students of color. Newer scholarship has shown, however, that contemporary racial prejudice can take an unintentional form such as implicit bias with serious consequences for children of color. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes

or stereotypes that affect people's understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.[26]

Implicit Bias and Racial Inequity

Individuals develop implicit bias as they grow up in a larger culture that continues to harbor profound racial stereotypes. The broader public discourse treats youth of color, especially urban African American youth, as pathological. Young black women are often seen as overly sexualized, while young black men are suspected of being violent.[27] Research has demonstrated that the news media contributes to these stereotypes as it excessively portrays blacks as criminals.[28] This is the racialized culture that leads to events like the shooting of Trayvon Martin and plays its role in the daily activities of police who stop and frisk young black and brown men at disproportionately high levels. A recent study showed that blacks and Latinos made up close to 90 percent of the people that New York City police stopped and frisked, while nearly 90 percent of them, 3.8 million over ten years, were innocent of any wrongdoing.[29]

Few would argue that teachers intentionally discriminate against students of color. But there is evidence that many teachers have low expectations of black and Latino children and do not believe they can learn at high levels. Teacher expectations are critically important because children respond and perform better when teachers have high expectations of them.[30] One study found that teachers perceived students who used a black walking style, defined as "deliberately swaggered or bent posture, with the heads lightly tilted to the side, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend," as lower in academic achievement, highly aggressive, and more likely to be in need of special education services.[31] Moreover, black and Latino students are even more likely to face low expectations when they attend schools in low-income communities.[32]

In a similar vein, implicit bias or cultural misunderstandings can lead teachers to exaggerate the disruptive behavior of black and brown boys, a key contributor to racial disparities in school discipline and to the school-to-prison pipeline. In practice this means that racial disparities are greatest when teachers discipline students for subjective interpretation of behavior (Is the student being defiant?) in contrast to more objective behaviors (Did the student hit another student?).[33]

If unconscious bias contributes to educational failure, then improved curricula featuring opportunities for deeper forms of learning may not produce better results. Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers have suggested that technical improvements in education may actually increase educational inequality because schools serving white, middle-class children have a greater capacity to use these new methods and teachers in those schools believe that their students will excel even further as a result.[34] Neither condition can be assumed to hold in under-resourced schools in low-income communities.

Educators also express deficit-oriented views of the families of low-income students of color, perceiving parents as less caring about schooling success for their children. Many blame parents for the problems of their children and expect little of them. Black parents in particular can be seen as hostile. Few educators inquire about, let alone admire, the strengths of parents who work long hours in low-wage jobs or struggle to survive on unemployment, who raise families in crowded and substandard housing conditions, who sacrifice to put food on the table for their children, and who counsel them daily about how to navigate dangerous streets. Perhaps it is not surprising that many parents resist when teachers look down on them and treat them with paternalistic condescension.[35]

Annette Lareau and her colleagues have shown how middle-class families are organized around schools, that is, parents know the parents of classmates and are better prepared to collaborate with educators. Working-class families have rich social networks of family and friends but not typically with other parents at their children's school; consequently, they are isolated in relationship to schools and less powerful to advocate for their children. While schools, families, and communities often work together in white, middle-class communities, families and communities of color typically lack the social power to be a force for school improvement and for holding schools accountable for the educational success of their children.[36]

The net result of all these forces reveals itself in the educational outcomes of children from low-income communities of color. Massachusetts is regarded as having one of the very strongest public education systems in the country, and Boston is regarded as one of the most successful big city school districts. Yet in Boston today only one in three third graders reads at grade level. Meanwhile, a child who enters ninth grade in a non-exam district school in Boston has only about a 12 percent chance of graduating from high school and then completing college within the next six years.[37]

Educational Failure: A Question of Power

Rather than confront inequality, our educational system actually reproduces these inequalities, as more successful students, typically white and affluent, then gain access to higher incomes and greater levels of civic and political participation. One recent study shows that students who are suspended (largely black and brown) are less likely to vote or participate in civic activities later in life.[38] Although our educational system may not have been intentionally designed to track black and brown children into poverty, prison, and powerlessness, the result of this system is to reinforce and maintain profound racial and class inequalities in the United States.

The concept of oppression and terms like *power* are seldom invoked in the mainstream discourse on education reform. Yet, in the end, educational inequality is rooted in and systematically connected to social, economic, and political inequalities in U.S. society. Education reform, then, cannot be considered mainly in technical or organizational terms but rather should be addressed as a profoundly political problem. The failures of public education reflect the lack of power held by low-income communities of color, in resources, accountability, and performance.

Those at the top of social class and power hierarchies seldom recognize or admit that these are systems of oppression. Rather, they rationalize these inequalities as the result of natural forces, even when they are interested in improving the lives of low-income children of color. Thus, people who face the direct consequences of these systems must play a central role in social change processes, because they can name the system and push for transformational change.

The Need for a Social Movement

Every year, thousands of new teachers enter classrooms in schools serving low-income children of color. More than one-third of these new teachers will leave in three years. Within five years, nearly half will be gone, with turnover even higher in distressed school systems. Many reasons have been given for this high rate of teacher attrition, from inadequate training to lack of support and mentoring on the job; and these certainly contribute to attrition. But if we accept the analysis presented earlier, we need to recognize that we are asking teachers to solve our biggest societal problems virtually on their own. Committed and talented teachers persist, but they operate in a

larger system designed to produce failure. It would be fair to say that the failure of public education in low-income communities of color is overdetermined.[39]

In this context it is useful to contrast transactional with transformational change. Transactional change refers to discrete reforms in policy, practice, or program. Transformational change goes broader and deeper and refers to changes in the way people think and act within or across a range of institutions. In organizations, transactional change modifies organizational procedures, while transformational change involves changes in norms, values, and assumptions.[40] Transactional changes are certainly important but on their own are not likely to address the systemic institutional and cultural problems such as deficit thinking in public education. They will matter only to the extent they are connected to and help advance broader efforts at transformational change.[41]

Transformational change, especially in situations of power inequalities and oppressive structures, requires a social movement. By social movement in this context, I mean collective action by oppressed or marginalized people to build power to win changes in government policy and public attitudes that advance the cause of social justice. Movements transform unequal power arrangements in part by demanding recognition, voice, and participation. Social movements create shifts in cultural attitudes and public discourse and so are necessary to combat the stereotypes and low expectations facing children of color in education, on the streets, and in the media.[42]

Successful movements seek out allies and work to build a larger societal consensus for change. In this way movements build power but also appeal to the hearts and change the minds of the majority. By putting forward a concrete agenda for change and a vision for a more just and equitable society, movements shift the dominant discourse and cultural patterns. Discrete initiatives in program or policy change cannot produce this kind of transformational change in public education. Rather, a social movement has the potential to galvanize a broad public consensus for a far-reaching and deep approach to education reform connected to forthright efforts to address poverty and racism. In other words, a social movement is necessary to transform public education itself and to connect this transformational effort to a larger movement to combat poverty and racism.[43]

The United States once undertook such a large-scale and broad effort at improving education as it also made great strides in combating poverty and racial discrimination. In the sixties and seventies, in large part as the result of the civil rights movement, the nation invested heavily in public education as it created new social programs and broke down barriers to education and employment for African Americans, Latinos, and other groups. By the mid-seventies, urban schools spent as much as suburban schools, while childhood poverty rates fell dramatically—to below the levels of today. As Linda Darling-Hammond has recently argued, this comprehensive and well-resourced approach worked. The “achievement gap” in reading scores between black and white students was cut in half and was also reduced substantially in math; for a short time black college attendance rates were comparable to white rates. With the retrenchment in social programs and affirmative action that began in the 1980s, however, progress in educational improvement for black and Latino children largely stalled and the achievement gap actually grew again in the 1980s. Since then, any progress that has been made on the racial achievement gap has been swamped by the growth of the socioeconomic class gap discussed earlier.[44]

The Seeds of an Educational Justice Movement

The seeds of a new educational justice movement have been growing. They can be found in the rise of community and youth organizing efforts, in the development of teacher activism, and in the recent creation of new alliances at local, state, and national levels that connect grassroots organizing to a broad range of stakeholders. Many of these activists and stakeholders have begun to offer a program for school transformation that connects to broader efforts to address poverty and racism.

The Rise of Community and Youth Organizing

Low-income communities of color, often led by parents whose children attend public schools, are organizing to build power to transform public education in cities and towns across the country. In fact, community organizing efforts at education reform have spread widely and deeply in the last twenty years. Community organizing refers efforts that develop the active engagement of grassroots people themselves in creating social change, that cultivate the capacity of people to lead change efforts, and that build power to address inequalities and failure in public policy and institutions. Most community organizing groups work in low-income communities of color and address a range of issues, such as affordable housing, economic development, neighborhood safety, and fair policing. Because education has emerged, however, as such a critical issue for young people and their families, more and more community organizing efforts have turned to working with parents and other community residents on education reform and educational justice. A recent estimate by this author places the number of community organizing groups working on public education to be at least five hundred, with groups active in virtually every city and many rural areas in the country.[45]

Community organizing groups are often thought of as grassroots efforts, but this assumption may mask just how deeply rooted organizing efforts are in communities and how sophisticated many are in thinking and strategy. Contrary to popular notions, parents and other participants in these groups do not simply protest or demand change from the outside. Many are intensely embedded in work to create deep and lasting change in schools. In *A Match on Dry Grass*, my colleagues and I document and describe the many different strategies employed by organizing groups: demanding greater resources for schools, building meaningful and powerful forms of parent engagement and leadership in schools, working to set up smaller schools that are more connected to communities and their cultures, collaborating with principals and teachers to create “relational cultures” in schools that engage all stakeholders, and connecting school reform efforts with other efforts to strengthen communities, such as building affordable housing, creating safer neighborhoods, fostering economic development, and making improvements in public health.[46]

In addition to the more adult-based community organizing groups, youth organizing groups have also grown and spread across the country. In these efforts, young people who attend public schools are building power to demand a say in transforming education. Some youth organizing occurs as the youth section of community organizing groups or in intergenerational organizations, but many are independent, youth-led, adult-supported groups. The Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing recently identified 180 youth organizing groups, with the largest concentrations on the coasts and in the Midwest with newer groups in the South. These groups are also multi-issue organizations, but the majority—nearly two-thirds in the survey—addresses public education or educational justice in some manner. The young people who

participate in these groups are typically students in secondary schools, mostly high school aged. They have demanded more resources for schools in low-income communities in places such as Baltimore and the Mississippi Delta, advocated for greater access to courses that prepare students for college admissions in Los Angeles, organized against large-scale school closures in Chicago and Philadelphia, helped open social-justice-themed high schools in New York City, organized against harsh disciplinary procedures and for restorative justice practices in Denver, and advocated for access to college for the children of undocumented immigrants through Dream Act–like legislation across California and the country.[47]

Community and youth organizing is foundational to the emergence of a movement because it is through this process that local people with the most at stake in educational equity and justice—parents and students—build relationships and gain the support and courage to take action to make change. Successful movements, however, require allies. In the context of educational justice, educators are critical to the success of movement efforts. Teachers and their unions remain a potent political force whose support will be necessary for any progressive transformation of schooling. In addition, a successful educational justice movement will need to win the support if not active embrace of teachers because they will be the ones to implement new policies and to treat and teach low-income students of color in more equitable, effective, and empowering ways.

Teacher Activism

Teachers themselves have begun to organize to advance a social justice agenda in education. Teacher action groups have organized in many major cities, including New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, and the San Francisco Bay Area. These teachers work inside and outside of their unions to organize fellow educators around an educational justice agenda. The strategies vary across localities, but all prioritize building alliances with community and youth organizing groups. These groups have fought school closings, opposed the expansion of standardized testing, and supported each other in finding ways to promote social justice education in their classrooms and schools and combat the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of these teacher activists connect through national networks, such as the Education for Liberation Network based in Chicago.[48]

Community and youth organizing groups have begun to find common cause with teachers unions at local and sometimes state levels. The relationship between teachers unions and communities of color has often been fraught with tension. Since the New York City teachers union opposed the efforts of the black community for community control of schools in the sixties, the two have often been divided or opposed. In Chicago, however, the teachers strike in 2012 was strongly supported by a wide array of parent, youth, and community groups and inspired experiments in alliance-building in other localities. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the nation's second largest teacher's union, hired a set of community organizers with the goal of building alliances at the local and state level with organized parent, youth, and community groups. The national day of action sponsored by the National Opportunity to Learn campaign in alliance with the AFT, the National Education Association, and several other community organizing networks and unions took place in sixty cities in December 2013.[49]

The nationally coordinated day of action illustrates the beginnings of a national movement. Local alliances play critical roles in educational change; but eventually, a national educational justice movement will be necessary. In part, a national movement is needed to influence federal education policy. Although decision making in public education remains

primarily at the state and local level, the federal government has dramatically increased its influence over education policy, through No Child Left Behind and more recently through its Race to the Top initiative. School accountability through standardized testing, the most important school reform initiative in the past fifteen years, has been imposed down on local school districts from federal and state levels. Moreover, state and local educational decisions are made within a national education policy discourse. For that reason, the power to affect local and state policy cannot be generated at the local level alone, however, essential these local organizing efforts are.

Many foundations, venture capitalists, and other private interests have organized nationally to advocate for what has been called a neoliberal or corporate reform agenda that features public school closings, the expansion of charter schools and sometimes vouchers, and the use of standardized tests to evaluate teachers. The Walton Family Fund, for example, has given $335 million to charter schools and spent more than $164 million in 2013 supporting schools, institutes, and other groups advocating for charter schools. This corporate reform effort seeks to influence policy at federal, state, and local levels.[50]

In many ways, the emergence of a well-financed, national corporate reform movement has stimulated efforts such as the day of action to connect the progressive organizing and educator groups that operate mostly locally. Successful movements create positive feedback loops and synergy between strong local organizing and the national alliances and connections that structure a larger movement. In this way, an educational justice movement has the potential to create a national discourse and consensus for transformational change that can then take effect at state and local levels. The day of action issued a set of principles that begin to construct an alternative vision to the corporate reform agenda. The principles call for connecting schools to broader community needs, providing greater resources for schools, encouraging local participation rather than top-down reform, and using tests to improve teaching and learning rather than evaluating teachers and students; more recently the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools which formed out of the day of action has added to its agenda the need to raise wages to lift families out of poverty.[51]

Organizing against the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Perhaps the best example of an emerging educational justice movement that has gained power and effected significant change is the movement against the school-to-prison pipeline. Community and youth organizing groups were some of the first to speak out against harsh and racially inequitable disciplinary practices in schools over fifteen years ago and to connect these practices to what was initially called a “jailhouse” track. In other words, while white, middle-class students are tracked to college, low-income black and brown students, especially boys, are placed on a track to jail. Civil and human rights advocates also raised the alarm, and researchers began to document racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion and the profound impact it was having on the lives of black and Latino youth.

Community and youth organizing groups such as Padres y Jovenes Unidos in Denver spent years working on the issue. They organized young people who faced harsh disciplinary action and their parents, researched the issue and developed policy proposals, held rallies to show support, met with educators to persuade them to change practice, and worked with national allies such as the Advancement Project to build a broad local alliance for alternative discipline approaches. The group finally made a breakthrough in 2008 when the school district adopted a new discipline policy that sought to reduce the use of suspensions and police referrals and supported the development of restorative justice pilot projects. This victory and other local

successes were publicized across the country, inspiring further local organizing efforts. With strategic support from private foundations, national alliances such as the Dignity in Schools Campaign and the Alliance for Educational Justice emerged to support and coordinate local efforts and to influence federal policy. The Advancement Project sponsored summer "action camps" where hundreds of young people gathered from local efforts across the country to learn effective organizing strategies; meanwhile, they shared stories and made connections that provided a sense of national identity for the nascent movement.[52]

The movement against the school-to-prison pipeline demonstrates the power of organizing to change public discourse and influence policy. Fifteen years ago, zero tolerance toward student behavior dominated discourse and policy. Recently, the *New York Times* declared the dominance of zero tolerance to be over as schools across the country rethink their policies. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice issued guidelines in 2014 concerning harsh discipline policies and racial disparities in school discipline. The guidelines call for schools to limit the use of suspensions, expulsions, and police referrals and arrests and instead seek alternative discipline policies that keep students in school and learning. The guidelines also state that discipline policies that disproportionately affect racial groups violate federal law.[53]

Especially in places with strong organizing or civil rights advocacy, local school districts are experimenting with a variety of alternatives, including positive behavioral intervention and supports and restorative justice. Statewide alliances have also made gains in state legislation in places such as Colorado, where organizing by Padres y Jovenes Unidos and other groups led to passage of the Smart School Discipline Law in 2012; the law requires local school districts to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. Though under-resourced and weak in many ways, the movement against the school-to-prison pipeline continues to build. It has much still to accomplish. Despite some evidence that suspensions and expulsion rates are beginning to fall, at least in places such as Denver with strong local organizing, racial disparities persist.[54]

The emerging educational justice movement will need to advance its efforts to create a new vision—not just against the corporate agenda or against the school-to-prison pipeline, but for high-quality, humane schools connected to communities and their values. By promoting attention to social and emotional learning and to restorative justice, and by calling for systemic changes in schooling, the movement against the school-to-prison pipeline has begun to develop a vision and program for what educational justice looks like. The "day of action" alliance's principles are another step in that direction.

Meanwhile, a group of researchers, educators, and policymakers have put forward a "broader, bolder approach" to education reform that promotes a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of low-income children for early childhood education, health and nutrition, after-school academic, cultural, and recreational opportunities, social support, and strong investments in improving schools. This effort overlaps with the community schools movement, which advocates for schools to become centers of community life and provide integrated services for students. Community schools are growing across the country. Cincinnati, for example, has transformed all of its fifty-five public schools into community learning centers and the school system has made strong improvements. These community-connected approaches represent an important part of a broader educational justice movement. They are beginning to offer a more concrete alternative to standardized testing and privatization, one that begins to connect school

reform to broader community development efforts that holistically address the needs of children.[55]

Educational Justice, Democracy, and Freedom

Because an educational justice movement cannot succeed solely by working within education alone, it will have to find ways to connect beyond education to organizing efforts around economic rights, immigrant rights, mass incarceration, environmental justice, and a range of other issues that structure the lives of low-income children of color. Including children's services in schools is an important step in this direction; but a movement will need to demand changes in institutional structures and policies that create the need for these services in the first place. The educational justice movement may well have the potential to galvanize this kind of broader progressive movement for both moral and economic-political reasons. First, low-income children of color are increasingly caught in the vice grip of growing economic inequality and persistent structural racism. They are bearing the brunt of these forces with dire consequences for their education and human development. Since it is hard to blame children for the circumstances of their birth and neighborhood location, the justice of their cause places a strong moral demand on the larger society.[56]

Second, children represent the future of the country. We all have a stake in the educational success of low-income children of color. Nearly half of all public school students in the United States come from low-income families and that proportion is growing. Meanwhile, students of color are expected to become the majority of all students in public schools across the country within the next ten years. Just as the nation could not have moved forward into the truly modern era without defeating Jim Crow segregation, we cannot move forward into the twenty-first century with our modern caste system in education.[57]

Like the civil rights and other movements that reinvigorated and expanded U.S. democracy in the past, an educational justice movement promises to galvanize a broader democratic transformation. Building an educational justice movement requires developing a vision for public education and our democracy beyond the production of increased test scores. The narrow pursuit of test score gains is constraining the imagination needed for high-quality, humane and democratic public education. In that sense, education is not just one of many concerns. It lies at the heart of the promise of American democracy and of the struggle of peoples to free themselves. In the end, the pursuit of educational justice is the struggle for people to define their own lives and to develop the capacity to achieve free and full development as human beings.

If education is the civil rights issue of the day, then it must become a societal cause. The civil rights issue of our generation is a life-and-death issue for so many low-income children of color. Educational injustice is also an urgent moral concern for Americans of all walks of life. At the same time, transforming public education is a vital economic and political necessity for the future of our democracy.

Notes

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