



Broadening Our Approach to Educating Children in Poverty

by Pedro A. Noguera

Abstract

New York City leaders have embraced a holistic vision of school reform that begins to confront the race and class disparities in learning opportunities for poor children that most other cities neglect. Though their plan for high-quality, full-service schools goes against the current tide of market-based reform, research has shown that these schools can have a major impact on the academic and social outcomes of children.

Key words: *comprehensive reform, full-service schools*

IS 218, the Salomé Ureña de Henríquez School in Washington Heights, is an amazing place. Developed through a partnership between the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and the Children's Aid Society in 1992, the school offers a broad array of services, including

after school and summer school enrichment, medical and dental care, adult education, and even a bicycle repair shop. IS 218 is one of three schools located in the building, and all three are based on the Children's Aid "full service" model: strong instruction, expanded learning opportunities, and social services to remove barriers to student learning and promote healthy development.

To his credit, Mayor Bill de Blasio has embraced the benefits of this ambitious model and recently announced his intention to spend \$52 million to open 40 additional full-service schools (also widely known as community schools or beacon schools) throughout New York City (City of New York, 2014b). Such an initiative is desperately critical, particularly in the city's poorest neighborhood schools, where the unmet social needs of children make the challenge of serving their educational needs extremely difficult. In neighborhoods like the South Bronx and East New York, child poverty rates are high—more than 50%; and at nearly all of the schools, more than 90% of the student population qualifies for free lunch (City of New York, 2014a; Roberts, 2013). However, New York has more than 1,700 schools, and the state has identified approximately a quarter of them as "failing" (New York City Department of Education, 2014). Of course, most of the so-called failing schools also serve the city's poorest children; hence the urgency to expand models like IS 218.

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A Limited Plan

Unfortunately, the problem is being addressed on only a limited scale. Thus far, the mayor and DOE Chancellor Carmen Fariña have not articulated a plan for implementing the full-service school initiative in concert with a broader school improvement plan. Many of New York's most troubled schools will need both. Unlike the Children's Aid Society, which learned through many years of experience that social services *and* high-quality education have to be combined to make a sustainable impact on student outcomes, both educational and developmental, neither the mayor nor chancellor has put forward a strategy for how this will be accomplished in high-poverty communities. While Mayor Michael Bloomberg never developed a plan for helping schools to improve, Mayor de Blasio hasn't either since taking office. The new mayor made it clear that, like his predecessor, he wanted to retain control of the public schools, and the public is anxiously waiting to hear what the new strategy will be.

Moreover, while \$52 million is a significant expenditure of public resources, it is substantially less than what is warranted to serve high-poverty children and schools. According to a report by the Annenberg Foundation (Fruchter, Hester, Mokhtar, & Shahn, 2012), there are 14 neighborhoods (census tract areas) where the college readiness rate is less than 10%. In those communities, a more comprehensive and aggressive plan will be necessary to improve schools and student learning outcomes.

Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Fariña are to be applauded for embracing a universal preschool plan. Through that measure and the community school plan, they are implementing a holistic

vision of school reform that begins to confront the race and class disparities in learning opportunities for poor children that most other cities neglect. They also are going against the tide of market-based reform, a strategy that has been widely adopted by urban school districts and even the Obama administration. That strategy consists largely of expanding the number of charter schools and shutting down schools deemed to be failing. It was enthusiastically espoused by billionaire Michael Bloomberg; during the 12 years he served as mayor of the city, more than 160 "failing" schools were closed. Each school that was closed disproportionately served the poorest and most disadvantaged children in the city: English language learners, children with special needs, homeless children, and others. While Mayor Bloomberg supported the acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone[®] created by Geoffrey Canada, he never employed that comprehensive approach in the schools for which he was responsible.

New York, like most American cities where poverty is deeply entrenched and schools and neighborhoods are racially segregated, demands a larger strategy, akin to the Harlem Children's Zone on a grander scale. Schools in high-poverty areas must be linked to and supported by hospitals, health clinics, universities, and social services agencies so that the children's health, nutrition, and housing necessities can be met and so that educators can focus on what they were trained to do: educate children.

The Limits and Possibilities of Full-Service Schools

Research on schools run by the Children's Aid Society has shown that high-quality full-service schools can have

a major impact on the academic and social outcomes of children if they are well-designed and implemented with careful attention to the educational and social needs of students (Martinez & Hayes, 2013). Likewise, The After-School Corporation (TASC), which provides technical support to dozens of schools in New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans, has found that by expanding learning opportunities through afterschool programs, gaps in achievement can be significantly reduced (Reisner, White, Russell, & Birmingham, 2004). Both organizations have discovered that maintaining high standards when executing these interventions is the key to ensuring the desired results.

Even when done well, though, programs like these cannot overcome broader problems related to poverty. Poverty is an economic condition, but it also has social and psychological correlates. High-poverty neighborhoods typically experience higher rates of crime and violence, unemployment, and housing shortages. Mental illness, substance abuse, and various forms of family crisis (e.g., domestic violence, child neglect), while not unique to impoverished urban communities, frequently are exacerbated by a lack of access to support services.

If Mayor de Blasio is serious about his commitment to reduce poverty and inequality, the two issues on which he campaigned, he will have to do much more than expand preschool and community schools. He will need to find ways to increase access to jobs that pay living wages, expand affordable housing, and improve public schools. The whole country could benefit by learning from New York City's effort to marshal its resources to tackle these complex and pressing problems. Let's hope that Mayor de Blasio can deliver.

A Comprehensive Plan

Cities like New York require a comprehensive neighborhood-based strategy to develop systems of support for children and families. Full-service schools could be part of this strategy, but they cannot be the only part. Affordable housing, social services, and creative economic development that lead to additional jobs for low-income residents also must be included in a plan to alleviate poverty in a concerted manner.

This is the kind of planning happening in the South Bronx. Under the leadership of Phipps Houses, a community development organization, and with funding from the JPMorgan Chase Foun-

dation, efforts are underway to create a cradle-through-college pathway based on multisector collaboration. The city must support this effort and launch more like it in other destitute neighborhoods. A similar strategy has been implemented in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Portland, Oregon. While it is too early to predict whether this approach will result in sustainable improvements, we already have substantial evidence from urban school districts throughout the United States that market-based reforms have not. ■

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