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**EDUCATION AS A KEY TO URBAN DEVELOPMENT:
EMPOWERING URBAN EDUCATION
FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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EMPOWERING URBAN EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

There is a myth among political and constitutional conservatives that throwing money at any problem except *Defense* and *Weapon Systems* will not help, ameliorate, or solve the problem. The problems of urban education are; therefore, considered the problems of the local and state educational agencies. The Federal government spends a miniscule 7% on education and yet the first line of defense for the country must be a high quality educational system.

The Coleman Report in 1966 pointed the way by identifying socioeconomic status as the key indicator for success in school. What it did not do was to disaggregate the data on urban schools to see what affects additional spending would have on academic performance if class size were reduced, teachers were given additional professional support and classroom aids (assistants) were also provided.

There is no mystery that students from wealthy families on average do better on standardized tests than students from poor families. There is no mystery that students from healthy families do better on standardized tests than students from medically stressed impoverished and or abused families.

One solution then would be to put all the urban families on the same income level as their suburban counterparts. That would be the solution Coleman's data analysis certainly suggested rather than his caustic suggestion that spending more on public education was counter-productive --e.g. throwing money at public education was not going to fix the problems of urban schools.

There is a way to progressively improve the "problem" of urban schools and it is NOT putting all teachers and administrators into religious orders and reducing the costs by 80%. That's the second myth that parochial schools are more "cost effective" than public schools and that vouchers will help children trapped in low performing public schools.

Urban education can be transformed. It is not theory or conjecture. It stems from peer reviewed action science supported by the Michigan Partnership for New Education[MPNE] from 1989-1994. The cost was reasonable since it involved teacher training, community asset building, teacher professional development and parent empowerment. For approximately sixty-five thousand dollars per elementary, eight-five thousand per middle school and one hundred and twenty-five thousand per high school a community partnership can be set up with a University School of Education and an urban school district. The school selection process is critical since the partnership is reciprocal and schools need to go through a selection process similar to a North Central Accreditation process. School staff need to hear what the University brings to the table and then give the University a presentation on why and how they would benefit from the partnership.

One example is the selection process that Longfellow Elementary School in the Pontiac, Mi., school district used. After hearing what the University was willing to do the school staff and parents made a presentation on what goals they envisioned for their school. The Longfellow School was selected by the School of Education at Oakland University in 1989 and the partnership continues to this day. The school went through some difficulty times, but each year there was improvement in a variety of indicators. First, the climate of the school began to change as classroom teachers now had the support and assistance of pre-service teacher education majors and teacher interns. Test scores on standardized tests slowly increased for several years, but after five years were the highest in the district and competitive with surrounding suburban districts. Another noticeable change was parent participation. In the first year of the partnership there were only a dozen or so active parents and perhaps two or three dozen who came to general meetings. By the third year the parent participation had increased 300% and attendance at general meetings had more than quadrupled. Parents were volunteering in school and some were being paid as teacher aides using Title 1 funds. Several mothers finished their associate's degree and transferred into the University and were later admitted into the Teacher Education program. Fortunately, they were able to do the majority of their fields and their Internship at their local school.

The funding from the State decreased over five years and ended in 1994 when the State shifted resources into Charter Schools. Longfellow Elementary continues to excel in test scores, parent participation, community involvement, and as an outstanding urban school placement for pre-service teacher educators.

Yet another benefit of the MPNE partnership was the on-going professional development for the teachers, teacher aides, staff, volunteers and administrators. The weekly in-serve planned and directed by a steering committee represented by all the stakeholders. The University facilitated the sessions and often worked in collaboration with the staff of the local Intermediate School District [Oakland Schools]. One major conflict was finding a time where all the stakeholders could be brought together. Saturday mornings, after school and before school breakfasts were all tried, but the clear need was for a common school time when all the stakeholders could attend without the pressure of outside commitments. The solution came from the total school community. Bus the children to the local Boys & Girls Club for the last two hours of the school day on Wednesday and devote that block of time to professional development. This was no easy matter since all sorts of logistics had to be worked out and the changes of the school day and bus schedule had to be approved by the school District's Board as well as the District Education Association. In the end it was approved and may have been the single most important factor contributing to a surge in improved test scores. The importance of professional development through an empowered school climate with an adjusted school week that allows for a minimum of a two-hour block of time where all the stakeholders can benefit from the in-service cannot be overstated. The time set aside for the professional development is not lost from the curriculum. The school day is lengthened by a half-hour each day on the other four days. In the end it was a win-win for both the District, the Union and the School.

The only missing ingredient was an additional merit pool for teachers tied into the improved test scores. The local teacher union had problems with that, but there still is a possibility of quality improvement awards or quality merit awards that could be funded from the State and local district.

Not all the support was withdrawn. The Wednesday afternoon Professional Development Day continued. The University continued placing pre-service teachers at the school as part of their professional experience and several required courses in the Elementary Teacher Education program were conducted at the school and the students did their field experiences at the school. University and Intermediate School District specialists continued to assist with the professional needs of the school staff, but this outside assistance was gradually deemed unnecessary as the faculty, staff and parents gained expertise and felt empowered to facilitate their own professional development session.

The school continues as a lighthouse and has assisted neighboring schools in both professional and community development. Without outside funding the transition from a low performing to a high performing school would almost certainly not have happened. It took a University partnership that brought in eager and idealistic education majors committed to the late Prof. Ron Edmonds' Effective Schools Research that stated, "We can successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us."

It took an elementary school faculty struggling with trying to improve to commit to a long-range continuous quality improvement model. It took the School District Board and Teachers Union to support innovative practices and allow for contract variances, schedule variances, and parent/teacher empowerment. And finally, it took parents who gradually became empowered to bring the school into community and the community into the school.

The key for urban redevelopment is education for community development. Urban areas can be revitalized one school at a time. A successful model exists, a willing coalition of Universities exists and costs are easily spread over local districts, the State, private foundations, sponsoring corporations and the federal government. Several large foundations that have generously targeted major urban school districts provide a model for what could be done. A coalition of foundations like Annenberg, Milken, Mott, Chrysler could easily broker enough money over five years to transform urban education systems in America into high achieving programs that focus on community development.

The costs for a large urban city like Detroit, MI., would be \$21 million a year; whereas, Pontiac, MI., would run approximately \$2million a year. The prudent strategy would begin with a pilot project in Pontiac to test out the feasibility of a district wide regenerative reform process over three years. That will not be long enough to show significant gains in the Michigan statewide assessments called MEAP tests, but by five years that should be evident. Therefore, a \$10 million grant over five years should prove whether large grants to major urban cities would be worth a \$100 million investment over five years. \$20 million a year in one large urban city may seem like an enormous investment, but it is the most effective investment for human resources short of a revised National Defense Education Act.

Now the times and circumstances clearly warrant a renewed collaborative effort to recognize the need and urgency to develop the human resources across urban America. The most effective vehicle would be a new NDEA for the 21st Century. Can we afford NOT to ?