

A comprehensive vision for urban school transformation

The Black and Latino Policy Institute maintains that to be successful, educational reforms in urban schools have to be part of a larger effort to address the problems of poverty and other social toxins in urban communities.

Therefore the institute calls for a more comprehensive vision of urban education especially regarding our Indianapolis Public Schools. This vision recognizes the need to move beyond attempts to only change the system of education inside schools in order to also address more fundamental problems in our community environment itself--an environment which enables failing schools and can destroy the hopes of students and their families.

We believe that in the absence of a long-range strategy to foster the self-determination and cultural empowerment urban resident-citizens need to challenge and eradicate the underlying causes of poverty and other social toxins, heroic attempts to restructure schools or to introduce new teaching/learning techniques in the classroom will be difficult to sustain.

Consequently, we must provide the conditions for a diminution of apathy and a resurgence of hope in our neighborhoods by an aggressive assault on urban poverty and social isolation in order to begin to see healthy returns on our investments in education.

To support this proposal, urban communities, where schools are located, must have an equal or greater voice than the district in determining the destiny of their own public schools. This is fundamental. Transforming urban education is just one part of our broader strategy for change because we realize no real improvement will come through the educational efforts of the Indianapolis Public Schools until urban communities are empowered economically and politically. We do not want the poverty and other social toxins that plague urban area to be eased or escaped from, but to be eradicated; and, we expect our Indianapolis Public Schools to help in every way possible.

“There is solid agreement on the basic proposition that conventional education is totally inadequate to address the special problems of the urban poor. Something quite different is needed, something that deals not only with reading, writing, and arithmetic, but with the environment that shapes these students' lives and determines their educational needs.”

~ Chief Justice Weilentz, New Jersey Supreme Court, 1990: Abbott v. Burke

"If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."
~ President John F. Kennedy

Everyone concerned with the present and future of our Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) wants the best for the community, residents, families, and students. Many are aware of the dropout rates and test scores which have enhanced the importance of and increased the urgency for effective urban public school transformation. The relationship among incarceration rates, illiteracy, and quality of life are well known. The constant barrage of commercial and political interests seeking to influence personal choices requires citizens who are critical thinkers and doers. Most know the challenges of the information age, globalization, and skill-based technology, making an empowering education indispensable. Finally, educators know and research demonstrates: schools with large shares of economically disadvantaged children become overwhelmed by factors which interfere with learning.

"Their environment does not allow them to be successful. Students have a lot of psychological issues and social problems, baggage that interferes with their academic success."
~ Jethroe Knazze, Principal IPS Arlington High School, 2010

According to Andrade and Morrell (2008), one cannot examine and become intimate with the problems of American urban schools without also becoming aware that the answers are much broader than simply improving the academic achievement of a subset of students.

Simply put, our serious social ills, particularly the inherent "social toxins" which characterize urban life, are major factors affecting school success. These social toxins are interpersonal: violence, fear, shame, uncertainty, nihilism, and loss of control; and, structural: poverty, family dislocation, health care, racism and social isolation, nutrition, and the exodus of jobs from the city (Ginwright, 2010).

How previous plans have missed the mark

Academic failure in urban schools persists despite increasing attention to the problem from a variety of sources including NCLB and millions of dollars for new classrooms, more computers, high stakes testing, tutoring, reduced class size, longer school days and school years, bringing in the best teachers and offering incentives (based on test scores), or using scripted literacy and math programs.

According to Andrade and Morrell, the failure of these efforts can be traced to the fact these resources have not been used to directly address the context of urban life and the poverty that shapes the lives of students and the surrounding community. They suggest community-wide efforts are needed to:

- help schools, and teachers most directly, in the development and implementation of pedagogy and curricula which
 - address the social and economic conditions of urban life, and
 - develop a sense of power among urban students for altering those conditions.

The Black and Latino Policy Institute (B&LPI) maintains that to be successful, educational reforms in the urban schools have to be part of a larger transformational effort to address the problems of poverty and other social toxins in urban communities.

"Among the lowest-performing schools, two-thirds also had the poorest students in the state. Poverty is insidious; it transcends almost all aspects of living. If we decided to do nothing but attend to poverty, we'd see a high graduation rate."

~ Professor Tracy Cross, Ball State University

B&LPI therefore calls for a more comprehensive vision of school reform regarding our IPS. This wider vision recognizes the need to move beyond attempts to change only the system of education inside the school in order to also address more fundamental problems in our community itself--an environment which enables failing schools and can destroy the hopes of students and their families.

Hence, this vision illuminates the issue: we cannot ignore how the cumulative effects of poverty and social-residential isolation of many Indianapolis neighborhoods (and the larger context of which they are a part), directly reflect the correlations among Marion County zip codes and school failure. If this were not the case, then people would not make entire life choices on the basis of access to school districts, and realtors would not be able to use public schools in certain zip codes as selling points (Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Our diagnosis and ideas result from a deep structural analysis. B&LPI's ultimate goal is to redress the effects of the destructive isolation in our city of its poorer residents, and to reduce or eliminate the political disenfranchisement and economical disempowerment that produces such marginalization.

Indeed, Americans are aware--and over 30 years of research consistently demonstrates--academic achievement in U.S. schools is closely correlated with student socioeconomic status. To really improve the chances of the children of urban neighborhoods, then, in school and out, we must increase their social and economic well-being and status before and while they are students. We must ultimately, therefore, eliminate poverty; we must eliminate the underperforming urban school by eliminating the underlying structural causes of this unacceptable performance.

"Together we can summon from ourselves and others the outrage, the combativeness, and the courage that will transform our inner city neighborhoods and schools."

~ Prof. Jean Anyon, Rutgers University

Visionaries have long maintained that in order to make fundamental changes we have to believe that such changes are possible. Unfortunately, educational "small victories" such as the restructuring of a school or the introduction of a classroom pedagogical technique that engage students and increase academic performance (measured by test scores), no matter how satisfying to those involved (both IPS students/families and the IPS district), without a long-range strategy to eradicate underlying causes of poverty and isolation, cannot add up to large victories in our urban neighborhoods with effects that are sustainable over time.

Although IPS has many successful schools/programs, the benefits of academic achievement are nullified here in Indianapolis when the graduates of such successful IPS schools have no

more decent economic prospects greeting them than the graduates of underperforming IPS schools. As well, the benefits of academic achievement are again nullified when the graduates of well performing IPS schools must continue to face the everyday urban issues and social toxins as do the graduates of poorer performing IPS schools (Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

In other words, we cannot deem IPS successful when success is predicated on an optimistic view of America's racial future and so presupposes "an elastic, democratic social order in which there are no artificial barriers against the social mobility of the individual" (Payne & Strickland, 2008). Simply too many structural barriers still exist countering the efforts of students of certain colors or/and class.

B&LPI demands both better schools and better neighborhoods--both empowered and self-reliant graduates, and empowered and self-determined communities.

Urban educational reform and urban social-economic reform are symbiotic: The collaboration of two approaches

If successful educational transformation at our IPS, leading to improved academic achievement by students, is dependent on revitalizing urban communities, how can this happen?

Approach I: The community

Since, under this vision, educational upgrading is itself dependent on improvements in the lives and opportunities of urban residents, IPS will need to link up with those who can create better social-economic conditions. A successful revitalization of urban neighborhoods through the spread of this new energetic vision requires a community-government-corporate-labor enterprise and financial investment into the neighborhoods where IPS schools are located. Quality education in our urban areas require bringing about the participation of under-utilized residents, individually owned or franchised businesses, labor and professional unions, social and faith-based organizations, non-profits, and government agencies in a community social-economic rebirth. As should be clear by now, however, while IPS attempts successful transformation, without the economic and political revitalization of certain urban neighborhoods, the greater educational revitalization in IPS is unlikely to occur. Both must be undertaken together. This collaboration is the basic ingredient of the more comprehensive vision of B&LPI proposes.

Admittedly, all this constitutes quite a challenge. However, if we do not improve the communities surrounding IPS schools, we face an impossible situation regarding sustainable urban educational transformation. According to Professor Jean Anyon in her landmark book, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (1997), attempting to improve our IPS without also improving the urban communities in which IPS schools are embedded is "...like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door."

B&LPI is also concerned about the economy, decent paying jobs, housing, safety, the local environment, adequate transit, health care (physical and mental), K-6 education, local & federal policies, and improved and trusted police relations.

The implications of Prof. Anyon's analysis are clear: the "...upgrading of city schools is itself dependent on improvements in the lives and opportunities of inner city residents." Thus, B&LPI proposes a movement for a major transformation of the urban areas of Indianapolis. Indeed, some IPS neighborhoods have a community service centers and recreational centers, and area health care clinics. Yet, IPS can approach foundations and governmental granting agencies to help us link up IPS school transformation with grants to groups and agencies providing additional and even better health, economic, and social recreational services to all IPS neighborhood residents. In fact, a coalition of IPS and community grant seekers will need to write proposals for programs that utilize IPS neighborhood schools as centers where referrals to these economic, political, and social services are made or where these services are provided.

Why is this so vital? When IPS students and their families have access to the range of services that provide a realistic expectation that education will lead to better jobs, lives, neighborhoods, and futures, as is expected in most middle-class and affluent homes, then the students will have a reason to make an educational effort. Realistic expectations that an IPS education will make a substantial positive difference in the lives of students and their neighborhoods may also motivate teachers and other school staff to a higher level of performance. At that point such an IPS/community coalition can more easily make a difference in the lives of those IPS families living in the circumstances of poverty.

Approach II: IPS schools as sites for major social transformation: parents, staff and students help improve education and serve the community

Parents as critical friends of IPS

B&LPI envisions IPS schools as centers where the economic and political disenfranchisement of IPS citizen-residents, especially parents/guardians, are addressed. Parents/guardians are more likely to participate in school reform activities, and more involved in their children's education, if they see meaningful results for themselves from authentic involvement through 2-way communications at the school—a participation moving beyond involvement where parents support school policies and instructional practices without question. Here, engagement is true dialogue and cooperative, genuine, and meaningful involvement by parents/guardians in **all** school decisions as partners, social equals, and critical friends whose questions and suggestions are expected. And, the result of that dialogue makes for better school policy and instruction.

Parents as activists

What is significant, genuine 2-way conversations support the idea of parents as activists. Enabling activism is needed to break a longstanding tradition of what Indianapolis has come to believe parents, particularly low income and bi-cultural, are capable of understanding and entitled to do (Olivos, 2010). We just have to look at how empowered parents run schools in Chicago for an example (Loflin, 2012). Indeed, parental support of student achievement is vital, but so is helping parents or guardians understand and promote their personal process of empowerment and efficacy. In this way, parents/guardians offer the most honest and powerful support of IPS.

IPS staff and students help transform education and their community

What is significant is most IPS schools are uniquely situated to understand, solve, and eradicate the very problems students face which negatively affect their school performance. Due to this, what is relevant and challenging: IPS teachers and students can become change agents, helping create and carry out social-economic improvement through a curriculum and pedagogy around, for example, project-based learning. Students can investigate a community issue and build a project around solving that problem. Also, a curriculum based on social justice (Mack & Picower, 2013) and using a critical pedagogy (Andrade & Morrell, 2008) will not only provide students with higher order thinking skills, but meet state learning standards. Such approaches make public schools important sites of intervention--interventions the intent of which are to remove the social toxins that can interfere with the academic performance of these same students.

Strong student councils can also improve their school. The UK seeks the opinions of high school students when making school decisions since 2002 (School Councils Foundation, 2013).

This fosters critical thinking and critical living, empowering and liberating urban students living in the circumstances of poverty in Indianapolis to demand their moral, economic, and political right to an education equal to that offered to students in the best schools in America.

Going to college is put in perspective: The limitations of the "college going" culture--a middle-class ideology which ignores pertinent problems of urban communities

Preparing students for college is one of the main IPS responsibilities. Yet, while striving for the academic achievement of every student, IPS cannot afford to make the mistake of attempting to replicate the schooling ideology of the middle class with its emphasis on a "going to college culture." Andrade & Morrell (2008) warn that doing so can enable IPS to practically: **ignore the material conditions of urban areas, which are more pertinent to the lives of their students and are far removed from the rhetoric of college attendance.**

An education with relevance: Increasing college eligibility

Let's be clear, IPS students should go to college at rates equal to their more affluent counterparts. The point here is an urban schooling environment which educates a majority of marginalized students of all colors must consider emphasizing the relationship between what goes on in the classroom and the most pressing conditions in these students' communities. This is **an education with relevance**, one which in fact is most likely to produce notable increases in college eligibility.

The B&LPI advocates for education models graduating critical and engaged students who have a democratic sensibility which critiques and acts against all forms of inequality.

Making college a realistic option

The unique lives and conditions of urban youth of all colors deserve an education system that accomplishes two goals in concert with one another (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008):

1. preparation to confront and eradicate the conditions of social and economic inequity they face, and
2. access to the academic literacies (reading, writing, math) making college attendance realistic.

“I'm not saying ‘achievement’ in the sense that people tend to read achievement as high test scores. That's not what I am talking about. I'm not talking about what students know, but what they can do with what they are learning. If students aren't doing anything with what they are learning, other than take a test, how can you say their learning anything? That has to be the ultimate goal of education.

Giving students an opportunity to look at important issues, make decisions, critically analyze their environments, help others in the neighborhood; if that's not happening, I really don't care what the diploma says. If students come away from a class not having learned to do some basic things like think, problem-solve, make decisions, and work together, or change their community for the better, then I don't care how high they score on standardized tests.”

~ Professor Gloria Ladson-Billings

This approach to urban education is a **double investment** in urban communities in Indianapolis:

- it provides pedagogy and curricula lending direct relevance of school in students' lives
- it also works to break the cycle of disinvestment of human capital in urban communities by
 - creating graduates who recognize their potential agency to improve urban centers and their neighborhoods, rather than seeing them as places to escape.

These prospects offer:

- IPS students a renewed sense of purpose with regard to school, and
- IPS neighborhoods the necessary human and institutional capital to contribute to its social, economic, and political revitalization.

What is foundational, IPS teachers and students can help create and carry out these social-economic reforms making their public schools important sites of intervention, interventions the intent of which are to remove the social toxins that can interfere with their school success.

Moreover, and also of great importance to the overall goal of improving life in IPS neighborhoods, by engaging staff and students in change, partnering with parents/guardians, and helping provide political and social-economic support services to resident-citizens at school sites, IPS can make IPS schools proactive change agents in the city at large.

It's a win-win situation: IPS and its schools are improved; current IPS students and graduates are able to think and live critically, and have empowering experiences solving the relevant real-world problems they face daily; the IPS neighborhoods are improved and continue the movement to eradicate the circumstances of poverty and nurture sustainability; and, IPS shares in the success.

Conclusions

“The [Freedom] Schools raised serious questions about the role of education in our American society: Can teachers...meet students on the basis of common attraction to an exciting social goal? Is it possible to declare that the aim of education is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for racial and national hatred, and to turn all educational efforts into national striving for these solutions?”

~ Sandra Adickes quoting Howard Zinn in *The Legacy of a Freedom School*

It is important to remember: to be successful in the long run, our IPS will need to be combine school improvement plans with more comprehensive approaches and actions to improve the economic, social, cultural and political circumstances of IPS students and their families. When the urban families and communities know their IPS is not only educating their children well but helping improve their lives and neighborhoods, the district will have their full support.

So, B&LPI requests IPS join those in urban neighborhoods who are not resigned, complacent, or afraid of banding together to engage in struggles to change attitudes and to alter existing political and economic priorities and laws. By collaborating, we can, as Anyon suggests, summon from ourselves and others the outrage, combativeness, and courage to transform both our public schools and the communities where each is located.

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This proposal is a compilation of ideas and direct quotes form *Ghetto Schooling* by Professor Jean Anyon and *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* by Professors Jeffry Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell.