

A comprehensive vision for urban school transformation:
A proposal to make the efforts of Charter Schools USA to improve our Emma Donnan Middle School and Emmerich Manual High School successful

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 school reform regarding our Emma Donnan Middle School and Manual High School. This vision recognizes the need to move beyond attempts to only change the system of education inside the school 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 Southeast students and their families.

We believe that in the absence of a long-range strategy to foster the self-determination and self-reliance Southeast 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 in Southeast.

The Southeast community must have an equal or greater voice than Charter Schools USA in determining the destiny of our own public schools. This is fundamental. Reforming and improving Emma Donnan and Manual is just one part of our broader strategy for change because we realize no real improvement will come through the educational efforts of Charter Schools USA until the Southeast community is empowered economically and politically. We do not want the poverty and other social toxins that plague the Southeast area to be eased or escaped from, but to be eradicated; and, we expect Charter Schools USA 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 Weientz of the New Jersey Supreme Court,
Abbott v. Burke decision in 1990

Everyone concerned with the present and future takeover of our Emma Donnan Middle School (EDMS) and Manual High School (MHS) by Charter Schools USA (CSUSA) 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 reform. 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 are aware of the challenges of the information age, globalization, and skill-based technology, making an empowering education indispensable. Finally, educators have long testified and research has long demonstrated: schools with large shares of economically disadvantaged children become overwhelmed by factors which interfere with learning.

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 poverty, are major factors influencing 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 exodus of jobs from urban to suburbs (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 in new classrooms, more computers, high stakes testing, reduced class size, bringing in the best teachers and offering incentives, 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 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 effort to address the problems of poverty and other social toxins in urban communities.

B&LPI therefore calls for a more comprehensive vision of school reform regarding our EDMS and MHS. This broader and deeper 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 Southeast students and their families.

However, the intent of this comprehensive vision is not to "blame" IPS, parents, or even the students themselves for widely inadequate educational performances. The intent, rather, is to illuminate the point that we cannot ignore how the cumulative effects of poverty and social-residential isolation of

many Southeast area neighborhoods and the larger urban 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.

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

Indeed, CSUSA is aware--and over 30 years of research consistently demonstrates--that academic achievement in U.S. schools is closely correlated with student socioeconomic status. To really improve the chances of the children of the Southeast community, 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.*

"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

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 the individuals involved (both students/families and CSUSA), without a long-range strategy to eradicate underlying causes of poverty and isolation, cannot add up to large victories in our Southeast area neighborhoods with effects that are sustainable over time.

Although CSUSA has a reputation helping students do well inside their southern charter schools, the benefits of educational reform are nullified here in the Southeast when the graduates of a restructured EDMS or MHS have no more decent economic prospects greeting them than the graduates of unreformed IPS schools. As well, the benefits of educational reform are nullified when the graduates of a restructured EDMS or MHS must continue to face the everyday urban issues and social toxins as do the graduates of unreformed IPS schools. 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 reform are symbiotic

Successful educational reform at EDMS and MHS, leading to improved achievement by students, is not only dependent on revitalizing the Southeast community, but is itself a crucial component of the more comprehensive change in urban education reform B&LPI envisions.

Since educational upgrading of EDMS and EMTHS is itself dependent on improvements in the lives and opportunities of Southeast residents, CSUSA will need to link up with those who can create better social-economic conditions. A successful revitalization of Southeast through the spread of this new energetic vision requires a community-corporate enterprise and financial investment by CSUSA into Southeast neighborhoods.

Quality education in the Southeast area requires bringing about the participation of under-utilized residents, individually owned or franchised businesses, labor groups, social and faith-based organizations, non-profits, and government agencies in a community economic rebirth. As should be clear by now, however, while CSUSA attempts successful educational reform, without the Southeast community's economic and political revitalization, the greater educational revitalization in Southeast community 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 Southeast area, we face an impossible situation regarding sustainable urban educational reform. According to Professor Jean Anyon in her landmark book, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (1997), attempting to fix Emma Donnon or Manual without also "fixing" the Southeast community in which it's embedded is "...like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door."

Schools as major sites for major social transformation

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

The implications 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, we propose a movement for a major transformation of the Southeast. We call upon CSUSA to join forces with us, and the under-utilized persons/groups mentioned above, if they are to consider their time reforming EDMS and MHS worthwhile.

"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

Indeed, Southeast has a neighborhood community services center and area health care clinics, yet SETF and CSUSA can approach foundations and governmental granting agencies to help us link up EDMS and MHS school reform with grants to groups and agencies providing additional and even better health, economic, and social services to neighborhood residents. In fact, SETF and CSUSA grant seekers will need to write proposals for programs that utilize EDMS and MHS as centers where referrals to these economic, political, and social services are made or where these services are provided.

Why is this so significant? When EDMS and MHS 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 CSUSA's education will make a substantial positive difference in the lives of their students and their neighborhoods may also motivate teachers and other school staff to a higher level of performance. At that point CSUSA teachers, principals, and the corporation's quality curriculum exemplified by its use of the ideas of nationally acclaimed educator Robert J. Marzano (1992 & 2009) and ongoing parent communication through integrated student information system (SIS) can more easily make a difference in the lives of those Southeast families living in the circumstances of poverty.

Staff, students, and parents help transform education and the community

What is profound and challenging, EDMS and MHS 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. This will foster critical thinking and critical living, empowering and liberating the students living in poverty in Southeast to demand their moral, economic, and political right to an education equal to that offered to students in the best schools in America.

B&LPI envisions EDMS and MHS as centers where the economic and political disenfranchisement of Southeast area 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 two-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 and critical friends whose questions and suggestions are expected. And, the result of that dialogue makes for better school policy and instruction.

What is significant is genuine dialogue supports the idea of parents as activists. Activism is needed to break a longstanding tradition of what our community and others have come to believe parents, particularly low income and bi-cultural, are capable of understanding and entitled to do. Indeed parental support of student achievement is vital, but so is helping parents/guardians understand and promote their personal process of empowerment and efficacy. In this way, parents/guardians offer the most honest and powerful support of Charter Schools USA.

Moreover, and of great importance to the overall goal of improving life in Southeast 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, CSUSA can make EDMS and MHS proactive change agents in the Southeast community at large.

It's a win-win situation: EDMS/MHS are reformed; current Southeast students and Manual graduates are able to think and live critically, and have empowering experiences solving relevant real-world problems; the Southeast community is improved and continues the movement to eradicate the circumstances of poverty and nurture sustainability; and, Charter Schools USA shares in the success.

B&LPI request CSUSA join us in a vigorous effort to engage Southeast resident-citizens of all ages in a grassroots struggle to change attitudes and to alter existing community economic-social condition as well as the political priorities of the city and state through providing the following:

- concerted federal, state, and county government actions to jump-start economic growth in Southeast and to spread the current growth in downtown Indianapolis to our community.
- programs to train Southeast residents for entry level jobs, more sophisticated positions, entrepreneurial endeavors, worker-led businesses, and ownership of capital for investment.
- legal services groups offering counsel and guidance for negotiating the maze of social services, and that can initiate lawsuits to obtain full service if necessary.
- housing and tenants associations that work for better conditions and sufficient low-income housing
- opportunities to develop education and literacy for citizenship and voter registration activities
- coalitions for the homeless that offer temporary shelter and permanent housing.

B&LPI also requests CSUSA join those in Southeast 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.

Educational reformers like CSUSA, housing activists, social justice attorneys, health care progressives, community organizers, labor-business partnerships--those who are in a position to create jobs and fund social change will work together. B&LPI requests that CSUSA:

- will support and fund a quality program to prepare pre-K staff in area churches and homes to provide children basic and appropriate academic knowledge and skills
- will support and fund the poverty video project
- will support and fund the poverty think tank
- will support and fund a student research organization initiative
- will support and fund the community efforts to organize those South East residents of all ages living in the circumstances of poverty
- will support, fund, and implement "A History of Labor" curriculum
- will support the creation and use of a common glossary of terms so we can come to a mutual understanding of the issues, ideas, and terms we will use as we develop our collaboration

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, any present and future Charter Schools USA educational initiatives chosen for our Southeast area schools will need to be combined with a more comprehensive plan and actions to improve the economic and political circumstances of Southeast students and their families.

By collaborating, we can, as Anyon suggests, summon from ourselves and others the outrage, combativeness, and courage to transform both our area public schools and Southeast community,

References

- Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities theory to practice in urban schools*. New York City, NY: Peter Lang
- Ginwright, S. (2010). *Black Youth Rising: Activism & Radical Healing in Urban America*. New York City, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Marzano, R. (1992). *A Different Kind of Classroom: Teaching with Dimensions of Learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Marzano, R. & Brown, J. (2009) *A Handbook for the Art and Science of Teaching*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

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 Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell.