

A comprehensive vision for the transformation of Southeast Indianapolis public education

The Southeast Working-Class Task Force maintains that to be successful, educational reforms in Southeast schools have to be part of a larger effort to address the problems of poverty and other social toxins in the Southeast.

Thus, we call for a comprehensive vision of urban education. 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--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 cultural empowerment that Southeast resident-citizens need to challenge and eradicate the underlying causes of poverty and other social toxins, heroic attempts to reform 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 Southeast 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, the citizen taxpayers and students who live in Southeast neighborhoods where our public schools are located, must have an equal or greater voice than the school district, charter board, or for-profit corporation in determining the destiny of their own public schools. This is fundamental. Transforming, not reforming Southeast schools via a relevant and life-changing curricula is just one part of our broader strategy for change because we realize no real improvement will come through the educational efforts of these schools until the urban communities where they are located are empowered economically and politically. We do not want the poverty and other social toxins that plague Southeast neighborhoods and families to be eased or escaped from, but eradicated; and, we expect each of our Southeast 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*

Southeast Working-Class Task Force Indianapolis, Indiana USA

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

The Southeast Working-Class Task Force (SEW-CTF)

The task force was established in early 2015 by the Southeast Congress and is an outcome of the Southeast Poverty Study Circle. The task force is dedicated to the following goals regarding our Southeast Indianapolis neighborhoods: preserving its working-class history and culture, increasing the representation of low-income families in community affairs, and easing and eradicating poverty.

The members of the SEW-CTF are visionaries

In light of the above goals, it must be known that since early 2010 the leaders of the task force have maintained that in order to make fundamental changes in our community, we must challenge and eradicate poverty and other social toxins. To promote a needed public conversation about poverty, then Poverty Study Circle membership and current task force members produced and published a documentary on poverty in the Southeast side of Indianapolis. The film, *Who owns poverty?* debuted on YouTube in April of 2014. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrQjaXBLC1I>.

What part do Southeast public schools play in discussions on local poverty?

The goals of the task force also illustrate our concern with the present and future of public education on the Southeast side of Indianapolis. We want the best for our community, its residents, families, and students. Many are aware of the "push-out" rates (Schott Foundation, 2012), dropout rates and test scores which have enhanced the importance of and increased the urgency for effective Southeast public school transformation. The relationship among incarceration rates, illiteracy, and quality of life are well known. Those under-resourced who live in poverty or those working poor families and their children must be educated to be critical thinkers and citizens. Most know the challenges of the information age, globalization, and skill-based technology, making an empowering education indispensable. Finally, the task force knows 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 Duncan-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, 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 (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008)

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 Duncan-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 SEW-CTF 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 the Southeast.

“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

The task force therefore calls for a more comprehensive vision of education regarding our public schools. Just “reforming” schools is not enough to meet the challenges of poverty. Our transformative 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 Southeast students and their families.

Hence, this vision illuminates the issue: we cannot ignore how the cumulative effects of poverty and social/residential isolation of most Southeast 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 this proposal result from a deep structural analysis. The ultimate goal of the task force is to redress the effects of the destructive isolation of our under-resourced

Southeast residents, and to reduce and eventually 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 authentically improve the quality of life for children living in Southeast neighborhoods, we must increase their social and economic well-being and status before and while they are students--not after. As suggested by Anyon (1997), we must therefore ultimately eliminate poverty; *we must eliminate our underperforming Southeast schools by eliminating the underlying structural causes of these unacceptable performances.*

"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

Have Indiana's school reform initiatives made a difference?

In 2011, Indianapolis Public Schools' Emman Donnan (7-8), and Manual and Howe (9-12) were taken over by Charters USA (Associated Press, 2011). In late 2014, the Indiana Board of Education extended the contract with Charter Schools USA. Manual's school grade had moved from an F to a D. (Charters Schools USA, 2014).

Unfortunately, educational "small victories" such as efforts to "takeover"/"turnaround" schools or the introduction of a classroom pedagogical technique that engage students and increase academic performance (as measured by ISTEP) are not enough. No matter how satisfying school improvement is to all those involved, without a long-range strategy to eradicate the underlying causes of poverty and isolation, just "turning around" a school cannot add up to any large victories in Southeast neighborhoods the effects of which are sustainable over time.

Although our Southeast neighborhoods have schools/programs that work for particular students and families, the benefits of academic achievement are nullified here when our successful graduates have no more decent economic prospects greeting them than the graduates of under-performing schools. As well, the benefits of academic achievement are again nullified when Southeast graduates must continue to face the everyday urban issues and social toxins as do the graduates of a poorer performing Southeast program (Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

In other words, the task force cannot deem any Southeast school 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). Too many structural barriers still exist countering the efforts of students of certain colors or/and class. It is these barriers and other social toxins which must be challenged and eradicated by "anti-poverty" and social justice curricula recommend by this proposal.

Thus, the SEW-CTF 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:
Combining three approaches**

If successful educational transformation of our public schools, leading to improved academic achievement by students, is dependent on revitalizing our Southeast community, then 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 Southeast residents, Southeast schools will need to link up with those who can create better social-economic conditions. A successful revitalization of Southeast neighborhoods through the spread of this new energetic vision requires a community-government-business-labor enterprise and financial investment into the neighborhoods where our Southeast schools are located.

Quality education in our neighborhoods 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 Southeast schools attempt successful turnaround educational transformation, without the economic and political revitalization of certain urban neighborhoods, the greater educational revitalization in urban public education is unlikely to occur. Both must be undertaken together. This collaboration is the basic ingredient of the more comprehensive vision of SEW-CTF proposes.

Admittedly, all this constitutes quite a challenge. However, if we do not improve the communities surrounding Southeast 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 Southeast schools without also improving the communities in which our Southeast schools are embedded is "...like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door."

SEW-CTF is also concerned about the economy, decent paying jobs, worker-owned businesses, housing, the local environment, civic engagement, adequate transit, health care (physical and mental), pre-K to 6 education, local & federal policies, and improved and trusted police relations.

The implications of 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, SEW-CTF proposes a movement for a major transformation of our neighborhoods.

Certainly, some Southeast neighborhoods have a community service centers and recreational centers, and area health care clinics. Yet, our public schools can approach foundations and governmental granting agencies to help us link up Southeast school transformation with grants to groups and agencies providing additional and even better health, economic, and social recreational services to all our neighborhood residents. In fact, a coalition of Southeast public school and community grant seekers will need to write proposals for programs that utilize our 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 Southeast 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 a public school education will make a substantial positive difference in the lives of Southeast students and their neighborhoods may also motivate Southeast school teachers and other school staff to a higher level of performance. At that point, such a Southeast schools-community coalition can more easily make a difference in the lives of the many under-resourced Southeast families living in the circumstances of poverty.

Approach II: Southeast public schools as sites for major social transformation

Under this strategy, parents, staff and students will organize to help improve education, and serve and change their community.

- Parents as critical friends of Southeast neighborhood schools

SEW-CTF envisions our schools as centers where the economic and political disenfranchisement of Southeast citizen-residents, especially parents/guardians, are addressed. Parents or guardians are more likely to participate in school reform activities, and be 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 simply 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 two-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; Parent Power, 2014). We just have to look at how empowered parents run schools in Chicago for an example (Loflin, 2012). Yes, parental support of student achievements 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 Southeast public schools.

- Staff and students at Southeast public schools help transform education and their community

What is significant is all Southeast public 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: Southeast public school 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 and/or place-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 our Southeast schools. The UK has been seeking the opinions of high school students when making school decisions since 2002. See: www.schoolcouncils.org. These schools involve students because all the research shows student participation has positive effects on school climate.

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.

Approach III: 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--must be explored and made relevant

- Preparing Southeast students for college

Making students ready for college is one of the main responsibilities of Southeast public schools. Yet, while striving for the academic achievement of every student, we 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 Southeast public schools 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, Southeast public school 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. *Therefore, SEW-CTF 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 Southeast 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 Southeast neighborhoods:

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

These prospects offer:

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

What is foundational: Southeast 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 the academic success of the school and its students.

Moreover, (and also of great importance to the overall goal of improving the quality of 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, Southeast schools become proactive neighborhood change agents.

It's a win-win situation:

- Southeast schools are improved;
- current Southeast students and graduates are able to think and live critically, and have empowering experiences solving the relevant real-world problems the face daily;
- Southeast neighborhoods are improved and continue the movement to eradicate the circumstances of poverty and nurture sustainability;
- Southeast neighborhoods do not become places from which to “escape” but to stay; and
- Southeast schools and programs share 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, each Southeast public school will need to combine school improvement plans with more comprehensive approaches and actions to improve the economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances of our students and their families. When Southeast families and communities know their schools are not only educating their children well, but helping improve their lives and neighborhoods, these schools and programs will have their full support.

So, the Southeast Working-Class Task Force requests all Southeast schools join those of us 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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