

Urban schools don't need fixing: We can't call schools designed to fail "broken"

The crisis is not about education at all. It's about power. ~ James Baldwin

Education is indoctrination if you're white - subjugation if you're black. ~ James Baldwin

The idea public urban schools are broken and need fixing was the basis for the 2014 IPS school reform debate. Commentaries and articles such as "IPS, Mind Trust propose fellowships to fix failing schools" (*Star*, April 23), "Blame is not going to rescue failing schools" (*Recorder*, Nov. 13), "Board seeks bigger role to fix schools" (*Star*, Dec. 4), and "Families should be free to move children from failing schools" (*Recorder*, Dec. 11).

Of course IPS Commissioner Kelly Bentley suggested this scenario in March 16, 2012 *Star* commentary titled, "A broken system."

Indeed, urban schools produce academic failure. Yet, this happens inside a system designed to predetermine winners and losers: some schools have resources for success and others do not. Thus, the "failure" of urban schools is not actually the result of failing. Urban districts like IPS are not broken. They're working exactly as designed.

Here's the question for Indy's African Americans: Has public education ever made its mission to educate all children equally and effectively? The obvious answer is no. Reality reveals decades of fiscal, political, and structural policies that deliberately undercut and demean public education.

This doesn't excuse poor academic outcomes in many urban schools, but suggests advancing past the politics of "fixing failure." According to *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* (the basis of this essay), "failure" in urban districts continues because:

1) *The Politics of Failure*: Perpetual failure is tolerated because deep down America subscribes to the belief that someone must fail in school. Here, failure results from the inferiority of the student, the family, or her/his culture and community. This deficit-model of students is built into most schools through a largely unchallenged system of grading and testing which by its very design guarantees failure for some.

2) *The Economics of Failure*: Public schools are America's socio-economic sorting machine where economic futures are cast and people are sorted into future roles. In short, some people must fill the least desirable places in society. It's important they feel they deserve to be in those positions or, basically, that there is a formal mechanism (public education) to justify their place there.

In effect, the high-stakes nature of this sorting process plays itself out behind the talk of opportunity and the myth of school-based meritocracy: all students compete under similar rules with equal opportunity. Still, in the game of education, some families and students have high levels of cultural capital. This guarantees an unfair competition producing the same unequal outcomes.

Change comes when citizens challenge the myth of meritocracy and the hype about "opportunity." The few exceptional urban students who combine fortitude and fortune to succeed in under-resourced schools play an important role in this myth making, confirming for the public that opportunity exists for anyone who wants it bad enough. This opens the door for others to say the reason some fail is simply because they and their families don't care about education or they haven't worked hard enough. This is, of course, untrue.

The stratified nature of society creates a "social pyramid" with no room at the top for everyone. This requires people to be sorted. Our public schools (both traditional and charter) are the "mechanism" used to resolve this messy social "conundrum." This helps explain the

present debate over the control of Indy's nationally famous Shortridge. The new urban middle-class of all colors wants Shortridge badly. Having a child graduate from the prestigious Shortridge will advance their social capital and that child's chances in life. See "Shortridge shuffle: A race-based fiasco courtesy of IPS" in the Nov. 25, 2014 *Indianapolis Recorder*, http://www.indianapolisrecorder.com/opinion/article_55d8d708-74c9-11e4-ace8-f7e3ebd2265e.html Also, the city wants an academic (International Baccalaureate) Shortridge to speed-up the gentrification of the mid-north/mid-town areas.

Having "equal opportunity" exist (currently defined as all children having access to public schools) helps maintain the story of a democratic and meritocratic society where competition churns the cream to the top, ultimately benefiting everyone by rewarding the most deserving. Still, those benefiting most from this sorting process look, talk, think, and act most like those who already have power.

This is inequality by design and well documented. IPS plays a role in the perpetuation of this rigged social lottery: the nation's poorest are most likely to be denied access to a quality education and blamed for their academic failure. Thus, with consistency, IPS disproportionately produces the citizens who will hold the least desirable and least mobile socio-economic positions. These positions will be mainly occupied by residents emerging from the district's poorest neighborhoods.

If IPS is criticized as broken, then these failures mean IPS is in fact successful at enabling the results it's designed to produce. We can't call schools designed to fail "broken."

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<http://www.nuvo.net/GuestVoices/archives/2013/02/07/perspectives-in-education-john-harris-loflin>

http://www.indianapolisrecorder.com/opinion/article_1d3be30c-ffcc-11e4-a3ef-3ff120b0f224.html