



Urban schools aren't broken: Moving to a 21st century vision of urban education

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

The idea IPS is broken and needs fixing is the basis for the current local school reform debate. This assertion leaves unchallenged facts showing wealthier communities have better educational opportunities than low-income. It doesn't make sense then to compare schools across these communities and then pronounce IPS as failing.

Urban schools produce academic failure at alarming rates. Yet, this happens inside a system designed to essentially predetermine winners and losers: one set of schools have the resources for succeed and another set of schools is not. Thus, the "failure" of urban schools is not actually the result of failing. *Urban schools like IPS are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do.*

Here's the question: has our public school system ever made its actual mission to educate all children equally and effectively? The obvious answer is no. Reality reveals decades of fiscal, political, and structural policies which deliberately undercut and demean urban public schools. This doesn't excuse poor academic outcomes in many urban schools, but suggests advancing past 20th century ideas based on "fixing failure."

According to *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*, on which most of this letter is based, there are two reasons why school failure in urban districts continues.

1. **The Politics of Failure:** Perpetual urban school failure is tolerated because deep down our nation 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. Indeed, this deficit-model of students is built into most schools through the existence of 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 their 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 (urban schools) 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 suggesting all students compete under similar rules with equal opportunity. Still, in the game of education, some families/students have high levels of social, political, economic capital. This guarantees an unfair competition and producing the same unequal outcomes.

To change public education, citizens must 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 do not care about education or they haven't worked hard enough. This is, of course, untrue.

The stratified nature of our current society creates a “social pyramid” with no room at the top for everyone. This requires people to be sorted, and schools are the “mechanism” used to resolve this messy social “conundrum.”

The fact that opportunity exists (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 society as a whole 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. Our IPS plays a role in the perpetuation of this rigged social lottery: the nation's poorest are the most likely to be denied access to a quality education and blamed (directly or indirectly) for their academic "failure." Thus, with consistency, IPS disproportionately produces the citizens who will hold the least desirable and least mobile socio-economic positions and these positions will be mainly occupied by residents emerging from the district's poorest communities.

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/PerspectivesinEducation/archives/2013/02/07/perspectives-in-education-john-harris-loflin>