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Publication Date

2002-10-01

Racial Isolation, Poverty and the Limits of Local Control as a Means for Holding Public Schools Accountable

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October 2002

UCLA/IDEA

There is perhaps no other sector that reflects the fractured nature of civil society in the United States more than public education. Despite a Supreme Court decision calling for schools to be racially integrated, public schools across the United States remain largely segregated with respect to the race and class make-up of their student populations (Orfield and Eaton 1996). Public schools are not only segregated, but in most American cities, poor children have been consigned to schools that show very little evidence of serving their educational needs. On every known measure of academic performance, the vast majority of students attending urban public schools in the United States (especially those who are African American and Latino), are deficient with respect to basic literacy and math skills (Miller 1995; James, Jurich and Estes 2001).

In California, the state's Academic Performance Index (API) rankings reveal that poor academic performance is most common in school districts serving low-income populations, particularly in racially isolated urban areas where poverty tends to be concentrated (Ed-data 2002). This is true in large cities such as Los Angeles, Fresno and Oakland, and it is also true in smaller cities such as Compton, Marin City and East Palo Alto. The State of California holds local school districts accountable for the academic performance of students, but it does relatively little to ensure that schools meet the conditions that are necessary to provide adequate educational opportunities for all students. Although numerous studies have shown that poverty and racial isolation contribute significantly to school failure (Coleman 1966; Jencks 1972; Kozol

1991), the state does very little to mitigate the effects of these external conditions. Instead,
responsibility for monitoring educational quality is delegated to educational leaders in school
districts and elected school boards in keeping with the long-standing practice of allowing local
communities to manage and operate public schools (Blasi 2001).

There is a vast body of research and evidence that shows such an approach does not
work. In most cases, poor communities lack the resources necessary to monitor the quality of
education provided to students. Concentrated poverty and racial isolation limit the ability of
parents to exert control over the schools that serve their children, and educational leaders in such
communities often lack the resources to take on the task themselves. For a variety of reasons that
shall be presented, conditions external to schools such as poverty, crime, housing affordability
and health care access, exert considerable influence over conditions within schools (Coleman,
et.al. 1966; Noguera 1996). Unless the state intervenes decisively to support schools in low-
income communities, it is unlikely that such schools will ever improve.

Drawing on research and work carried out in schools and community organizations in
Oakland, California over a twenty-year period, this paper presents an analysis of the ways in
which poverty and racial isolation have contributed to the problems that have plagued schools in
the district. The analysis presented draws upon the concept of social capital; a concept that has
been used by social scientists to study how social relationships and networks are related to the
quality of civic life.   Social capital has also been employed to understand a variety of issues and
problems facing inner-city communities (Sampson 2000; Waquant 1998).   Through an analysis
of the factors that hinder the development of social capital in low-income communities, I will
show why local control is inadequate as a mechanism for holding schools accountable in high

poverty areas. I also hope to use such an approach to draw attention to what it might take to transform inner city schools into genuine assets for the communities that they serve.

Race, Class and School Accountability

Although there is considerable variation among local school districts in the United States with respect to the demographic composition of the students and communities they serve, the policies used to regulate America's public schools are amazingly consistent. This is the case with respect to the application of Federal statutes (e.g. Special and Compensatory Education) that are used to regulate the provision of educational services to specially designated populations. It is also the case with respect to the strategies employed by states to hold school districts accountable. In the last five years most state governments have implemented academic standards and assessments to monitor student achievement (Elmore 1996). With few exceptions, there is also a high level of consistency in the policies that provide the legal parameters for school governance through a practice commonly referred to as "local control".

Throughout the United States, communities of all kinds elect individuals to school boards who have primary responsibility for managing the affairs of public schools.[1] Local control is a unique form of governance that is a product of the decentralized and largely unplanned historical process that gave birth to public education in the United States (Katznelson and Weir 1994). Unlike most other nations that have centrally planned and managed educational systems, the United States has a highly decentralized system in which primary responsibility for the affairs of schools is delegated to local school boards. Local control continues to be widely practiced even during periods of intense criticism over the quality of public education, largely because it is

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[1] There are cities such as Boston and Chicago, and jurisdictions where school board members are appointed by the Mayor or some other elected official.

perceived as inherently more democratic than a centralized Federal or state-managed system (Linn 2000).

Local governance of public schools ostensibly serves as a means to insure that schools are responsive and accountable to the communities that they serve. Locally elected school board members are typically responsible for overseeing matters pertaining to financial management and personnel (e.g. collective bargaining agreements), while the education professionals they hire have primary responsibility for managing the provision of educational services. The system is designed so that those with a vested interest in the affairs of public schools – parents and the local community – are well positioned to monitor conditions in their schools.

Yet, inequities among school districts and the communities they serve are rampant and extreme, and local control does not make it easier for schools to address the academic needs of poor students. Academic performance outcomes generally reflect broader patterns of inequality that are evident elsewhere in American society (Kozol 1991; Noguera and Akom 2000). Local control and financing of public education exacerbates educational inequality because there is wide variation in the ability of local communities to generate revenue and support for schools at the local level (Cibilka 2001). As a result of local control, affluent communities with a higher tax base are generally able to provide more funding for schools than poor communities. Even in states such as California, where as a result of *Serano v. Priest*,[2] the formula used to finance schools is more equitable, there is wide variation in the ability of communities to generate supplemental resources.

Differences in per pupil spending often mirror differences in the abilities of school districts to generate and sustain civic engagement in various activities and affairs related to the

management and operation of public schools. While affluent communities generally have little difficulty eliciting community participation in school board elections, site decision-making councils, and other avenues for civic involvement, low-income communities often encounter obstacles in enlisting and sustaining the involvement of parents and a diverse cross section of community members in such activities (Epstein 1993).

Low levels of parental and community participation in public schools is frequently interpreted as an indication of disinterest in education. Yet, these patterns follow trends that are common to other forms of civic engagement (eg. voting, participation within political parties and community organizations) in low-income communities (Putnam 1995). The reasons that have been suggested for lower involvement vary, ranging from lack of time and information (Gold 2001), to feelings of powerlessness and a low sense of individual and collective efficacy (Lareau 1988). Whatever the explanation it is clear that in urban areas like Oakland, where poverty is concentrated and poor people are socially isolated, the parents of the children who experience the greatest difficulty in school also tend to be the least involved.

Poverty, Racial Isolation and Oakland's Failing Schools

As is true for most other school districts in the United States that cater to poor children and their families, on most measures of academic performance the Oakland Unified School District demonstrates little evidence of success in educating its students. For example, recent data from the California Department of Education shows that 43 of Oakland's 56 elementary

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[2] Serano v. Priest, 5 Cal. 3d 584 (1971)

schools received a ranking of 5 or less on the Academic Performance Index (API).[3] This means

that according to the state's performance measure, two thirds of Oakland's elementary schools

are considered "low performing". Under the 1999 Public School Accountability Act "low

performing" schools are to be subject to various sanctions and possible state takeover if they

show no improvement over three years.

The challenge confronting the district as a result of the new policy is daunting. More than

half of Oakland's elementary schools received an API rating of 1 or 2 (the lowest possible score)

from the state. Prospects for change appear even more remote among secondary schools. All but

one of the 16 middle schools and all seven of the district's high schools received API ratings

below 5. The API ratings for Oakland's schools are consistent with a broader set of academic

indicators such as the drop-out rate (25.2%),[4] the suspension and expulsion rate, student grade

point averages, and college eligibility rates (19.6%).[5] All of these indicators serve to reinforce

the widespread impression that Oakland public schools are failing and that enrollment in them

should be avoided by those who can.

Yet, despite the public embarrassment engendered by the publication of the school

rankings, the threat of state takeover may actually do little to prod the District to improve. With

hundreds of failing schools and districts across California, the ability of the state to intervene is

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[3] The academic performance index is a rating system which assesses the performance of schools based upon the average scores received by its students on the Stanford 9 achievement tests. For information on PSAA see http://www.cde.ca.gov/iiusp/

[4] Most researchers regard official dropout rates as inaccurate because it fails to capture students who dropout before entering high school. See Civil Rights project

[5] College eligibility rates are determined by the number of high school graduates who have successfully taken the courses and obtained the test scores necessary for admission to either the University of California or the California State University system.

likely to be limited.[6]   Moreover, the State's own track record in managing failing districts

indicates that it may be no more able to improve schools than local school districts.[7]

Oakland has received more than its share of ridicule and blame for the failure of its

schools. In 1996 national attention was focused on the district as a result of the controversy

created by the district's adoption of a policy that called for Ebonics (also known as Black

vernacular English) to be treated as a legitimate second language. As news and confusion spread

about the School Board's new language policy, Oakland was immediately subjected to ridicule

and scorn for promoting what critics referred to as "bad English" and "slang" in the media (Perry

and Delpitt 1997). Within a few weeks of the Board's resolution, the California State

Legislature and US Congress moved quickly to prohibit the use of state or Federal funds to

support implementation of the policy. The District even came under attack from several

prominent African American leaders who charged the District with damaging the education of

Black children through its poorly conceived policy.[8]

Responding to the Non-Academic Needs of Students and the "Captured Market" Problem

Interestingly, even as Oakland's schools were castigated over the Ebonics resolution, few

of those who engaged in the attack offered any recommendations for actions the district might

take to solve the problem it was attempting to address. The widely misunderstood policy had

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[6] For a detailed description of conditions in California's public schools and the number of schools that may be subject to reconstitution as result of PSAA see "Who is accountable to Our Children: Conditions in California Public Schools at the Beginning of the Millennium, available at http://www.law.ucla.edu/reports517003.htm

[7] In the past, the state of California has only intervened in school districts when they were fiscally insolvent. In 1995, the state took over management of Compton public schools and turned control back to the locally elected school board in 2001. However, there is little evidence that conditions in Compton's schools have improved. See "Accountability won't rescue disadvantaged students" 5 *California Educator* (June).

[8] In addition to the attacks from the media and politicians, critics of Oakland's language policy included individuals such as the Reverend Jesse Jackson and poet Maya Angelou. However, once these individuals learned that the district had not intention of teaching children Ebonics as had been reported in the press, but rather sought to train teachers on how to work with students who speak Ebonics so that they can be taught standard English, their positions were reversed.

been adopted by the School Board in response to a recommendation from a task force on African American student achievement. The task force had been formed for the purpose of devising a strategy to address widespread academic failure among African American students. (The grade point average for Black students in Oakland in 1996 was 1.8) While it might be fair to question the District's emphasis on Ebonics as a strategy for raising student achievement, the absence of alternative suggestions served as the strongest indication that the critics had no idea themselves of what should be done to respond the problem.

Yet, as disturbing as the outlook for schools in Oakland might appear, a closer look at the characteristics of the students it serves reveals that the situation is more complex than it seems. According to the state's data, nearly two thirds of students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch based upon household income (Education Data Partnership 2001), and over 40% of its students come from families served by the CalWORKS program (formerly AFDC). The concentration of poverty is even more intense when one considers that all of the schools that received an API rating of 1 or 2, and have been designated "low performing", serve student populations where over 90% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Additionally, more than a third of the district's students are from families that recently migrated to the United States whose first language is not English (Education Data Partnership 20001). The school district is also responsible for providing adequate educational opportunities for these students who speak over seventy different languages.

Oakland students also come to school with a wide array of unmet social, material and emotional needs that affect their ability to learn. For example, because their families are often uninsured, many poor children lack access to adequate health and dental care (Alameda County

Health Department 1998). This means that they are less likely to receive preventative treatment and more likely to rely upon hospital emergency rooms when they become ill. As is true for poor children elsewhere in the country, Oakland students are more likely to suffer from asthma and tooth decay and less likely to receive eye glasses when they need them (Alameda County Health Department 1998). As a result of poverty and the high cost of housing in the Bay Area, many Oakland students experience a high level of transience and are forced to change schools frequently when their families move into new housing. Finally, although data on these issues is less reliable, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that large numbers of Oakland's students come to school hungry, without adequate clothing, and suffering from stress as a result of domestic conflict in their families (Noguera 1996).

At Lowell Middle School in West Oakland where I conducted research in the early 1990s, over 40% of the students suffered from some form of chronic respiratory condition, and two thirds of all students lived in a household with someone other than a biological parent (Noguera 1996). District officials applied considerable pressure on the school's leadership to raise test scores (which were among the lowest for middle schools in the District), but they did little to address the health and welfare needs of students at Lowell even though they were well aware of the obstacles these created. District administrators adopt a narrow focus on raising student achievement, not because they do not understand that a broad array of social and economic factors influence academic outcomes, but because they lack the resources to address the external conditions that impact student learning.

District administrators are not the only ones who ignore the health and welfare needs of poor children as they press schools that serve them to improve. State and Federal policy makers

collect data on some of the needs of poor children, but do little to ensure that districts like

Oakland receive additional resources to address these needs.[9] Instead, even though more affluent

children in neighboring school districts such as Piedmont, Moraga and Orinda arrive at school

better prepared academically and generally have fewer unmet needs, significantly more money is

spent on their education than is spent on children in Oakland (Ed Data 2001). Even as the State

moves forward with its effort to hold all schools accountable for the academic performance of

students, it continues to ignore the fact that poor and affluent students have vastly different needs

and are generally educated under very different conditions. Moreover, the state's accountability

policies, like the idea of local control, ignores the fact that low-income communities such as

those served by public schools in Oakland, lack the resources to hold schools accountable for the

service they provide to students.

Despite the severity of the problems facing children in school districts like Oakland, such

matters have generally not resulted in state or national intervention. Rather, under the pretense

of local control Oakland's educational problems are treated as local matters to be addressed by

locally elected officials and the community itself. The state and federal government allocates a

variety of supplemental funds to serve the special needs of particular populations of students

(e.g. special education, bilingual education, compensatory education, etc.), authority for

managing the affairs of schools in Oakland is delegated to the locally elected school board. With

seven elected and three appointed members,[10] the Board of Education has responsibility for

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[9] Evidence that the State and Federal government is aware of the additional needs of poor children can be seen in policies such as Compensatory Education and Economic Impact Aid, both of which provide additional funds to the school's attended by poor children.

[10] As a result of a charter amendment proposed by Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown (Former Governor of California), the Mayor has the power to appoint three members to the School Board. The Mayor called for this measure to be instituted so that "genuine" reforms could be made in the system.

managing a district comprised of 55,000 students with an annual operating budget of approximately 370 million dollars. Although the per pupil expenditure in Oakland is greater than the state average ($7,120 in Oakland, $6,334 is the state average), the funds available are largely insufficient to meet the health and welfare needs of Oakland's impoverished students.

Yet, lack of financial resources is only one of the reasons why so many of the needs of Oakland's children are unaddressed. Despite the severity of the education and welfare challenges facing Oakland's schools, matters related to financial management have often taken precedent over these issues. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is the largest employer in the city, and in a city with high levels of poverty and unemployment, economic considerations, such as the letting of contracts for construction, maintenance and educational consulting, and collective bargaining issues generally, often take on greater importance and receive more attention than educational issues. Conflicts over how to allocate the resources controlled by the school district is of such great importance to the economy of the city that providing quality education to all students has often not been treated as a priority issue.

Finally, there is another important reason why educational issues have often been neglected in Oakland, and in many school districts that are located in impoverished communities throughout the country. Public schools in Oakland serve a captured market. The student population, which as I've pointed out is largely poor, immigrant, and non-white, is completely dependent upon the school system. Private schools are not accessible to most poor families due to cost, and leaving the system is typically not possible even if one is dissatisfied with the quality of school services provided. With a majority of the students served by Oakland's schools trapped by economic circumstances, dependent and unable to leave, affairs of the district can be

managed with little concern for whether or not those served are satisfied with the quality of

education provided. With the exception of the superintendent and principals who are removed

easily and frequently, employees in the district can be confident that their positions are secure

even though the system they work for largely fails to fulfill the mission for which it was created.

Like other school districts in California, state funding to Oakland's public schools is determined

by the average daily attendance of its students. As long as parents continue to enroll their

children in the district's failing schools, the miserable status quo can be sustained indefinitely.

The Role of Social Capital in Improving the Quality of Public Schools

Several researchers have suggested that the quality of education children receive is

directly related to the ability of parents to generate social capital (Coleman 1988, Laraeu 1996;

Noguera 2001). Social capital is a concept that has been used by social scientists to describe

benefits individuals derive from their association with and participation within social networks

and organizations (Sampson 1998; Woolcock 1998, Putnam 1995).   Like economic capital,

social capital can provide concrete benefits to those who have access to it, such as jobs, loans,

educational opportunities and a variety of services. The more connected one is to groups or

individuals that have access to resources, the greater the possibility that one can obtain concrete

material and social benefits.

However, becoming connected to influential social networks is not easy. Access to some

networks may be based upon family ties, income, religious affiliations or association or with

powerful groups that have been cultivated over time. It is generally not possible to simply join

an exclusive social network. In addition to having less economic capital, the poor often have less

social capital than the affluent because the connections they have tend to be limited to other poor

people or to organizations with fewer resources (Saegert, et.al. 2001).

In cities such as Oakland, poverty and racial isolation constitute significant barriers to

acquiring social capital, particularly "bridging" and "bonding" forms of social capital that have

been identified as most important for community development (Woolcock 1998). Bridging

social capital refers to the connections that link poor people to institutions and individuals that

have access to money and power. In Oakland, poor people of color generally lack bridging

social capital because they are often excluded from influential social networks as a result of race

and class barriers, and social isolation. For example, although Oakland has several powerful and

influential Black churches, their membership is more likely to be drawn from middle class

residents who reside in more affluent neighborhoods and the suburbs than from the lower class

communities in which the churches are located (Commission for Positive Change 1990). The

same is true of many African American political clubs in Oakland such as the NAACP, the

Niagra Democratic Club, and the East Oakland Democratic Club. Influential churches and civic

associations play important roles in the political life of the City and often provide important

services to the poor. But most poor people in Oakland do not participate in these organizations

and their absence further exacerbates their marginalization and social isolation.

Bonding social capital that provides connections among and between poor people

(Woolcock 1998), and that serves as a basis for solidarity and collective action, is also in short

supply in Oakland. Over the last fifteen years, Oakland has attracted large numbers of Mexican

and Asian immigrants who have moved into neighborhoods in East and West Oakland that have

been traditionally African American (Clark 1998). This demographic shift has had the effect of

diminishing community cohesion as language and cultural differences have contributed to

fragmentation and distrust between new and older residents (League of Cities 2000). Aside from

the fact that they reside on the same streets and even live in the same apartment buildings, these

rapidly changing communities are made up of strangers who perceive themselves as having little

if anything in common.[11] Rather than working together in pursuit of common community

interests, growing diversity has increased the level of competition over community resources,

which in turn has heightened tensions and fueled inter-group conflict. Tensions and occasionally

violent outbursts related to demographic change have most frequently been manifest in

Oakland's public schools, one of the few sites where different groups come into direct contact

with each other (Noguera and Bliss 2001).

Finally, poor people in Oakland tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods that lack strong

social institutions, public services and businesses. The census tracts where poor people reside in

greatest numbers also have the highest rates of crime and are therefore regarded as less desirable

places to live by the middle class (City of Oakland 1994). In east and west Oakland, the poorest

sections of the city, there are few banks, pharmacies or grocery stores. Libraries, parks and

recreational centers are present in these neighborhoods, but residents frequently complain that

drug trafficking and crime have rendered these potential community assets unusable (Office of

Economic development 1994). Sociologist, Loic Waquant, has argued that public institutions in

inner city neighborhoods may actually generate negative social capital (i.e. undermine social

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Most observers agree that while this additional support will be helpful, that it will not be sufficient to address the wide disparities in funding among school districts. For an analysis of the new education bill see New York Times, January 8, 2002. [11] Efforts to address the lack of community organization in Oakland have recently been supported by the Koshland Committee of the San Francisco Foundation. For the last five years, the committee has developed an initiative in the San Antonio district, an area comprised of Latinos, Southeast Asians, older African Americans, Native Americans and white small business owners.

cohesion) because their unresponsiveness to the needs of residents undermines and erodes the

social well being of the community (Waquant 1998). Furthermore, in addition to possessing few

social assets, the poorer neighborhoods of east and west Oakland have a disproportionate number

of vacant, abandoned and derelict sites. Undesirable land use facilities such as solid waste

transfer stations, drug treatment centers and industrial plants that emit toxic pollutants (Office of

Economic Development 1994) are also plentiful in these areas.

Throughout the United States, close examination of residential patterns reveals a high

level of racial segregation and class isolation (Clark 1998; Massey and Denton 1993). This is

also the case in Oakland where since the 1960's race and class boundaries have tended to

correspond to fairly distinct geographic patterns and census tracts (US Census Report on

Oakland 2000). Reflecting a pattern common to cities throughout the United States, Oakland's

flatland neighborhoods are disproportionately comprised of lower class racial minorities, while

white middle class and affluent residents of a variety of backgrounds reside in the hills and outer-

ring suburbs. Following a trend evident in other parts of the US, formerly white suburbs to the

south and east of Oakland are now more racially diverse, but data from the 2000 census suggests

that race and class segregation remains firmly intact there as well (US Census 2000). Unlike the

pre-civil rights period when racial boundaries were enforced by legally sanctioned segregation,

restrictive covenants and occasionally violence, in the post civil rights era property values and

social networks play a similar role (Massey and Denton 1992).

Social Capital and Institutional Responsiveness

The prevalence of race and class isolation often has direct bearing upon the quality of

schools children attend. In Oakland, children tend to enroll in schools located in neighborhoods

where they live. As a result of this practice, the poorest children generally enroll in the lowest performing schools, while middle class children from more affluent neighborhoods attend better schools. As the chart below reveals, differences between schools in different neighborhoods is striking. Though the District does not prevent low-income parents from enrolling their children in higher performing schools, lack of transportation and limited space make this an option that few can exercise.

Selection of Oakland Schools by Neighborhood and API Rating

School	Neighborhood	API Rating
	(Poor)	
Golden Gate	West Oakland	1
ML King	West Oakland	2
Sobrante Park	East Oakland	1
Brookfield	East Oakland	1
	(Affluent)	
Chabot	Claremont	9
Hillcrest	Montclair	10
Joaquin Miller	Hills	10

The relationship between poverty and school quality requires further elaboration. Research shows that poor children are generally less prepared than middle class children with respect to their academic skills at the time they enroll in school (Jecnks and Phillips 1998). Rather than adopting measures that might reduce the effects of differences in prior academic

preparation, schools often exacerbate pre-existing differences in ability by providing poor children with an inferior education.

In this respect, Oakland is no exception. The schools where a majority of poor children are enrolled not only have lower test scores, they also tend to have inferior facilities, and are generally more disorganized. They also have fewer certified teachers and higher turn-over among principals (District Profile 2001). Some of the schools, such as Lowell Middle and McClymonds High School in West Oakland, tend to have lower enrollment because they have difficulty attracting students, while several of the schools in the San Antonio and Fruitvale sections of East Oakland are overcrowded and literally bursting at the seams.

Despite the consistency of this pattern, there is no evidence that shows that the condition of schools in low-income neighborhoods in Oakland is a product of intentional policy or a conspiracy aimed at depriving poor children quality of education. At least part of the problem lies with the lack of social capital in Oakland's low-income communities created by poverty and social isolation, and the disproportionate social capital possessed by others. The leadership of Oakland's public schools is more likely to be pressured with demands from its unions and the small but influential number of middle class parents it serves, than by advocates and parents of poor children. The first two constituencies are well organized, politically savvy, and have access to financial and legal resources. Occasionally, poor parents also organize themselves to apply pressure on the school district, but their efforts are rarely sustained. Even when they are, the demands of poor parents can be more easily ignored because they typically lack the ability to exert leverage upon school officials.

Yet, differences in political influence explain only part of the reason why the needs of poor children receive less attention. Research on social capital in schools shows that poor children of color and their parents also tend to be treated differently in schools (Lareau 1994; Ada 1998; Noguera 2001). While middle class parents often have access to resources (i.e. education, time, transportation, etc.) and networks (contacts with elected officials, Parent Teacher Associations, and if necessary, attorneys), that enable them to exert influence over schools that serve their children, poor parents typically have no such resources (Epstein 1993; Noguera 2001). Even if they lack these sources of support middle class parents possess the ultimate tool for exercising leverage upon schools: they generally can withdraw their children if they are not satisfied with the schools they attend. As I've pointed out already, poor parents typically lack this option, and for this reason how satisfied they feel about the schools their children attend has little bearing upon the quality of education that is provided.

Coleman has argued that social capital can produce a mutual sense of accountability between parents and school personnel, or what he terms "social closure". This is particularly likely to be the case when association with a particular school is based upon shared beliefs and values that reinforce the goals of schooling (Coleman 1988). When schools are concerned about satisfying the needs of those they serve they tend to pay closer attention to the quality of services they provide (Fantini et.al. 1970). Coleman has suggested that parochial schools are more likely to exhibit a greater degree of social closure and to be more responsive to the needs of the parents they serve than public schools because shared religious beliefs and values serve as the basis for generating a sense of community and affinity (Coleman 1988). As a result of race, class and cultural differences, poor parents in cities like Oakland generally have less in common with

school personnel than do middle class parents. Lack of social closure created by these difference

results in poor parents having limited ability to exert constructive influence upon schools if they

are dissatisfied with the quality of education provided to their children.

For all of these reasons, poor parents are less able to hold the schools their children attend

accountable for the quality of education they provide. They have less time to attend meetings

related to school governance, fewer personal resources to contribute to schools financially, and

fewer options to exercise if they are dissatisfied with the treatment they or their children receive.

As a "captured market" they are a group of consumers who are compelled to accept the quality

of educational services provided to them, whether they like it or not.[12]

A Dream Deferred: Racial Politics and the Unfulfilled Promise of Black Power in Oakland

With academic failure so persistent and widespread one might wonder why a community

with a reputation and history for political activism would not have acted long ago to radically

reform its schools. Oakland was after all the birthplace of the Black Panther Party, an

organization that took on another public institution that was perceived as failing to serve

community needs, namely the police department, which it accused of engaging in rampant

harassment and brutality. Oakland's history of Black leadership and political activism goes back

to the 1930s when it served as the national headquarters of the powerful Sleeping Car Porters

Union (Franklin and Moss 1988). In the 1920s Oakland had one of the most active chapters of

UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association - the largest Black political organization in

US history headed by Marcus Garvey) on the west coast (Martin). In the 1970s, Oakland voters

transformed the city from a company town dominated by Kaiser Aluminum and controlled by

white Republicans, into a city where all of the major public officials (Mayor, City Manager,

Superintendent of Schools, Police Chief, State Assemblyman and Congressman) were African

American (Bush 1984).

However, political activism and racial succession in politics have not made it possible for

those served by the Oakland public schools to exert influence and control over them. Unlike

unions and political organizations that have typically been comprised of individuals from middle

and stable working class backgrounds, since the advent of school desegregation, public schools

in Oakland have catered primarily to children from lower class families. Poor people in Oakland

have not had the power or resources to effectively exercise influence over their public schools.

Middle class residents have been less likely to take on this challenge because their children are

less likely to be enrolled in failing schools with poor children or in the district at all. Poor

parents and community activists have organized at various times to call for reform and

improvement in the City's schools. For the most part, such efforts have not resulted in

significant or sustained improvements. Moreover, the fact that Black middle class administrators

have held important positions throughout the district for over thirty years has done little to bring

about greater accountability and responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of those who rely

upon the public schools.

For the last ten years attempts there have been renewed attempts to mobilize grassroots

pressure for school improvement. The Oakland Citizens Organizations (OCO), a broad multi-

racial, faith-based coalition, has mounted considerable pressure upon the district for meaningful

improvement and reform. At large public gatherings it has organized, OCO has pressured public

officials to pledge their support for changes in the operation and management of the schools.

Yet, while their efforts have led to the adoption of significant policy changes such as site-based

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[12] Explain captured market

decision making and an initiative to create several new, smaller schools (Thompson 2001), general academic improvement remains unattained.

The election of Jerry Brown as Mayor of Oakland in 1999 has also brought increased pressure and attention on the schools. Brown raised the need to reform of Oakland's public schools prominently in his mayoral campaign and he pledged to use his office to bring about a complete overhaul of the school district. Brown's efforts to improve Oakland's schools have consisted primarily of attempts to obtain greater control over the leadership of the District. He has attempted to do this by getting the School Board to appoint his ally, George Musgrove, as Interim Superintendent. He was also successful in getting voters to amend the City Charter so that he could appoint three members to the Board. However, after a year in office, Musgrove was not selected to serve as the permanent superintendent by the Board. By all accounts, the Mayor's relationship with the new superintendent, Dennis Chaconas, has not been good, and thus far, the only concrete change that can be attributed to the Mayor's influence is the opening of a new military academy charter school (Brown 2001).[13]

Part of the problem with the approach that has been taken by OCO , Mayor Jerry Brown and the State of California, is that more than just pressure is needed for Oakland's schools to improve. While a great deal needs to be done to increase the administrative efficiency of the district and to generally improve the quality of teaching, the simple fact is that the schools cannot serve the needs of Oakland's poorest children without greater support. Other public agencies

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[13] Even with his three appointees on the School Board Mayor Brown was unable to gain the Board's approval the creation of the Military Academy. After several unsuccessful attempts to obtain approval from other authorizing bodies, Brown was granted approval from the Governor's Office and the academy was opened to students in the Fall of 2001.

must provide additional resources and services to address the health, welfare and safety needs of students so that the schools can concentrate their attention on serving their educational needs.

Dennis Chaconas, the new superintendent of Oakland's public schools, has made concerted efforts over the last two years to address the problems plaguing the school district. He has shaken up the central administration by replacing several long-term managers with younger professionals recruited from outside the district. He has also applied greater pressure on the principals of low performing schools and removed several principals from schools where there was little evidence of progress in raising achievement. It is undoubtedly too early to know whether the Superintendent's efforts will produce meaningful improvements in Oakland's schools. However, past experience suggests that placing greater demands upon the District Administration, the School Board, or the schools themselves is unlikely to lead change. Unless increased pressure is accompanied by systemic changes in the way schools respond to the needs of students and parents, and genuine assistance is provided to the schools serving the neediest children, it is unlikely that lasting, significant change will be made.

Changing Schools from the Outside In: The Potential Role of Social Capital and Civic Capacity Building Efforts

Given the failure of past reform efforts in Oakland and in the other large urban school districts, there is a growing consensus that alternative strategies to improve the quality of public education must be considered. Although by no means popular among policy makers and reform advocates, strategies that attempt to develop the social capital of parents and to cultivate the civic capacity of communities may be the most important steps that can be taken to further educational reform in cities like Oakland. If carried out in a coordinated manner, the two strategies could

bring about several significant changes in the way public schools in Oakland have functioned

and produce lasting changes in school systems.

There are several reasons for one to be optimistic about the potential of such an approach.

First, developing the social capital of parents may be the only way to address the captured

market problem. It is generally true that any organization that is able to function as a monopoly

over a segment of a market can afford to operate without regard for the quality of service it

provides to its clientele (Gormley 1991). It is often difficult to improve such organizations

because there is no incentive for good service or penalty for poor service. This is true whether

the organization in question is a public hospital, an airline or a police department. If the quality

of service provided has no bearing upon the ability of an organization to continue to operate, and

if those who receive the service have no way to effectively register their concerns, self-initiated

change is less likely.

Unlike many defenders of public education, proponents of vouchers and various school

choice schemes have understood the importance of addressing the captured market problem.

Voucher advocates have argued that the solution to the problem lies in allowing parents to

change schools by "voting with their feet" - allow them to leave a school when they are not

satisfied with the quality of education offered to their children. They argue that such a strategy

will force bad schools to close when they lose students, and that competition is the best way to

promote reform (Chubb and Moe; Gormley 1991).   Not surprisingly, polling data shows high

levels of support for vouchers among low-income, minority voters in urban areas where the

worst schools tend to be located (Wilgoren 1997).

Despite its understandable appeal, voucher advocates generally ignore the fact that schools rather than parents retain the ultimate choice over who will be admitted to a school, and the supply of good schools is limited. Vouchers will not provide parents with access to selective private schools both because of the prohibitive cost of tuition and because the selectivity of such schools is designed to favor an elite and privileged population of students. Moreover, the few high performing public schools in Oakland have limited space and enrollment, and cannot easily accommodate increased demand for access. Finally, research on voucher programs shows that there is no clear evidence that private schools are better at educating low-income students than public schools (Rouce 1999). There is even less evidence that other private and parochial schools are clamoring for an opportunity to educate poor children if and when they flee from failing public schools.

Efforts aimed at developing the social capital of parents can address the captured market problem when combined with policies that empower parents and make schools accountable to those they serve. In Chicago, this has been done through the development of elected local site councils (LCS) that are comprised of parents and community representatives (Hess 1999). The LCS has responsibility for hiring and monitoring the performance of the school principal, reviewing and approving the school's budget, and receiving reports on its academic plans. Under such an arrangement, how parents feel about the education their children receive is more likely to be taken into consideration because parents are empowered as decision makers at school sites (Fine 1993).

To be effective, such a strategy must also be combined with ongoing efforts to organize and keep parents informed about their rights and responsibilities so that the LCS does not come

under the control of a small number of well organized people or become manipulated by a savvy administrator. For this to happen efforts to develop the social capital of parents must be accompanied by technical assistance, translation services, childcare and active support from community-based organizations. Churches and community groups that possess strong ties with poor communities, especially recent immigrants, are often well positioned to provide training and to facilitate contact and communication between parents and schools.

Many new charter schools have been designed with these goals in mind. At several new charter schools parents are required to serve on the site council or to provide services to their school voluntarily (Clinchy 2000). In some of these new schools, such an approach creates conditions for a genuine partnership between parents and educators. Unlike many public schools that do not actively encourage parents to be involved in the education of their children, many new charters require active participation and have a clearly enunciated approach for promoting their rights and responsibilities.

Strategies such as these represent significant investments in the social capital of parents because they fundamentally change the relationship between parents and schools. Unlike traditional schools where parents most often interact with school personnel as individuals, the approach used in Chicago and several charter schools provides a basis for collective empowerment. Acting on their common interest in quality education, organized parents are better positioned to demand good service from schools and to hold them accountable when their expectations are not met.

Developing Civic Capacity

Like social capital, civic capacity building also occurs outside of schools but can have a direct impact upon what happens within them.   Civic capacity building requires organizations and institutions that may not have any direct relationship to education to play an active role in supporting schools in their efforts to provide services to students (Stone, et.al. 2001). It compels the leaders of public and private organizations to think creatively about how to bring the resources they control to bear upon the goal of educating students. Most importantly, civic capacity building forces the members of a community to cease blaming schools for their failures and to focus instead on how to help them improve.

In a city like Oakland, civic capacity building could involve at least four different kinds of activities. First, it could entail the use of community volunteers in roles as tutors and mentors for students. Several school districts have been very successful at getting public and private organizations to provide release time to their employees so that they can provide services in schools.   In San Francisco, a private non-profit corporation coordinates the recruiting and training of volunteers who provide a variety of services in schools. Several other school districts have taken advantage of the Ameri-corp Program to get university students to provide college counseling, tutoring and other services to students. Strategies such as these enable schools to reduce the adult to student ratio and make it possible to address the needs of students who have fallen behind academically.

Secondly, civic capacity can also involve the formation of school-community partnerships to provide work-related internships and to support the development of career academies. Research on high schools has shown that career academies are possibly the most

successful means for increasing student engagement in school (Conchas 2001). Several Oakland high schools already have career academies, some of which perform quite well, however involvement by community-based organizations and businesses has been minimal. To obtain the maximum benefit from these partnerships, on-site learning opportunities through internships need to be created so that the partnerships can produce genuine career opportunities for students. The Bio-tech academy established by the Bayer Corporation at Berkeley High School and now in place at five other high schools in the Bay Area is a model of what can be accomplished. Students in the program receive advanced training in science and math, and through the participation of local community colleges and California State University at Hayward, students have the opportunity to pursue related studies in bio-technology so that they do not get stuck in entry level jobs. When done successfully, school-community partnerships can provide students with meaningful learning opportunities outside of school, enhance the relevance of what they learn in school, and in the process transform education from an activity that is strictly school-based, to one that is embraced by the entire community.

Third, school-community partnerships that lead to enhanced civic capacity can also focus on the provision of professional development services to school personnel. Given the high turn-over among teachers and administrators in a district like Oakland, there is an ongoing need for professional development and training. Partnerships with local universities may be the most effective way to provide support to teachers in pedagogy and curriculum content. However, public and private organizations can also play a role in supporting administrators, particularly school principals, who increasingly are required to take responsibility for a broad array of activities beyond traditional school management. Given the work demands that school

personnel must contend with, most professional development activities need to be site-based. It

is also important for those who provide the training and support to have a genuine knowledge of

the work performed by educators.

Finally and most importantly, the area where civic capacity development is most urgently

needed is in the provision of health and welfare services to students and their families.

Throughout the country, there are several effective models for providing a range of services to

students at schools. In all cases, the best programs are based upon a partnership between schools

and community agencies. For example, the Children's Aid Society in New York City operates

eight community schools that offer health, dental, recreational and employment training services

to students and their families (Dryfoos 1997). A number of Beacon and Full Service schools

operate throughout the country and they often remain open twelve hours per day by drawing

upon a second shift of community professionals to run after-school programs. While many of

these programs are exceptional, the number of students served by them is miniscule. Most of the

best programs operate at individual school sites, and not a single one operates throughout an

entire school district.

Given the high levels of poverty among school children in Oakland, a comprehensive,

city-wide strategy for providing social services at school sites is needed. For the sake of cost

efficiency, this will necessarily involve improved cooperation between the School District, City

government (which funds recreational and youth services), and County government (which funds

health and social services). Private organizations (e.g. YMCA, Girls and Boys Clubs) as well as

churches and non-profits can also play important roles in developing systems of support for

students, but the large public agencies will undoubtedly have to take the lead since they control the bulk of resources for social services.

Given that all three of these public agencies provide services to the same population of families, improved coordination in service delivery could actually reduce redundancy and increase cost efficiency. However, inter-agency cooperation is difficult to accomplish on a large scale because the individuals staffing these organizations generally have no prior history of cooperating, and bureaucratic narrow mindedness is not a small hurdle to overcome. For this reason, leadership and support from the Mayor, Superintendent, School Board, and County Board of Supervisors, will be needed so that those who carry out coordination activities have the backing to overcome the obstacles they will inevitably encounter.

Conclusion

In contrast to many analyses of urban school systems in the United States (Kozol 19991; Maeroff 1990), it is my hope that the one presented here is relatively optimistic. I genuinely believe that it should be possible for Oakland public schools to effectively serve the educational needs of its students. Further, by creating conditions that enable schools to be held accountable by those they serve and drawing on the active support and participation of the numerous assets and resources present in the City, Oakland should be able to significantly improve its schools. This is not to suggest that the obstacles to bringing this transformation about are not formidable, but clearly the conditions and possibility for change does exist.

The same may not be true for other poor communities that have less money and fewer community assets. Strategies that develop the social capital of parents and civic capacity of communities in socially isolated areas where poverty is concentrated are less likely to produce

lasting improvements in public schools. Small cities like East Palo Alto or Compton, California,

North Chicago, Illinois or Poughkeepsie, N.Y., simply cannot be expected to elevate the quality

of their schools on their own. In such places, the array of social and economic hardships

besetting the community is so vast, and the availability of resources so limited, that outside

assistance will be needed if change is to be made. In such places, the limitations of local control

of schools and the inequities it tends to reinforce are most evident.

Rather than presuming that all schools can be treated the same, state and Federal officials

must recognize that socioeconomic conditions within the local context can act as significant

constraints limiting possibilities for local control of schools. Put more simply, without the power

and resources to exert control over schools, low-income communities cannot be expected to hold

their schools accountable. Nor is it reasonable to expect that schools in such communities will

be able to solve the vast array of problems confronting students and their families on their own.

Unless states enacts measures to mitigate against the effects of poverty and racial isolation, local

control will remain little more than a guise through which the State can shirk its responsibility

for insuring that all students have access to quality education.

The fractured nature of civil society in the U.S. may make it unlikely that policy makers

will enact the kinds of far reaching changes in social policy that are needed. Ideology, racism

and divisions related to class, national origin and even geography, have historically prevented

politicians and vast segments of the general public from considering problems affecting the poor

as a matter of national concern (Gans; Phillips;). The recently approved Leave No Child Behind

Act, which will significantly increase the Federal government's role in failing local school

districts, is unlikely to provide the help that is needed. The measure does nothing to address the

horrid conditions present in many failing schools, and it does not even begin to attempt to ameliorate the social inequities that impact schooling.

For African Americans the government's continued neglect of public education represents a significant problem. Although reforming public schools will not eliminate poverty or racial discrimination, education continues to be the only legitimate source of opportunity available to the poor. Beyond the skills and job opportunities that education can make possible, it can also serve as a means for the poor and oppressed to imagine and more just social order (Freire 1973). Having the ability to imagine alternative possibilities is often how social movements that lead to greater societal change are born (Horton and Freire 1990). For communities struggling to meet basic needs, improvements in education can be an effective means to obtain tangible benefits even without other more far-reaching social reforms.

Public education has historically occupied a special place within American civil society because it has often been the birthplace of democratic reform (Tyack 1980). For African Americans, education has long been recognized as vital to collective improvement because "it is the one thing they can never take away" (Anderson 1988). Education is also the only social entitlement available to all children in the United States regardless of race, class or national origin (Carnoy and Levin 1986). In the last ten years, support for improving public education has also been the only domestic issue that has generated broad bi-partisan consensus among policymakers. Given its unique status it makes sense for those interested in finding ways to reduce poverty and racial inequality to focus at least some of their energies on efforts to improve the quality and character of public education in the United States.

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