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From Truancy and Alienation to School Fluency and Graduation: Increasing Student Engagement by Bridging Institutions

Education continues to be perceived as the great equalizer, especially for underserved groups. As a society, we expect schools, particularly those in urban areas, to level the playing field amid larger social and economic ills present in such contexts—poverty, residential segregation, and health care disparities (Noguera, 2003). Urban schools are also challenged to diminish or at least resist the pervasive achievement gap while also faced with inequitable funding formulas, high leadership turnover, and underprepared and inexperienced teachers (Kozol, 2005). In this context, schools are charged to invest their limited resources in circumventing such inequalities (Conchas, 2001, 2006) while teaching children the new basic skills to thrive in today's complex economy (Murnane & Levy, 1996).

However, schools by themselves continue to struggle to serve all youth well. Although some provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act have forced the system to become accountable for all student populations, research also suggests that the NCLB requirements may also be exacerbating educational inequality by pushing children out of school (Meier & Wood, 2004). While schools are under increased scrutiny to force children to achieve, our nation's public schools continue to produce unacceptably low graduation rates, particularly among low-income Black and Latina/Latino youth in the United States (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). How are we to reverse these negative trends?

Understanding the Truancy–Dropout Connection

The connection between truancy, disengagement from school, and dropout are all too familiar in the lives of urban youth and the schools that serve them. In fact, the effects of truancy on the academic and social outcomes of youth are highly interrelated. Truancy can have destructive social consequences for urban young people, such as run-ins with the criminal justice system through drug or alcohol abuse, violence, and crime. Other young people are truant from school because they need to work to support their family, care for younger siblings or an ill adult at home, or stay home because school is boring.

Truancy also leads to the ultimate form of school exclusion—dropout. Research shows that, accounting for low expectations and poor grades, truancy is the most common determinant of dropping out of school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), and that truancy and dropout are concentrated in racially segregated central cities in primarily large high schools attended by mostly low-income youth of color (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2000). Thus, the connection between truancy and dropout presents a greater challenge to urban schools—not so much because schools are responsible for the struggles children face outside of school, but because schools have to serve the needs of these children more adequately and help them meet their challenges. Therefore, programs, practices, and policies should be concentrated on contexts that fit these profiles. With the dropout rate in urban areas at twice the national average—at nearly 20% (Balfanz & Legters, 2001) and in some areas as high as 50%-60% (Swanson, 2004)—combating truancy and dropout via community-based intervention requires immediate action.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Most research quantitatively associates individual risk factors and structural conditions (i.e., poverty) with dropping out. However, attention has recently shifted to understanding school-level dynamics to better understand why students dropout (Rumberger, 2004). This research shows, in part, that large urban high schools often function as dropout-producing factories, poorly able to engage the most vulnerable youth (Fine, 1991; Wasley, 2002) and provide an adequate opportunity to learn (Fry, 2003). Although the causes of truancy and dropout are explained partially by the internal processes of schools (Asplough, 1998), outside forces—such as the social, economic, and political context of the urban environment—play a significant role in explaining why students disengage from school and eventually dropout (Rumberger, 1995). Therefore, there is a great need to understand the link between neighborhood factors and schools (Conchas & Noguera, 2003; Noguera,

2003) for the purposes of forging hope and finding solutions that expand beyond the school walls.

Some community-based programs have recognized this important link and have responded by providing powerful interventions that get at the root of the problem facing urban young people. Such initiatives are often committed to utilizing rigorous and proactive strategies and processes to engage youth, and making critical linkages between communities, programs, and schools for the purposes of building an expansive network of support for the students (Noguera, 2001).

An Example of a Successful Model

The Boston Urban Youth Foundation (BUYF) exists as one such program. This community-based organization seeks to prepare socially and academically disadvantaged Black and Latina/Latino youth for college and successful futures. The program's central mission is to help young people develop spiritually, emotionally, academically, and economically. The organizational structure and programs revolve around key social and educational scaffolds that engage and empower low-income disadvantaged urban young people toward promising educational endeavors. This organization also redefines notions of being community-based by stepping over the symbolic boundaries between community and school by knocking on doors, picking youth up at their doorsteps, and creating safe spaces for reflection, engagement, and action. As a result of being in the program, participants once considered truant find themselves attending school and developing a pro-academic ideology through the following processes:

The Role of Safe Space for Peer Interactions

The deliberate creation of safe spaces for meaningful student engagement was an aspect of BUYF that proved to be especially influential. Under the BUYF programs, students identified space as a significant factor in promoting positive peer relations. Space is viewed as a structured location created for the purposes of empowering young people through a dialectical process in which young people are given opportunities to co-construct each other's knowledge and truth through dialogue. Within BUYF, space is a location where learning and teaching occurs among the young people. 'Club', the after-school academic enrichment program, is an example of a safe space for engagement between students and adults. Students find it particularly meaningful to see young people, like they, thrive in the program, succeed in school, and matriculate and graduate from college.

The Program Incentive Structure

Program staff embrace a whatever-it-takes approach in engaging the program participants, particularly the initially resistant youth. Staff provides meaningful incentive structures for program participants in a creative manner. Incentive structures serve as a mechanism to motivate young people to take positive action through investment and participation that can lead to short and long-terms benefits for the students. Incentives are used as a means to achieve positive academic, personal, and social results.

Youth Advocacy and Institutional Accountability

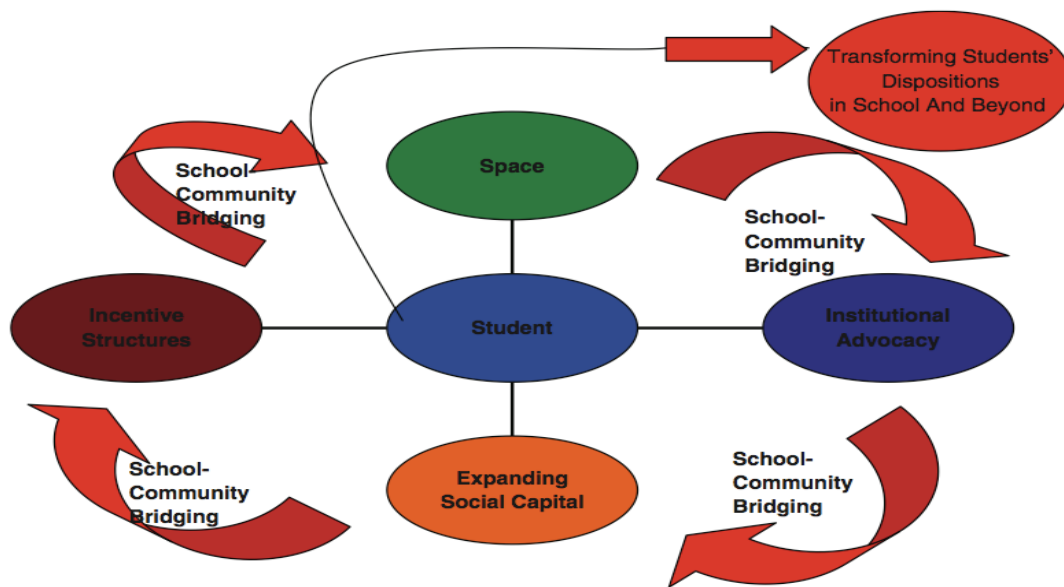
Program staff recognizes the marginalization that urban youth of color experience in and out of school. Thus, the program makes it a priority to deliberately create opportunities to advocate for the student, both within the family and in the school setting. Such advocacy is meant to facilitate opportunities for students to positively engage in these various contexts; advocating for students empowers the participants to become better students and citizens in society. Every student is assigned a caseworker; the caseworker approach is particularly effective with program participants. Caseworkers are familiar and adept at maneuvering in and out of the schools and other school related organizations that these students encounter. Caseworkers check in with program participants twice a week by making school visits and encouraging them to attend after-school tutoring. Students see that an adult cares about their well-being. In-school advocacy provided by the caseworker was another degree of support particularly meaningful to program participants. Caseworkers were able to influence various dimensions of the student's in-school experience, thus adding another level of accountability on the student's behalf. For some, caseworkers advocated for placing students in more appropriate courses; for others, they collaborated with teachers and administrators to create strategies and goals for the student. In sum, this community-school connection showed the power behind the notion of capitalizing on the social capital available through building bridges across institutions, thereby facilitating the success of the community's most vulnerable children.

Conclusion

Racial minorities are far less likely to exercise the social capital that is traditionally valued and legitimized by the school culture (Conchas, 2006; Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Recognizing this struggle, program staff prioritized access to role

models and mentors who could forge opportunities and deliver information to marginalized urban youth. Social networks comprised of family, school, and communities were interconnected within the program. These partnerships validated, supported, and empowered young people around a matrix of healthy relationships. The program’s initiatives and practices with participants were guided by a central belief in leveraging and utilizing social networks. For example, at club, students had access to program alumni and older program mentors. During the after-school program, students had access to college-level tutors. During field trips, participants developed critical connections with college students and garnered necessary information to make college enrollment a reality. The program’s commitment to providing a safe space, incentive structures, institutional advocacy, and social networks all contributed to transformation that the youth began to experience (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the different dimensions of the program at work).

Figure 1
A Multiinstitutional Approach to Truancy/Dropout
Prevention/Intervention



Educational research, policy, and practice have much to learn from grassroots community-based organizations that understand the complexities of urban environments and their schooling systems and that directly battle with the social struggles in these communities. More community-based truancy prevention programs should be instituted, and current programs and schools should incorporate the beliefs and practices that were particularly influential to student engagement. Although the themes presented here are by no means conclusive, we trust that they may serve as a hopeful and realistic guide to build and maintain programs that provide support and uplifting opportunities for urban youth whose circumstances place them “at risk” of truancy and dropping out of school.

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