A **broader** and **bolder** approach uses education to break the cycle of poverty

Making bold assertions that all children can achieve while doing nothing to address the challenges they face is neither fair nor sound public policy.

By Pedro A. Noguera

RECOGNIZING THAT POVERTY has a profound influence on academic outcomes is not a new idea. In fact, a large body of research over several decades has shown that poor children face enormous education challenges specifically related to poverty (Coleman et al., 1966; Rothstein, 2004). However, recently it's become fashionable for policy makers and reformers to criticize anyone who points to poverty as an obstacle to learning and higher achievement. Loudly proclaiming "no excuses," these reformers claim that large numbers of ineffective classroom teachers, not poverty, are the real obstacles to improving academic outcomes for poor children. While it is absolutely the case that poor children need dedicated, passionate, and effective teachers and principals to be successful, there is no evidence that even the best schools can overcome the effects of poverty on their own. However, a growing number of "reformers" steadfastly make this assertion, and these individuals have enormous influence over education policy.

In an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* last year, Joel Klein, former New York City Schools chancellor, Michael Lomax, chief executive of the United Negro College Fund, and Janet Murguía, president and chief executive of the National Council of La Raza, wrote:

> In the debate over how to fix American public education, many believe that schools alone cannot overcome the impact that economic disadvantage has on a child, that life outcomes are fixed by poverty and family circumstances, and that education doesn't work until other problems are solved. This theory is, in some ways, comforting for educators.

The obstacles confronting poor communities are real, and, if actions aren't taken to address them, they will often undermine efforts to help students achieve and schools improve.

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> After all, if schools make only a marginal difference, we can stop faulting ourselves for failing to make them work well for millions of children . . . Problem is, the theory is wrong. It's hard to know how wrong — because we haven't yet tried to make the changes that would tell us — but plenty of evidence demonstrates that schools can make an enormous difference despite the challenges presented by poverty and family background (Klein, Lomax, & Murguia, 2010).

Schools with a track record of failure often lose incentive to improve because they rationalize failure as the inevitable consequence of serving impoverished children.

While it might seem encouraging for education and civil rights leaders to assert that poverty isn't an obstacle to higher student achievement, the evidence does not support such claims. Over 50 years, numerous studies have documented how poverty and related social conditions (e.g., lack of access to health care, early childhood education, stable housing, etc.) affect child development and student achievement. The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself should be regarded as a learning disability. Rather, research suggests that poor children encounter obstacles that often adversely affect their development and learning outcomes. To ignore this reality and make bold assertions that all children can achieve while doing nothing to address the outside-of-school challenges they face is neither fair nor a sound basis for developing public policy.

Despite compelling evidence that education policy must devise ways to at least mitigate the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement and child development, most state and federal policies have failed to do so. However, there is growing awareness among a number of educators, mayors, and policy advocates of the need to do so based on the realization that a great deal can be done to counter the effects of poverty on children's lives and their education.

POVERTY INFLUENCES LEARNING

A substantial body of evidence shows that concentrated poverty in urban neighborhoods and the adverse social conditions that typically accompany it affect the performance of students and of schools in at least three important ways.

#1. External support: Academic and social support is less available to students outside of school.

Sociologist James Coleman (1998) coined the term "social closure" to describe the mutually reinforcing partnerships between parents and schools in healthy schools and communities. Coleman found that supportive relationships between parents and teachers promote and strengthen values and norms that positively influence student achievement. He also said such relationships serve as an essential ingredient of school success.

In her research on parents, sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) found that middle-class parents provide their children with a broad assortment of advantages (e.g. access to private tutors, summer enrichment camps, homework support, etc.) that improve the likelihood of academic success, while poor parents were typically less able to provide this type of support. Moreover, in inner-city communities, social closure between parents and schools is generally weak or even nonexistent because racial and class differences contribute to a lack of trust (Noguera, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Instead of working together to benefit children, schools in poor communities frequently experience difficulty in getting parents involved at school and are more likely to experience antagonism and even hostility with the parents they serve, particularly at schools with a long history of poor performance.

#2. Environmental obstacles: Adverse conditions influence students' health, safety, and well-being, which invariably influence learning.

In cities and towns where poverty is concentrated, rates of inter-personal violence tend to be higher, health indicators tend to be more negative, stress and overall psychological and emotional well-being tends to be substantially worse (Kirp 2011; Noguera 2003). This is due to the lack of services as well as what sociologist William Julius Wilson has described as a "concentration effect" (1987). A substantial body of research has shown that the quality of life and the overall health of children in poor neighborhoods are substantially lower than for middle-class children. Not surprisingly, these conditions influence academic and developmental outcomes (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Syme, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Without the resources to support children or a strategy to protect children from the harmful effects of dangerous and even toxic conditions in their communities (Greenberg & Schneider, 1996), schools can be overwhelmed. Not surprisingly, the inability to respond to the nonacademic needs of their students often compromises the ability of schools to meet the academic needs. For example, several studies on federally funded Head Start programs have shown that the benefits of early childhood education are often undermined when children don't receive ongoing support, both in and outside of school, after they enter kindergarten (RAND, 2007). Similarly, a study on the long-term consequences of infant exposure to substance abuse has shown that such children are no more likely to experience school failure than nonaffected children from the same neighborhoods; the harmful effects of the environment can be as devastating as early exposure to drugs (RAND, 2007).

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#3. Negative social capital: Adverse conditions undermine the ability of parents and schools to influence the character of schools and ensure that they serve their interests.

Adverse environmental conditions in poor communities, such as violence and substance abuse, tend to negatively influence the ability of parents and schools to develop the social capital to draw upon local resources to further student learning and promote healthy development. In middle-class communities, schools often draw on community resources to augment services they either can't afford or simply can't provide. In fact, real estate agents often use the viability and attractiveness of local schools as a selling point to attract homebuyers.

In contrast, schools in high-poverty communities often function in isolation from other community organizations and agencies (churches, social service agencies, recreation centers, etc.), either because school staff lack relationships with these groups or because they perceive the neighborhood as hostile and potentially dangerous. If residents perceive the school as undesirable, residents who can will go out of their way to avoid sending their children there. Sociologist Lois Wacquant (2002) has argued that, in many poor urban areas, public schools become negative assets that actually undermine the well-being of their communities. Even though public schools are often the most stable social institutions in poor neighborhoods (largely because of public funding), when they function poorly because they're overwhelmed by the needs of their students, they may become formidable obstacles to neighborhood improvement and stability (Noguera, 2003).

None of this means poverty is destiny, or that the obstacles are so significant that they can't be overcome. There are many inspiring examples of poor children who manage to overcome obstacles related to poverty to achieve success in life. But these individuals are always the exceptions. More often than not, when the obstacles confronting poor communities are ignored, efforts to help students achieve and schools improve are less effective.

MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY

While expecting a single school to counter the effects of poverty on its own is unrealistic, a small but growing number of American schools are finding ways to reduce some of the effects. Mitigation is not the same as solving a problem, but it's nonetheless an important strategy for schools to employ.

In Newark, N.J., for example, the Broader, Bolder Approach (BBA) reform plan is developing a comprehensive school reform strategy. Operating in seven schools in Newark's Central Ward (six kindergarten through 8th-grade schools and one large comprehensive high school), BBA has introduced school-based interventions that are responsive to the issues and challenges. Through these interventions, social services, and a concerted effort to increase civic engagement, BBA is working to ensure that environmental hardships related to poverty don't undermine efforts to transform schools. With funding from the Ford, Victoria, and Prudential foundations, the BBA effort commenced two years before the $100-million donation from Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg came to Newark.

BBA is working to:

- Expand learning opportunities for students through quality early childhood education and by extending the traditional school day;
- Enrich the curriculum through enhanced literacy development in all content areas and greater emphasis on project-based learning; and
- Build critical partnerships that will strengthen the capacity of schools to respond to student needs and enable community interests to come together so parents and their allies can hold schools and their leaders accountable for academic outcomes.

The BBA strategy draws on research that suggests a more comprehensive approach is needed to increase academic outcomes for poor students and to improve schools that serve them (Blaue & Currie, 2006; Comer, 1988; Dryfoos, 1993; Rothstein, 2004; Waldfogel & Lahaie, 2007). The community schools movement, which provides students (and often their families) with access to mental health and other social supports at school sites is but one example of how service organizations have partnered with schools in high-poverty urban areas to address the social needs of children (Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005). In a recent book, David Kirp (2011) cites the full service schools developed by the Children's Aid Society and Communities in Schools as models that have helped schools meet both the academic and nonacademic needs of children. A growing body of research shows that when schools can offer students access to a variety of social services (e.g., licensed social workers or psychologists, nurse practitioners, or dental services), academic and developmental outcomes for children can improve (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Similarly, research shows that extending the school day before and after traditional school hours, as well as requiring students to attend school on Saturdays and lengthening the school year, can have a tremen-

dous impact on achievement (Kirp, 2011). When carried out in tandem, these practices enable schools to meet many of the needs that typically undermine student learning and child development.

SCHOOL REFORM IS COMMUNITY REFORM

Newark has embraced BBA because there is a growing awareness that the city needs new strategies for developing its human capital before it can experience sustained economic and social renaissance. Transforming schools so they're more effective in providing young people in Newark with an education that can make it possible for them to participate fully in the economic rebirth of the city is widely recognized as essential.

Part of transforming schools is developing the civic capacity of Newark by creating a series of strategic partnerships.

Improving Newark schools will enable the city to address many of the social and economic challenges that have prevented residents from experiencing a superior quality of life. Specifically, the BBA strategy aims at combining research-based education strategies with school-based social services, after-school programs, and interventions to increase the capacity of schools to respond to issues that are endemic to the social and environmental context (e.g., the need for health, nutrition, jobs, safety, etc.). The assumption is that such a full-service approach would enable Newark schools to better meet student needs.

The BBA strategy is based on the theory that improving the schools could spur economic development and improve the quality of life for a greater number of residents. Though this proposition has never been tested at such a large scale before, the theory behind BBA is based on the recognition that education is both a *cause* of many of the problems that plague the city and a potential *solution* to those problems.

BBA seeks to transform schools by creating a series of strategic partnerships between schools, businesses, universities, hospitals, local government, and an array of neighborhood-based service organizations. Such partnerships are designed to increase local support for schools and enhance the social capital of students and their families. Policy advocates of civic capacity building have argued that providing schools with substantial increases in external support is the most cost-effective means of delivering the resources and support they need. The theory holds that such support will lead to greater accountability, better functioning schools, and higher levels of student achievement.

A combination of social, economic, and political problems has historically constrained efforts to improve Newark schools. These problems are also at the root of many of the current challenges confronting its residents. Social isolation and economic marginalization (Wilson, 1987) have an enormous influence upon employment opportunities, health and welfare, aspirations and behavior, and the noncognitive traits typically associated with academic success (Bryk et al., 2010). Experience in Newark (and several other cities) has shown that when education reforms fail to consider how environmental factors influence students and schools, sustainable improvements in student academic outcomes are difficult to achieve (Noguera, 2003; Payne, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). The BBA strategy seeks to mitigate the detrimental effects of the environment by developing the capacity of schools to respond to student needs and by drawing on support and resources from local institutions.

The BBA strategy also seeks to transform how urban public schools typically serve low-income children of color and their families. In many low-income urban communities, complacency, low expectations, disorder, and dysfunction are endemic to the public schools. In such schools, failure has been normalized (Noguera, 2008), and change often seems impossible. In *Getting What We Ask For* (1984), sociologist Charles Payne points out that schools with a track record of failure often rationalize failure as the inevitable consequence of serving impoverished children. Years of failure in Newark schools have had similar effects upon many of its staff. In Newark, the normalization of failure can be seen in high absentee rates of staff, tolerance of student absenteeism and tardiness, and a lack of attention when implementing interventions and programs designed to help students. BBA will attempt to counter these trends by working with parents and community organizations to support schools and hold them accountable.

BBA CRITICS

The BBA reform agenda in Newark is part of a national effort to change the focus and direction of education policy, one that recognizes that creating classrooms, schools, and school systems where children of all ages and backgrounds thrive, requires a focus on the social and economic factors that influence schools and children. In cities such as Newark, where poverty is concentrated and has been reproduced across generations, the social conditions that arise from poverty — poor health, high crime rates, substance abuse, etc. — present formidable challenges to school reform. At a national level, the BBA approach aims to provide educators with the resources to meet students' learning needs. It acknowledges that *fixing schools* in high-poverty neighborhoods must include strategies that make it possible to respond to the range of challenges that affect child development and learning and the performance of schools and classrooms. BBA proponents have embraced a strategy that should make it possible to address what we have

known for years: Children's lives are situated within ecological systems that are made up of complex histories, processes, relationships, and institutions that shape their development.

BBA's approach has critics and opponents — the most prominent being the Coalition for Civil Rights and Education (CCE). Led by an unusual combination of prominent public figures, former chancellor of New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, former House Republican leader Newt Gingrich, and civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton, the CCE described education as the most important civil rights issue of the 21st century. CCE called for affirming the principles of NCLB, such as standards-based reform and accountability through high-stakes testing. The CCE also suggested that shifting the focus of school reform toward reducing poverty or improving the health and welfare of children would be nothing more than an attempt to use poverty as an excuse for not educating all children at high standards.

Despite its critics, the BBA strategy is moving forward and gaining momentum as an array of stakeholders across the country agree to support it. This won't be easy. In the absence of state and federal policies that explicitly encourage a more integrated and holistic educational strategy, local leaders face major challenges bridging complex interests in ethnically diverse communities, and overcoming entrenched bureaucratic patterns of operating in silos. Nonetheless, cities such as Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Houston, Orlando, Syracuse, and Denver are making slow but steady progress in adopting reform strategies similar to those in Newark. Part of the reason for this growing support lies in the recognition that all other approaches to reform have failed. Although called by other names, the schools-alone strategy advocated by the CCE has been the strategy of choice for 30 years. Billions of dollars have been spent on revamping school curriculum, retraining teachers, introducing new technology, and making schools smaller, but none of these costly measures have had the desired effect on academic and developmental outcomes for children. In a growing number of communities across the country, leaders from local government, hospitals, nonprofits, private foundations, and the private sector are affirming their support for BBA. The history of failure in past school reform efforts has made it clear to stakeholders that a reform strategy based upon an ecological framework (Brofenbrenner, 1975) is the only way to achieve sustainable progress in public education.

CONCLUSION

Only time will tell if the BBA strategy will work. Preliminary results from three years of work in Newark show impressive gains in student achievement at Central High School. Student scores on the state assessment exam showed a 32.5 percentage point growth in the amount of students categorized as proficient in English language arts (from 36.6% in 2010 to 69.1% in 2011), and a 25.9 percentage point growth in mathematics (from 19.9% in 2010 to 46% in 2011). Teachers were provided with targeted professional development in the areas where the data showed students needed the most assistance, and administrators took responsibility for providing tutoring to students who needed additional support. CHS administrators also ended the longstanding practice of isolating English language learners and special education students. As a result, for the first time all Haitian-Creole speakers passed the state exam. Results were not as promising at the K-8 schools, and it remains to be seen whether the gains achieved at Central High can be sustained.

Clearly, it is too early to declare victory or to proclaim the BBA strategy an unqualified success. However, it is also clear that the NCLB strategy of using high-stakes testing to apply pressure on students and schools hasn't worked, and more of the same under a new name (Race to the Top) is unlikely to bring significant improvements in student achievement, if contextual issues like poverty continue to be ignored. American policy makers and reformers must be willing to accept the obvious: School reform efforts can't ignore the effects of poverty on children's lives or on the performance of schools. What we need is a more holistic strategy, one that makes it possible for schools that serve the most disadvantaged children to meet their academic and social needs so that they can overcome a track record of failure. The BBA strategy can't do this by itself. It must be combined with state and federal reforms that promote enriched learning environments, that make it possible to attract and retain excellent teachers, and that create clear criteria for accountability of all stakeholders in the education process — educators, parents, and students. K

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"I hope my application for a block grant is approved. Right now my kindergarten class is using frozen waffles for stacking and building."

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