

The Community Development and Education Connection

Reviving cities, transforming schools and engaging young people in the process

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In its streets and alleyways, West Oakland, California, retains the vestiges of an historic past: The first black labor union, the Sleeping Porters Brotherhood, was born here in the 1920s; this was the heart of the West Coast jazz and blues music scene in the 1930s and '40s; and during the World Wars, shipbuilding industries on the Bay employed hundreds of community residents. That proud history, however, has given way to a challenged present. When its manufacturing employers withdrew in the 1950s, the community's prosperity went with them. West Oakland today is afflicted by high poverty rates, abandonment and blight.

To tackle these issues, West Oakland is officially designated as a state and local community redevelopment area. Over the past ten years, two HOPE VI grants have financed local housing developments, and the area has received millions of community development dollars from foundation grants. More recently, market-rate housing development has moved in, as home buyers find themselves priced out of San Francisco and other more traditional middle-income and upper-middle income neighborhoods.

Concurrent with the neighborhood revitalization activities—but disconnected in terms of policy and planning—the local McClymonds High School also received financial help for comprehensive reforms. A Small Schools grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with other private money, converted the large, comprehensive high school into three small schools, an action designed to improve student performance and create a greater sense of community within the school.

Like West Oakland, decaying urban neighborhoods around the country have become targets for community development, and like McClymonds High School, many urban public schools have been offered help to revive their faltering academic agenda. However, as was the case in West Oakland, these two programmatic efforts usually move forward with little collaboration, and sometimes even without one hand knowing what the other is doing.

This need not be the case. At UC Berkeley, the Center for Cities & Schools (CC&S) has been pursuing ways to not only engage schools and students in the urban planning process, but to build a framework for systemic change that will help to align community development with school reform.

Community Development and School Collaborations: Creating Systemic Change

The connection between good schools and good neighborhoods is intuitively clear and, for skeptics, the linkage is supported by research. It would seem logical, then, for school systems and community development agencies to work together. By tradition, however, public schools and the various agencies, public and private, that deal with community development have existed in separate silos. The original motivation for this strategy was to protect schools from the political wheeling and dealing that was thought to characterize city government. Over the years, however, the strategy has produced unintended but nevertheless negative

Engaging Youth in Urban Planning

One of CC&S's programs, known as Y-PLAN (Youth—Plan, Learn, Act Now), has been working with McClymonds High School students to help them become engaged in the changes happening in West Oakland. Mentored by UC Berkeley graduate students, McClymonds's students worked with local community groups, government agencies, and private developers to create a vision for the design of the 16th Street Train Station project. The station, the historic first western terminus of the transcontinental railroad, had long been out of service, a rundown abandoned place that bred nothing but trouble.

After considerable study, the students proposed a series of recommendations for the train station, including a job center, a student-run dining car restaurant, a performance and community space, and a photography exhibition highlighting the station's relationship to West Oakland. The students presented their ideas to the Oakland City Council, which approved the plan with intentions of including the youth's vision and ideas. "The train station for some families represents the beginning of a new life and I believe that's very important," wrote Samirah Adams, one of the student participants. The West Oakland model—one in which policymakers and principals in community development and public education communicate and collaborate—may represent the beginning of a new life for many similar communities.

outcomes, as community development and schools, both targeting the same neighborhoods for improvement, have lost the potential benefits of collaborative enterprise.

Recently, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have begun to make progress toward integrating community development with educational policy and practice. Both LISC and the Enterprise Foundation have established programs that focus on school-centered community revitalization, and a series of reports have been published that show the benefits that can accrue when school reform and neighborhood revitalization go hand in hand. In Centennial Place in Atlanta, for example, a new public elementary school was built along with more than 800 new units of housing. Today, the school is one of the city's best; about 90 percent of its students meet or exceed state standards in reading and math. The existence of the school has become a selling point for subsidized and market rate housing.

By and large, however, these are still idiosyncratic efforts, each designed to suit a particular situation or community; although they may eventually serve as models for use elsewhere, this wider application is not part of the original intent. Nor are there effective channels to foster communication and share best practices among various projects, with the kind of synergy this can build. As a result, there remains a gap between successful local efforts to bring together community development and school reform, and a broader effort to foster systemic change in the way we approach neighborhood revitalization.

To fill this gap, CC&S is taking a deliberate systems approach to addressing the historic disconnect between cities and schools. If high-quality education is a critical component of urban and metropolitan vitality, more resources need to be directed to understanding how community development and school reform can be linked institutionally—to change it from a “once in a while” approach to the “normal” way of doing business. What administrative and data collection procedures need to be changed to allow for cross-agency collaboration? How do we reframe the educational experience so it becomes relevant to all members in the community, not just those in K-12? How can we adjust the tools of community development finance—tax credits, loans, investment capital—to promote rather than deter collaboration? For example, while programs like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit have effectively brought financial institutions into affordable housing projects, they do not promote efforts to think holistically about communities and invest in schools at the same time.

None of these questions are easily answered. But as a starting point, CC&S has launched the PLUS (Planning and Learning United for Systems-change) Leadership Initiative, a three-year program funded by the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, to see what lessons can be learned when community/school collaboration is put into practice. The goal of the Initiative is to identify promising approaches while at the same time develop educational and civic leaders—both on and off campus—who are aware of the importance of connecting city and school policies and practices.



Students work together on a neighborhood survey in Elysian Fields, New Orleans

As part of the PLUS Leadership Initiative, CC&S invited sixty officials and community leaders from six Bay Area cities—some of them representing school districts and others city government or related agencies—to participate in a year-long Institute. Participants have access to training and education, professional development, and opportunities to share ideas and challenges with other cities. While each city is pursuing its own plan, all PLUS city-school district projects have three common components: (1) they recognize that the built environment (e.g., innovative school facilities, joint use or affordable housing development) impacts learners and must be connected with traditional educational policy making; (2) they are developing intergovernmental strategies and practices; and (3) they are inviting youth to join in policy making, decision making, and practice. Because young people traverse not only school but home and community in the course of each day, the Center believes that their needs and realities must drive both educational and urban/metropolitan policies and practices.

In a recent meeting, each of the city teams shared ideas and described the resources and programmatic changes they have used to develop more coherent and coordinated pathways for children and youth to succeed in their communities, both as students and as citizens. For example, the Oakland Unified School District described its new Youth Data Archive (YDA), a data-sharing and data-integration collaboration in which school district, city, and county data will be merged to look at the needs of the whole child. The Emeryville team described the Center of Community Life, their effort to transform the school district into a learning campus for the entire city.

Based on the lessons and outcomes of this initial three-year project, the Center hopes to expand the PLUS model throughout California and eventually across the nation. The long term vision of this work is for urban and metropolitan communities and public education to create integrated and mutually beneficial policies, practices, and governance systems, enabling all students—from all communities—to participate and excel in our economy and democracy. ■