

# The Politics of School Reform: A Broader and Bolder Approach for Newark

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## Abstract

*A substantial body of evidence has shown that past reforms have largely failed to improve schools in urban areas. After reviewing some of the major reforms that have been undertaken over the last 20 to 30 years the authors conclude that prior efforts failed to address the numerous ways in which poverty influences student academic outcomes and school performance (Coleman et al., 1966; Rothstein, 2004). As a contrast to the decontextualized approach to school improvement that has characterized national reforms, a new strategy to school improvement that is underway in Newark, New Jersey is presented as an alternative model. Conceived as a demonstration model for the Broader and Bolder Approach,<sup>2</sup> the Newark strategy follows an approach that has been pursued by the Harlem Children's Zone, the Children's Aid Society, and a small number of similar efforts. These initiatives are based on the premise that educational reforms must be designed to counter and mitigate the effects of social and economic conditions in the local environment. The case of Newark is presented as a model for what it might take to enable a greater number of schools in distressed neighborhoods to experience success.*

*Keywords:* Social Context, School Reform, Impact of Poverty on Education, Integrated Social Policy

Perhaps one of the most ambitious goals of President Obama's *Blueprint for Reform* is its call for the transformation of the nation's persistently failing schools. According to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, there are over 5,000 chronically underperforming schools throughout the country. Many of these are high schools that he and others have described as "dropout factories" because they consistently lose far more students than they graduate each year (Gonzalez, 2010). Although recent data indicate that there has been a slight increase in high school graduation rates from 70% to 72% (Pearson Foundation, 2010), a closer examination of the evidence reveals little change in many of the nation's largest cities and school districts where dropout rates typically hover at around 50% and are generally substantially higher for Black and Latino males.

This article begins by presenting an analysis of the major school reform efforts that have occurred over the last 20 to 30 years and offers an explanation for why they have largely failed to bring about the dramatic changes in student achievement that have been promised. A central argument of this paper is that one of the reasons why past reforms

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<sup>2</sup> The Broader and Bolder Approach is a set of policy prescriptions adopted by a broad number of researchers, policymakers, and educators as a counter to the current No Child Left Behind policy. For a detailed description, see <http://www.broaderbolderapproach.com>.

have failed to improve schools in urban areas in particular is because they have failed to address the numerous ways in which poverty influences student academic outcomes and school performance (Coleman et al., 1966; Rothstein, 2004). As a contrast to the decontextualized approach to school improvement that has characterized national reforms, we describe the strategy to school improvement that is underway in Newark, New Jersey. Conceived as a demonstration model for the Broader and Bolder Approach,<sup>3</sup> the Newark strategy is firmly rooted in the recognition that schools are influenced by social and economic conditions in the local environment and that in order for reforms to be successful they must effectively design strategies to counter and mitigate these effects. The case of Newark will be presented as a model for what it might take to enable a greater number of schools in distressed neighborhoods to experience success.

The Obama administration has made reducing the dropout rate and improving the nation's lowest performing schools a national priority, which is part of an ambitious agenda for overhauling the nation's schools on a scale never seen before. Secretary Duncan has called for schools with a track record of chronic failure to be transformed, turned around, or completely shut down.<sup>4</sup> President Obama explained the need for such a drastic strategy in a speech focused on the use of federal stimulus funds:

Replacing school staff should only be done as a last resort. If a school's struggling, we have to work with the principal and the teachers to find a solution. We've got to give them a chance to make meaningful improvements. But if a school continues to fail its students year after year after year, if it doesn't show any sign of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability. (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010)

It would be difficult to dispute the need for change in American education, particularly in urban and rural communities where poverty is concentrated and school failure is pervasive. However, the administration has not explained why it believes its strategy is more likely to succeed than the reforms pursued by the Bush administration. Nine years after the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the most far-reaching federal educational reform ever enacted, school failure rates are still high, reading and math scores on standardized tests for low-income and minority children remain low, and college attendance rates have been stagnant (Darling-Hammond, 2010). With its continued emphasis on raising academic standards and tightening accountability as the primary levers for change, there is little reason to believe that the Obama–Duncan plan will be any more successful than the policy strategy pursued by the Bush administration under NCLB. The new plan differs from the Bush era mandates in that it comes with

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<sup>4</sup> Within the federal guidelines, these terms have very specific meaning. Transformation is the mildest remedy and allows changes to be made under the supervision of the State Department of Education. Turnaround requires that 50% of the teachers be fired or transferred. Under a school closure plan, the entire staff would be removed and the school would re-open under new management. For more information on these terms, see <http://www.ed.gov/category/program/school-improvement-grants>.

significant dollars, made available through stimulus funding and the Race to the Top initiative. If state governments agree to adopt the measures mandated by the administration, some of these funds can be used by states to overhaul failing schools.

Like NCLB, the Obama–Duncan plan does not provide direction or clear guidance on how schools are to improve. It relies largely on pressure and threats to compel schools to produce better academic outcomes and essentially ignores the fact that this approach has not worked as a means to improve the most challenged schools. Such a strategy did not even work in Chicago where Secretary Duncan previously served as Chief Executive Officer of schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). In fact, in a comprehensive examination of the school improvement strategies that were implemented over a 10-year period in Chicago, Bryk et al. (2010) found that the least progress was made in the schools serving the poorest children, where change was needed most.

The history of educational policy in the United States over the last 30 years is characterized by sweeping reform initiatives that have been offered periodically as a means to overhaul and elevate American education to new heights. When promoted by elected officials, the reforms have typically been offered as a means for the nation to maintain its competitive advantage. Tyack and Cuban (1995) characterized such efforts as an elusive march toward utopia. They also pointed out that the grand promises of reform that are typically issued each time a new administration assumes office have often ignored the underlying social and economic challenges that impact education: “[L]eaders inside and outside of education generally share a common vision of scientific management as a blueprint for re-organizing the school system” (p. 8). They also argued: “[S]uch approaches avoid intractable problems such as social inequality and racial discrimination and place unrealistic expectations upon schools” (p. 46). A similar point has been made by sociologist Charles Payne (2008), now the Chief Education Officer of Chicago Public Schools, in his important critique of major school reform initiatives carried out in Chicago over the last 10 to 15 years, when he posed the provocative question: So much reform . . . why so little change?

### **So Much Reform . . . Understanding the Limitations of Past Reforms**

In the 1960s and 1970s, much of the effort to reform urban public schools in the United States focused on de-segregation and anti-poverty efforts (Barton & Coley, 2010). School bussing initiatives, Head Start, magnet schools, and a variety of academic programs financed by Title I (the Elementary and Secondary School Act) attempted to counter the pernicious effects of racial segregation and concentrated poverty in inner-city communities in the hope that this would in turn lead to improved academic outcomes for students (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Lashaw, 2010). This changed in the 1990s as a new series of school reform efforts focused specifically, and in many cases exclusively, on altering school conditions (curriculum, school structure, instruction, technology, etc.) took precedent over the context-focused approach of the previous era. The assumption guiding these efforts was that improved student academic outcomes could be obtained by altering conditions within schools, and in effect ignoring the social and economic circumstances of the communities where they resided.

In 1993, former Ambassador Walter Annenberg made an extraordinarily large donation—\$500 million—for the purpose of reforming the nation’s urban public schools.

To realize his ambitious goals, 18 locally designed Challenge projects<sup>5</sup> were created to operate in 35 states. Over the course of nearly 10 years, the initiative provided funding to 24,000 public schools. Additionally, \$600 million in private matching funds were raised from businesses, foundations, colleges and universities, and individuals. Each Challenge project was designed to address the unique local conditions of schools in the areas where funds were committed, and a local planning group comprised of educators, foundation officers, and community and business leaders, along with an independent nonprofit entity, was created to oversee the administration of grants to schools. As newly elected State Senator in Chicago's South Side, President Obama agreed to serve on the Chicago Annenberg Board of Directors. Grants ranging from \$10 million to \$53 million were awarded to sites in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, the San Francisco Bay Area, South Florida (encompassing Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties), and hundreds of communities through the Rural Challenge. Smaller "opportunity grants" of \$1 to \$4 million were awarded to sites in Atlanta (GA), Baltimore (MD), Chattanooga (TN), Chelsea (MA), and Salt Lake City (UT). Ten years later, after most of the funds were expended, it became clear that the ambassador's ambitious goals were not achieved. While it may be unfair to characterize the reform efforts that were launched as a result of the Annenberg grant as a total failure, it is accurate to point out that the changes enacted as a result of the grants did not result in the large-scale improvement that was hoped for. It was especially clear that very little progress was made in the poorest communities where school failure was most pervasive.<sup>6</sup>

A few years after the Annenberg Challenge, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched its own ambitious set of reforms. This time the plan focused largely on the need to redesign and restructure large impersonal high schools into small learning communities, or in some cases, autonomous small schools. The Gates Foundation surpassed Ambassador Annenberg, spending well over \$2 billion to support this reform initiative over a 10-year period. In New York City alone, over \$1 billion was spent on the effort to transform the city's large dysfunctional high schools.<sup>7</sup> The Gates initiative relied upon intermediary reform organizations to provide technical assistance to schools and to ensure that funding from the foundation would be used in a manner that was consistent with its goals. Without much fanfare, the small schools reform effort came to a gradual end between the years 2006 and 2008, as The Gates Foundation ceased funding new initiatives and quietly admitted that in too many cases the new schools were no better than the ones they replaced.<sup>8</sup> A cover article in *Bloomberg Business Week* entitled "Bill

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<sup>5</sup> The term "challenge project" was used to describe communities that received grants as part of the Annenberg initiative.

<sup>6</sup> For a review of several evaluation studies carried out as part of the Annenberg Challenge (2001), see [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/challenge/evaluation/eval\\_reports.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/challenge/evaluation/eval_reports.html)

<sup>7</sup> It should be pointed out that several of the highest performing high schools in New York are among the largest in the city—Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Technical High School, etc.—and there was never any attempt to reduce the size of these schools.

<sup>8</sup> This is a broad generalization. A study on the new small high schools in New York City conducted by researchers at MDRC (Bloom, Thompson, Unterman, Herlihy, & Payne, 2010) documented that many of the new schools had significantly higher graduation rates and were performing better than the large schools they replaced.

Gates Gets Schooled” explained the failed experiment in this way:

Visits to 22 Gates-funded schools around the country show that while the Microsoft couple indisputably merit praise for calling national attention to the dropout crisis and funding the creation of some promising schools, they deserve no better than a C when it comes to improving academic performance. Researchers paid by their foundation reported back last year that they have found only slightly improved English and reading achievement in Gates schools and substantially worse results in math. There has been more promising news on graduation rates. Many of the 1,000 small schools the Gateses have funded are still new, however, and it's too soon to project what percentage of their students will finish school and enter college, also a foundation goal. The collapse of Manual High is an extreme case, but one that points to a clear lesson: Creating small schools may work sometimes, but it's no panacea. (Greene & Symonds, 2006)

These are only the most recent examples of sweeping reforms supported by investments from the private sector that have been carried out over the last 20 to 30 years. During the same period, state and federal governments have launched their own initiatives, at times complementing those supported by private funding, and at other times focusing on an entirely different set of goals and challenges. The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 by the National Governors Association (which was chaired by former President Bill Clinton when he was governor of Arkansas) called for action to be taken to address the mediocrity of America's public schools. Using language for the explicit purpose of provoking action, the report charged that low standards in the nation's schools were a threat to the nation's economic competitiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). Its dire warnings sparked a variety of reform initiatives led by federal and state governments to revamp public education. Among other things this period of government-initiated reforms included new curricula to change the way reading and math were taught, new governance models to promote accountability and to make possible a more collaborative approach to school-based decision making, zero-tolerance laws to ensure order and safety, and greater choice in school enrollment through the creation of magnet and charter schools.<sup>9</sup>

It would be unfair to characterize all of these reform initiatives as failures because in many cases they were not given enough time to take hold. As Cuban and Tyack (1995) pointed out in *Tinkering toward Utopia*, many reforms have been scrapped without ever being evaluated simply because of changes in political leadership. Others have argued that school reform itself has become an industry comprised of think tanks, consultants, and a variety of nonprofits. Like other industries that have sprung up in response to pressing social problems, critics charge that the reformers actually have been complicit in school failure because success would effectively end their *raison d'être* and drive them out of business (Lashaw, 2010). Taking a less cynical perspective, Hess (1999) argued that the tumultuous nature of educational politics at the local level has been one of the

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the reforms that were launched by state and federal governments in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, see “A Nation at Risk 25 Years Later” by *Education Week* (December 23, 2010).

major factors contributing to the lack of progress achieved in the nation's 30-year effort to improve public education.

In addition to the political factors that have contributed to the lack of progress, there is also a substantial body of evidence that the educational reforms implemented over the last 30 years have not succeeded in bringing about sustainable improvements in the most disadvantaged schools because they have largely ignored, or at least failed to address, the impact of poverty on school performance and student learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Payne, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). Recent evidence from international comparisons of achievement in math and science (Gertz, 2010), child health and well-being (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2002), and reports that attempt to explain the lack of progress made in closing the so-called achievement gap (Barton & Coley, 2010), suggests that three decades of reform has not led to significant increases in the achievement of American students. This is particularly true for poor and minority children. In her new book, *The Flat World and Education*, Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that a major part of the reason why greater progress has not been achieved is because we have not made a more explicit commitment to equity in school finance nor have we made the types of investments into public education (e.g., universal access to high-quality, early childhood education, higher professional standards for teachers, etc.) that many of the nations that have surpassed the United States (e.g., South Korea, Singapore, and Australia) have made.<sup>10</sup> Darling-Hammond also suggested that unless the desire to raise academic standards is combined with willingness to ensure that optimal learning standards are in place for a greater number of students, a change in school or student performance would be unlikely.

Several critics of American education policy have pointed out that too often reforms are conceived and implemented in a top-down manner and without sufficient understanding of how they will impact schools (Fullan, 2007). Policymakers typically develop and legislate new education policy in state capitols based on ideas that may be politically popular (i.e., phonics versus whole language or opposition to bilingual education), but without consulting with educators or educational researchers. In many cases, educational policies are more likely to be based on politics and ideology than on objective educational research. This has been most evident in the policy debates over how best to teach reading and how best to teach English-language learners (García, 2001). Finally, several critics have argued that the reforms have failed because in many cases the theory of change guiding them has been weak and has not taken into account all of the related changes that need to accompany a particular reform (Elmore, 2004; Noguera, 2005). There have also been several cases in which those who legislated a reform were unaware of the adverse unintended consequences that might result.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Flat World and Education*, Darling-Hammond (2010) cited South Korea as a particularly noteworthy example because just 20 years ago it was not recognized as a leader based on international comparisons of educational achievement and attainment. Since 2005 it has surpassed the United States in math and science achievement and the percentage of its youth that enroll in college.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of an unintended adverse consequence of a reform was seen in California in 1992 after Governor Pete Wilson mandated that class sizes in kindergarten and first grade be lowered to no more than 20 students per class. Policymakers had not anticipated that lowering class size would require them to create more classrooms and hire more teachers.

### Why Poverty Matters

There is substantial evidence that one of the major reasons why greater progress in improving American schools has not been achieved is because federal education policy has not adequately addressed the ways in which poverty and inequality influence student learning and school performance. For the last 20 years most social scientists and urban planners who have studied poverty alleviation have argued that poverty and the variety of the social issues that frequently accompany it (e.g., housing instability, substance abuse, unemployment, etc.) has an impact on student achievement and the character of schools (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Noguera, 2003; Payne, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). This is especially the case in communities where poverty is concentrated (Bryk et al., 2010). Numerous studies have shown that family income and parental education are two of the strongest predictors of student achievement and attainment (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks, 1972; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Despite compelling evidence that educational policy must devise ways to mitigate the harmful effects of poverty on student achievement and child development, most policy devised at the state and federal level has failed to do so.<sup>12</sup> In fact, under the banner “No Excuses,” a new crop of reformers (Joel Klein, former chancellor of public schools in New York, and Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington DC, are two of the most prominent) and a growing number of charter schools have argued that poverty is not an obstacle to student achievement, and that a combination of hard work, good teaching, and accountability are all that are needed to produce a greater degree of educational success.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these assertions there is substantial evidence that concentrated poverty in urban neighborhoods, and the adverse social and economic conditions that typically accompany them, impact the performance of a school in at least three important ways: (a) students’ academic and social supports outside of school; (b) conditions that influence students’ health, safety, and well-being; and (c) conditions that influence the ability of parents and schools to develop social capital.

Poverty influences the amount and quality of academic and social support students receive outside of school, at home from parents and other relatives, or elsewhere. Sociologist James Coleman (1998) coined the term *social closure* to describe the mutually reinforcing partnerships that exist in healthy schools and communities between parents and the staff of schools. These relationships promote and strengthen values and norms that support student achievement and often serve as an essential ingredient of school success (Coleman, 1998). Additionally, middle-class parents provide their children with a broad assortment of advantages that improve the likelihood of academic success (Lareau, 2003). These include access to private tutors, summer enrichment camps, homework support, etc. In inner-city communities, many families are unable to provide these types of support to their children and social closure between parents and

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<sup>12</sup> Title I is, of course, the major exception. Adopted by the Johnson administration as part of a larger set of initiatives aimed at improving civil rights and alleviating poverty, Title I funds from the federal government have been used to compensate for disadvantages faced by poor children and the schools that serve them. For an analysis of Title I and its impact on American public schools see *Hard Work for Good Schools: Facts, Not Fads, in Title I Reform* by Gary Orfield (1996).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of how the “No Excuses” discourse has been applied to schools see *No Excuses* by Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom (2003) and *Sweating the Small Stuff* by David Whitman (2008).

schools is generally weak or even nonexistent due to a lack of trust (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Noguera, 2003).

Environmental conditions influence the health, nutrition, safety, and overall psychological and emotional well-being of young people. Research has shown that the quality of life and the overall health of the neighborhoods where children reside have considerable bearing on academic and developmental outcomes (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Syme, 2004). Without the resources to support children or a strategy to protect them from the harmful effects of dangerous and even toxic communities (Greenberg & Schneider, 1996), schools can be overwhelmed and unable to respond to the nonacademic needs of the children they serve. For example, several studies on federally funded Head Start programs have shown that the benefits of early-childhood education are often undermined when children do not receive ongoing support, both within and outside of school, after they enter kindergarten (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). 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 unaffected children who live in the same neighborhoods because the harmful effects of the environment are even more detrimental than early exposure to drugs (Auerback, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000).

Environmental conditions influence the ability of parents and schools to develop the social capital that makes it possible to draw upon local resources to further student learning and promote healthy development. Schools in high-poverty communities often function in isolation from other community agencies (churches, social service agencies, recreation centers, etc.) either because school staff members lack relationships with these community-based organizations or because they perceive the neighborhood is hostile and potentially dangerous. In many poor urban areas public schools are the most stable social institutions (largely because of public funding), while potential partner organizations often lack resources and capacity or simply do not exist (Tabb, 1970; Wilson, 1987). In a worst-case scenario, schools may even erode the social capital for the communities they were intended to serve if those who work within them resist efforts to build partnerships with families and neighborhood-based organizations either out of fear, bias, or a lack of awareness that help is needed (Noguera, 2003; Wacquant, 2002).<sup>14</sup>

In the following pages we describe an approach to school reform that is being undertaken in Newark, New Jersey. The reform model guiding change efforts in Newark was conceived as a demonstration project that would be designed with the explicit goal of addressing the harmful effects of poverty on students and schools. Called the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA),<sup>15</sup> this ambitious reform project has been launched as an attempt to develop a comprehensive school-reform strategy that will address issues

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<sup>14</sup> The break down of partnerships between schools and community organizations often occurs due to a lack of clear understanding about the nature and terms of the collaboration. For a discussion of frequent conflicts between schools and CBOs, see *Identity and Youth Development* (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993) and "Obstacles to Strong School-Community Partnerships" by Joyce Dryfoos (2005).

<sup>15</sup> BBA is a policy statement that was issued by a coalition of scholars, policymakers, and educational leaders in 2008. The BBA statement called for three major revisions in federal education policy: expanded access to pre-school, healthcare, and after-school programs. For a detailed discussion of the BBA plan, go to <http://www.bolderapproach.com>

and challenges arising out of the distressed social contexts in which families and public schools are situated through a variety of school-based interventions. The goal of the BBA is to bring school reform efforts into alignment with the provision of social services, economic development plans, and civic engagement in order to ensure that efforts to transform schools are not undermined by environmental hardships or the lack of attention to quality control in educational practices and interventions. A central component of BBA is to *expand learning opportunities* for students through excellent early-childhood education, extending the traditional school day, and *enriching the curriculum* to ensure that students are provided with an education that is relevant to the economic, political, cultural, and social life of the city, the nation, and the world in the 21st century. It also seeks to build *critical partnerships* that will make it possible to strengthen the capacity of schools to respond to student needs and for community interests to come together in ways that allow parents and their allies to hold schools, and those who lead them, accountable for academic outcomes.

### **Overcoming a History: Creating Good Schools for Newark**

Newark is one of several American cities trapped in a vicious cycle of economic depression that has relatively little to do with trends in the national economy. Years before the current national recession, the unemployment rate in Newark was well above 10%, and in the poorest neighborhoods of the city it runs as high as 28% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Business leaders and elected officials, including Mayor Cory Booker, have attempted to break this cycle by promoting economic development projects designed to stimulate the economy and rejuvenate the downtown area. They have also made a concerted effort to reduce the crime rate by hiring a large number of police officers and employing modern policing tactics that have proven effective elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Though there have been some signs of progress, so far these efforts have not succeeded in revitalizing the city and in resuscitating it from the cumulative effects of deindustrialization, disinvestment, and middle-class flight.

There is a growing awareness that if Newark is to experience a sustained economic and social renaissance it must develop new strategies for developing its human capital by educating its citizens and doing more to ensure their well-being. Transforming schools so that they are more effective in providing young people in Newark an education that can make it possible for them to participate fully in the economic rebirth of the city is widely recognized as essential. However, the record of school reform in Newark is one of unfulfilled promise and repeated failure (Anyon, 1997). Even the recent gift of \$100 million from Facebook Founder Mark Zuckerberg for the purpose of improving education in Newark has generated more cynicism than inspiration because of the city's long history of failure.

Part of the reason for pervasive skepticism is that over the last 20 years Newark has participated in numerous national educational reform experiments, but these have yielded

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<sup>16</sup> Shortly after his election Mayor Booker appointed Garry McCarthy, a veteran of New York City's police force, as chief of the Newark police department in the hope that Newark, like its larger neighbor across the Hudson, might experience a substantial decline in its crime rate. For more information, see Newark City Website:  
[http://www.ci.newark.nj.us/government/city\\_departments/police\\_department/about\\_the\\_director.php](http://www.ci.newark.nj.us/government/city_departments/police_department/about_the_director.php)

negligible results.<sup>17</sup> Schools in Newark exhibit all of the features typically associated with large urban school districts throughout the United States where failure and decay have been pervasive—high dropout rates, low student-achievement measures, poor attendance, high rates of disciplinary infractions, etc. (Anyon, 1994; Payne, 1984). The persistence of failure has contributed to a growing awareness that any effort to improve schools in Newark must be carried out in concert with strategies that address economic and social conditions confronting children, families, and the neighborhoods where they reside.

In Newark, economic decline and educational failure have a long, intertwined history. Founded in 1666, over 100 years before the birth of the nation, Newark is one of the oldest cities in the United States. Strategically located at the mouth of the Newark river, the city became an important center for commerce and, later, industry due to its easy access to New York Harbor and the Atlantic. By the turn of the 19th century Newark developed both rail and port systems that made it possible for it to serve as a regional hub of manufacturing and commercial activity. By World War II Newark was a thriving retail and political center. Several major department stores, cultural centers, and hospitals were located in its downtown, and the presence of a variety of state and municipal buildings made Newark the most important administrative and legal center in northern New Jersey. With a population comprised of White Ethnics (Jews, Italians, Slavs, etc.), and a mix of working-class and professional households, Newark exhibited the characteristics typically associated with a healthy metropolitan area (Gans, 1962) until the early 1960s. Though African-Americans were present in Newark for hundreds of years, their numbers did not increase significantly until the Great Migration in the 1940s and 1950s (Lehman, 1996). The Latino population of Newark did not expand until the 1970s. Today, Latinos constitute the fastest growing segment of the state's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Between 1950 and 1967, Newark's White population declined from 363,000 to 158,000. During the same time period, the city's Black residents increased from 70,000 to 220,000 (Chernick, Indik, & Sternlieb, 1967). Beginning in the 1960s, housing policy in Newark appears to have been designed to deliberately keep poor African-Americans concentrated in segregated neighborhoods. Five new housing projects were built in Newark's Central Ward during the 1960s, and low-income African-American households comprised 95% of the residents in these new developments (Anyon, 1997; Sasaki, 1994). Similar patterns of segregation emerged in the eastern and southern sections of the city during the same period. Although African-Americans migrated to northern cities like Newark in pursuit of jobs, poverty and unemployment in segregated neighborhoods were high from the time that they were developed. Cut off from jobs in the northern industrial sections of the city, and subject to discrimination in the downtown retail sector, the stage

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<sup>17</sup> Some of the major reforms over the last few years include project GRAD, the creation of small learning communities at high schools, the implementation of new math and literacy curriculums, and investments in technology to enhance teaching and learning. For a discussion of these initiatives and an analysis of their impact see "Raising Student Achievement in the Newark Public Schools: Report of the Strategic Support Team of the Council of the Great City Schools," submitted to the Newark Public Schools by the Council of the Great City Schools (2007).

was set for a social upheaval as resentment festered in neighborhoods where opportunity and mobility were scarce (Price, 1980).

As was true for Detroit, Cleveland, and several other U.S. cities at this time, the riots of 1967 were sparked by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 3rd and a history of discrimination and egregious incidents of police brutality (Price, 2007). The riots were a watershed moment for Newark. From May 3rd to May 26th, there were several clashes between African-American residents and the local police. Throughout this period, businesses and homes were burned and looted in the Central Ward. It took the deployment of troops from the National Guard and 14 days of military occupation to restore a semblance of order. In the wake of this upheaval, Newark experienced a steady exodus of White residents and capital. Over the next few years the city was dramatically transformed into one that was primarily poor, Black, and economically depressed.

For more than a generation since 1967, Newark has been ranked among the top ten poorest cities in the nation with a population over 250,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In 2009, the per capita income of Newark residents was \$17,372 compared to the \$50,919 for households in the state (City-Data, 2009). The median household income, \$35,296, is half of the statewide median household income of \$70,398. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2009), 25% of Newark residents live below the federal poverty level, almost four times the average for the state. However, the New Jersey Poverty Research Institute, which calculates a poverty rate based on geographic variations in the cost of living across the state, indicates that the true poverty rate for Newark is closer to 50% (City-Data, 2009). Today, Newark is a “majority minority” city. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Report on Newark (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), 54% of its residents are identified as Black (this includes immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa) and another 30% are Latino (the majority are Puerto Rican, but there are also large numbers of residents from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Brazil, and Central America). Whites make up only 24% of the city’s residents, and most are concentrated in the North Ward.

It has taken over 40 years, but for the last four years, Newark finally appears to be in the midst of a period of rebirth and rejuvenation. There are clear signs of economic development and improvement to the city’s housing market and infrastructure, and new hotels, sporting arenas, and cultural centers in the downtown area have become powerful symbols of change. Although several neighborhoods in Newark are still characterized by high rates of crime and poverty, the demolition of older low-income housing and construction of new housing developments has brought evidence of gradual change even in these areas.<sup>18</sup> The current economic crisis has pushed the unemployment rate in Newark from 9% to 11% in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), but there has also been a gradual increase in the middle class as professionals have moved into new condominiums and apartments in the North Ward.

With this mix of indicators, Newark can be described as a city on the edge. It sits precariously on the border between continued gradual progress and improvement, and the possibility that it will fall back into a state of entrenched poverty and economic blight. There is a growing consensus among stakeholders in Newark that if the progress is to

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<sup>18</sup> In Mayor Cory Booker’s most recent State of the City address, the mayor cited several signs of progress including new jobs, housing units, etc.

continue, schools in Newark must be substantially improved. With 42% of adults over 25 lacking high-school diplomas, and a mere 9% in possession of bachelor's degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), Newark is in need of a strategy to develop its human capital. Yet, despite the clear need for improvement, educational change has been difficult to achieve.

### **The Need for a Broader and Bolder Approach**

The theory of action guiding the BBA is that by transforming schools in Newark it will be possible to address many of the social and economic challenges that have prevented residents of the city from experiencing a superior quality of life. Specifically, the BBA strategy aims to combine research-based educational strategies with school-based social services, afterschool programs, and interventions to increase the capacity of schools to respond to issues that are endemic to the social and environmental context (i.e., the need for health, nutrition, jobs, safety, etc.).<sup>19</sup> The assumption is that such an approach will make it possible for schools in Newark to be in a better position to meet the needs of the students they serve. It is also assumed that successful implementation of a full-service reform model will improve the ability of schools to prepare students to meet the demands of a rapidly changing knowledge-based economy and increase the likelihood that public education in Newark will play a role in reducing poverty and improving social conditions over time.

Rather than wait for a transformation of the local economy, the BBA strategy is based on the theory that it may be possible to spur economic development and improve the quality of life for a greater number of residents by transforming the schools. 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.

The BBA strategy aims at transforming schools through the development of the civic capacity of Newark. Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi (2001) and others (Noguera, 2003; Orr, 2007) have defined civic capacity as the creation of a series of strategic partnerships between schools, businesses, universities, hospitals, local government, and a broad 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 to deliver 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.

As is true in many other high-poverty urban areas, a combination of social, economic, and political problems has historically constrained efforts to improve schools in Newark. These problems are also at the root of many of the current challenges confronting its residents. In high-poverty cities like Newark, where the children attending public schools are primarily from low-income Black and Latino families, social isolation and economic marginalization (Wilson, 1987) have an enormous influence upon

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of several researched-based interventions including the extended school day, see *Kids First* by David Kirp (2011).

employment opportunities, health and welfare, aspirations and behavior, and the non-cognitive traits typically associated with academic success (Bryk et al., 2010). Past experience in Newark (and several other cities) has shown that when educational reforms fail to take into account the various ways in which 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 the way in which urban public schools typically serve low-income children of color and their families. In many communities across the country there is a complacency that is prevalent in public schools. Conditioned by years of failure, low expectations, a high degree of disorder and dysfunction, and a lack of internal or external accountability, failure in many public schools is normalized (Noguera, 2005). As Payne (1984) wrote in *Getting What We Ask For*, schools with a track record of failure often lose any incentive to improve because they rationalize failure as the inevitable consequence of serving impoverished children. Years of failure in Newark schools have had similar effects upon many of the staff employed there and the normalization of failure can be seen in: (a) high absentee rates among staff (according to a former superintendent Newark had one of the highest rates of teacher absenteeism in the State of New Jersey in 2009); (b) tolerance for student absenteeism and tardiness (at two of the better high schools in Newark it is a common practice not to take attendance until after 10 a.m. in order to maximize the number of students who will be counted present because large numbers arrive after the start of school at 8 a.m.); and (c) lack of attention to quality control in the implementation of interventions and programs designed to help students. The BBA will attempt to address complacency and the lack of quality in school interventions by using data to carefully monitor student progress and training staff to evaluate the ways in which intervention programs are implemented. The goal will be to respond immediately to evidence that programs are not implemented with fidelity or are not achieving the goals that have been set.

Successfully implementing such a strategy will be difficult due to a variety of obstacles and constraints that are present within the political and economic environment of Newark. Although there are a small but significant number of high-performing, high-poverty schools (Barth et al., 1999), there are almost no examples in the United States of school districts that have achieved significant improvements following years of failure (Council of Great City Schools, 2007). Nonetheless, a growing body of research in urban education suggests that any approach that focuses narrowly on achievement and ignores the social needs of children is doomed to fail (Barton & Coley, 2010). A recent study on the impact of school reforms in Chicago found that gains in school performance were least likely in schools that served the most disadvantaged populations precisely because these schools were overwhelmed and unable to respond effectively to student needs (Bryk et al., 2010). Research has shown consistently that without a comprehensive strategy there are a variety of contextual conditions—inadequate housing, a broad array of health challenges, high crime and violence, and high unemployment—that will impact

and undermine student achievement and school performance (Coleman et al., 1966; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Rothstein, 2004).

In her seminal work, *Ghetto Schooling*, Anyon (1997) provided a thorough historical examination of the dynamic relationship between urban school reform, changing demographics (particularly with respect to the race and class makeup of the city), and the political economy of Newark. Her analysis revealed how the calculated economic and political decisions made by the city's leaders between the 1940s and the 1970s left the city and school district "bankrupt and dysfunctional" (p. 127). The combination of corruption and systematic disinvestment in public schools occurred as the Black population grew. As was true in many other cities across the country, politicians in Newark viewed schools and other public operations as a source of patronage. Rather than focusing on whether or not children received a quality education, those responsible for the schools were far more concerned with who controlled the jobs and the contracts issued by the school district (Anyon, 1997).

Anyon (1997) attributed the failure of past reforms not only to the climate of dysfunction that characterized the city and the district, but also to the singular focus of the reform efforts that accompanied the Abbott decisions on educational systems alone:

By isolating city schools from their urban context, and then aiming funding only at the educational institutions, are we not "missing one whole side of the barn?" . . . [W]e need to broaden our sights and focus, in addition, on the problems of what the New Jersey Supreme Court called the "economic and social disaster areas" that are our nation's cities. (Anyon, 1997, p. 148)

What is illuminating about Anyon's (1997) work for our purposes is the way in which her analysis of school failure makes it clear that school reform in Newark has repeatedly been implemented without consideration of the ways in which the social, political, and economic contexts of the city affects the well-being and education of children. The BBA initiative is designed not to make the same mistake. Recognizing the importance of the relationship between environmental factors and academic performance, BBA in Newark makes a deliberate effort to mitigate the harmful effects of conditions that undermine student performance by building a system of support for schools that draws on the resources of local institutions. Through strategic partnerships with local corporations, nonprofits, and health centers, BBA will develop a support system for schools designed to increase their ability to respond positively to student needs. The theory of action guiding BBA is that obstacles to school improvement that emerge from the local context will be countered by the strategic deployment and coordination of community resources. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data including surveys from parents and teachers, health data on students, crime reports, and census data will be collected as the project is implemented and will be used to test the viability of this proposition.

### **An Ecological Framework for Change**

The BBA reform agenda in Newark is rooted in an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1975), one that explicitly 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 a city like Newark, where poverty is concentrated and has been reproduced across generations, the social conditions that arise from poverty, including poor health, high crime rates, substance abuse, etc., present formidable challenges to school reform. The BBA approach is designed to provide educators, and those who collaborate with them, with the skills and resources to mitigate the risks that might otherwise undermine their efforts to meet their students' learning needs. It acknowledges that *fixing schools* in high-poverty neighborhoods must include strategies that make it possible to respond to the wide range of challenges that affect child development, learning, and the performance of schools and classrooms. Breaking with precedent, reformers in Newark 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 which shape their development.

Not surprisingly, such an approach certainly has critics and opponents. Shortly after BBA was announced as a policy agenda, another national group of educational leaders and policymakers launched what they called the Education Equality Project (EEP). Led by an unusual combination of prominent public figures, including former chancellor of New York City Schools, Joel Klein, former House Republican leader, Newt Gingrich, and civil rights activist, Reverend Al Sharpton, the EEP described education as the most important civil rights issue of the 21st century and called for affirming the principles of NCLB (e.g., standards-based reform, accountability through high-stakes testing, etc.). The EEP also suggested that any effort to shift the focus of school reform to efforts aimed at reducing poverty or improving the health and welfare of children was nothing more than an attempt to use poverty as an excuse for not educating all children at high standards (Klein, Lomax, & Murguía, 2010).

Despite its critics, the BBA strategy is moving forward and gaining momentum as a broad array of stakeholders in Newark agree to support the approach even in the face of complex interests, political dynamics, and entrenched patterns of silos. Much of the reason for this broad support lies in the recognition that all other approaches have failed. Although called by other names, the "schools alone" strategy advocated by the EEP has been the strategy pursued by Newark Public Schools (and most other urban school districts) for the last 30 years. With funds from Abbott, schools have been rebuilt, new technology has been introduced, after-school and pre-school programs have been implemented, but none of these costly measures have had the impact on academic and developmental outcomes of children that had been hoped for. Leaders from city government, hospitals, local nonprofits, private foundations, and the private sector have now affirmed their support for BBA. The history of past school reform efforts in Newark has made it clear to a broad array of stakeholders that a reform strategy based upon an ecological framework is the only way that sustainable progress in public education will be achieved.

The BBA strategy draws on lessons learned from research carried out in a variety of fields on the social and emotional needs of children and the *best practices* of current reform initiatives. This research suggests that a more comprehensive approach is needed to increase academic outcomes for poor students and to improve the schools that serve

them (Blau & 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, Kirp (2011) cited the full-service schools developed by the Children's Aid Society and Communities in Schools as models that have proven successful in helping schools meet both the academic and non-academic needs of children. A growing body of research has shown that when schools can offer students access to a variety of social services (i.e., licensed social workers, 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 tremendous impact on achievement (Kirp 2011). When carried out in tandem, these practices make it possible for schools to meet the wide variety of needs that typically undermine student learning and child development. While there is no guarantee that such an approach will succeed in raising student achievement and significantly improving the performance of schools in Newark, the long history of failure shows that reform strategies that ignore student needs have not worked.

### **Conclusion**

To a large degree, the BBA school reform in Newark is an experiment designed to challenge existing policy assumptions about what it takes to improve urban schools. It is also a strategy that is rooted in the city's past failures with school reform. Considerable sums of private and public funds have been invested in what could be broadly described as a schools alone strategy, one that focused on changing conditions within schools while ignoring the social context of learning. As it is applied in Newark, the BBA strategy will attempt to avoid past mistakes, but it is still clear that achieving success will not be easy. In November 2009, Chris Christie became the first Republican to win a statewide election since 1997, ousting Governor Jon Corzine. Since assuming office, Governor Christie has vowed to "take back New Jersey" by decreasing spending, cutting taxes across the board, and appointing an education commissioner who would lift the cap on charter schools. Not long after his election, Newark Superintendent Dr. Cliff Janey, a major supporter of BBA, was informed that his contract would not be renewed after it expires in June 2011.

The state budget passed by the new administration for the 2010-2011 fiscal year cut aid to New Jersey's public schools by \$802 million. In Newark these reductions created a \$42 million budget gap, sparking district budget cuts that resulted in the elimination of numerous positions and programs. In the midst of these rising fiscal and school staffing challenges, the New Jersey State Department of Education issued a list of 34 persistently low-achieving schools across the state required to implement one of four federal school-intervention models; one-third of the schools on this list were in Newark.

In such an economic climate the need to align education and social services has become even more necessary, but doing so is even more challenging. Mayor Booker will now have considerable influence over the appointment of the next superintendent. Given

his support for vouchers and charter schools<sup>20</sup> it is not clear what this will mean for BBA and public schools in Newark. Despite this uncertainty, the BBA initiative in Newark continues to move forward. With a broadly based advisory board, comprised of civic leaders and representatives of major social institutions and local organizations (such as Rutgers University, Newark Alliance, United Way of Essex County and West Hudson, Abbott Leadership Institute, Newark Teachers' Union, and local philanthropic organizations, such as Victoria Foundation, The Nicholson Foundation, and The Prudential Foundation), it should be possible to continue the work despite the political changes. Additionally, parents, students, teachers, and community members have been engaged in various ways, including participation in the development of the school-improvement plan for Central High School and a three-year strategic planning process that included these traditionally marginalized stakeholders. Finally, the principals of the seven BBA schools have coalesced around the initiative in a way that is unprecedented, committing to a reciprocal accountability structure through which they will share resources, discuss common problems, and promote leadership development that research has shown is necessary to lead systemic change in urban schools systems (Fullan, 2007).

Only time will tell if the BBA strategy will work. There is a clear sense of what has not worked, but this is no guarantee that the BBA strategy will be more effective and make it possible for schools to overcome their history of failure. The BBA strategy is committed to transparency and accountability, to the funders and stakeholders in Newark, and to the community being served. This will not necessarily increase the chance of success, but it will make it much harder to simply blame others if it does not.

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<sup>20</sup> Though there are several charter schools in Newark, none are presently part of the BBA plan. This could change if the next superintendent decides to forge a collaborative relationship between traditional public schools and the local charter schools.

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