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The Neglected Educational Reform:
the Holistic Revitalization of American Urban Neighborhoods

The interdependency between the built environment of the city, human culture and individual development was embodied by the Greek word "polis." The preservation of the "polis" was tantamount to safeguarding Greek democracy itself. Non-Western cultures also viewed the city as the well-spring of civilization. In his address to the Boston University community in 1999, Jon Westling reflected on Gilgamesh's vision of Urak,

> "He is now able to see the city for what it truly is: the great, shared building project that makes civilized life possible. He stands before his city, ready to accept its human scale and to take up again the immensely hard, but immensely rewarding work of building a civilization, brick by brick." (1)

There is another aspect to building a "civilization, brick by brick" and that is enculturation child by child. Educational historian, Diane Ravitch wrote,

> "There is a clash of ideas occurring in education right now between those who believe that public education is not only a fundamental right but a vital public service…and those who believe that the private sector is always superior to the public sector….Public education is one of the cornerstones of American democracy. The public schools must accept everyone who appears at their doors, no matter their race, language, economic status, or disability…. The schools should be far better than they are now, but privatizing them is no solution." (2)

Although good schools and teachers can (and do) make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children, the persistence of nation-wide achievement gaps gives pause. "Part of this *hitting the wall* may be the troubling fact that we may need to attack family poverty before we see greater progress in closing achievement gap." (3) Contrary to claims made by the proponents of privatized education the holistic revitalization of our impoverished urban neighborhoods (inclusive of physical, socio-economic and educational interventions) remains the critical yet often missing, component of a comprehensive strategy to raise student achievement. By narrowly training the sights of government policy-makers on education "child by child" as the exclusive pathway out of poverty, the need to simultaneously transform the nation's inner cities "brick by brick" has been neglected.

I. Privatization?

Market-oriented policies such as vouchers, charter schools and non-unionized labor first surfaced in the 1983 Nation at Risk Report (4) and have gained currency in many circles, from the U.S. Congress to the Congress for the New Urbanism. Yet there has been little discussion about the implications of privatizing tasks (be it military operations or public education.) In his book, Are We Rome, Cullen Murphy cites Ramsey MacMullen's search for a plausible explanation of the dissolution of ancient Rome. His answer included privatization, defined as the deflection of public purpose by private interest. It can occur anytime public tasks are lodged in private hands, no matter how honest the intention or efficient the arrangement because private and public interests tend to diverge over time."(5) The unquestioning acceptance of privatization obscures the fact that privately chartered schools have not been particularly successful in closing achievement gaps.

A national study of charter schools by Stanford economist Margaret Raymond (the CREDO study,) evaluated student progress on math tests in half the nation's five thousand charter schools and concluded that 17 percent were superior to a matched traditional public school; 37 percent were worse than the public school; and the remaining 46 percent had academic gains no different from that of a similar public school. (6) Among those with the greatest success, has been the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools. However, KIPP administrators screen their students and parents. (7) The school day is four hours longer, the school week is six days, and summers are truncated; all of which means less time in the neighborhood. The extra time in school however, (a luxury public schools cannot afford) enables a congenial pace that promotes deeper learning.

Targeting teacher unions also reflects a bias against public endeavor to promote common good. However Finland, which ranks the highest in the developed world in student achievement (as measured by the PISA,) has a fully unionized teaching corps. (8) Virginia is a "right to work state" yet its urban areas have experienced the same problems. As Harold Meyerson states, "Blaming teachers for the dysfunction of inner cities and the decline of American industry lets a lot of other, more culpable, parties off the hook." (9) From a global perspective, "Nations with high-performing school systems succeed not by privatizing their schools or closing those with low scores, but by strengthening the education profession. They also have less poverty. Fewer than 5 percent of children in Finland live in poverty, as compared to 20 percent in the United States. Those who insist that poverty doesn't matter, that only teachers matter, prefer to ignore such contrasts." (10) Unfortunately, over the past four decades, social policy makers have focused almost exclusively on education as the primary vehicle for increasing economic opportunity. By the same token, academic policy research has artificially separated K-12 education policy from factors exogenous to the school and classroom that could critically affect educational outcomes.

II. "Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations" or Concentrated Poverty?

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, any educator who suggested that a child's socio-economic background might have some bearing on achievement was accused of the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Public education policy at all levels of government, has therefore unfortunately favored narrowly defined and targeted instructional programs and testing regimes, aimed at closing achievement gaps at the expense of comprehensive, systems-oriented investigations.

In response to David Guggenhiem's movie "Waiting for Superman," Angela Blackwell of PolicyLink wrote, "We must remember that schools finish the job that communities start." (11) It is also important to remember that much of today's disinvested urban landscape is the by-product of past urban renewal and housing policies. As Jane Jacobs stated "Whole communities are torn apart and sown to the winds, with a reaping of cynicism, resentment and despair that must be heard and seen to be believed." (12) Thus began an evolution from once, economically diverse neighborhoods replete with janitors, shop owners and doctors to neighborhoods devoid of "high status" role models. This trend has been exacerbated by high rates of incarceration with dire results upon the young people left behind (13, 14.)

Recent national studies have shown that for children with similar levels of family income, growing up in a neighborhood where the number of families in poverty was between 20 and 30 percent increased the chance of downward economic mobility by more than 50 percent

compared with children who grew up in neighborhoods with under 10 percent of families in poverty. (15) Little wealth is created in such neighborhoods, particularly among African-American households where the average family (after deducting the value of a home) has only $300 in assets compared to $30,000 for White households. (16) Early childhood poverty, left unaddressed also has lasting cognitive impacts. Active working memory is impaired among children subjected to chronic stress (17.) "By age 4, the average child in a professional family hears about 20 million more words than the average child in a working class family and about 35 million more than the average child in a welfare family-a child often alone with a mother who is a high school dropout." (18) The ability to master complex material in middle school is directly tied to comprehension which in turn is related to the acquisition of vocabulary early in life. The Furman Center for Public Policy found, "that kids in public housing are consistently doing worse in school than their peers should make all of us think hard about how to narrow the gap." (19) Other studies suggest that the optimal mix of income groups to sustain achievement among the lowest income students is somewhere between 20%-40%. (20, 21) As succinctly put by Paul Barton, "closing the gap must be more than a one-front operation. Educators must hold ourselves responsible and accountable for improving schools when and where we can. At the same time, we must recognize that the achievement gap has deep roots." (22)

The correlation between academic achievement and the broader context is evident in all urban places regardless of size and overall prosperity. For instance, despite the advantages of being a home to the University of Virginia, the dynamics of concentrated poverty and racial mistrust play out daily in the neighborhoods and schools of Charlottesville, VA. However, because of its compact size and strong fiscal support from local government, the division cannot be faulted for failing to maintain quality control within its schools of high poverty (thereby debunking the myth that achievement gaps are caused solely by inferior personnel in urban school divisions.)

III. Case Study: Charlottesville Context

Charlottesville is a small city (10.4 SM with 3du/gross acre on average) in central Virginia, one-hour west of Richmond and two and one-half hours south of Washington, D.C. It has the highest incidence of low income and African-American residents in its metropolitan area. According to the U.S. Census for 2005, Charlottesville had 41,393 people with a median income of $59, 284. Albemarle County had 92, 866 with a median income of $84,351. (23) The city did experience a slight increase in population from 2000 to 2005, but only in non-family households. It actually lost family households in that same time period as well as 4% of its private sector, for profit jobs. (24) There are less than 3800 students is the city's public school system while there are close to 13,000 students enrolled in the Albemarle County public schools. Today Charlottesville is approximately 20% African-American whereas its public school population is 46% (25.) The county is 9.6% African-American. 9.4% of the city's family households were below the poverty rate compared to 4.7% in the county. Significantly, 19.7 % of Charlottesville's families with children under 18 lived in poverty compared to 8.1 % in Albemarle County. 1,317 of Charlottesville's children under 18, or 19.7% of all children lived in poverty. This is 1.7% higher than the national average %. Of those children, 65.8% lived in female-headed households. (26) These current patterns are directly tied to urban renewal and housing policies prevalent in the 1960's and 70's.

Vinegar Hill was the cultural and commercial heart of Charlottesville's African American community. Its "urban renewal" took place during the early 1960's ostensibly to remove blight, improve automobile traffic patterns and make room for newer commercial

development in the form of super-blocks and parking lots. However, the former block structure was pedestrian in scale while the architecture was rich in detail, with large storefronts and private frontages facing the street.

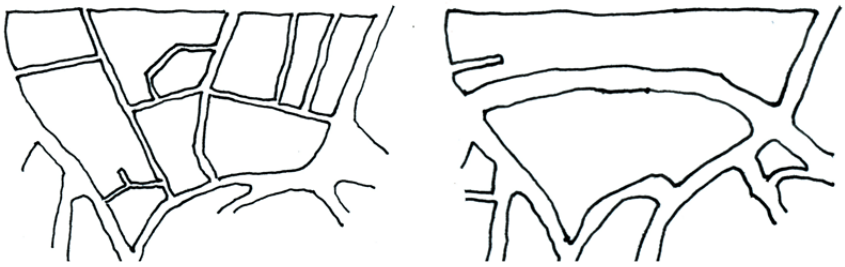

Figure1. Vinegar Hill Block Pattern Before and After Urban Renewal. *Courtesy Galvin Architects*

Figure2. Vinegar Hill Before Urban Renewal**.** *Source:http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/schwartz/vhill/vhill.html*

In 1964, the Housing Authority began building public housing projects in African-American neighborhoods to accommodate persons displaced by urban renewal. However, they were the antithesis of Vinegar Hill in that they were isolated within "mega-blocks," lacked employment and were devoid of economic diversity. Their only common trait with Vinegar Hill was racial composition. Furthermore, because they were designed as low-rise, low density (some were less than 4.0 du/gross acre) garden apartment buildings, internally oriented to courtyards or parking lots instead of public streets, they broke all the rules of "defensible space." (27) By 1967 the local NAACP opposed such policies stating, "public housing represented an attempt by city planners to create ghettos." (28) Nonetheless, throughout the 1970's and 80's the city approved site plans for privately-owned, subsidized apartment complexes (such as Friendship Court, Hearthwood and Blue Ridge Commons) either adjacent to or within walking distance of older public housing projects.

Figure3. Typical Public Housing Architecture and Site Planning circa 1960's *courtesy CRHA*

The legacy of urban renewal, public and assisted housing placement when combined with the loss of "blue collar" employment opportunities during that same time period, (29) created entrenched pockets of concentrated poverty across generations for a small, African American

segment of the population (see Figure 4.) City-wide in 2009, Charlottesville was about 65-70% white, 25% black. In 2010, CRHA's residents were 22% white, 77% African American and 1% Hispanic (measured by "Head of Household.) 81% of the public housing households were extremely Low Income (0 – 30% Annual Median Income or AMI,) and 16% were Very Low Income (30 – 50% AMI.) (30) In 2007 approximately 50% of the city's public housing residents did not have a high school diploma. (31) In Friendship Court, 64% of households had a high school diploma, 14% had a GED, 9% had less than high school. (32) According to Communities is Schools, family poverty and low parent educational levels are strong predictors of dropping out of high school. (33) A disproportionate % of African-American prison inmates are also high school dropouts. (34*)*

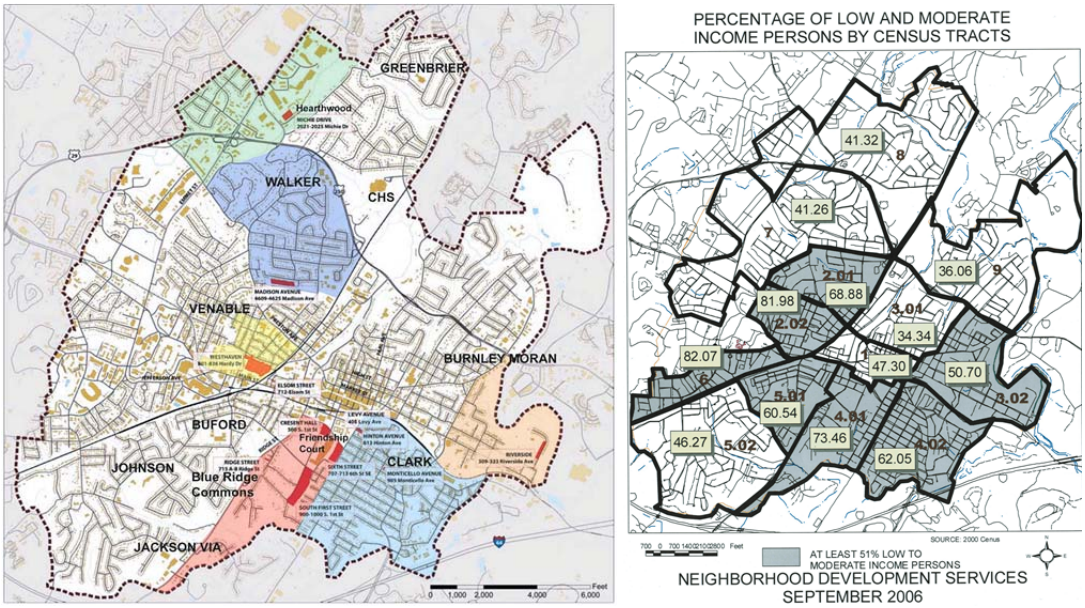

Figure4. Public Housing, Schools, and Neighborhoods *courtesy WRT (left) and NDS (right)*
NOTES: On the WRT map, the colored areas represent neighborhoods with public housing sites (noted in red.) Assisted housing projects are identified in sentence case; school names are in bold, upper case.

TOTAL FAMILIES by ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

School District	Burnley Moran	Greenbrier	Venable	Jackson Via	Clark	Johnson
Existing CRHA Neighborhoods	**Westhaven** 126 families	**Michie Drive** 23 families	**Madison Avenue** 18 families	**South 1st Street** 58 families	**6th Street** 25 families	
	Riverside 16 families			**Ridge Street** 2 families	**Hinton Avenue** 1 family	
	Elsom Street 1 family				**Monticello Avenue** 1 family	
Adjacent Low Income Developments		**Hearthwood** 200 families			**Friendship Court** 150 families	**Blue Ridge Commons** 200 families
Current Totals	**143 families**	**223 families**	**18 families**	**60 families**	**177 families**	**200 families**

Figure5. Public/Assisted Housing Families by Elementary School *courtesy CRHA, February 2010*

IV. Case Study: Charlottesville City Schools

Just before the onset of urban renewal, the Virginia General Assembly passed "Massive Resistance" legislation in 1956 in reaction to court ordered school desegregation. Eventually Between 1950 and1988, the Charlottesville City Schools (CCS) did desegregate, but not without considerable pain and anguish. That memory, especially when coupled with the

legacy of urban renewal, continues to foster distrust between African-American neighborhoods and government authorities (despite having an African-American superintendent and city manager.) Today there are six elementary schools (Burnley-Moran, Clark, Jackson-Via, Johnson, Venable, Greenbrier,) one upper elementary, one middle (Walker and Buford) and one high school. In the mid-1990's a decentralized "attractor model" was employed to foster innovation. However, high mobility among poor children between elementary schools with divergent pedagogies, may have exacerbated differences in student achievement. In 2000 the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL,) and NCLB ushered in a centralized administrative model. By the end of 2005 a balanced management approach was instituted resulting in more consistency between schools and an emphasis on early intervention. In 2007, the division added a three-year old to its four-year old pre-school for disadvantaged children. In 2009 Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) was adopted at the middle and high school. In addition to the division's long-standing alternative high school for students with behavioral issues, another alternative high school revolving around on-line learning (WALK) was instituted in 2008.

			Reading Gaps		**Math Gaps**	
SCHOOL	**% FRLP**	**#**	**B/W % pass**	**B/W % pass adv.**	**B/W % pass**	**B/W % pass adv.**
Burnley-Moran	42.6	289	22.1	34.4	32.4	39.4
Clark*	84.6	208	4.6	*	21.7	12.5*
Greenbrier	44.2	283	21.6	57.8	28.6	65.3
Jackson-Via	68.3	249	9.2	44.5	6.1	36.4
Johnson*	80.6	232	*	*	*	*
Venable	34.5	304	37.7	60.3	34.5	76.3
Walker Upper	57.3	571	22.9	40.3	33.2	48.9
Buford Middle	52.9	556	36.4	37.9	19.3	46.3
Charlottesville High	43.5	1183	31.6	56.3	40	42.5
		3875				

Table1. School Profile and % Gaps by School. (CCS, October, 2008)
NOTE: 3rd, 5th, 8th grade test scores and 9th grade Reading and Algebra II were compared.
*White subgroup was not statistically significant (i.e. less than 10 students.)

SCHOOL	**% FRLP**	**#**	**Pass advance: Reading**	**Pass advance: Math**
Burnley-Moran	42.6	289	12	32
Clark	84.6	208	20*	20.8*
Greenbrier	44.2	283	25	21.4
Jackson-Via	68.3	249	11.1	41.4
Johnson	80.6	232	40*	59.4*
Venable	34.5	304	18.5	20.7
Walker Upper Elem.	57.3	571	21.9	23.4
Buford Middle	52.9	556	11.3	4.5
Charlottesville High School	43.5	1183	20.6	3
		3875		

Table2. Black "pass advance" %'s between schools. (CCS, October 2008)
NOTE: 3rd, 5th, 8th grade test scores and 9th grade Reading and Algebra II were compared.
*White subgroup was not statistically significant (i.e. less than 10 students.)

The results of these school-centric reforms have been mixed. Pass rates between Black and White subgroups in reading and math appear to be narrowing at the elementary level, regardless of school poverty. Such performance is due to the herculean efforts of excellent administrators and teachers. However, upon closer inspection some troubling details emerge.

1. With few exceptions, no more than 24% of Black students made "passed advanced."
2. "Back-sliding" begins in 5th grade and continues through high school.

These details beg the question, has the CCS division essentially "hit the wall?" Additional analysis over-time and across geography is therefore essential to better gage the impact of diversity, peer group and neighborhood socio-economics on each child. Small class size and intervention programs have produced steady progress in reading and math scores in the elementary schools, but the lowest achieving student subgroups city-wide over time remain Black, disabled or disadvantaged (Table 3.) Although there have been improvements in on-time graduation rates, pronounced differences in college preparedness remain (Table 4) that seemingly parallel the differences in "pass advanced" rates among subgroups in elementary school. In 2008 when the high school population was 46% black; 43% white, 9th grade Honors English enrollment was 10.2% black and 85.2% white. AP English Literature/Composition was 6.7% black and 84.4% white. (35)

	2006 % pass	**B/W gap**	**2007 % pass**	**B/W gap**	**2008 % pass**	**B/W gap**	**% gain**	**B/W gap narrowing**
READING								
Black	59%	28	66%	26	73%	19	+14%	-9
White	87%		92%		92%		+5%	
MATH								
Black	47%	37	62%	28	66%	26	+19%	-11
White	84%		90%		92%		+8%	

Table3. Longitudinal Data on Division-wide Gaps in SOL Pass- rates Averaged for all NCLB Sub-groups. MGT Study (36)

DIVISION ACADEMIC INDICATORS	**2007/08**	**2008/09**	**2009/10**
WALK enrollment	6	43	65
4 Yr. Graduation Rate-Black	66.44%	68.21%	75.18%
4 Yr. Graduation Rate-SID	61.36%	65.75%	72.93%
Standard Diplomas Issued-Black %	73%	63%	63%
Standard Diplomas Issued-White %	21%	26%	28%
Advanced Diplomas Issued-Black %	19%	24%	21%
Advanced Diplomas Issued-White %	72%	67%	70%

Table4. CCS Academic Intervention Indicators and Outcomes at Charlottesville High School, (CCS.)

Finally, incremental reductions in achievement gaps come at considerable cost (especially in light of declining enrollment.) First, CCS has the highest per capita costs (Table 5) among the surrounding suburban counties in part due to the need for interventions (Tables 6.) Second, the division is operating under capacity as a result of enrollment declines thereby precluding economies of scale. The most dramatic drop in the city's school age population (ages 5-17) occurred in the decades associated with suburbanization nationally and court-ordered desegregation in the South. From 1970-80, that population declined 28.9% and 12.7% between 1990-1980. (37) Declines were most pronounced in the poorest school districts namely (Table 7.) A declining school population severely limits the division's ability to achieve socio-economic diversity at the elementary level or raise revenue. Furthermore, each decline costs the division approximately $2,700 student in revenue from the Commonwealth which bases its funding to localities on Annual Daily Membership. (38) Finally, the challenges wrought by these trends are amplified by the fact that during that time period, 1988/89-2009/10 the % of students on the FRLP went from 33.12% to 53.18%. (39)

DIVISION	ENROLLMENT	% FRLP	COST/STUDENT
Charlottesville	3826	55%	$18,000 +/-
Albemarle	12, 986	24.5%	$11,870
Fluvanna	3761	25%	$9,999
Louisa	4212	42%	$3,787
Greene	2840	33%	$9,780
Orange	5110	35%	$8,894+/-
Goochland	2312	24%	$4,471
Fredericksburg	2730	42%	$11,636

Table 5. Regional comparisons between school divisions, VDOE, 2009.

KEY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS & APPROXIMATE COSTS	2009/10
Premium for Small Class Size (MGT Study data, Jan. 2009.)	$2,005,640.00
3 & 4 Year Olds ($98,000x19 for on-going programs)	$1,862,000.00
Reading Intervention	$169,978.00
Special Education Teachers	$3,571,240.00
Social Workers	$247,952.00
Total of Key Interventions	$7,856,810.00
Total of Instructional Budget (73.2% of $71,206,712.00 in 2009/10)	$52,123,310.00
% Key Intervention of Instructional Budget	15%
Total Division Budget (in 2009/10)	$71,206, 712.00
% Key Intervention of Total Division Budget	11%
Total # of CCS Students (2009/10)	3880
Total of Key Interventions/capita	$2,025.00/capita
Total of Instructional Budget/capita	$13,433.84
TOTAL Division Cost/student (2009/10)	$18,352 +/-

Table 6. Key academic interventions. (CCS 2009-2010 School Division Budget. Does include the costs of all academic support or human service delivery programs.) NOTE: The Harlem Children Zone spends a minimum of $16,000 per student in public and private money; not including its 4-6 p.m. after-school program, rewards for student performance, a chef, central administration, building costs, students' free health and dental care. (40)

School	1993/1994	2009/10	% difference
Burnley Moran:	367	301	-18
Clark:	399	195	-51.1
Greenbrier:	256	269	+5.1
Jackson Via:	378	288	-23.8
Johnson:	314	220	-29.9
Venable:	296	286	-3.4
	2010	1559	-22.44
Walker:	737	543	-26.3
Buford:	656	531	-19.1
	1393	1074	-22.9
CHS:	1153	1247	+8.2
DIVISION-Wide	4556	3880	-14.8

Table 7. Enrollment Trends. (Abbreviated School Profiles as of June 2009, CCS.)

V. Conclusion.

In the mid-20th century, planners, urban designers, and architects played a crucial role in formulating policies which stripped neighborhoods of economic diversity and shunted people into enclaves of concentrated poverty. In light of these past trends, American cities can continue to address the symptoms of poverty and focus solely on teaching at increasingly high public expense. A better alternative would be to incorporate school improvement within a more holistic approach to closing the "opportunity gaps" prevalent in today's urban neighborhoods. In the 21st century, the same change agents who gave us urban renewal have an obligation to work with community stakeholders and educators to create the physical, social and economic conditions whereby all children will not only succeed, but flourish. To paraphrase Angela Blackwell, we must a*nticipate success* by avoiding displacement and ensuring affordability in the wake of holistic neighborhood revitalization (41) and in the process truly "leave no child behind."

FOOTNOTES.

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