

Ed school dean: Urban school reform is really about land development (not kids)

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: May 28, 2013

(Correction: Fixing publication date for book, and removing quote attributed to book)

Here is a provocative piece from [Leslie T. Fenwick](#), dean of the Howard University School of Education and a professor of education policy, about what is really behind urban school reform. It's not about fixing schools, she argues, but, rather, about urban land development. Fenwick has devoted her career to improving educational opportunity and outcomes for African American and other under-served students.

By Leslie T. Fenwick

The truth can be used to tell a lie. The truth is that black parents' frustration with the quality of public schools is at an all time righteous high. Though black and white parents' commitment to their child's schooling is comparable, more black parents report dissatisfaction with the school their child attends. Approximately 90 percent of black and white parents report attending parent teacher association meetings and nearly 80 percent of black and white parents report attending teacher conferences. Despite these similarities, fewer black parents (47 percent) than white parents (64 percent) report being very satisfied with the school their child attends. This dissatisfaction among black parents is so whether these parents are college-educated, high income, or poor.

The lie is that schemes like [Teach For America](#), charter schools backed by venture capitalists, [education management organizations](#) (EMOs), and [Broad Foundation](#)-prepared superintendents address black parents concerns about the quality of public schools for their children. These schemes are not designed to cure what ails under-performing schools. They are designed to shift tax dollars away from schools serving black and poor students; displace authentic black educational leadership; and erode national commitment to the ideal of public education.

Consider these facts: With a median household income of nearly \$75,000, Prince George's County is the wealthiest majority black county in the United States. Nearly 55 percent of the county's businesses are black-owned and almost 70 percent of residents own homes, according to the U.S. Census. One of Prince George's County's easternmost borders is a mere six minutes from Washington, D.C., which houses the largest population of college-educated blacks in the nation. In the United States, a general rule of thumb is that communities

with higher family incomes and parental levels of education have better public schools. So, why is it that black parents living in the upscale Woodmore or Fairwood estates of Prince George's County or the tony Garden District homes up 16th Street in Washington D.C. struggle to find quality public schools for their children just like black parents in Syphax Gardens, the southwest D.C. public housing community?

The answer is this: Whether they are solidly middle- or upper-income or poor, neither group of blacks controls the critical economic levers shaping school reform. And, this is because urban school reform is not about schools or reform. It is about land development.

In most urban centers like Washington D.C. and Prince George's County, black political leadership does not have independent access to the capital that drives land development. These resources are still controlled by white male economic elites. Additionally, black elected local officials by necessity must interact with state and national officials. The overwhelming majority of these officials are white males who often enact policies and create funding streams benefiting their interests and not the local black community's interests.

The authors of "[The Color of School Reform](#)" affirm this assertion in their study of school reform in Baltimore, Detroit and Atlanta. They found:

Many key figures promoting broad efficiency-oriented reform initiatives [for urban schools] were whites who either lived in the suburbs or sent their children to private schools (Henig *et al*, 2001).

Local control of public schools (through elected school boards) is supposed to empower parents and community residents. This rarely happens in school districts serving black and poor students. Too often people intent on exploiting schools for their own personal gain short circuit the work of deep and lasting school and community uplift. Mayoral control, Teach for America, education management organizations and venture capital-funded charter schools have not garnered much grassroots support or enthusiasm among lower- and middle-income black parents whose children attend urban schools because these parents often view these schemes as uninformed by their community and disconnected from the best interest of their children.

In the most recent cases of Washington D.C. and Chicago, black parents and other community members point to school closings as verification of their distrust of school "reform" efforts. Indeed, mayoral control has been linked to an emerging pattern of closing and disinvesting in schools that serve black poor students and reopening them as charters operated by education management organizations and backed by venture capitalists. While mayoral control proposes to expand educational opportunities for black and poor students, more-often-than-not new schools are placed in upper-income, gentrifying white areas of town, while more [schools are closed](#) and fewer new schools are opened in lower-income, black areas thus increasing the level of educational inequity. Black inner-city residents are suspicious of school reform (particularly when it is attached to neighborhood revitalization) which they view as an imposition from external white elites who are exclusively committed to using schools to recalculate urban land values at the expense of black children, parents and communities.

So, what is the answer to improving schools for black children? Elected officials must advocate

for equalizing state funding formula so that urban school districts garner more financial resources to hire credentialed and committed teachers and stabilize principal and superintendent leadership. Funding makes a difference. Black students who attend schools where 50 percent of more of the children are on free/reduced lunch are 70 percent more likely to have an uncertified teacher (or one without a college major or minor in the subject area) teaching them four subjects: math, science, social studies and English. How can the nation continue to raise the bar on what we expect students to know and demonstrate on standardized tests and lower the bar on who teaches them?

As the nation's inner cities are dotted with coffee shop chains, boutique furniture stores, and the skyline changes from public housing to high-rise condominium buildings, listen to the refrain about school reform sung by some intimidated elected officials and submissive superintendents. That refrain is really about exporting the urban poor, reclaiming inner city land, and using schools to recalculate urban land value. This kind of school reform is not about children, it's about the business elite gaining access to the nearly \$600 billion that supports the nation's public schools. It's about money.

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