

# Chapter 5

## Community Schools as a Vehicle for Social Justice and Equity

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### ABSTRACT

*A deficit narrative of academic success in low-performing schools is articulated in cultural norms set by those who fail to understand how poverty and racial inequality manifests through daily interactions, beliefs, and biases. Work to address race and poverty are emotional, complicated, and challenging because the concepts are avoided, minimized, or disputed by a dominant narrative and privileged cultures that oppress students of color. This chapter is not about a study of race or poverty nor does it seek to forward understanding of how race and class intersect. Instead, it focuses on the ways a university has promoted social justice and equity in the development of community schools. This work encompasses: the influence of change through advocacy and policy, issues of school culture and climate, and shared leadership. It recognizes emerging perceptions impacting health, violence, and food security that cause socio/emotional issues not considered when critically addressing issues of race and poverty. Therefore, community schools are a vehicle for social justice and equity.*

### INTRODUCTION

Working with communities to improve schooling – and thereby democracy – is a central premise of the growing community schools movement. A century-old idea that originated with social reformers Jane Addams and John Dewey, community schools are neighborhood hubs that bring together families, educators, government agencies, and community groups and organizations to provide all the opportunities

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and services young people need to thrive. The movement has experienced a renaissance of sorts, tied to the broader 'new localism' (Hunter Quartz, 2019).

For decades, education reformers and politicians have attempted to improve schools by creating a competitive market-driven approach to education. Despite these efforts, many school communities are limited by social and political situations, often wrestling with extreme gaps in wealth and resources. Researchers note how the complexity and multiplicity of impediments point to inequitable resources, racial bias, disparities in school funding, and a curriculum that fails to acknowledge the histories, contributions, and learning styles of students of color (Delpit, 2006, Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999).

## **UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The need for community engagement to challenge the interpretation of these issues warrants the authentic collaboration and application of resources by colleges and universities (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009). The need for partnerships with institutions of higher education can contribute to the coordination and alignment of P-12 and higher education goals by establishing a continuum of resources that address the holistic needs of children and their families and proactively address issues of race and privilege and the social context in which families live. The concerns prevalent in urban school communities are historical, complex, enduring, and multifaceted. Thus, the partnerships of universities and school communities can help by addressing the challenges and barriers in schools that prevent students from becoming academically successful and identifying the cultural assets that pragmatically define success. Now, more than ever, these partnerships must work at preparing professionals, teachers, administrators, and community leaders who can debunk deficit notions of struggling urban schools. The partnerships provide a counter-narrative focused on research that supports accomplishments and addresses the inequities that persistently plague these schools and their communities. Through the shared leadership, this work aims to obtain equity and social justice through democratic place making.

In Indiana, the community school movement has advanced for more than 20 years and has sustained one of the nation's most comprehensive community school initiatives (Grim, Medina, & Officer, 2011) in Indianapolis. Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) champions the notion of University-Assisted Community Schools and exemplifies the model by offering valuable resources to enrich and support public education. As a mission-driven engaged anchor institution, IUPUI has learned from neighborhood schools and continues to work with community organizations to advance civic action, democratic voice, and social justice. Rather than ignoring inequities in local schools, IUPUI proactively addresses them. More than 17 university departments work with communities, demonstrating IUPUI's commitment to civic engagement in urban schools. Despite progress made, the situation compels us to critically reflect on our community school/university perspectives and deepen efforts as we renew and advance the commitment to our urban public schools and their community through an equity and social justice lens.

School reform movements often minimize the systemic issues affecting the academic achievement of students of color or economically challenged households and abate complex problems that historically plague urban communities. Models of school/community collaboration have emerged claiming to address the broader issues faced by urban schools. The results of a seven-year study of the Chicago Public Schools, conducted by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010), suggest that

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