Chapter 7
Transforming Schools, Communities, and Universities:
University–Assisted Community Schools as a Case Study

Ira Harkavy
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Rita A. Hodges
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Joann Weeks
University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

The chapter describes the university-assisted community school approach developed by Penn's Netter Center for Community Partnerships with its school and community partners since 1985, as well as adapted nationally. The approach is grounded in John Dewey's theory that the neighborhood school can function as the core neighborhood institution that provides comprehensive services, galvanizes other community partners, and helps solve locally-manifested, universal problems such as health inequities and unequal education. Academically-based community service is presented as a core strategy for engaging the Penn's academic resources with the schools and community. Penn's evolution towards becoming a democratic anchor institution is discussed to highlight the importance of engaging the full resources (academic and economic) of the university in community partnerships. Providing concrete examples from nearly 35 years of work, the authors argue that university-assisted community schools is a promising approach to significantly improve schooling, communities, and universities.

INTRODUCTION

Our position is simple: No radical reform of American higher education, no successful education reform. The radical reform of higher education, we contend, is most likely to occur in the crucible of significant, serious, sustained, active engagement with public schools and their communities. Splendid abstract, contemplative, inner-ivory tower isolation will neither shed intellectual light nor produce positive democratic change. We contend serious and sustained engagement with community partners would not only improve the education and the quality of life of their neighbors, but also better realize higher education's mission to advance learning and knowledge for the betterment of human life.

We strongly agree with the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi that the answer to the question "What kind of education do we need?" is to be found in the answer to the question "What kind of society do we want?" (Tironi, 2005). Education and society are dynamically interactive and interdependent. If human beings hope to maintain and develop a particular type of society, they must develop and maintain the particular type of education system conducive to it. Stated directly, *no effective democratic schooling system, no democratic society*.

From our experience of nearly thirty-five years of work with West Philadelphia schools and neighborhoods, we believe that university-assisted community schools constitute the best practical means for democratically transforming universities, schools, and communities in order to develop participatory democracy (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007).

The extreme poverty, persistent deprivation, and pernicious racism afflicting communities in the shadows of powerful, wealthy (and relatively wealthy) urban universities raise troubling moral issues, as well as questions about higher education's contribution to the public good. It is essential that universities as key anchor institutions significantly contribute to radically reducing the pervasive, ongoing, seemingly intractable problems of our inner cities, including public education (Harkavy et al., 2009).

Conditions in Penn's city, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania are an example of a more general phenomenon of urban distress. At 25.7 percent, the poverty rate is the highest among the nation's 10 largest cities. About 400,000 residents—including roughly 37 percent of the city's children under the age of 18—live below the federal poverty line, which is $19,337 in annual income for an adult living with two children. And nearly half of all poor residents are in deep poverty, defined as 50 percent below the federal poverty line (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2017). At the same time, Philadelphia (and many other cities) is home to a key resource that can help to change these conditions. It has one of the highest concentrations of anchor institutions, with "eds and meds," (i.e., colleges and universities as well as academic medical centers and hospitals), representing 12 of the 15 largest private employers, and the Philadelphia metropolitan area contains more than 100 colleges and universities (Select Greater Philadelphia Council, 2016).

Simply put, the revitalization of Philadelphia, and of American cities in general, depends on the effective, thorough engagement of higher education.

A simple typology helps illustrate our assessment of the current state of university-community engagement and points to what could and should be done. An urban university's interaction with its local community might usefully be placed within the following four categories:

1. Gentrification and displacement of low-income residents,
2. Disregard and neglect,
3. Partially engaged (frequently indicated by involvement of the academic *or* the institutional/corporate component of the university, but not both),

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