

## **Collaborative Community-Based Public Education and Neighbourhood Schools: Assessments of Racial Harmony and Issues of Equity**

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### **Abstract**

There are growing concerns about the viability of urban public schools. Urban public schools are commonly overcrowded, under-funded, burdened with federal and state mandates, and have comparatively large numbers of students from low-income households. Children raised in poverty commonly lack sufficient support systems or learning environments conducive to educational excellence. Minority children are often bused to schools outside their community detaching them from resources and support systems of community. Before we dismantle our urban public school systems, we should make sure that we have exhausted all alternatives. This research explores public support for a return to neighbourhood schools and community-based education in an urban public school district. Public support is particularly important to the success of community-based education because members of the community must become co-producers of public education including volunteering their time and talents. The findings indicate that, despite concerns about racial harmony and educational equity, there is broad-based support for a return to neighbourhood schools and once again making schools the centre of community.

**Key Words:** Neighborhood Schools, Bussing, Community Development, Collaborative Networks, Racial Equity

### **Introduction**

Urban public education is at a critical juncture in the United States (Katz, 2000). The decisions we make today will have an important and lasting impact on societal well-being and quality of life in the United States. While it is clear that there is need for change, it is not clear what those changes should be. As we usher in the age of global competition, educational institutions in the United States are under increased pressure to produce graduates that will give this country the competitive edge.

There is growing evidence that urban public educational institutions are not adequately preparing their students to compete in the global economy. Those supporting privatization of education argue that the only way to bring about meaningful change in urban education is to replace public institutions with “schools of choice.” Those supporting schools of choice and a market approach to education argue that public educational institutions should step aside and allow market forces to determine which agencies are the appropriate delivery agents (Cooper, 1989; Percy & Maier, 1996; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 1998). Advocates of privatization of education reason that publicly funded vouchers give the urban poor the same opportunity as those holding dollars to make their educational demands heard.

Before making an irreversible decision to abandon public education, it is important to examine the values behind public education including implications of landmark judicial rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education*. It is also important to assess the current status of public education and to explore public education alternatives including investments in neighbourhood schools building on the foundation of community, community development, and networked solutions to public education. Community development and networked solutions to urban public education depend on the formation of a symbiotic relationship between neighbourhoods and schools. These symbiotic relations are driven in part, on the willingness of citizens to simultaneously co-produce improvements in schools and the neighbourhoods in which they are located.

### **The Intent and Implications of Public Education**

The United States is increasingly becoming a culturally and ethnically diverse society. While this diversity can be an important source of societal enrichment, it can also be the focus of conflict. Public educational institutions in general and urban public schools in particular, are places where these cultural differences converge (Davis, 1996). Education is critical to prosperity and public education was designed to equalize opportunity between different classes of citizens. Historically, urban public school systems have been used as instruments of social change including mending societal divisions based on race and income. Essentially, we have asked urban public schools to resolve issues of racial prejudice and inequality. Judicial rulings associated with *Brown v. Board of Education* are based on fundamental values of this nation as articulated in the United States Constitution. Legal decisions built on constitutional dictates recognize that equal economic opportunity is determined in no small part by equal educational opportunity. While the effectiveness of these mandates is subject to debate, it is clear that they have contributed to positive societal changes. We live in a more racially integrated society today and people of colour have realized important socio-economic gains. In spite of these gains, racial equality remains an elusive goal (Adams, 1997; Blackwell, 1994; Feagin, 1991).

### **Unintended Consequences of Bussing**

There has been considerable progress since *Brown v. Board of Education*, but much remains to be done. People of colour still commonly live in racially segregated housing in economically depressed ethnic enclaves (Gramlich, Laren & Sealand, 1992; Jargowsky, 1994; Massey & Egger, 1990). While it is clear that school desegregation is well-intended and has had positive societal benefits, it is also clear that it has had some unintended negative consequences. In the past, schools were the social centres of neighbourhoods and community. Busing mandates have served to erode the connection between schools and community, particularly in the case of low-income minority communities.

Concerns surrounding the disconnect between schools and community were confirmed in a study of middle school youths in the community that is the focus of this study. This research revealed that school children are divided in their allegiance between neighbourhood and school. Findings indicate that Caucasian youths have stronger allegiances to school friendships while their African-American counterparts are more likely to align with friends from the neighbourhood. Generally then, African-American children are more likely to have important friendships in their

neighbourhood and are also more likely to be bussed, therefore they are more likely to suffer divided loyalties between neighbourhood and school (Glaser & Parker 1995).

In many ways, segregation has come full-circle since *Brown v. Board of Education*. School preferences are influencing regional development. Typically, middle- and upper-income households migrate to suburban communities with schools that have a reputation for educational quality. As a result, most urban school districts have lost or are losing academically successful students to suburban public schools (Kantor & Brenzel, 1993; Levy, 2000). These migration patterns concentrate poverty and students with the greatest educational challenges in urban public schools and at the same time suburbanize the tax-base necessary to address these challenges. In some cases, state law has attempted to address this mismatch between need and ability to fund public education through legislation that attempts to equalize the financing of public education (Moser & Rubenstein, 2002). In spite of a variety of measures taken to improve equity in public education, inequality remains. Further, with each passing year the cumulative impact of academic deficits makes it increasingly unlikely that the academic fortunes of disadvantaged youths will be reversed.

### **The Educational Performance Considerations: Unequal Opportunity**

Unmistakable differences in economic well-being are tied to the racial divide in America (Blackwell, 1994). Equal opportunity builds on the foundation of educational opportunity. If we are to have enduring success in closing the economic divide between races, education will be an essential element driving that success. Currently, much of the burden for addressing deep societal divisions associated with race fall squarely on the shoulders of our urban public schools and these institutions are buckling under the weight.

Essentially, deep and growing societal divisions between haves and have-nots translate into two very different student bodies. Private institutions and suburban public schools are more likely to include students that come from households with higher socio-economic standing and relatively stable home environments. Economically advantaged student bodies have family support systems and families that are more likely to co-produce the education of their children or who have the capacity to supplement their children's education. Upper and middle class students are also more likely to enter school with cultural resources (e.g. behavioural norms, language) that match the dominant culture of school systems. They thus experience advantages that accumulate over time (Spillane, 1998). Students from poverty households enter institutions of public education with deficits that form formidable barriers to learning. A recent study of student performance in California found that "[b]y almost every indicator, Hispanic and black children are at a disadvantage when compared to white and Asian children" (Cheng, 2001). Quite simply, students with poor educational foundations become increasingly disadvantaged educationally as they move between grades (Wolman et al., 1992). Once students realize that they do not have the tools that will allow them to keep pace with their classmates, they naturally and commonly respond by poisoning the learning environment and further diminishing their chances for educational success (Spillane, 1995). While there are many explanations for poor academic performance, clearly there is a strong and undeniable connection between poverty and performance (Baum, 1999; Kantor & Brenzel, 1993; Katz, 2000; Wolf, 1999).

## **Public Educational Alternatives: Community Development and Networked Solutions**

This paper argues that before we dismantle urban public education, we need to critically examine societal implications and to fully explore public educational alternatives. Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* the symbiotic relationship between community and schools was important to the well-being of both. Busing contributed to desegregation but also weakened the historical bonds between community and schools. Privatization of education threatens to further weaken these bonds.

Neighbourhood schools provide the opportunity for strengthening the bonds between communities and schools. The success of community-based urban education hinges on at least two considerations. First, urban public schools districts must be willing to invest disproportionately in low-income neighbourhood schools to address the competitive disadvantage of these school children. Second, the success of community-based education depends in no small part on the extent to which low-income communities are willing to provide leadership that acknowledges cultural differences and yet diligently pursues educational quality. The success of community-based education also hinges on the extent to which members of the community are willing to co-produce community and educational improvement (Schrenzel, 1994). Recognition of the interaction between community and schools is critical to the well-being of both (Davis, 1996; Gardner, 1995/1996; Casey Foundation, 2000). Citizens who register stronger allegiance to community are more likely to view investments in public education as civic investments which bring positive returns to community (Glaser, Denhardt & Hamilton, 2002). Evidence also indicates that there is a connection between community orientation and the extent to which taxpayers are willing to support public education (Button & Rosenbaum, 1989; Glaser, Aristigueta & Miller, 2000). Wholesale exchanges of public for private educational institutions risks further weakening of the connection between community and school, including willingness to pay for education.

Community development ventures require collaborative networks and the orchestrated use of public funds including the funds associated with public education, as well as the funds of other units of local governments (including city and county government) to produce meaningful change. A return to neighbourhood schools is facilitated when city or county government is committed to a neighbourhood engagement strategy. Increasingly, neighbourhoods and neighbourhood-based organizations are viewed as vehicles for organizing the voice of the community and for enlisting co-production for community improvement (Barry, Portney & Thomson, 1993; Haeberle, 1986; Haeberle, 1987; Thomas, 1992). For example, the effectiveness of community policing depends on citizens providing police with the information they need to solve or prevent crime. Community policing is an essential component of community development. In some cases, local government has provided leadership that created a nonprofit organization that was instrumental in establishing collaborative networks and facilitating coproduction for purposes of community development, community policing and public education (Glaser, Denhardt & Grubbs, 1997; Glaser, Denhardt & Grubbs, 1996; Glaser, Soskin & Smith, 1996).

Interest in community-based education is growing. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, after several years of attempting statewide system reform in child welfare programs, acknowledges the

importance of community attachment and the connection between communities and schools through neighbourhood-based initiatives to improve the lives of children. The *Making Connections* program is operating in 22 cities. It is based on the premise that “[c]hildren do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighbourhoods” (Casey Foundation, 2000). Based on research on decentralized, community-linked school systems in six urban areas, they define the characteristics of community schools as: small, personal, simple, serene (where learning is the primary activity), close to families, relentless about learning, and collaborative. They also argue that good schools improve the desirability of neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the presence of schools in neighbourhoods where parents feel welcome rather than intimidated can stimulate the development of informal social networks that further improve both schools and communities (Casey Foundation, 2000). There is considerable evidence that good schools raise property values (Black, 1998; Weimer and Wolkoff, 2001-02) and that school decline lowers property values (Schulte and Keating, 2001).

### **Case Description**

The community examined here is located in a metropolitan area of approximately 500,000 residents. The school district that is the focus of this study has an enrollment of approximately 45,000 students. Approximately 65 percent of the student body is receiving free or reduced lunches, a proxy measure for poverty or near poverty. In sharp contrast, suburban public schools in the same metropolitan area are much less likely to serve disadvantaged school children. Many if not most of the suburban public school districts in the community examined here have student bodies in which less than 10 percent receive free or reduced lunches. Further, private schools are even less likely to include students living in poverty.

The viability of community-based education will depend in part on how those who will be most impacted by change feel about the community in which they live. In other words, do people living in enclaves of poverty view these enclaves as viable communities that merit investment or are they disenfranchised and living among strangers who anxiously awaiting an opportunity to escape. If citizens view the place where they live as a “ghetto of last resort,” then investments in public infrastructure are not likely to produce meaningful community improvement. Conversely, ethnic enclaves with residents who view their neighbourhood as a “community of choice,” merit consideration for collaborative investment in neighbourhoods and neighbourhood schools.

A recent study of a large African-American enclave in the urban community associated with this study, revealed that two-thirds of the respondents consider their neighbourhood, referred to as the Northeast community, as a community of choice. More specifically, approximately two-thirds of the responding households from the Northeast community indicated that if they were to receive a monetary windfall they would invest that windfall in a new home in the Northeast community. While there is no guarantee that actions will follow intent, it is clear that this African-American enclave is a community of choice for many (Glaser, Parker & Li, 2003).

Major changes in urban policy are not without risk and community-based education is no exception. Urban public school systems not only lay the educational foundation that is critical to gainful employment but they are also important points of contact between races. Experiences associated with urban education not only influence economic opportunity but also effect how we

see those who are racially or ethnically different than us. A decision to return to community-based education means that younger school children (5<sup>th</sup> grade and younger) concentrated in ethnic enclaves such as the Northeast community will have reduced contact with Caucasians prior to middle school. Middle and high schools draw from larger geographic areas and in most cases include more racially and ethnically diverse student bodies. Elementary schools are smaller and neighbourhood-based. It is also important to note that in the community examined here, many students of colour are concentrated in ethnic enclaves but the majority live in blended or racially mixed neighbourhoods outside of ethnic enclaves.

In any case, there is evidence that racial divisions in our society are becoming more pronounced (Massey & Eggers, 1990). Daily, public schools plant the seeds of harmony or conflict one student at a time. While a relatively small proportion of our nation is being directly influenced by urban public education on any given day, most Americans carry images driven in no small part based on educational experiences (Gardner, 1995/1996). These collective images, however accurate or inaccurate they may be, will decide the future of urban public education and represent important influences on societal divisions based on race and socio-economic standing. This research provides a improved understanding of these images including issues of racial harmony and equity in urban public schools and corresponding support for a return to neighbourhood schools. In particular, this research focuses on differences in perceptions based on race and household income. While broad public support is essential for changes of the nature and magnitude discussed here, support from low-income and minority households will be especially important.

### **Research Methods**

The empirical evidence associated with this research was collected in the spring of 1999 in conjunction with project associated with a capital improvements referendum. As a result, the research was designed to reach a large number of voters. Approximately 23,000 registered voters were randomly selected to receive a survey and a follow-up reminder. In an effort to target households most likely to vote, the sampling frame was confined to registered voters who voted in the most recent election. Further, the computer program used to select the sample was programmed to allow only one member per household to participate in the survey. Since low-income minority households are underrepresented by this sampling frame, minority voters were over-sampled. An additional 2,000 surveys were sent to precincts with concentrations of low-income minority households. Approximately 200 African-American households were mistakenly sent two questionnaires and care was taken to screen for double responses from these households. Officials responsible for voter registration estimate that approximately 10 percent of the sampling frame included inaccurate addresses. A total of 7,233 respondents completed and returned their questionnaire. It is interesting to note that the results of the survey accurately predicted the outcome of the referendum which passed by a two-to-one margin. (The demographics of the sample and a comparison with the population of the school district are included in the note at the end of this article.)

Analysis includes the following:

- First, a profile of citizens is developed based on perceptions of racial harmony in the community, racial harmony in urban public schools, and racial equity in the delivery of

urban public education. Tests were performed for differences in perceptions of racial harmony and racial equity in the school system based on the race of the respondent (Table 1).

- Second, respondents are classified according to their combined perceptions of racial and income equity and tested for differences based on the race (Table 2) and household income (Table 3).
- Third, respondents are tested for differences in support for a return to neighbourhood schools and for making schools community centres based on race while controlling for household student status (a household member currently attends the urban public schools) (Table 4).
- Fourth, respondents are examined for differences in support for a return to neighbourhood schools based on concerns about racial harmony and racial equity in the delivery of urban public education while controlling for household student status (a household member currently attends an urban public school) (Table 5).

## **Findings**

The first section of the findings provides an assessment of where urban education stands in the eyes of the community. The evidence found in Table 1 lays the foundation for a better understanding of the current climate as it relates to racial harmony in the community and in urban public schools. This assessment is made with the clear understanding that the average citizen does not have direct knowledge of urban public schools because the household does not currently have school children. In spite of this lack of first hand knowledge, respondents to this survey are taxpayers who may influence funding and to some extent the very existence of urban public schools.

The citizen classification was formed based on the combined responses to three statements. First, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a statement of racial harmony in the broader community (Community Racial Harmony: “People of different races get along in the community”). Second, respondents were asked about racial harmony in public schools (School Racial Harmony: “Students of different races get along in the public school system”). The third item used to form the classification assesses the extent to which the community feels that there is racial equity in the delivery of public education (School Racial Equity: “Students get the same quality of education regardless of race”). The negative and positive scores in the table are based on the combined level of agreement or disagreement with these three statements. Respondents received a positive designation for each item that they indicated some level of agreement (i.e., agree or strongly agree). Those indicating that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements were classified as negative. Respondents that indicated “Don’t Know” to any of the three items were excluded.

Slightly less than half (46.7%) of the responding citizens reported favourably to all three items, i.e. that people of different races get along in the broader community, students of different races get along in public schools, and that there is racial equity in the delivery of public education. Interestingly, nearly 70 percent of the respondents regardless of what they think about racial harmony in the community or the schools report positive impressions of the public educational system in its ability to rise above racial disharmony and to equitably deliver public education.

Relatively few respondents see racial harmony as a problem that exclusively resides with the urban public school system. In other words, most citizens feel that racial harmony is a societal concern. Nearly 43 percent of the respondents feel that there is either racial disharmony in the community or in the schools.

**Table 1**  
**Classification of Racial Harmony and School Racial Equity by Race**

Community Racial Harmony	School Racial Harmony	School Racial Equity	Race (Percentages)				Overall	
			Caucasian	African-American	Hispanic	Native American		Other
Negative	Negative	Negative	12.5	22.1	31.0	21.2	19.0	14.0
Positive	Negative	Negative	02.7	07.1	04.3	03.0	01.3	03.1
Negative	Positive	Negative	01.7	09.6	03.4	01.5	02.5	02.5
Positive	Positive	Negative	08.9	26.2	13.8	13.6	10.1	10.6
Negative	Negative	Positive	15.1	02.9	06.0	16.7	06.3	13.6
Positive	Negative	Positive	04.5	02.0	03.4	07.6	01.3	04.3
Negative	Positive	Positive	05.7	02.9	02.6	04.5	03.8	05.2
Positive	Positive	Positive	48.9	27.2	35.3	31.8	55.7	46.7

N= 4849; Chi-Square= 342.6; p .001

**Overall** Number of cases: 4,982

Community Racial Harmony: "People of different races get along in this community"

School Racial Harmony: "Students of different races get along in the public school system"

School Racial: "Students get the same quality of education regardless of race"

Positive: Agree or Strongly Agree with statement

Negative: Disagree or Strongly Disagree with statement

Breakouts based on race found in Table 1 indicate that Caucasians are much more likely to feel that there is racial harmony inside and outside schools and that there is equitable treatment in the delivery of public education. In contrast, Native Americans (21.2%), African-Americans (22.1%), and Hispanics (31.0%), see racial disharmony (community and school) and inequality. Interestingly, Hispanics are sharply divided in their perceptions with more than a third of the responding Hispanics reporting positive perceptions across the board while nearly a third reported negative feelings in all three categories. In other words, Hispanics are much more likely to carry views that are in diametric opposition.

The most alarming finding from the perspective of urban public schools is that nearly two-thirds (65.0%) of the responding African-Americans and more than half of the responding Hispanics report that they do not feel that students get the same quality of education in urban public schools regardless of race. Clearly, there is a problem of trust as it relates to race and the delivery of public education. While reality and perceptions of reality are not necessarily matched, behaviour is driven by perceptions.

These findings seem to add support for a return to neighbourhood schools, particularly in the case of African-Americans. African-Americans are particularly guarded in their relationship with the urban public school system in regards to issues of racial equity. The school district integration plan requires that nearly all African-American students be bussed out of the Northeast neighbourhood, while three elementary schools and one high school that serve the area have magnet designations in an attempt to achieve integration by attracting white students to the Northeast community. As mentioned earlier, research indicates that nearly two-thirds of the

responding African-Americans living in the Northeast community see it as a “community of choice.” Generally, then, the evidence is consistent with policy in support of neighbourhood schools and community-based education as a method of addressing concerns about equity in the delivery of public education, at least in the case of the Northeast community.

The classification found in Table 2 builds on the theme of equity in the delivery of public education by classifying respondents based on combined perceptions of racial (School Racial Equity: “Students get the same quality of education regardless of race”) and income (School Income Equity: “Students get the same quality of education regardless of income”) equity. More than a quarter (26.6%) of the respondents report concerns related to both race and income inequality in the delivery of public education while more than half (54.7%) of the respondents see the urban public school system as being even handed on issues of race and income. Some (15.4%) see inequality in the delivery of public education based exclusively on income.

Three-quarters of the responding African-Americans feel that students do not get the same education because of some combination of race or income inequities. Approximately two-thirds of the responding African-Americans report concerns about racial inequality in the delivery of public education. Hispanics also are concerned about the effects of race and income inequality although they are not as skeptical as African-Americans. Interestingly, Native Americans are split with roughly 45 percent indicating that they are not particularly concerned about the potential for inequitable treatment based on race and/or income. In the case of African-Americans and most likely in the case of Hispanics, community-based education may serve to answer some of their inequities concerns related to the delivery of public education.

**Table 2**  
**Classification of Race and Income Equity in Public Schools by Race /Overall**

School Income Equity	School Racial Equity	Race (Percentages)					Overall
		Caucasian	African-American	Hispanic	Native American	Other	
Negative	Negative	22.5	61.0	50.0	35.9	33.3	26.6
Negative	Positive	16.3	08.1	08.9	16.7	05.7	15.4
Positive	Negative	03.2	05.9	04.8	02.6	02.3	03.4
Positive	Positive	58.1	25.0	36.3	44.9	58.6	54.7

Race: N= 5746; Chi-Square= 360.4; p .001; Overall: N=5899

School Income Equity: “Students get the same quality of education regardless of income”

School Racial Equity: “Students get the same quality of education regardless of race”

Table 3 repeats the analysis found in Table 2 except this time the analysis tests for differences based on household income. Contrary to expectations, there are no significant differences in the level of concern about race and income inequality based on the level of household income. Based on this finding, low-income neighbourhoods exhibit behaviour similar to the general population in regards to a return to neighbourhood schools.

**Table 3**  
**Classification of Race and Income Equity in Public Schools by Income**

School Income Equity	School Racial Equity	Race (Percentages)					
		Less Than \$20,000	\$20,000-\$29,999	\$30,000-\$39,999	\$40,000-\$49,999	\$50,000-\$70,000	Above \$70,000
Negative	Negative	29.8	28.4	28.5	26.4	25.9	25.2
Negative	Positive	12.6	14.1	16.9	16.2	16.0	16.8
Positive	Negative	04.1	03.8	03.4	02.3	03.5	03.1
Positive	Positive	53.4	53.7	51.2	55.0	54.7	54.9

Race: N= 5404; Chi-Square= 18.6; p .233

School Income Equity: "Students get the same quality of education regardless of income"

School Racial Equity: "Students get the same quality of education regardless of race"

Public school systems focus their attention and tend to gear responsiveness to households with school children and are prone to ignore the broader community. This misspecification of constituency has political and financial implications since the vast majority of public taxes for education come from households who do not have school children. Therefore, public school officials would be well advised to rethink how they define their constituency and are encouraged to engage the broader community. Co-production is essential to community-based education and this broader view of community is critical. Residents, particularly those residing in low-income neighbourhoods, must feel ownership in their neighbourhood and neighbourhood schools if they are to be actively engaged in community development directly and indirectly related to public education.

The evidence found in Table 4 more directly assesses citizen support for a return to neighbourhood-based schools. Respondents were queried about their level of agreement with a statement supportive of neighbourhood schools ("Students should go to school close to where they live"). The information found in Table 4 provides an overall reading and also segments citizen support based on race while controlling for the presence of school children who attend the urban school district. Although both classes of respondents are supportive of neighbourhood schools, households who do not currently have children in the urban school district are somewhat more supportive of a return to neighbourhood schools than those with children in public schools. Generally then, this finding indicates that neighbourhood schools have symbolic meaning to the community that is not necessarily tied to immediate classroom experiences. While there is broad based support for a return to neighbourhood schools, African-American households are slightly less supportive when compared to Caucasians. While African-Americans are less supportive of neighbourhood schools, it is important to note that more than three quarters (78.8%) of the responding African-Americans without district school children and nearly two-thirds (64.3%) of the African-Americans with district school children support a return to neighbourhood schools. In other words, in spite of concerns related to racial discrimination, the majority of African-Americans find neighbourhood schools inviting.

**Table 4**  
**Support for Neighbourhood Schools and Schools as Community Centres**  
**by Race with Urban Public School Student Status**

Support Neighbourhood Schools/ School Community Centres	Race (Percentages)					Overall
	Caucasian	African- American	Hispanic	Native American	Other	
<b>Support Neighbourhood Schools<sup>a</sup></b>						
No Public School Children						
Strongly Disagree	01.2	02.6	04.8	03.3	06.3	01.4
Disagree	06.4	18.6	09.5	10.0	12.5	07.3
Agree	38.5	46.8	42.9	48.3	43.8	39.3
Strongly Agree	53.8	32.0	42.9	38.3	37.5	52.0
Public School Children						
Strongly Disagree	02.4	09.2	03.8	03.6	11.4	03.5
Disagree	16.1	26.5	21.2	14.3	31.4	17.8
Agree	32.9	28.6	46.2	28.6	25.7	32.6
Strongly Agree	48.6	35.7	28.8	53.6	31.4	46.1
<b>Schools Should Become Community Centres<sup>b</sup></b>						
No Public School Children						
Strongly Disagree	05.2	06.3	05.6	07.5	08.3	05.4
Disagree	18.7	21.1	22.2	22.6	18.3	19.0
Agree	51.3	52.3	47.2	52.8	50.0	51.3
Strongly Agree	24.8	20.3	25.0	17.0	23.3	24.4
Public School Children						
Strongly Disagree	06.3	07.2	04.2	20.0	14.3	06.8
Disagree	25.3	22.9	16.7	20.0	14.3	24.4
Agree	43.2	45.2	47.9	32.0	54.3	43.6
Strongly Agree	25.2	24.7	31.3	28.0	17.1	25.2

Note a. N= 6513; Chi-Square/No Children= 94.6; p .001; Chi-Square/Children= 49.6; p .001  
 Note b. N= 5870; Chi-Square/No Children= 07.0; p .857 Chi-Square/Children=15.0; p .243  
 Support Neighbourhood Schools: "Students should go to school close to where they live"  
 School Community Centres: "Schools should become community centres"

There are many and varied reasons for support of neighbourhood schools (Levy, 2000). In some cases, parents may be resistant to busing for reasons of safety. For example, cross-town bus travel introduces the possibility of some type of vehicular accident. In other cases, parents may feel that time spent on the bus is wasted. In still other cases, parents may be concerned about having immediate access to their children. Children attending neighbourhood schools are often within walking distance of their homes. Some parents may feel more comfortable sending their children to neighbourhood schools because of familiarity with their children's schoolmates. Some parents have issues related to race and see neighbourhood schools as a vehicle to insulate exposure to racially diverse students. Finally, some see neighbourhood schools as a vehicle for expanding social networks and building social capital.

The second half of Table 4 provides insight about the extent to which respondents see value in schools as a vehicle for strengthening social networks and connecting to community. The evidence indicates that the vast majority of the responding citizens would like to see schools become community centres. Interestingly, there is little difference between those with versus

those without school children and their desire to see schools become community centres. Finally, there is no significant difference in support for schools as community centres based on race. In other words, there is support for making schools community centres regardless of race.

Table 5 looks through the eyes of responding citizens based on the racial harmony and school equity classifications established in Table 1 and tests for differences in support for a return to neighbourhood schools. Once again, households who do not currently have children in the urban public school system are somewhat more supportive of a return to neighbourhood schools compared to those with children in school. In many ways, children are an integral part of neighbourhood communications. Essentially, children are the messengers of the neighbourhood carrying information and expanding communication among households. Adults who do not have school-aged children or whose children do not attend the urban public school system are more likely to be isolated from their neighbours and the events of the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood schools provide an avenue for community engagement. Children have the propensity for strengthening the bonds of community.

While there is broad support for a return to neighbourhood schools there are some differences in value assigned to neighbourhood schools based on the respondent's perceptions of racial harmony and school equity. Those who are negative about race relations in school, in the community, and who have concerns about racial equity in the delivery of education (Group 1) are the least supportive of a return to neighbourhood. In other words, this class of citizens are the least likely to see neighbourhood school as the solution. Even though Group 1 respondents who currently have children attending urban public schools are the least supportive of neighbourhood schools of any class of citizens, more than two-thirds (69.5%) feel that students should go to school close to where they live. At the other end of the classification (Group 8), those who feel that there is racial harmony inside and outside the school and who believe that students get the same education regardless of race, are especially supportive of a return to neighbourhood schools. In fact, nearly 93 percent of the respondents associated with this class who do not have children in the urban public school district support a return to neighbourhood schools. Those who have children in the urban public schools system, are negative about issues of race in the community, positive about race relations in the schools but who do not think that children get the same educational experience regardless of race, are also particularly supportive (Group 3, 86.2%) of a return to neighbourhood schools.

Groups 5 and 6 are also worthy of note because of their particularly strong support for a return to neighbourhood schools. Those who are concerned about racial tension inside and outside school but who feel that students get the same quality of education regardless of race (Group 5), are especially supportive of a system that allows students to go to school close to where they live. Generally speaking, those who trust that there is racial equity in the delivery of public education support a return to neighbourhood schools regardless of their feelings about racial harmony.

**Table 5**  
**Classification of Support for Neighbourhood Schools**  
**by Racial Harmony/School Racial Equity**  
**with Public School Student Status**

Support Neighbourhood Schools/ Children Attend Public School	Group	Classification: Racial Harmony & School Equity							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Community Racial Harmony		(-)	(+)	(-)	(+)	(-)	(+)	(-)	(+)
School Racial Harmony		(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)
School Racial Equity		(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
No Public School Children									
Strongly Disagree		04.9	04.1	01.3	02.1	01.0	02.5	01.8	00.5
Disagree		09.1	09.2	10.7	09.5	06.9	05.0	09.5	06.8
Agree		36.2	32.7	38.7	39.3	30.6	35.0	30.8	40.5
Strongly Agree		49.8	54.1	49.3	49.1	61.5	57.5	58.0	52.1
Public School Children									
Strongly Disagree		07.1	02.3	04.8	04.2	04.8	00.0	06.6	02.7
Disagree		23.4	18.6	19.0	19.6	11.0	17.9	22.4	17.0
Agree		29.1	39.5	40.5	35.7	22.8	20.5	27.6	33.0
Strongly Agree		40.4	39.5	35.7	40.6	61.4	61.5	43.4	47.2

N= 4653; Chi-Square/No Children= 72.8; p# .001; Chi-Square/Children= 40.1; p# .007  
 Support Neighbourhood Schools: "Student should go to school close to where they live."  
 Public School Children: "Household member(s) currently attend(s) a Wichita public school"

## Conclusions

It is clear that there must be important changes in urban public education if the United States is to remain competitive in the global economy and to provide equitable solutions that narrow the divide between advantaged and disadvantaged classes of citizens. A number of options are being considered including assessments of the relative merits of public versus private education (Loveless, 1997; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Willms, 1984). In fact, some see competition between public and private education in a positive light arguing that it has ignited a competitive spirit in public schools (Wolf, 1999). Regardless of the merit of these arguments it seems clear that differences in performance between urban public, suburban public and private educational institutions are driven in no small part by differences in educational preparedness of the student body. Economically disadvantaged school children begin formal education with an educational deficit and many will never catch up with their advantaged classmates without some form of intervention. Therefore, debate should be less about the obvious, why private and suburban public institutions out-perform urban public schools, and more about values and the extent to which this nation is true to its professed beliefs of equal opportunity. Equal opportunity begins with equal educational opportunity and closing the educational divide between disadvantaged and advantaged school children.

Those supporting privatization essentially are placing their faith in markets and appeals to self-interest. A market approach values choice and accordingly attempts to measure and respond to the demands of parents as customers. Those supporting a market approach reason that disadvantaged school children will be able to use vouchers to register their demands through schools of choice. Large differences in educational preparedness and household resources

available to facilitate educational preparedness will necessarily lead to student body segmentation based on socioeconomic standing. It is also likely that those with the economic means will use their private resources to segregate their children from those funded from public resources including school children with educational vouchers. Privatization and markets are driven by appeals to self-interest and strictly speaking, taxpayers without school children may increasingly question why their public tax dollars should be used to fund private education.

Supporters of public education argue that we all share responsibility for the long-term well-being of community and that public education is a component of community well-being. Those supporting this position argue that public schools should be driven by democratic processes that balance self-interest against the long-term well-being of community. Citizen engagement in the case of public education extends well beyond parents of school children in recognition that the entire community has a stake in public education.

Community-based urban education and neighbourhood schools attempt to bring about educational reform through democratic processes and co-production that tailor education to the unique character of a particular neighbourhood or community. Community-based education recognizes diversity and differences in culture and shapes education around differences but also recognizes that elementary children attending neighbourhood schools will one day compete in a diverse and increasingly competitive global labor force. Community-based education depends on community development and networked solutions built on symbiotic relationships between community and schools. Semiautonomous community-based organizations are sometimes used to organize the resources of the community and to channel the use of resources in ways that treat community as a system including interaction between community and schools. Members of urban neighbourhoods are more likely to become willing co-producers of community and educational improvements when they can see the connection between their contributions and the well-being of community.

People of colour in general and African-Americans in particular are concerned about racial harmony and inequality in the delivery of public education. Three-quarters of the responding African-American registered doubt about racial or income equity in the delivery of public education. Regardless of the validity of these perceptions, confidence in public education must be strengthened through educational reform. The evidence presented here generally indicates broad public support for neighbourhood schools and community-based education. Naturally, people of colour in general and African-Americans in particular are more reserved in their support. Many have felt the sharp bite of racial disharmony, discrimination, and inequality of opportunity and they understand that community-based education has risks. In spite of these reservations, a clear majority of people of colour see possibilities in educational reform associated with neighbourhood schools.

We must also find ways of making better use of existing resources by channeling their use toward a common goal. This means that the resources of schools, municipal government, nonprofits agencies and the low-income community all must be used to further common goals through networked solutions. While the effective use of limited local resources is critical, these actions will be insufficient to produce educational equality. Most school finance literature focuses on methods by which states allocate resources to school districts and interdistrict

spending differences. More recent work is exploring how resources are allocated within school districts (Goertz and Odden, 1999; Odden and Archibald, 2001). Community-based schools are consistent with the proposed financing schemes that call for building level autonomy over allocation of resources, particularly of teacher time. It is at the building level that teaching and learning take place. It is at the building level where parents interact with the education system. It is at the building level where most education reform efforts are taking place. The extent to which building-level staff interact effectively with other social institutions, should influence the opportunity for success. Children, between birth and age 18, spend 91 percent of their time *outside* school. Responsibility for improved student performance cannot rest solely with public schools.

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**Notes**

Note 1: Demographic Comparisons between the sample and the population

Sample	Sample	Sample	Population: School District*	Population
<i>Race</i>	Percent	Number	<i>Race</i>	Percent
Caucasian	87.4%	6,150	White	80.6%
African American	07.5%	529	Black	11.1%
Hispanic	02.1%	151	Hispanic	4.7%
Native American	01.4%	98	American Indian	1.2%
Asian	00.6%	45	Asian/Pacific Islander	2.4%
Other	00.9%	65		
<i>Income</i>			<i>Income</i>	
Less than \$20,000	11.8%	772	Less than \$15,000	15.8%
\$20,000 – \$29,999	14.8%	972	\$15,000-\$24,999	16.9%
\$30,000 – \$39,999	13.7%	901	\$25,000-\$34,999	18.6%
\$40,000 – \$49,999	14.3%	937	\$35,000-\$49,999	22.3%
\$50,000 – \$70,000	22.0%	1,443	\$50,000-\$74,999	17.8%
Above \$70,000	23.4%	1,538	\$75,000 & Above	8.4%
<i>Age</i>			<i>Age</i>	
Below 25	03.3%	238	19 and Below	28.9%
25 – 35	13.0%	927	20-39	34.8%
36 – 45	21.9%	1,557	40-59	19.5%
46 – 55	21.1%	1,501	60 and Above	16.8%
56 – 65	14.4%	1,026		
Above 65	26.2%	1,864		

\*1990 Census of Population and Housing

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