Finding Hope Among the Hopeless

It was an overcast, Thursday afternoon. The fog was rolling in across the Bay and the temperature was dropping. It was the kind of day that is more typical of summer than fall in the Bay Area. It was late in the day and I was feeling particularly uninspired about my job. When I had first started working as the Executive Assistant to Mayor Loni Hancock, I’d thought I had the best job in the City. I was at the center of power in local government, and I thought I was in a position to make things happen. From the very first day the job had been demanding, but in a good way. Every day I was presented with new challenges and new issues to work on. At first I thought that I was in a position to have an impact on issues I cared about—homelessness, drug abuse, and the plight of the city’s youth. About three months into the job my optimism had given way to the grim reality that change comes slowly in municipal government.

I soon realized that the Mayor’s office was not a place where sweeping reforms would be launched and fundamental changes would be initiated. Even more depressing for me was the realization that rather than power what I had was responsibility. I was responsible for figuring out what the City should do about the homeless who were camping out in the park behind City Hall. I was responsible for explaining to frightened residents why the police couldn’t stop the drug dealers who were terrorizing their neighborhood. I was responsible for meeting with protesters who wanted to make Peoples Park into a national shrine, and old ladies who wanted their neighbors to trim their trees so that their view of the Bay would not be obstructed.

I was growing tired of Berkeley politics, and for the first time in my life I felt discouraged, despondent and down right depressed about my work. Perhaps I had been too naïve. Why should I have thought that crime and poverty could be solved by one city, even as it plagued communities throughout the United States?

The year was 1988 and crack cocaine and the violence that accompanied it were devastating the Black community in Berkeley. As the Mayor’s representative, I was frequently the person who had to respond to community complaints about drive-by shootings and crack houses that operated like open markets. I quickly learned that city government lacked the resources to solve any of the major problems facing residents. As the person most likely to hear the pain and anguish of the community and to be blamed for the city’s failures, I had grown extremely frustrated after just two years on the job.
Feeling beleaguered and burdened by the responsibilities of the job, I was miraculously drawn back into education by the principal of a local high school who came to my office that foggy afternoon accompanied by one of his students. My friend George Perry, had recently been assigned to serve as principal of the local continuation school, East Campus (a school for students who were removed from the traditional high school due to poor behavior and/or grades). It turned out that he had been assigned to his new job as a punishment for the trouble he had caused in the District. However, instead of being scared into retirement as the higher ups had hoped, the assignment renewed George’s sense of purpose about his work in education.

He came to see me because I had once served as the student body President at UC Berkeley, and he wanted me to convince his student – John Peters, to run for student body president of his school. As George sang the praises of his student leader, I took a good look at John and immediately surmised that he was probably a street-level drug dealer. With gold teeth in his mouth, a thick gold chain around his neck, and a beeper at his waist, John fit a profile I had come to know well. I looked at John and then back at George, and my look revealed my confusion about what he had in mind. But instead of voicing my doubts I listened as George told me why he wanted John to run for student body president and I listened closely as John told me about himself. Within minutes I understood what George was thinking. John was intelligent, articulate, and extremely charismatic. George knew that if he could co-opt John by convincing him to play a positive role at his school, that he might be able to find a way to get other students to begin to take their education more seriously. John was a natural leader and George understood that he needed John on his side. He needed John to be a force for good at the school.

East Campus had once served as an alternative school for kids who did not fit in at the large, impersonal environment at Berkeley High School. Over time, it had become a dumping ground for troubled kids like John. Tucked away at the margins of the school district, East Campus was a school in name only. The first time I visited the school there were more kids in the parking lot blasting their car radios and smoking pot, than there were in the classrooms. In a city that took great pride in its commitment to racial integration, the school was over 90% Black. Hardly any students attended class, and those that did seemed to be there in body only.

Despite the sorrowful state of the school, I was so taken by John and by what my friend George Perry was trying to accomplish, that I was immediately convinced that working at the school was where I should be given my desire to make a difference. I saw the potential to transform this small forgotten school into a place that could become a genuine alternative for kids who were being killed and imprisoned over the drug trade on the streets each day. Shortly after my visit, I left my job with the Mayor to join George as a teacher at East Campus.
Confronting the "Crisis" in Urban Public Schools

I begin this book with this story about my entry into the field of education because it is reflective of how I have come to understand the promise and the potential of urban public schools in the United States. Like East Campus, many urban schools have been written off as failures, and failure is the word used most frequently to describe urban public schools in the United States, because the lists of problems confronting these institutions is so long and daunting. Low test scores, low grades, high drop out rates, poor attendance and generally unmotivated students, usually top the lists of failings. Burnt out and ineffective teachers, who care more about protecting their jobs than helping students, typically follow complaints about students. Those more intimately familiar with conditions in urban districts point to dilapidated and unsafe buildings, administrations hopelessly mired in politicized and inefficient bureaucracies, and an endless series of reforms that never seem to lead to genuine improvement (Hess, 1999).

If these characterizations were limited to a handful of urban schools or districts the "problem" might not seem so daunting, but this is not the case. Urban school failure is pervasive. It is endemic in the nation’s largest cities – New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, and not uncommon in small towns such as East St. Louis, Poughkeepsie, Camden, and Compton. In fact, where ever poor people are concentrated and employment is scarce, public schools are almost always very bad. In many parts of the country, the problems present within urban schools are perceived as so numerous and intractable that the term "crisis" is frequently applied to describe the situation; and this is how it is described by those who haven't given up hope completely.

Yet, although the problems and issues confronting urban public schools in the United States are profound and deeply discouraging, characterizing their plight as either one of crisis or utter hopelessness is inaccurate. Nor do such grim portrayals serve as a genuine diagnosis of the problems or shed light on what should be done to address them. Such descriptions do, however, play an important role in influencing popular conceptions of urban schools, and ultimately have an influence on how policy makers approach the task of "fixing" them.

Were the situation in urban schools truly a "crisis" one might expect to see urgent responses from leaders at the local, state and federal levels. After all, the education and welfare of millions of children are at stake, and if a crisis were genuinely perceived would not drastic measures be taken to alleviate the suffering, not unlike the actions taken following an earthquake or hurricane? However, even during a period in which educational issues receive more media coverage and more attention from policy makers than ever before (1), there is a stunning lack of urgency associated with official responses to the issues confronting urban public schools.

Moreover, in the parlance of everyday usage, the term crisis is typically thought of as a temporary condition. Injured individuals and beleaguered communities affected by a storm or fire are generally not thought of as being in a permanent state of crisis. Even if the problems have devastating long-term consequences, over time the condition ceases to
be described as a crisis. Eventually, there is a recovery and a return to a state of normalcy, since the term crisis connotes a temporary though serious deviation from the status quo. Crises that persist or become more severe, like illnesses that take a turn for the worse and are deemed incurable, are generally characterized as chronic and debilitating conditions; unfortunate but permanent states for which solutions may never be found.

Similarly, while the term crisis may not appropriately characterize the situation in urban schools, those who describe them as doomed and hopelessly unfixable are also off the mark. There is no question that the problems of urban schools are entrenched and intractable. However, compelling evidence suggests that despite their failings and weaknesses urban public schools are in fact indispensable to those they serve. Without any viable alternative available, urban public schools can not be written off as rotten structures in need of demolition.

**The Indispensable Institution**

Despite the severity of the conditions present in many urban schools, and despite the intractability of the problems they are faced with, these deeply flawed institutions continue to serve millions of children throughout the United States. In fact, the largest school districts in the nation are classified as "urban" and they serve nearly one third of school-aged children (Council of Great City Schools, 2001). In a profound demonstration of faith, millions of parents take their children voluntarily each day to the very schools that have been described as "desperate hell holes" (McGroarty, 1996). Certainly, many do so with reluctance and considerable consternation. In many cases, parents enroll their children only because they lack options or access to schools they regard as better or safer. However, many others do so willingly, hoping against the odds that for their child, or at the particular school their child attends, something good will happen, and a better future through education will be possible. At the minimum they may enroll their sons and daughters because they know that even at a failing public school their children will have access to a warm meal and adult supervision while they are there.

I was reminded of the difficult choices facing poor parents during conversations with Salvadoran refugees in run-down neighborhood of inner city Los Angeles. I was meeting with a group of parents at CARECEN (Central American Refugee Center) shortly after the Rodney King uprising of 1991. We met in an area of downtown LA called Pico Union; one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the United States and home to thousands of undocumented war refugees from Central America. Although it did not receive much media attention, it had been one of the epicenter of violence and looting during the riots. The parents I met with described the riot as the product of rising frustrations, and while others debated whether the outburst should be called a riot or a rebellion, these refugees of brutal civil wars termed it “un explosion social” (a social explosion).

As they described the perils they faced raising children in this crime-ridden, drug infested neighborhood, they made me aware of how important the public schools were to them. They did not complain about the over crowded classrooms, the absence of certified
teachers, or the dismal state of the facilities. Instead, they spoke with genuine appreciation of how happy they were to have a safe place to send their children. The fact that their children were fed, and in at least one school provided health care, added to their sense of gratitude. “Somos pobres, sin poder o derechos. Por los menos nuestro hijos tienen una educación. Sí, hay problemas en las escuelas, pero tenemos esperanza que el futuro de los hijos va estar mejor”. (We are poor, without power or rights. At least our children have an education. Yes, there are problems in the schools, but we have hope that the future for our children will be better.)

In economically depressed inner-city communities like Pico Union, public schools play a vital role in supporting low-income families. Even when other neighborhood services including banks, retail stores, libraries and other public services do not exist, are shut down or abandoned, public schools remain (Noguera, 1995). They are neighborhood constants, not because they succeed in carrying out their mission or because they satisfy the needs of those they serve, but because they have a relatively stable source of funding assured by the legal mandate to educate children.

Urban public schools frequently serve as important social welfare institutions. With meager resources they attempt to address at least some of the nutritional and health needs of poor children. They do so because those charged with educating poor children generally recognize that it is impossible to serve their academic needs without simultaneously addressing their basic need for health and safety. For many poor children schools provide a source of stability that is often lacking in other parts of their lives, and while many urban public schools are plagued by the threat of violence and intimidation, most are far safer than the communities in which they are located (Casella, 2001). The bottom line is that even when there is little evidence of educational efficacy, urban public schools still provide services that are desperately needed by poor families, and federal and state policies offer few alternatives.

In the absence of genuine alternatives, even failing public schools retain a dependent though disgruntled constituency base because they are typically the only social institution that provides a consistent source of stability and support to impoverished families.

For this reason, those who castigate and disparage urban public schools without offering viable solutions for improving or replacing them jeopardize the interests of those who depend upon them. Politicians who often lead the chorus of criticisms have largely failed to devise policies to address the deplorable conditions present in many inner-city schools and communities. Even in the few cases where drastic measures such as state takeovers of troubled districts have been taken (most often these have been urban school systems), the results achieved have generally failed to live up to the expectations or promises. Most of the popular educational reforms enacted by states and the federal government (e.g. standards and accountability through high stakes testing, charter schools, phonics-based reading programs, etc.) fail to address the severe social and economic conditions in urban areas that invariably affect the quality and character of public schools.
The central argument of this book is that until there is a genuine commitment to address the social context of schooling – to confront the “urban” condition - it will be impossible to bring about significant and sustainable improvements in urban public schools. The complex and seemingly intractable array of social and economic problems in urban areas must be addressed and school-based policies that respond to these problems must be devised, otherwise pervasive school failure in cities across the United States will continue to be the norm.

Public schools are the only institutions in this country charged with providing for the educational needs of poor children. Given the role they play it would be a mistake to allow them to deteriorate further or to become unsalvageable. Undeniably, they often carry out their mission poorly, without adequately serving the educational needs of the children under their charge. However, public schools in the United States are the only social institutions that cannot by law turn a child away regardless of race, religion, immigration status, or any other trait or designation (Kirp, 1982). Access to public education in the United States is complete, universal and compulsory (Tyack, 1980), and as such, it is also the only public service that functions as a form of social entitlement; a “positive right”(4) and social good provided to citizens and non-citizens alike (Carnoy & Levin, 1986). For all of these reasons, public education, even in the poorest sections of the inner city, constitutes a vital public resource. Rather than being regarded as hopelessly unfixable, urban public schools, particularly those that serve poor children, must be seen for what they are: the last and most enduring remnant of the social safety net for poor children in the United States.

Seen in this light, the problems confronting urban public school must be approached from a different perspective. Instead of castigating and decrying their failures, and inadvertently joining the chorus clamoring for their total demolition, those who recognize the value and the importance of the services they provide must instead adopt a position of critical support. In the same way that it would be unwise for criticisms of overcrowded buses or trains to prompt calls to abandon mass transportation, those who deplore conditions in urban public schools must recognize that despite their weaknesses, urban public schools are desperately needed by those they serve. Just as complaints about long lines and poor service should not be used to justify the elimination of public hospitals and clinics that provide health services to the poor and elderly, the failures of urban public schools should not be used as a rationale for their elimination. At least until a genuine, superior alternative for all children is available, public education with all its faults and weaknesses remains "the one best system", or at least, the only system we have (Tyack, 1980).

However, critical support should not be confused with unquestioning loyalty to public education. Parents, especially those whose children are forced to attend the worst schools, generally have very little loyalty to the "system", and for good reason. The parents I spoke with in Pico Union appreciated the support their children receive from struggling schools in their neighborhood but would in all likelihood jump at the opportunity to enroll their children in better schools if it were possible. Few parents are willing to sacrifice the needs of their children because they wish to show support for the democratic
principles underlying the existence of public schools. Given the opportunity, most parents actively seek schools they think have the greatest potential to meet the needs of their children. Whether this occurs in a public, private or charter school is generally less relevant than whether the school is accessible, affordable, safe and educationally viable. Defenders of public education who refuse to recognize this reality of parenting will undoubtedly feel betrayed when those who were once their most reliable consumers, namely poor parents, abandon public schools when provided with options they perceive as superior.

Critical supporters of public education must recognize that it is the rights of children and their families to a good education that must be supported and not a failed system. Critical supporters must not be afraid to honestly identify and call attention to the failures of the system, whether these are related to unresponsive leadership or the poor quality of teaching. Critical supporters must demonstrate active support for change and improvement, and given the sorrowful plight of many schools, they must be open to considering a variety of strategies for innovation. This should not be interpreted as a naïve willingness to embrace every new fad in educational reform that comes along. Rather, critical supporters should recognize that all reforms should be evaluated and assessed by the academic and social outcomes obtained by children. With calls for privatization gaining support and momentum, the only way to save public education is to radically alter it. Insuring that the needs of students and their parents are treated as the highest priority may be the most radical reform of all.

Pragmatic Optimism as a Guide

This book was written to show how urban schools are affected by the social environment in which they are located and to put forward a set of strategies to transform, improve, and fundamentally restructure them. The ideas presented are the product of years of research, teaching and service in urban schools throughout the United States. These years of experience have provided me with a strong sense of the grim reality present in many urban public schools, and also insights into what I believe it will take to make change possible. I characterize my perspective on the issues and problems confronting urban public schools as one of critical support and pragmatic optimism.

My pragmatism comes from personal and direct experience grappling with the problems facing urban public schools; and so does my optimism. As a middle and high school teacher in Providence, Rhode Island, and in Oakland and Berkeley, California, I have seen first hand how hard it can be to work within schools and districts where the academic failure of large numbers of students has been the norm for a very long time. In such places, patterns of failure for certain kinds of students are so commonplace and so deeply entrenched that failure tends to be accepted as inevitable and unavoidable. Through research carried out at numerous urban schools I have seen how easy it is for teachers and administrators to rationalize and therefore accept failure. Given the abundance of unmotivated and under-prepared students, dysfunctional and distressed families, unresponsive and incompetent administrators and teachers, and most of all misguided and foolhardy politicians, there is no shortage of compelling excuses for
persistent failure. Yet, even this litany of charges ultimately just provides the person espousing them with a justification for their inability to make a difference with the children they serve. The tendency for some educators to cast blame elsewhere while accepting responsibility for very little provides me with a strong sense of pragmatism as I consider what it will take to bring about change.

Additionally, having served as an elected Director and President of the School Board in Berkeley, California I also realize how difficult it is to reverse negative trends and change things for the better. Serving from 1990 to 1994, during a period in which many schools faced severe financial hardships, it became evident that my job was to manage what I came to regard as a miserable status quo. My responsibility as a Board member required me to eliminate vital programs to balance the District budget. I was forced to take the heat for strained relations with our labor unions because we were unable to satisfy their legitimate demands for higher wages. Worst or all, I was forced to vote to expel some of our neediest students, setting them loose on the streets without adequate provision for their education or welfare because they engaged in violent or dangerous behavior.

If I had not become a pragmatist from such experiences I would have undoubtedly abandoned my interest in working for the betterment of urban public schools long ago. Pragmatism makes it possible for one to act even under difficult circumstances when one must accept and recognize the limitations of what may be possible. Pragmatism also makes it possible to avoid demonizing beleaguered administrators, angry parents, and frustrated teachers, because it allows one to understand the legitimate source of their resentment, even if it does not provide a way to adequately respond to it.

However, my pragmatism has not given way to cynicism or disillusionment. I remain profoundly aware of the unique potential inherent in education; it alone has the ability to transform and improve the lives of even the neediest and most downtrodden individuals. At the most basic level I know that all children, regardless of their race or class background, can learn and grow in positive and productive ways when provided the opportunity, and that even in the poorest communities it is possible to create schools that serve children well. I know these things not because of blind faith but also from direct experience. I have taught in schools that were dumping grounds for "at-risk" adolescents, and I have worked with students who were written off as incorrigible and unteachable. I have seen these same students learn, grow confident in their abilities, and aspire to achieve goals that previously seemed impossible.

Gaining a Perspective on Success and Failure in American Education

My faith in the possibility that education can serve as a vehicle of individual transformation and even social change is rooted in an understanding that human beings have the ability to rise above even the most difficult obstacles, to become more than just victims of circumstance. I have seen education open doors for those who lacked opportunity and open the minds of those who could not imagine alternative ways of being and living. Like Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, I have seen education enable students to
“…to perceive critically the way they exist in the world; to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (Friere, 1970, p. 71).”

My optimism is rooted in my faith in people. It is a faith affirmed by teachers like Timiza Wagner, who unlike me spent nearly twenty years teaching at East Campus, tirelessly working to instill a sense of hope among young people who had been written off as hopeless by the schools that served them. It is a faith that is renewed by finding schools like Henshaw Middle School in Modesto, California, where most of the children are recent immigrants, speak Spanish as their first language, and have parents who work at the dirty jobs that most Americans refuse to take. Yet, this is a school whose students consistently achieve at high levels (Carnegie Quarterly, 1994/1995), and a school where parents are respected as genuine partners despite all the things they do not have. I have worked with other schools that provide an oasis of hope to children who live in neighborhoods and housing projects that seem unfit for human habitation, whose lives are so difficult and arduous that coming to know them well can be a painful experience. I have also had the privilege of working with schools that have gradually been transformed from dumping grounds for bad kids and poor teachers, into model schools that provide students with genuine alternatives from the uncaring, impersonal environments present in many urban public schools. Finally, I have observed teachers who consistently create educational magic in their classrooms, who incite and motivate their students to want to learn, who set high standards for themselves and their students and make it clear that not learning simply is not an option.

Experiences such as these enabled me to overcome the pessimism I felt while working in the Mayor’s office; a pessimism that so often overwhelms those who work in urban schools in the United States. As a university professor of course, I have a luxury to visit both good and bad schools, but unlike those I observe and work with, I get to leave the despair and return to the comfort of the university. I work with and speak to thousands of teachers, students and parents, and I hear them express their frustrations about politicians who either do not understand or do not care about the conditions in inner-city schools. I also serve on national committees that are charged with studying the problems confronting urban education, and I am occasionally asked to testify before policy makers about what should be done. I use these opportunities to voice the concerns of those who are never heard because their plight and suffering is simply not seen as important.

Yet despite my extensive involvement, I still get to leave the schools whenever I want. I get to return to my office at the university where I can escape the daily grind, and the mind numbing routine of so many schools. I can escape the loud hallways and the tedious faculty meetings that drive even idealistic and committed teachers to cynicism or out of teaching altogether. I get to see the big picture, to keep one foot in and one foot out of urban public schools, and I am allowed time to reflect on what I have seen. I have time to review the data I've collected, to reflect on the stories I have heard, and the opportunity to write and speak about my experiences at some distance from the places where the drama of school plays itself out. I am mindful of the many privileges I enjoy in relation to this work and I feel compelled to use my position to speak on behalf of those who do not
possess similar opportunities and advantages. I do not take this responsibility lightly. My experience leaves me compelled to be accountable for my words and deeds.

When I compare my situation to the reality of most teachers, counselors and administrators who work within urban public schools, or to the lives of the children who attend them, I am forced to reflect on my own life and the privileges I enjoy. As a former student in New York City's public schools, I am keenly aware that things could have turned out differently for me. Most of my closest friends did not go to college, much less an Ivy League university. The fortunate found dead-end jobs that provide them and their families with a degree of stability. The less fortunate are either dead or wasting away their lives in prison. The long list of those who met such a fate suggests their demise was more than the result of poor choices made or a lack of self-discipline.

My personal fortune does not lead me to the conclusion that if I, a working-class kid from Brooklyn, can find success through education, then so can anyone else who makes the effort. Unlike individuals such as John McWhorter (2000) and Shelby Steele (1990), who use their personal success as a basis for castigating others, especially Black people, for laziness and anti-intellectualism,(5) my experience has taught me that there is more to achieving academic and personal success than effort alone. Children don't get to choose their parents, the neighborhood they'll grow up in, the school they'll attend or the teachers to whom they'll be assigned. While growing up I knew many kids who tried hard to do well in school, whose parents supported them and who valued education as strongly as did mine. Yet, most of them were not as fortunate. Due largely to circumstances beyond their control, their dreams and those of their parents were never realized, not because of a lack of effort, but because of a lack of luck and opportunity.

As the second of six children from working-class Caribbean immigrant parents, neither of whom graduated from high school or attended college, I benefited from having learned at an early age to understand the importance of education. Even though neither of my parents had the time or knowledge to navigate the school system, they still managed to convey the importance of academic success to their children, and succeeded in sending all six to some of the most highly regarded universities in the nation. We didn’t attend elite private or suburban schools. There was no money for private tutors, computers or expensive vacations. Yet, education worked for us, even though for the most part, we succeeded in spite of the system, not because of it. As new immigrants, my parents rejected the idea that the skin color and culture made us racially inferior. We were taught that character and hard work mattered more than race, and that none of the White children we went to school with were inherently superior. Ours is an old success story, one of immigrants who are able to reap the rewards of American opportunity through hard work and determination. Yet, such stories do not negate the fact that without a Herculean effort, the vast majority of those who are born poor stay poor.

Now, as the parent of four children, all of whom have attended urban public schools, I continue to enjoy a position of privilege. Unlike me, my children have access to the resources available to most middle-class families – summer enrichment programs, music lessons, and foreign travel. They attend public schools but we have know-how to make
the system work for them and the resources to make up for what they do not receive in school. I know how to advocate for my children and I know how to help them navigate schools that consistently fail large numbers of students. My education grants me class privileges, and I am generally treated with courtesy and respect when I visit my children’s schools. Unlike many parents, I am treated like a valued customer; a client who has the ability and wherewithal to exit the system if I feel unsatisfied with the quality of service.

My experience as a parent and student in urban public schools has taught me that while effort is a key ingredient for individual success, for those who are born poor it is not a guarantee. My understanding of the broad patterns of failure and success in American society leads me to conclude that under the present conditions, academic failure for large numbers of poor and working-class children is inevitable. Although we may be in a “new economy” in which many jobs require advanced skills and education (Murnane & Levy, 1996), there is still a need for people who are willing to accept low-status, low-wage work. As long as some schools (suburban and private) are able to generate a sufficient number of academically qualified students for high skill, high wage labor, or for as long as such labor can be imported, the failure of low performing schools does not pose a problem for the economy.

Politically, the quality of schools corresponds closely to the strength of electoral constituencies. This is a point that will be developed further in Chapter 2 where I examine the effects of poverty and racial segregation on local control over schools. Since the end of World War II political power has shifted in most states from the cities to the suburbs (Clark, 1985; Gratz & Mintz, 1998). Moreover, in high poverty urban areas, voter participation tends to be low and ties to political parties are often weak (Schorr, 1997). Cities increasingly lack the political clout needed to obtain much-needed resources from state government. In some cases, cities still serve as important centers of economic and cultural activity. But even when they retain a degree of viability they are more likely to employ those who reside elsewhere than those who live within city limits (7).

Throughout the United States, failing schools are treated as local matters and responsibility for improving them is delegated to those who reside in the communities they serve. This continues to be the case whether or not communities can generate the resources to address the needs of poor students. From afar, state governments have established academic standards and systems for holding schools accountable (Blasi, 2001; Elmore, 1996), even though it is widely recognized that there are many schools where basic “opportunity to learn standards” have not been met (Oakes, 2002). Of course, state governments do find ways to commit resources to an ever-expanding penal system that stands ready to absorb those who have encountered failure elsewhere.

The consistency of patterns of success and failure, both academic and ultimately economic, and the predictability of these patterns - their correlation with the racial and socio-economic backgrounds of children - explains why the problems of America's urban public schools are written off as inevitable. Although academic failure in urban schools may be lamented by politicians and deplored by the media, and although those seen as
responsible may be viciously castigated, such posturing should not be confused with a serious response to the problem. Ultimately, the lack of a concerted and sustained effort to respond to failing urban public schools can only be explained by understanding that America simply does not care that large numbers of children from inner-city schools and neighborhoods are not properly educated.

This is not a conspiracy theory. For me, it is simply a starting point for my pragmatism. The plight of inner-city schools and many rural schools that serve poor children throughout the United States is not a secret or unknown fact. It is widely recognized that many urban public schools are places that should be avoided because they are dangerous, chaotic and potentially damaging to those who go there. Yet, it is also understood that certain children - the poorest and neediest - will end up there. For this reason, the possibility that low performing schools will be forced to close and that other schools will be required to educate their students as called for in a new policy from the Bush administration seems implausible. Just as it was true during the bitter and bloody conflicts over bussing, it continues to be true today: there aren’t many schools in affluent areas that want to serve poor children, especially those who are not White. For this reason it highly unlikely that the new policy--various forms of school choice or even vouchers--will provide the least powerful children access to schools that are as good as those that serve affluent children. (9)

Urban schools and the children who attend them languish under third world-like conditions even as President George W. Bush boldly promises to “Leave No Child Behind”. Millions of dollars from private and public sources are spent in the name of reform and restructuring, and an entire industry of education experts has been created to go about the work of improving America’s schools, but the situation in inner-city schools remains largely unchanged.

In my travels across the United States, I frequently encounter a small number of effective schools that cater to poor children. However, I realize that their scarcity is not an accident. (10) In the San Francisco Bay Area, elementary schools such as Washington in Richmond, Emerson in Berkeley (profiled in chapter 4) and Hawthorn in San Francisco, serve as living proof that it is possible to create schools that serve poor children well. Their existence, like the four thousand high performing, high poverty schools throughout the nation identified by the Education Trust, remind us that the problem is not the children but the schools they attend (Education Trust, 2002). Still, knowing that such schools exists forces me to ask why we continue to allow them to be exceptions amidst a sea of miserable inadequacy.

The extreme disparities in wealth that pervade United States society are largely responsible for the plight of young people and the state of education in urban areas. However, the dearth of good schools is also the inevitable by-product of a system that is almost completely unaccountable to those it serves. Public education is one of few enterprises where the quality of service provided has no bearing whatsoever on the ability of the system to function. Even when there is little evidence that schools are able to fulfill their basic mission – educating children - the system continues to chug along and all
employees get paid (some quite well). This is why I believe that the high stakes exams that have been adopted in states such as Massachusetts and California are fundamentally flawed and morally irresponsible. The exams are being used to hold students accountable for their achievement even though the authorities who have imposed the exams know that they cannot guarantee the quality of the education students receive.

As long as we are able to convince ourselves that simply providing access to education is equivalent to providing equal opportunity, we will continue to treat failing schools as a non-issue. We will also continue to delude ourselves with the notion that the United States is a democracy based on genuine meritocratic principles; a society where social mobility is determined by individual talent and effort. We hold on to this fantasy even as a quarter of the nation’s children are denied adequate educational opportunity.

Ultimately, this denial relegates the problems and issues confronting urban public schools to the margins of public life in American society. The media frequently carries stories about deplorable conditions in urban public schools, but typically it does so as if they occurred far away in some Third World nation. Occasionally, the media will report on the triumphant stories of poor children like Cedric Jennings, the lead character in A Hope in the Unseen (Suskind, 1999). Cedric manages to overcome tremendous obstacles while going to school in Southeast DC, and he manages to succeed against great odds. Yet, even in telling his story the idea that individual effort rather than structural change is the solution is reinforced. As a society we are generally far more comfortable extolling the virtues of individual responsibility and merit, even as the structural nature of the problems affect poor kids and schools in poor neighborhoods go unexplored and unaddressed in policy.

The fact that the United States tolerates the failure of so many of its urban schools suggests that either there is a pervasive belief that poor children are not entitled to anything better, or an active conspiracy to insure that the majority of children who are born poor, stay poor. Whether we accept either of these explanations is ultimately less important than what critical supporters actually do to insure that present and future generations of children are provided with the opportunity to attend better schools.

The Limits and Possibilities of Changing Urban Public School

One of the goals of this book is to put forward a framework that can be used to guide the improvement of urban public schools, one that takes the social context--or what I have termed the urban condition--into account. Drawing on my research and teaching experience, and from a perspective based upon pragmatic optimism, my starting point for such a framework is to recognize the limits and possibilities of what can be changed under current circumstances.

My own thinking about limits and possibilities is influenced by the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1972). Freire uses the concept of a “limit situation” in theorizing about his work in adult literacy. For Friere, illiteracy is much more than a failure to master the mechanics of reading and writing. It is rather a symptom of a larger condition
of oppression and powerlessness and therefore cannot be fixed through traditional approaches to adult education. Instead, through dialogue and communication that is based upon mutual respect and reciprocity, Freire calls upon educators to teach students to “read the world”. This entails helping students to acquire an understanding of the forces that maintain imbalances in wealth and power so that they can see their “situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation” (p. 73). It also involves a move away from fatalistic perspectives that lead individuals to accept and adapt to oppressive circumstances, and calls for the adoption of a critical stance toward relations of power.

Freire recognized that a critical perspective (He uses the term critical consciousness) is not enough to transform social conditions, so he calls upon teachers to treat conditions of oppression as “limit situations”; problems which require critical reflection, engagement and praxis. By this he meant that in any historical period the possibilities for change must be constantly assessed and reflected upon so that strategies for countering these conditions can be devised. Friere conceived of human liberation and social justice as states of being to which people must aspire and devise courses of action to realize. By viewing the constraints upon their freedom and dignity as limited situations, Freire believed the oppressed would be less inclined to see their situation as having been ordained by God. He hoped that such a shift in perspective would open the possibility that the oppressed would consider ways to act upon these constraints and gradually expand possibilities for a greater degree of freedom. Friere (1979) writes:

As they separate themselves from the world and locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations in the world and with others, men overcome the situations which limit them: the “limit situations”. Once perceived as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality… As critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit situations. (p. 89)

If we apply Freire’s approach to understanding the limit situations that confront urban schools, there is a greater likelihood that we can devise creative approaches that make it possible to move beyond the dismal status quo. In the case of urban public schools, the constraints that stand in the way of change are both internal and external to school systems. Externally, the constraints are primarily related to the effects of poverty and social isolation on families in economically depressed inner-city neighborhoods. External conditions related to poverty invariably effect schools and have an impact upon teaching and learning (Schorr, 1997; Anyon, 1996; Maeroff, 1988). Many inner-city communities have been in a constant state of economic depression for a very long time, and in many areas, even the prosperity of the 1990s failed to significantly lower unemployment or bring about significant improvements in the quality of life (Phillips, 2002). The absence of well-paying jobs and a vibrant retail sector has converted many of these communities into what some economists refer to as "no zones" - no banks, no stores, no pharmacies, no community services. In the absence of a functioning formal economy, many residents generate income through the informal economy where most of the transactions and economic activities are illegal (i.e. drug trafficking, prostitution, gambling, "off-the-
books" labor). Consistently, research has shown that when poverty is concentrated and poor people are socially isolated the health and welfare of children and families suffer (Wilson 1987; Greenberg & Schnieder, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1993).

The role that local and state politicians play vis-à-vis urban schools and communities is another important external factor that influences the operation of schools. In many cities, the public school system is the leading employer, and the jobs available within school systems often offer higher pay than similar jobs in the private sector. The officials who manage schools are often quite powerful. Granting contracts for construction, food services and maintenance constitute a significant source of revenue for external suppliers. When those responsible for schools treat the economic activities of the school system as a cash cow and source of patronage, educational issues often become a low priority. In such cases, it is not uncommon for resources that should be directed to support schools to be re-directed into questionable activities. Political corruption, instability in leadership, institutional indifference, administrative interference and/or ineptness, can all have a profound effect on the ability of schools to function (Anyon, 1996; Henig et al., 1999). Finally, when battles for political control of schools take on greater importance than fulfilling their educational mission, key players and constituencies can become too distracted to focus on the critical educational work that needs to be done.

A broad array of demographic and socio-economic factors, including the arrival of new immigrants (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and neighborhood instability, also exert powerful influences over schools and the children who attend them. For example, as middle-class families have moved out of rust-belt cities like Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland and Hartford since the 1960’s, the quality of schools has declined precipitously. They decline partially because there is less money available for schools as the tax base is eroded, but also because when household income goes down and the percentage of low-income single parent families goes up, the challenges facing schools increases significantly. Likewise, other trends such as housing affordability and stability, the accessibility of health care, and the impact of welfare reform, profoundly effect schools and the quality of children’s lives.

These external constraints cannot be ignored or treated as factors that are beyond the reach of schools and therefore impossible to address. The tendency to ignore the environmental context is commonplace even though a vast body of research has shown that external factors such as poverty play highly significant roles in influencing the quality of schooling provided to children (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Anyon, 1996; Noguera, 1995). Despite widespread recognition of the dire social problems confronting urban public schools, it is rare for politicians to devise policies that take social context into account. Instead, there are numerous examples of policies that treat schools uniformly, and subject both rich and poor to the same laws and regulations.

Internal constraints also limit and hinder the possibilities for schools to improve. High turnover among superintendents, principals and teachers adds to the sense of instability present in some schools, and results in inexperienced professionals being assigned the most difficult and complex educational jobs (Darling Hammond, 1996). Even when
turnover is not as great a problem, urban districts often have large numbers of teachers who are demoralized and/or burnt out as a result of poor working conditions and low salaries. The morale of school personnel, the culture and organizational climate within schools and administrative offices, all have a tremendous bearing upon the capacity of schools to change and improve. Genuine reform and improvement are impossible to achieve in schools where disorder and chaos are prevalent (Payne, 1986; Payne, 2001).

Similarly, inadequate facilities, and in many urban areas this may include broken windows, poor heating and ventilation, and a wide array of cosmetic and structural deficiencies, as well as a shortage of instructional materials such as computers and textbooks, also constitute important internal constraints on schools. Finally, the common tendency to pursue costly reforms without a commitment to evaluate the effectiveness of new measures, adds to the sense of demoralization experienced by school personnel, and contributes to a profound cynicism among them about the possibility of reform itself. Commenting on the tendency of policy makers to issue new recommendations for reform without evaluating or learning from past failures, Sarason (1971) writes:

When you read the myriad of recommendations these commission reports contain, it becomes clear that they are not informed by any conception of a system. This is a charitable assessment. It deserves emphasis that none of these reports confronts the question of why these recommendations for changing this or that part of the system have been ineffective. More upsetting is the question of why so many people think the situation has not remained the same but deteriorated. Why, in the quiet of night, do so many people think that the situation is hopeless? (p. 15)

Many of the conditions described above are not unique to urban schools, but are present to varying degrees within schools throughout the United States (Cuban & Tyack, 1995; Wagner, 1994). However, they are more likely to be present and to be particularly severe in urban public schools that are located in economically depressed neighborhoods.

Yet, despite the real obstacles created by internal and external constraints, there are realistic possibilities for improvement and reform. The most compelling evidence that such openings exist in spite of these constraints is the existence of what are now widely recognized as "effective schools" that serve poor children and operate in low-income urban areas. Isolated and few in number though they may be, a significant number of schools that serve poor children manage to demonstrate that it is possible for students to achieve at high levels. Research on such schools has shown that they succeed both because they find ways to develop the internal capacity of schools to support good teaching and learning, and because they face the external constraints head on (Haycock, 2002). They do this by consciously devising strategies that enable them to cope with, and in some cases overcome, the obstacles present within the external environment. Such schools find ways to provide coats to children in the winter and additional food to children who don’t eat regularly at home. By finding ways to mitigate the impact of the external constraints, such schools provide a reasonable basis for pragmatic optimism.
Furthermore, possibilities for change and improvement are enhanced when capable and committed educators are organized to serve the needs of children. Programs such as the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco, Young Black Scholars in Los Angeles and the Paul Robeson Institute in New York, have been highly effective in furthering academic achievement of poor, minority students. Of course, the success of such programs is contingent upon the availability of competent and committed personnel, a fact that often makes replication difficult. However, this fact should not negate the possibility that similar programs can be adopted to help schools to improve. Rather, it should underscore the importance of the most critical ingredient of school success - the availability of highly skilled and dedicated professionals - without whom success simply is not possible. Furthermore, the success of certain interventions, as well as even the temporary success of certain schools, all serve as proof that the possibility for transforming urban public schools is real.

Finally, and most importantly, the possibility for better education exists because the children are fundamentally educable and capable of learning at high levels. This fact must be articulated repeatedly because in too many cases it is not the premise upon which reforms are based. When the adults who serve children do not believe their students are capable of learning and achieving at high levels, it is extremely unlikely that they will provide them with an education that challenges them to fully realize their intellectual potential. Adults who question the ability of students to learn invariably set lower standards and hold lower expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Most disturbing of all is the fact that such educators provide an education to their students that they would regard as unacceptable for their own children.

Working with an awareness of the limits and possibilities for school improvement compels us to re-visit the issue of commitment, effort and will. While such subjective characteristics may not suffice as explanations for student achievement, they are indispensable features of any school change process. Put most simply, schools improve when people work harder and smarter (Elmore, 1996). When they invest greater time and energy into improving their practice and coordinating the services they provide to children and their families in a more coherent manner, increased achievement is more likely. This is not to suggest that hard work alone is all that is needed to improve urban schools. However, even if all of the key ingredients are in place and optimal conditions have been created to support teaching and learning, success will still require hard work.

The work required to improve schools that serve poor children entails much more than a mechanistic adherence to a set of prescribed reforms or the adoption of a new curricula. One consistent feature of schools that succeed at educating poor children is that they are guided by a coherent mission; one that is enthusiastically embraced by teachers, students and parents (Meier, 1995; Sizemore, 1988; Edmonds, 1979). Such schools are almost always led by dedicated and exemplary principals who motivate and inspire their staff while simultaneously generating a sense of accountability to those they serve. Successful schools, especially those that succeed over a long period of time, often have an intangible quality about them that produces high morale, and an esprit de corps that compels those who teach or learn there to approach their work with a sense of purpose and commitment.
I was reminded of this characteristic of effective schools when I went to see an old friend from college. I sought out my college roommate, Amateka Morgan, after nearly twenty years without contact hoping that he might have some wisdom to share with my seventeen-year-old son Joaquin, who was about to enroll in college in New York City. We found Amateka working in a private Islamic primary school in the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn. Two weeks before school was to begin he was hard at work waxing floors, painting walls and moving furniture. He explained that he had recently resigned from Girls and Boys High School (a large comprehensive public school in Brooklyn) where he had been employed for over ten years as a science teacher and track coach. He told us that although he enjoyed working at the school, he had grown tired of hearing people say that if he could save one or two children he had accomplished something. Smiling broadly he informed us, "At this school, we know we can save all of our children. The only thing limiting us is the size of the building. Even though we don't have facilities like the public schools we can do a better job because we love the children, and it shows in what they can do"(personal communication, September 2, 2000).

Without the kinds of qualities demonstrated by my old friend - commitment, enthusiasm, compassion, solidarity and love - it is doubtful that public schools can be reformed. Individuals possessing such qualities also need support derived from structural changes aimed at easing the effects of poverty. However, without such individuals change may not be possible at all. The nature of work in urban schools is simply too difficult, the working conditions too harsh, and the external obstacles too numerous. Without the extra boost provided by an emotional or philosophical motivation for doing the work, success can not be achieved. Unfortunately, such traits cannot be invoked by policy makers, or mandated by superintendents or school boards; if they are not rooted within an individual's value system often they cannot be cultivated. In some cases, individuals can be inspired to manifest these qualities, but they can not be coerced to do so. Hence, to a large degree, the possibility for transforming urban public schools is contingent upon our ability to find ways to either attract highly motivated and competent professionals to work in them, or to inspire and support those who are already there. Assessing the situation in urban schools with a healthy dose of pragmatism forces us to recognize that neither task is easy.

Improving the Quality of Public Education in The San Francisco Bay Area

For nearly twenty years I taught and conducted research in several schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. These experiences provide the empirical basis for my analysis of the limits and possibilities for improving urban schools. Widely regarded as one of the most prosperous regions in the United States due to its proximity to the Silicon Valley, the national center of the "new economy," the Bay Area would seem to have every ingredient needed to make the probability for success in public education likely. Yet, like urban schools throughout the rest of the nation, public schools in the Bay Area exhibit most of the familiar signs of failure and distress despite their location in this affluent region.

In the forthcoming chapters I will explain why public education in the Bay Area has largely failed to live up to its promise and potential. Through a series of case studies, I
will show how several of these schools have been affected by and have attempted to respond to the challenges of the urban environment. I will do this by drawing attention to both the reasons for failure and the factors that have enabled some schools to produce a degree of success.

It is my hope that this book will not only inform readers about the peculiarities of this region, but will also provide insights that can help us to understand what it will take to reverse trends in urban education generally. It is my hope that by grounding this analysis in the experience of real schools and communities, a credible and realistic case for radically improving urban public schools will be made. Drawing on my position of critical support and pragmatic optimism, I will describe how schools can respond to the forces of social inequality and fulfill the promise of American education. That promise is rooted in Horace Mann’s belief that schools should function as the great “equalizer” of opportunity; an arena where inherited privileges do not determine ones’ opportunities (Tyack 1980). Improving the state of America’s urban schools will necessarily be a central element of any effort to realize that promise.

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