Introduction

There is perhaps no other sector that reflects the fractured nature of civil society in the United States more than public education. Despite a Supreme Court decision calling for schools to be racially integrated, public schools across the United States remain largely segregated with respect to the race and class make-up of their student populations (Orfield and Eaton 1996). Public schools are not only segregated, but in most American cities, poor children have been consigned to schools that show very little evidence of serving their educational needs. On every known measure of academic performance, the vast majority of students attending urban public schools in the United States (especially those who are African American and Latino), are deficient with respect to basic literacy and math skills (Miller 1995; James, Jurich and Estes 2001).

In California, the state’s Academic Performance Index (API) rankings reveal that poor academic performance is most common in school districts serving low-income populations, particularly in racially isolated urban areas where poverty tends to be concentrated (Ed-data 2002). This is true in large cities such as Los Angeles, Fresno and Oakland, and it is also true in smaller cities such as Compton, Marin City and East Palo Alto. The State of California holds local school districts accountable for the academic performance of students, but it does relatively little to ensure that schools meet the conditions that are necessary to provide adequate educational opportunities for all students. Although numerous studies have shown that poverty and racial isolation contribute significantly to school failure (Coleman 1966; Jencks 1972; Kozol 1991), the state does very little to mitigate the effects of these external conditions. Instead, responsibility for monitoring educational quality is delegated to educational leaders in school districts and elected school boards in keeping with the long-standing practice of allowing local communities to manage and operate public schools (Blasi 2001).

There is a vast body of research and evidence that shows such an approach does not work. In most cases, poor communities lack the resources necessary to monitor the quality of education provided to students. Concentrated poverty and racial isolation limit the ability of parents to exert control over the schools that serve their children, and educational leaders in such communities often lack the resources to take on the task themselves. For a variety of reasons that shall be presented, conditions external to schools such as poverty, crime, housing affordability and health care access, exert considerable influence over conditions within schools (Coleman, et.al. 1966; Noguera 1996). Unless the state intervenes decisively to support schools in low-income communities, it is unlikely that such schools will ever improve.

Drawing on research and work carried out in schools and community organizations in Oakland, California over a twenty-year period, this paper presents an analysis of the ways in which poverty and racial isolation have contributed to the problems that have plagued schools in the district. The analysis presented draws upon the concept of social capital; a concept that has been used by social scientists to study how social relationships and networks are related to the quality of civic life. Social capital has also been employed to understand a variety of issues and problems facing inner-city communities (Sampson 2000; Waquant 1998). Through an analysis of the factors that hinder the development of social capital in low-income communities, I will show why local control
is inadequate as a mechanism for holding schools accountable in high poverty areas. I also hope to use such an approach to draw attention to what it might take to transform inner city schools into genuine assets for the communities that they serve.

**Race, Class and School Accountability**

Although there is considerable variation among local school districts in the United States with respect to the demographic composition of the students and communities they serve, the policies used to regulate America’s public schools are amazingly consistent. This is the case with respect to the application of Federal statutes (e.g. Special and Compensatory Education) that are used to regulate the provision of educational services to specially designated populations. It is also the case with respect to the strategies employed by states to hold school districts accountable. In the last five years most state governments have implemented academic standards and assessments to monitor student achievement ([Elmore 1996](#)). With few exceptions, there is also a high level of consistency in the policies that provide the legal parameters for school governance through a practice commonly referred to as “local control”.

Throughout the United States, communities of all kinds elect individuals to school boards who have primary responsibility for managing the affairs of public schools. (1) Local control is a unique form of governance that is a product of the decentralized and largely unplanned historical process that gave birth to public education in the United States ([Katznelson and Weir 1994](#)). Unlike most other nations that have centrally planned and managed educational systems, the United States has a highly decentralized system in which primary responsibility for the affairs of schools is delegated to local school boards. Local control continues to be widely practiced even during periods of intense criticism over the quality of public education, largely because it is perceived as inherently more democratic than a centralized Federal or state-managed system ([Linn 2000](#)).

Local governance of public schools ostensibly serves as a means to insure that schools are responsive and accountable to the communities that they serve. Locally elected school board members are typically responsible for overseeing matters pertaining to financial management and personnel (e.g. collective bargaining agreements), while the education professionals they hire have primary responsibility for managing the provision of educational services. The system is designed so that those with a vested interest in the affairs of public schools – parents and the local community – are well positioned to monitor conditions in their schools.

Yet, inequities among school districts and the communities they serve are rampant and extreme, and local control does not make it easier for schools to address the academic needs of poor students. Academic performance outcomes generally reflect broader patterns of inequality that are evident elsewhere in American society ([Kozol 1991; Noguera and Akom 2000](#)). Local control and financing of public education exacerbates educational inequality because there is wide variation in the ability of local communities to generate revenue and support for schools at the local level ([Cibilka 2001](#)). As a result of local control, affluent communities with a higher tax base are generally able to provide more funding for schools than poor communities. Even in states such as California, where as a result of *Serano v. Priest* (2), the formula used to finance schools is more equitable, there is wide variation in the ability of communities to generate supplemental resources.

Differences in per pupil spending often mirror differences in the abilities of school districts to generate and sustain civic engagement in various activities and affairs related to the management and operation of public schools. While affluent communities generally have little difficulty eliciting community participation in school board elections, site decision-making councils, and other avenues for civic involvement, low-income communities often encounter obstacles in enlisting and sustaining the involvement of parents and a diverse cross section of community members in such activities ([Epstein 1993](#)).
Low levels of parental and community participation in public schools is frequently interpreted as an indication of disinterest in education. Yet, these patterns follow trends that are common to other forms of civic engagement (e.g. voting, participation within political parties and community organizations) in low-income communities (Putnam 1995). The reasons that have been suggested for lower involvement vary, ranging from lack of time and information (Gold 2001), to feelings of powerlessness and a low sense of individual and collective efficacy (Lareau 1988). Whatever the explanation it is clear that in urban areas like Oakland, where poverty is concentrated and poor people are socially isolated, the parents of the children who experience the greatest difficulty in school also tend to be the least involved.

Poverty, Racial Isolation and Oakland’s Failing Schools

As is true for most other school districts in the United States that cater to poor children and their families, on most measures of academic performance the Oakland Unified School District demonstrates little evidence of success in educating its students. For example, recent data from the California Department of Education shows that 43 of Oakland’s 56 elementary schools received a ranking of 5 or less on the Academic Performance Index (API) (3). This means that according to the state’s performance measure, two thirds of Oakland’s elementary schools are considered “low performing”. Under the 1999 Public School Accountability Act “low performing” schools are to be subject to various sanctions and possible state takeover if they show no improvement over three years.

The challenge confronting the district as a result of the new policy is daunting. More than half of Oakland’s elementary schools received an API rating of 1 or 2 (the lowest possible score) from the state. Prospects for change appear even more remote among secondary schools. All but one of the 16 middle schools and all seven of the district’s high schools received API ratings below 5. The API ratings for Oakland’s schools are consistent with a broader set of academic indicators such as the drop-out rate (25.2%) (4), the suspension and expulsion rate, student grade point averages, and college eligibility rates (19.6%) (5). All of these indicators serve to reinforce the widespread impression that Oakland public schools are failing and that enrollment in them should be avoided by those who can.

Yet, despite the public embarrassment engendered by the publication of the school rankings, the threat of state takeover may actually do little to prod the District to improve. With hundreds of failing schools and districts across California, the ability of the state to intervene is likely to be limited. (6) Moreover, the State’s own track record in managing failing districts indicates that it may be no more able to improve schools than local school districts. (7)

Oakland has received more than its share of ridicule and blame for the failure of its schools. In 1996 national attention was focused on the district as a result of the controversy created by the district’s adoption of a policy that called for Ebonics (also known as Black vernacular English) to be treated as a legitimate second language. As news and confusion spread about the School Board’s new language policy, Oakland was immediately subjected to ridicule and scorn for promoting what critics referred to as “bad English” and “slang” in the media (Perry and Delpitt 1997). Within a few weeks of the Board’s resolution, the California State Legislature and US Congress moved quickly to prohibit the use of state or Federal funds to support implementation of the policy. The District even came under attack from several prominent African American leaders who charged the District with damaging the education of Black children through its poorly conceived policy. (8)

Responding to the Non-Academic Needs of Students and the “Captured Market” Problem

Interestingly, even as Oakland’s schools were castigated over the Ebonics resolution, few of those who engaged in the attack offered any recommendations for actions the district might take to solve the problem it was attempting to address. The widely misunderstood policy had been adopted by the School Board in response to a recommendation from a task force on African
American student achievement. The task force had been formed for the purpose of devising a strategy to address widespread academic failure among African American students. (The grade point average for Black students in Oakland in 1996 was 1.8) While it might be fair to question the District’s emphasis on Ebonics as a strategy for raising student achievement, the absence of alternative suggestions served as the strongest indication that the critics had no idea themselves of what should be done to respond the problem.

Yet, as disturbing as the outlook for schools in Oakland might appear, a closer look at the characteristics of the students it serves reveals that the situation is more complex than it seems. According to the state’s data, nearly two thirds of students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch based upon household income (Education Data Partnership 2001), and over 40% of its students come from families served by the CalWORKS program (formerly AFDC). The concentration of poverty is even more intense when one considers that all of the schools that received an API rating of 1 or 2, and have been designated “low performing”, serve student populations where over 90% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Additionally, more than a third of the district’s students are from families that recently migrated to the United States whose first language is not English (Education Data Partnership 2001). The school district is also responsible for providing adequate educational opportunities for these students who speak over seventy different languages.

Oakland students also come to school with a wide array of unmet social, material and emotional needs that affect their ability to learn. For example, because their families are often uninsured, many poor children lack access to adequate health and dental care (Alameda County Health Department 1998). This means that they are less likely to receive preventative treatment and more likely to rely upon hospital emergency rooms when they become ill. As is true for poor children elsewhere in the country, Oakland students are more likely to suffer from asthma and tooth decay and less likely to receive eye glasses when they need them (Alameda County Health Department 1998). As a result of poverty and the high cost of housing in the Bay Area, many Oakland students experience a high level of transience and are forced to change schools frequently when their families move into new housing. Finally, although data on these issues is less reliable, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that large numbers of Oakland’s students come to school hungry, without adequate clothing, and suffering from stress as a result of domestic conflict in their families (Noguera 1996).

At Lowell Middle School in West Oakland where I conducted research in the early 1990s, over 40% of the students suffered from some form of chronic respiratory condition, and two thirds of all students lived in a household with someone other than a biological parent (Noguera 1996). District officials applied considerable pressure on the school’s leadership to raise test scores (which were among the lowest for middle schools in the District), but they did little to address the health and welfare needs of students at Lowell even though they were well aware of the obstacles these created. District administrators adopt a narrow focus on raising student achievement, not because they do not understand that a broad array of social and economic factors influence academic outcomes, but because they lack the resources to address the external conditions that impact student learning.

District administrators are not the only ones who ignore the health and welfare needs of poor children as they press schools that serve them to improve. State and Federal policy makers collect data on some of the needs of poor children, but do little to ensure that districts like Oakland receive additional resources to address these needs. Instead, even though more affluent children in neighboring school districts such as Piedmont, Moraga and Orinda arrive at school better prepared academically and generally have fewer unmet needs, significantly more money is spent on their education than is spent on children in Oakland (Ed Data 2001). Even as the State moves forward with its effort to hold all schools accountable for the academic performance of students, it continues to ignore the fact that poor and affluent students have vastly different needs and are generally educated under very different conditions. Moreover, the state’s
accountability policies, like the idea of local control, ignores the fact that low-income communities such as those served by public schools in Oakland, lack the resources to hold schools accountable for the service they provide to students.

Despite the severity of the problems facing children in school districts like Oakland, such matters have generally not resulted in state or national intervention. Rather, under the pretense of local control Oakland’s educational problems are treated as local matters to be addressed by locally elected officials and the community itself. The state and federal government allocates a variety of supplemental funds to serve the special needs of particular populations of students (e.g. special education, bilingual education, compensatory education, etc.), authority for managing the affairs of schools in Oakland is delegated to the locally elected school board. With seven elected and three appointed members (10), the Board of Education has responsibility for managing a district comprised of 55,000 students with an annual operating budget of approximately 370 million dollars. Although the per pupil expenditure in Oakland is greater than the state average ($7,120 in Oakland, $6,334 is the state average), the funds available are largely insufficient to meet the health and welfare needs of Oakland’s impoverished students.

Yet, lack of financial resources is only one of the reasons why so many of the needs of Oakland’s children are unaddressed. Despite the severity of the education and welfare challenges facing Oakland’s schools, matters related to financial management have often taken precedence over these issues. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is the largest employer in the city, and in a city with high levels of poverty and unemployment, economic considerations, such as the letting of contracts for construction, maintenance and educational consulting, and collective bargaining issues generally, often take on greater importance and receive more attention than educational issues. Conflicts over how to allocate the resources controlled by the school district is of such great importance to the economy of the city that providing quality education to all students has often not been treated as a priority issue.

Finally, there is another important reason why educational issues have often been neglected in Oakland, and in many school districts that are located in impoverished communities throughout the country. Public schools in Oakland serve a captured market. The student population, which as I’ve pointed out is largely poor, immigrant, and non-white, is completely dependent upon the school system. Private schools are not accessible to most poor families due to cost, and leaving the system is typically not possible even if one is dissatisfied with the quality of school services provided. With a majority of the students served by Oakland’s schools trapped by economic circumstances, dependent and unable to leave, affairs of the district can be managed with little concern for whether or not those served are satisfied with the quality of education provided. With the exception of the superintendent and principals who are removed easily and frequently, employees in the district can be confident that their positions are secure even though the system they work for largely fails to fulfill the mission for which it was created. Like other school districts in California, state funding to Oakland’s public schools is determined by the average daily attendance of its students. As long as parents continue to enroll their children in the district’s failing schools, the miserable status quo can be sustained indefinitely.

Click here for Part 2: The Role of Social Capital in Improving the Quality of Public Schools

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