Building the Road as we Travel It: the Role of Theory and Practice in Developing University-Assisted Community Schools and Distressed Neighborhoods

Keynote Address
The Second Annual Southwest Regional Network Conference
October 25-26, 2010
Tulsa, Oklahoma-

Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of my presentation is to explore the relationship between theory and practice in the development of university-assisted community schools. The issue of underperforming schools and distressed neighborhoods is the single most important domestic problem in the United States, and I believe the university-assisted community school model holds the greatest promise for solving it. But for that to happen, the model must be embedded in a developmental framework that overcomes the schism between theory and practice. That is, the university assisted community school approach must be upscaled into a theory-driven practical model, which is based on interactive links between theory and practice. Because "research" is a core value of higher education, the university is ideally situated to forge a "theory and practice" paradigm that informs the university-assisted community school model.

My presentation is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the public school and distressed neighborhood problem, while the second part examines the efforts to upscale our work at Futures Academy, a k-8th grade public school. The final segment

1

concludes the presentation with a slideshow that concretizes our work in a real world setting.

2.0 The Underperforming Public School and Distressed Neighborhood Problem

The premise undergirding my presentation is that theory and practice should be the engine that drives the development of *university assisted community schools*. Why is this task so critical to the success of our movement? The goal of *university assisted community schools* is not only to build a pathway to college and/or careers for children in distressed communities, but also to develop critically conscious and civically engaged citizens who believe in socioeconomic and racial justice, diversity, participatory democracy and cosmopolitanism; young people who are committed to remaking troubled neighborhoods, reinventing the urban metropolis and building a better world; *students who can earn a living and who are determined to create a world worth living in*.

Realizing this goal in practice will not be easy. A major reason is that *underperforming public schools* have been converted into factories that produce and reproduce marginalized people who are trapped in the nation's economic basement, locked in its prisons, entangled in its welfare system and lost on its streets of desperation and hopelessness or mired in its world of crime and violence. For example, according to the *2010 Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, the national high school graduation rate among African American males is only 47%, while in major cities, such as New York, New Orleans, Miami, Cleveland and Detroit the black male graduation rate hovers around 28 percent, and in Buffalo it stands at a shocking 24%. About 40% of these black males drop out

of high school, with the majority becoming unemployed and having a 30% chance of serving time in prison before age 30.

Many of these academic underachievers and dropouts will become jobless, unwed fathers, victims of crime or commit crimes themselves, or end up shot, dead or in prison [Black Males Rampant Joblessness, high dropout rate, Incarceration dooming black community: study; Jet, March 26, 2007]. The picture among Latino males is essentially the same.

This disastrous schooling problem, however, does not stand alone. The data show that students from distressed neighborhoods have lower educational attainment than do their counterparts in more affluent communities, and this *achievement gap* cannot be explained simply on the basis of what happens within the four walls of the school building. Something else is going on and that something else is neighborhood distress. Indeed, the problem of underperforming schools is not separate from, and independent of the problem of neighborhood distress. On the contrary, the problem of underperforming schools grew out of the problem of neighborhood distress. Therefore, we cannot separate these two issues; neither can we solve one without solving the other, and if we try, we will fail.

This *premise* is based on the concept that *neighborhoods* are not neutral sites, but catalytic places where interactive relationships exist among people, the physical environment and community organizations and institutions. Thus, in the neighborhood setting, people act on place and place acts on people. For example, the "neighborhood effects" literature demonstrates that distressed communities contribute to negative social outcomes such as crime, violence, drug abuse, health problems and academic underachievement. On the flip side, healthy neighborhoods produce positive social outcomes by providing people with the resources, institutions, organizations and caring residents needed to support and nurture them.

The bottom line is the *Underperforming school and distressed neighborhood problem* is a wicked problem. It is wicked, not because it is evil, but because it is a <u>composite</u> of interrelated problems such as poverty, joblessness, single-parent families, poor health, bad housing, crime, violence, and drug abuse. These varied neighborhood-based problems merged to form a *seamless web of circumstances* that influence academic achievement among inner city students. Consequently, the problems of *underperforming public schools and distressed neighborhoods* can only be fully understood and solved in relationship to each other. There is no other way.

3.0 Toward a Theory and Practice Paradigm

Given its complexity," we will not solve this "wicked" problem without developing a model grounded in theory and practice. As Ira Harkavy says, "learning how to transform schools and neighborhoods is harder than Rocket Science," and this is precisely why we have to build a paradigm in which "*theory informs practice and practice informs theory*." In this approach, the goal is to produce knowledge that illuminates and guides the development of our practical activities. Then, by reflecting on the application of this knowledge to practice, we generate new knowledge and insights that enrich and inform our theory. The secret to realizing this approach is the construction of a research model, which involves the completion of four highly interactive tasks.

3.1 Building the Research Agenda

The *first task* is to develop a research agenda that is *systematic, strategic* and *focused* on building university assisted community schools that will become catalytic agents that drive the neighborhood transformation process. This task is important because the literature on education and neighborhood development, while voluminous, has not produced many studies on the nexus between *schools and neighborhoods and* on the *university assisted community school* movement. For example, there is a vast literature on urban education, schools, pedagogy, community development, educational reform and neighborhood revitalization, but when the search engines

4

turn to the nexus between schools *and* neighborhood and university assisted schools, the literature thins significantly.

This is significant because there are huge conceptual and methodological problems that must be solved in the process of building university assisted community schools. For example, although there have been advances in social epidemiology and in the development of multilevel theories and sophisticated statistical models, we still have not solved the enormous conceptual and methodological problems associated with understanding the causal relationship between neighborhoods and academic outcomes. For example, we believe that a number of neighborhood factors influence the academic performance of inner-city students, but will know very little about what specific factors affect the students, or if some factors affect them more than others. Insight into these issues will assist greatly in the design and development of *wraparound* social, health and education services, which are needed to support the children and their families [**pause**].

The truth is we know very little about the neighborhoods in which these children live. Of course, we have great statistical profiles, but we have done almost no ethnographic studies, which explore the social texture of everyday life and culture and the complex realities of home life. In fact, most of our programs and activities are based on assumptions, while logical and sensible, have very little empirical data to support them. Additionally, many of the questions we ask not only require ethnographic studies to answer, but also sophisticated conceptual and statistical models, which are needed to probe the real world's multilevel structure and the complex relationships within it.

So, while there are thousands of books, articles and scholarly essays on varied aspects of education and neighborhood development, many of them are not useful in helping us to solve the problems we face. Here, I am reminded of the words of the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink." His statement refers to the reality that *water*

can be abundant but unusable. Likewise, there are studies, studies everywhere, but many of them are not useful for our purposes. They do not provide us with a roadmap to our destination. We know where we want to go; we just don't how to get there. Thus, we must build the road as we travel it. Metaphorically, this means that we must construct a knowledge base that will illuminate the path and guide us along the way.

One reason this is important is the necessity to prove that a powerful set of interlocking links connect underperforming schools to distressed neighborhoods. The data clearly points in this direction, and the correlation seems so logical and sensible that it hardly needs explaining. Yet, there are many school reformers and policymakers who believe that underperforming schools and distressed neighborhoods are unrelated variables. They believe that public education can be changed with a *schools-only model*, which focuses exclusively on activities taking place *inside* the school. In other words, they believe the problem of underperforming schools can be solved by making changes solely within the four walls of the school building. This viewpoint is dominant, and it will not change without evidence of the pre-eminence of the university assisted community school model and other neighborhood and school-based programs.

The recent experience of Jeffery Canada's Harlem Children's Zone is instructive.   The Harlem Children's Zone is a non-profit organization that funds and operates a neighborhood based system of education and social services for the children of low-income families in a 100 block area in Harlem, New York. *The HCZ education components* include early childhood programs with parenting classes; public charter schools; academic advisors and afterschool programs for students attending regular public schools; and a support system for former HCZ students who have enrolled in college. *The health components* include a fitness program; asthma management; and a nutrition program. *The neighborhood component* include organizing tenant associations, one-on-one counseling to

families; foster care prevention programs; community centers; and an employment and technology center that teaches job-related skills to teens and adults.

Although the HCZ is not a *university-assisted community school*, it nevertheless shares three important assumptions with our model. The first assumption is that it takes both effective, achievement oriented schools and strong social and communities services to support the educational achievement of inner city children. The second is that effective *schools-alone* are insufficient; inner city families and children cannot make it without assistance, including health care, nutrition, job training, counseling, financial advisement, parenting and the like. Thus, the schools must be enveloped in a network of education, health and *social wraparound* services that support children, their families and significant others. These services should be coordinated and highly individualized ones that are located inside and outside the school and that are available year around. The third assumption is that *both* the underperforming school and the distressed neighborhood it serves must be transformed in order for the children to succeed.

The HCZ has become one of the most celebrated school reform programs in the history. It has received remarkable media coverage, produced a best-selling book, a 60 Minutes feature and inspired a movie, *Waiting for Superman.* Then presidential candidate Barack Obama campaigned on replicating the HCZ as the first part of his plan to combat urban poverty and bolster the education of inner city children. True to his campaign promise, President Obama instituted a Promise Neighborhoods Initiative intended to replicate the HCZ in 20 cities across the United States. The program received a $10 million appropriation from Congress in 2010, under which 339 communities applied to the U.S. Department of Education for planning grants to create Promise Neighborhoods.

Against this backdrop of unprecedented attention, the Brookings Institute decided to evaluate the HCZ. They wanted to know if a *schools-only approach* was as effective as a holistic, neighborhood-based approach to the educational achievement of students in distressed

neighborhoods. So they posed the simple question, "Does the Harlem Children's Zone work?" The Brookings study was carried out by a couple of Harvard university researchers who compared the academic outcome of students attending the HCZ with a similar group of student who attended charter schools in NYC.

Using *test scores* as the critical variable, the researchers concluded that HCZ was a middle of the road school with other charter schools having higher scores in select academic content areas. The researchers concluded that the *schools-only approach* works as well or better than the *schools plus community service and neighborhood revitalization approach*. Most significant, the researchers said the hypothesis that—"investments in neighborhoods and services influences student academic achievement"-- is unproven. They conclude by saying the same or better results can be achieved using   the "less expensive" schools-only approach. The Brookings Institute study was not benign. Following its release, the Senate Appropriation Committee slashed the Obama Administration's requested $160 million for the Promise Neighborhood initiative to only $20 million.

The flawed character of the Brookings Institute study notwithstanding, it was still well received, and this portends the continued flow of criticism of the schools and neighborhood approach to public school reform.   To deflect these criticisms and sustain the school-neighborhood movement, we will need to anchor it with a strong research agenda and strive to transform the university assisted community school movement into an evidence based initiative. One key to achieving this goal is the development of a highly innovative and creative formative and summative evaluation program.   Here, the challenge is the selection and development of a unique set of metrics and other means needed to measure our progress toward our goals. The bottom line is our evaluation system must go beyond the "test score" evaluation paradigm to embrace other measures of school and neighborhood transformation.

3.2 Recasting the Link between Applied and Theoretical Research

The last point I wish to make on the development of a research agenda is we need to *recast the link between applied and theoretical research* and *between quantitative and qualitative methodologies*. Often these approaches and methods are set in opposition to each other, with the debate centering on which approach or method is superior and the most scientific. From our perspective, this discussion is meaningless. We need both approaches and methods to gain insight and to find solutions to the *underperforming school and distressed neighborhood* problem. In addition, we need local community studies, as well as broad national and international studies on schools and neighborhood development. Given the great needs of our movement, our only concern is the quality of the research, regardless of the approach or method employed.

3.3 Civic Education: Distribution of Findings

Conducting research is the first step in the theory and practice paradigm, and distributing the key findings of that research is the second. Here, the goal is to enable a broad audience of practitioners, policymakers, scholars and citizens to share the knowledge produced on university assisted community schools and neighborhood development. As we extend the frontiers of knowledge, we want others to benefit from the insights and understandings that we have developed, thereby potentially bolstering the quality of their work. This distribution process also represents a form of civic education, which is designed to produce a pubic environment that is supportive of the university assisted school movement.

There are three interactive levels involved in the distribution of research findings. The first is the distribution of findings to study participants, participating organizations, community partners, stakeholders, scholars and other significant publics. At the second level, the focus is on holding conferences, workshops, seminars and community forums to discuss the study's findings and their implications for school reform and neighborhood development. At these gatherings the goal is to

develop insights into the research findings and to discuss ways they can be incorporated into the practical work unfolding in the community. At the final level, the goal is to publish the finding in scholarly journals and/or other publication outlets, including newspapers and magazines.

4.0 Knowledge Transfer and Practical Application

Lastly, without exaggeration, the development of an authentic *knowledge transfer system* is crucial to developing a "theory and practice paradigm" that can drive the university assisted community school movement. This paradigm is based on the premise that "theory enriches practice and practice enriches theory. However, simply having the requisite knowledge and information on hand will not ensure their adoption and utilization by potential end users. For that to happen, we have to develop a plan based on the construction of an *exchange model* of knowledge transfer. Ideally, in this approach, a looping feedback system is established so that knowledge and information is transferred to end users, and the insights and knowledge that the end users derive from practical application is then "fed back" to the researchers, thereby, infusing their theoretical work with new ideas and insights.

The success of the *exchange model of knowledge transfer* is based on the strength of the relationship that is established between researchers and end users. The goal is to create an environment based on mutual interest, in which those who produce the knowledge are able to transfer it to practitioners, and those who put the knowledge to use are able to give feedback on their experiences. When this type of dialectical relationship is established, we are able to realize the axiom, "theory enriches practice and practice enriches theory."

5.0 Upscaling the Futures Academy Initiative: Putting Theory into Practice

Up to this point, our discussion of the role theory and practice in developing university assisted community schools and revitalizing distressed neighborhoods has focused mostly on the theoretical side of the equation. In the remaining portion of my presentation, I want to concretize

this topic by discussing the efforts to upscale our work at Futures Academy, a K-8th grade public school. The goal is to expand our work at Futures Academy by building a pre-k to college and/or career *education pipeline* for students living in our target neighborhood.

Conceptually speaking, we do not view the *education pipeline* as "one big pipeline." Instead, we see it as a series of smaller education pipelines that carry students from early childhood to college and/or careers. Within this framework, the challenge is for each distressed community to build its own pipeline, thereby bolstering the life chances its residents. The goal is to collaborate with several schools and pre-k programs to build an uninterrupted continuum of educational experiences for students attending the pipeline.   This pipeline, in turn, we be transformed into a change agent that plays a critical role in driving the neighborhood transformation process.

We are still in the planning phase of this project, but the lessons we are learning in designing the education pipeline, building the requisite collaboration, and marshalling the necessary resources to launch it, are instructive, and I wish to share them with you.

5.1 The Limitations of Transforming One School

When we first started work at Futures, the main goal was to establish an action-based, problem-solving pedagogy that enabled students to apply the knowledge learned in the classroom to improving conditions in the neighborhood and in their own lives. This approach was based on the theory that inner city students underachieved academically, in part, because they do not see a relationship between schooling and the conditions found in their communities. To many inner city students, school is nothing but a "stop over" on the "road to nowhere;" an irrelevant force in everyday life and culture. To change this anti-education mindset, we sought to develop a pedagogical model that created "critical consciousness" among the students and that allowed them to use the knowledge learned in the classroom to improve neighborhood conditions, thereby motivating them to become better students.

Although we experienced success at Futures, we nonetheless came to realize the limitations of our work. Futures Academy is just one school. No matter how successful we were, when the students moved on to high school, we lost control over their educational experience; and depending on the high school they attended, our work could be completely undermined. We believed the best way to solve this problem was to build a pre-k to college and/ or career *educational pipeline* for the children living in our target neighborhood.

Building such a pipeline became our top priority. Within this framework, we sought to build a university assisted educational pipeline, which is embedded in a *theory and practice paradigm*. A central feature of this strategy is to build a set of collaborative relationships, which makes it possible to construct a holistic program that is both cost-efficient and sustainable. *Our guiding principle is to get organizations, institutions and individuals to do what they do, but to do it in a strategic and collaborative fashion.* In the remaining time, I will outline the essential features of this strategy.

5.1 The Better Schools/Better Neighborhoods Education Pipeline

The goal of the *education pipeline* is not only educate the children, but to turn "pipeline" schools into a catalytic force that drives the neighborhood transformation process. Construction of this educational pipeline requires the development of five interactive layers.   The development of these layers, I might add, does not happen in an orderly, sequential manner. Instead, this is a messy process in which a variety of activities occurs simultaneously and is melded together, at some indeterminate stage in the process.

5.2 Building the Pipeline

The first layer is focused on building the pipeline that will carry student from pre-k to college and /or a career. The key to realizing this goal in practice is to establish a set of seamless linkages among pre-k programs, K-8th grade elementary schools and a neighborhood-based high school. The establishment of this system, based on a set of interactive feeder schools, will construct a controlled

environment that produces an uninterrupted continuum of educational experiences for the students. The feeder system will work this way. Through our partnership with the Erie County Community Action Organization, several Head Start programs will be established in the target neighborhood. The students coming out of these programs will be "fed" into one of the three participating K-8th grade elementary schools. Then, after leaving elementary schools, the students will be "fed" into the participating high school.

In Buffalo, school selection is a democratic process and students can go to any school they desire. Thus, parents living in the target neighborhood will be encouraged to send their children to the neighborhood pipeline schools. The School Superintendent is supportive of the plan, and will work with us to develop strategies to encourage neighborhood students to attend pipeline schools. Moreover, a neighborhood based after-school program will be established to reinforce the learning experiences of all students in community. This way, all neighborhood students can benefit from the enriched educational experiences, which will be developed at the pipeline schools.

5.3 Establishing the Wraparound Service Framework

The *education pipeline* is based on the premise that children live in troubled communities where families, relatives and friends are caught up in a difficult struggle for survival. These families and children cannot make it without assistance, including health care, nutrition, job training, counseling, financial advisement, parenting and the like.   Thus, the *education pipeline* must be embedded within a system of social, health and education *wraparound services* that support the children, their families and significant others. These services will be located inside and outside the *pipeline* schools and will be made available year around.

We are still in the process of designing the *wraparound service program*, which will be based on data gathered from five sources. First, we will conduct a literature survey that examines the services delivered at full service community schools.   Second, focus groups will be held with

teachers and principals to obtain their views on the types of supportive services needed in their schools. Third, focus groups will be held with the parents to gain insight into the types of supportive services they desire, and fourth, focus groups will be held with children to gain insight into their issues. Finally, we will conduct a survey of organizations, agencies and institutions to determine the breath of services being offered locally, and within this framework, identify those groups interested in collaborating with the pipeline schools. Based on the data analysis and the availability of locally based services, the wraparound services for the education pipeline will be designed.

5.4 Creating the Problem-Based Civic Engagement Curriculum

Another premise upon which the pipeline is based is the view that children lose interest in education, in part, because they do not see a connection between the lessons learned in the classroom and the improvement of conditions inside their communities. Within this framework, they are taught that education will provide them with an "escape route" out of their neighborhoods, rather than equip them with the tools needed to change the distressful conditions found in their community.   To change the student's anti-education mindset, we must provide them with educational experiences that create opportunities for them to use the knowledge learned in the classroom to work with residents to change neighborhood conditions. This will not only lead to improved academic achievement, but will also help turn students into caring citizens who are concerned about building a better world. Toward this end, a problem-based civic engagement program will be established in the pipeline schools, including the pre-k programs.

University Assistance: The SUNY Schools and Neighborhood Task Force

The education pipeline is a university assisted community school initiative, and to facilitate higher education's ability to support and develop it, the UB Center for Urban Studies (CENTER) in partnership with other units at the University at Buffalo established the SUNY Schools and Neighborhoods Task Force. The task force brings together scholars and staff members from the

CENTER, the School of Social Work, the Buffalo Center for Social Research, and the UB Center for Educational Collaboration, along with Buffalo State College, Empire State College and Erie County Community College.

The goal is to devise strategies that bring the full range of SUNY Buffalo's resources to bear on the development of the *education pipeline*. Within this conceptual framework, the task force will be to engage in five interrelated activities to assist in developing the *pipeline*. First, it will design the *wraparound service program;* and second, it will develop a research program to gather and analyze data, produce technical reports and generating research studies, including theses and dissertations, on a range of education and neighborhood development topics. Third, the task force will develop a *knowledge transfer* program that makes possible the rapid integration of the most advanced ideas into practice. Fourth, through academic-based service learning programs, the task force will unleash an army of students to work on varied educational, job training, and neighborhood development projects.

5.5 Organization and Leadership

To realize in practice the ambitious goals of the *education pipeline*, we need to build a collaborative organization to lead the effort. Toward this end, the UB Center for Urban Studies in partnership with the Erie County Community Action Organization and the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority organized the Better Schools/Better Neighborhoods Collaborative, which is a consortium of neighborhood schools, organizations, institutions, elected officials, business owners, higher education faculty and staff, and residents and stakeholders. The *education pipeline* will operate under the leadership and "guidance" of this organization. The relationship between the organizational leadership and the schools will be based on mutual interest and a shared mission and vision.

6.0 Conclusion

The challenge of radically transforming underperforming schools and turning distressed neighborhood into great places to live, work and raise a family seems like an impossible dream. Maybe it is; but my dad taught me that "impossible" only defines the degree of difficulty involved in achieving a task. So, I say to you, let us not only "dream this impossible dream," but let us also dare to turn that "impossible dream" into a living reality. This will not be easy, as a community partner once said, "there is no known route to our destination. So, we will have to build the road as we travel it." This is where the interplay between theory and practice comes in and explains why catalyzing this dialect is so critical to our success.