



Linking Community Development and School Improvement

An Interview with Professor Mark Warren



What sense does it make to talk about school reform while the communities around them stagnate or collapse? Conversely, how can we succeed in revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods if we don't make the schools better? In this interview, Mark Warren,¹ Associate Professor

of Education at Harvard University, argues that collaboration between schools and community development organizations is vital if we hope to revitalize neighborhoods and provide high quality education.²

CI: How did you become interested in researching the links between communities and schools?

Professor Warren: For a long time, I've been interested in understanding what it takes to empower and revitalize urban communities. My earlier research focused on the role of community organizing as a strategy for doing that, and the importance of people becoming involved in efforts to make change in their own communities. Institutions are a critical part of that—particularly in low-income areas they can be seen as the anchors of many communities—and my early work focused on the role of congregations and faith based groups in community organizing.

But when you think about it, across the country, what types of institutions do you find in every neighborhood? You find congregations, and you find public schools. So I began by thinking about public schools as institutional sites for strengthening and revitalizing urban communities, and once I started doing that, I became very interested in the interconnections between the two. It struck me as very odd that those two worlds have, for the most part, existed separately in the United States for the last 30 to 40 years. Organizations that focused on neighborhood revitalization or community development weren't focused on schools at all, and for schools, the communities were just the seen as the backdrop—or the problem—that the schools were facing.

CI: For most people, the link between schools and neighborhoods seems pretty intuitive—certainly for anybody who has kids and has looked for a place to buy a house.

Professor Warren: I think families on the ground understand it. And I think that more recently community based organizations have come to understand it. They might not know what to do about it, but they understand that they're not going to be able to deal with the issues facing the families in the community unless the schools get better. Today, how children do in school is so fundamentally important to their prospects for future life, more so than twenty or thirty years ago when a high school degree still could lead to a middle class life. That's no longer true. On the other side of

the coin, if families start to do better economically, perhaps even due to a community-based organization's economic development efforts, they're going to move out of the community if the schools aren't that good.

Meanwhile, many public schools understand that communities matter, but they are isolated and overwhelmed. They don't have links to community groups, and even if they think it would be a good idea to link the two together, they don't have any concrete ideas for how to do it. So they keep their focus on curriculum reform and other within-school issues. But if you're a school in a neighborhood where there's a crisis in affordable housing, you may have a situation where 50 percent of the kids turnover every year. In this case, school reform is likely not to help at all. If we don't start dealing with housing issues in these neighborhoods—and with jobs and other economic development issues—it's almost silly to focus that much attention on schools. As Jonathan Kozol has written, if kids are coming to school without health care, we need to deal with that issue. As education professionals, to say that's not our concern doesn't really make sense to me. So I think, no matter how difficult, we need to find ways to link school reform with community development efforts.

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CI: So how can we think about bringing these two disparate groups together?

Professor Warren: The idea of social capital can provide a useful framework for thinking about how to reconnect schools to their communities. When I talk about social capital, I am talking about the resources that are inherent in relationships of trust and cooperation among people. Relationships are important to making anything work, but particularly in places that lack human capital (e.g. education) or financial capital, social capital can play a very important role in bringing real resources into the community. It's not a panacea that will solve all problems, but it helps to overcome the isolation characteristic of many inner city communities.

All sorts of things can happen when these relationships are actively fostered. When parents build relationships with each other, then you really start to see a collective sense of



Parent mentors participate in one of LSNA's monthly Neighborhood-Wide workshops.

efficacy and power that can mitigate against some of the unequal power relations that exist in poor communities. This in turn can help to ensure that local initiatives respond to the needs of families in the community. Some of the schools I have written about have used these relationships to build a large pool of parent leaders. In Chicago, for example, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) turned its considerable community development organizing background to the issue of education, engaging local immigrant parents in the schools and building their leadership capacity so that parents could become active decision-makers in the community. A number of initiatives have grown out of this, including a literacy ambassador program that brings teachers and parents into households in the community in the evening to read books out loud and to suggest strategies for helping children with reading. While the program focuses on improving literacy in the community, it also helps to further build the relationship between parents and teachers.

I think there are two important lessons from my research that can help to inform how to build these relationships. First, sending a note home in a student's backpack will not be effective in getting parents to attend a meeting—particularly if they are already strapped for time. The best way to get people involved is if they're asked personally by someone they know to get involved. Second, too often the schools or organizations fail to ask the parents what issues they're interested in. It shouldn't just be the professionals saying "This is what you should care about." Instead, the starting point needs to be "What do you care about? What do you think can be done?" From there, it becomes possible to create meaningful collaboration between families and schools and build towards addressing issues like curriculum development that are central to teaching and learning.



The Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in Los Angeles

CI: How can traditional community development organizations help to build these relationships?

Professor Warren: There certainly isn't one way of doing it. The type of community you're in matters, and the type of community development organization you are might matter. But there are at least three models that seem to be emerging in communities across the country. The first is the community organizing approach, reflected in the work of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

A second model is to approach schools as an institutional partner for providing some of the services in the community, like after-school programs, health care clinics, or community learning centers for adults. Part of the idea here is not just to create add-on services, but to use the services as a starting point for building relationships with the school and the wider community.


The third model is when community development organizations start a charter or semi-autonomous school that has as part of its mission reaching out to the community. The Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in Los Angeles is a good example of that. The Academy was started by Pueblo Nuevo Development (PND), a nonprofit community development corporation, in response to the educational needs of low-income immigrant families in the MacArthur Park neighborhood. In a series of conversations with local parents, PND learned that more than 16,000 children were being bussed out of MacArthur Park to schools in other neighborhoods, and the children of the neighborhood's low-income Latino families were not faring well at these schools. Many parents told

PND staff they wanted a neighborhood alternative for their children, and the idea for a new charter school emerged.

One of the unique features of Camino Nuevo Charter Academy is that PND has contributed to neighborhood revitalization in the neighborhood by renovating abandoned buildings for their schools. With financial support from LISC and LIIF, as well as from the philanthropic community, PND started its first campus in an abandoned mini-mall in the heart of the neighborhood that was an eyesore and contributed to the derelict feel of the community. Today, PND owns several school buildings and leases them to the charter academy, building financial equity that can be leveraged to invest in new properties. These projects continue to help reduce blight and spur others to invest in the neighborhood, making the community a more viable place for raising families. And since the families are much more strongly connected to each other through the schools than in the typical housing development, the schools become a way to build community capacity.

But it's important to remember that charter schools are very hard to do well. I'm hopeful about the possibilities of these charter schools, but a lot of them—even successful ones like Camino Nuevo—struggle in the first few years to establish strong leadership. Showing an impact on educational achievement can be equally challenging. The changes take a long time. As hard as any other challenge—affordable housing, job training—has been, I think that school reform is probably the most difficult thing any of these community organizations has ever tried to do.

CI: What's the potential to replicate these efforts in other communities?

Professor Warren: I think the key is that any effort has to start with reaching out and attempting to collaborate with the institutions that already exist within the community. Simply "scaling up" or applying the same model to every community won't work. There must be an indigenous effort to build social capital and relationships, and to empower people at any particular school so that they really own what the reforms are. The best thing organizations engaged in community development—including financial institutions—can do is to look for promising things that are happening locally and support them, either financially, or by helping to build partnerships and connections to other resources and networks. In the end, it's the social fabric of communities that will determine whether the schools work well and whether people stay and continue to invest in the neighborhoods. Community development organizations can be an important catalyst for helping to weave this social fabric and contribute to lasting change. 

The Economics of Early Childhood Development as Seen by Two Fed Economists

1. This commentary is partially based on an article previously published in *Education Week*: A. Rolnick and R. Grunewald, "Early Intervention on a Large Scale," *Education Week* 26, no. 17, (January 4, 2007): 32, 34-36.
2. Chairman Ben S. Bernanke, "The Level and Distribution of Economic Well-Being," Remarks before the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Omaha, Neb., February 6, 2007. Online at <http://federalreserve.gov/BoardDocs/Speeches/2007/20070206/default.htm>
3. J. Heckman and D. Masterov, "The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children," Early Childhood Research Collaborative, Discussion Paper 104, August 2006, 43. Online at <http://www.earlychildhoodrc.org/papers/DP104.pdf>
4. For a detailed description of the scholarship fund, see A. Rolnick and R. Grunewald, "A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development," Working Paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, March 2006. Online at <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/highreturn.pdf>

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1. Mark Warren is the author of *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, which studies the Texas/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, the nation's most prominent faith-based community organizing network.
2. For more details, see M. Warren (2004), "Linking Community Development and School Improvement," A Report prepared for the Ford Foundation, online at <http://www.isna.net/display.aspx?pointer=2515>.

Youth Engagement in Planning Nationwide

1. Ariel Bierbaum is the Program Manager at the Center for Cities & Schools, UC Berkeley. She manages the Y-PLAN program, as well as the broader Youth, Schools, and Planning Initiative, which includes professional development, capacity-building, and research around youth engagement in planning practice. Alissa Kronovet is a candidate in the Master of City Planning program at UC Berkeley and a research fellow with the Center for Cities & Schools. In addition to coordinating the New Orleans trip, Alissa is heading up the national organizing efforts around the Young Planners Network.

The Glow Foundation

1. L. Muraskin and J. Lee (2004) "Raising the Graduation Rates of Low-Income College Students" (Washington: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity In Higher Education).
2. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2006). *Mortgaging Our Future: How Financial Barriers to College Undercut America's Global Competitiveness*. (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance).
3. "In their Words", College Summit, 15 April, 2007, <<http://www.collegesummit.org/school-districts/>>
4. Bedsworth, W., S. Colby and J. Doctor (2006). *Reclaiming the American Dream* (Boston: Bridgespan).
5. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2002). *The Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America* (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance).