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### The Promise of University-Assisted Community Schools to Transform American Schooling: A Report From the Field, 1985-2012

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# The Promise of University-Assisted Community Schools to Transform American Schooling: A Report From the Field, 1985–2012

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This article explores the university-assisted community school approach as it has been developed at the University of Pennsylvania with its school and community partners in West Philadelphia since 1985, as well as adapted nationally. The approach is grounded in John Dewey's theory that the neighborhood school can function as the core neighborhood institution that provides comprehensive services, galvanizes other community institutions and groups, and helps solve the myriad problems schools and community confront in a rapidly changing world. Building on Dewey's ideas, the authors argue that all colleges and universities should make solving the problem of the American schooling system a very high institutional priority; their contributions to its solution should count heavily both in assessing their institutional performance (by themselves and others) and be a critical factor when responding to their requests for renewed or increased resources and financial support. Providing concrete examples from over 20 years of work in West Philadelphia, as well as from initiatives across the country, this article explores the potential of developing university-assisted community schools as an effective approach for school reform, pre-Kindergarten through higher education.

Our position is simple: No radical reform of American higher education, no successful education reform. The radical reform of higher education, we contend, is most likely to occur in the crucible of significant, serious, sustained, active engagement with public schools and their communities. Splendid abstract, contemplative, inner-ivory-tower isolation will neither shed intellectual light nor produce positive democratic change.

We strongly agree with the Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi that the answer to the question "What kind of education do we need?" is to be found in the answer to the question "What kind of society do we want?" (Tironi, 2005). Education and society are dynamically interactive and interdependent. If human beings hope to maintain and develop a particular type of society, they must develop and maintain the particular type of education system conducive to it. Stated directly, *no effective democratic schooling system, no democratic society.*

From our experience of more than 20 years of work with West Philadelphia schools and neighborhoods, we believe that university-assisted community schools constitute the best practical

means for democratically transforming universities, schools, and communities in order to develop participatory democracy (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007).

### THE UNIVERSITY-ASSISTED COMMUNITY SCHOOL APPROACH

“Community schools” bring together multiple organizations and their resources not only to serve and educate young people but also to democratically engage all members of the community in which the school is located. Essentially, this idea extends and updates John Dewey’s theory that the neighborhood school can and should function as the core neighborhood institution—one that provides comprehensive services and galvanizes community institutions and organizations to help solve the myriad problems individuals and communities confront in a rapidly changing world. Dewey recognized that if the neighborhood school were to function as a genuine community center, it would require additional human resources and support. But to our knowledge, he never identified universities as a key source of broadly based, sustained, comprehensive support for community schools. We emphasize “university-assisted” because we have become increasingly convinced that colleges and universities are uniquely well-positioned to provide strategic, comprehensive and sustained support for community schools (e.g., academic and instructional resources, health and human services, college access programs, and evaluation) that effectively engage students, their parents and guardians—indeed all individuals living in the neighborhood (Benson et al., 2007).

The university-assisted community school strategy assumes that community schools, like colleges and universities, can function as focal points to help create and foster healthy urban environments and democratically engaged communities. The strategy also assumes that universities and colleges function best in such environments. More specifically, the strategy assumes that public schools can function as environment-changing institutions and can become strategic centers of broadly based partnerships that engage a wide variety of community organizations and institutions (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009). Because public schools “belong” to all members of the community, they should serve all members of the community.<sup>1</sup> More than any other institution, public schools are particularly well suited to serve as neighborhood “hubs” or “centers” around which local partnerships can be generated and developed. When they play that innovative role, schools function as community institutions par excellence. They then provide a decentralized, democratic, community-based response to rapidly changing community problems. In the process, they help young people learn better, and at increasingly higher levels, through action-oriented, collaborative, real-world activities.

For public schools to successfully function as integrating community institutions, however, local, state, and federal governments, as well as nongovernmental agencies, must be effectively coordinated, and the assets of higher educational institutions strategically leveraged to provide the significant resources community schools will need to play the greatly expanded roles that we envision them playing in American society. We discuss this issue more fully at the end of the article.

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<sup>1</sup>Public schools are not, of course, the only places in the community where learning and social organization occur. Other “learning places” include libraries, museums, private schools, and faith-based organizations. Ideally, all of these places would collaborate.

When institutions of higher education give very high priority to actively solving real-world problems in their local communities, a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance research, teaching, learning, and service, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration, and simultaneously reduce what Penn's founder Benjamin Franklin stigmatized in 1789 as "ancient Customs and Habitudes," that impede the development of mutually beneficial, higher education-civic partnerships (Hartley, Harkavy, & Benson, 2009).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, by focusing on solving universal problems that are manifested in their local communities (such as poverty, poor schooling, inadequate healthcare), institutions of higher education will generate knowledge that is both nationally and globally significant and be better able to realize what we view as their primary mission of contributing to a healthy democratic society.

American colleges and universities have deep civic roots. The vast majority of our institutions of higher learning were established to serve their local communities and to prepare leaders for their communities and society (Hartley & Hollander, 2005). This history strongly supports our belief that the democratic mission is, and should be, the primary mission for U.S. higher education. The founding purpose of the early colonial colleges and historically black colleges and universities founded in the 19th century was to educate young people for service to others. Fulfilling America's democratic promise was the founding purpose of land-grant universities. And the emergence of an urban-serving mission for higher education dates from the late 19th century, notably the founding of the Johns Hopkins University, the first modern research university, in 1876. William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, was perhaps the most eloquent and powerful proponent for the engagement of universities with their cities and communities (Benson et al., 2007). He helped the University of Chicago become arguably the greatest university at the turn of the last century by acting on the premise that involvement with the city, particularly its schools, would powerfully advance faculty research and student learning.

Harper's (1905) devotion to pedagogy logically derived from two propositions central to his vision for the University of Chicago in particular and for American universities in general:

1. "Education is the basis of all democratic progress. The problems of education are, therefore, the problems of democracy" (Harper, 1905, p. 32).
2. More than any other institution, the university determines the character of the overall schooling system: "Through the school system, the character of which, in spite of itself, the university determines and in a larger measure controls . . . through the school system every family in this entire broad land of ours is brought into touch with the university; for from it proceeds the teachers or the teachers' teachers" (Harper, 1905, p. 25).

The societal, indeed global, reach of universities also makes them particularly important partners in school-system reform, as well as community-wide improvement in areas such as health, education, and economic development. In this era of global information and communication, local school systems are powerfully affected by larger national and global schooling systems. But local

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<sup>2</sup>The college that Franklin envisioned broke radically with the classical tradition and gave instruction entirely in the vernacular language. Instead of imitating English colleges, Franklin theorized, an American college's curriculum, methodology and texts should be appropriate for the education and development of American youth. For a college in Philadelphia to insist on instruction in Latin and Greek and a curriculum dominated by intensive study of classical texts in their original languages, Franklin believed, simply exemplified the disastrous tendency "in mankind [to] an unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient customs and habitudes, which inclines to a continuance of them after the circumstances, which formerly made them useful, cease to exist" (Reinhold, 1968, p. 224).

changes cannot be sustained if they remain only local and unconnected to broader national and global developments. Significant systemic change not only must, therefore, be locally rooted and generated, but also must be part of a national/global movement for change. For that to occur, an agent is needed that can simultaneously function on the local, national, and global levels. Universities are that agent. They are simultaneously the preeminent local (embedded in their communities) and national/global (part of an increasingly interactive worldwide network) institutions.

To help accelerate progress to the point where major changes become firmly institutionalized and produce significant results, we have called for an action-oriented acceptance of the following radical proposition: All colleges and universities should make solving the problem of the American schooling system a very high institutional priority; their contributions to its solution should count heavily both in assessing their institutional performance (by themselves and others) and be a critical factor when responding to their requests for renewed or increased resources and financial support (Benson et al., 2007). Actively helping to develop an effective, integrated, genuinely democratic pre-K through higher education schooling system, we contend, should become *a* primary mission of American universities and colleges. It is also one that all types of higher educational institutions can and should embrace. Whether teaching or research focused, large or small, rural or urban, colleges and universities have intellectual and material resources that can be brought to bear in partnerships with their local schools. These reciprocal partnerships not only assist schools and the children and communities they serve, but also promote powerful advances in learning and knowledge for students in the university through problem-solving learning.

At this time, moreover, when public colleges and universities in particular are facing serious and severe strain resulting from large-scale, significant cutbacks in governmental funding, especially at the state level, they are also under increased scrutiny by the government to demonstrate that they are serving the public good. “Community benefit” has become an essential component of funding appeals to many donors and foundations, as well as governmental agencies. Simply put, higher education understands more fully than ever that it is in its enlightened self-interest to be civically engaged with their local schools and communities.<sup>3</sup>

For colleges and universities to act effectively, however, they must overcome the burdens of history and tradition. In particular, they need to overcome the fragmentation of disciplines, excessive overspecialization, and the false dichotomy between the arts and sciences and professions that is particularly characteristic of all major research universities. These departmental and disciplinary divisions too often produce narrow, solipsistic research, resulting in knowing more and more about less and less. They have also increased the isolation of universities from society. A report published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development entitled *The University and the Community: The Problems of Changing Relationships* pointedly observed, “Communities have problems, universities have departments” (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 1982, p. 127). The statement neatly indicates a major reason why universities

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<sup>3</sup>For a case study on how one institution, Oregon State University, transformed itself in the face of declining public financial support by focusing on its land grant mission, democratic processes, and community connections, see Ray (2013). The Coalition for Urban Serving Universities powerfully advocates for federal support of public urban research universities based on their significant contributions to the development of the nation’s cities and metro regions (<http://www.usucoalition.org/>). For more general discussion on the challenges of governmental cutbacks, see Newfield (2011).

have not contributed as they should. Quite simply, their unintegrated, fragmented, internally conflictual structure and organization work against collaborative understanding and helping to solve highly complex human and societal problems.

However, it is also the case that if colleges and universities can succeed in transforming themselves into genuinely engaged civic institutions, they will be better able to achieve their self-professed, historic missions of advancing, preserving, and transmitting knowledge; and they will help produce the well-educated, cultured, truly democratic citizens necessary to develop and maintain a genuinely democratic society. Implementing that organizational revolution poses extraordinarily complex intellectual and social challenges. However, as Dewey argued, working to solve complex, real-world problems is the best way to advance knowledge and learning, as well as the general capacity of individuals and institutions to do that work (Benson et al., 2007).

### ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: OUR EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Admittedly, the history of Penn's work with West Philadelphia public schools has been a process of painful organizational learning and conflict; we cannot overemphasize that we have made many mistakes and our understanding and activities have continually changed over time.<sup>4</sup> Penn is only now beginning to tap its extraordinary resources in ways that could mutually benefit both Penn and its neighbors and result in truly radical school, community, and university change. We have come to see our work as a concrete example of Dewey's (1910/1990b) general theory of learning by means of action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem solving. Conceptualizing our work in terms of schools as the strategic components of complex urban ecological systems represented a major advance for us.

When we first began work on university–community relationships in 1985, we did not envision schools or universities as highly strategic components of urban ecological systems. What immediately concerned us was that West Philadelphia was rapidly and visibly deteriorating, with devastating consequences for community residents, as well as the university. This included increased blight, crime, and poverty, as well as Penn's ability to continue to attract and retain outstanding faculty, staff, and students. Given that “present situation” (as Dewey would have phrased it), we asked, what should the university do? (Dewey, 1916/1990a, p. 222). Committed to undergraduate teaching, one of the authors, Ira Harkavy, and distinguished Penn historian Lee Benson designed an Honors Seminar aimed at stimulating undergraduates to think critically about what Penn could and should do to remedy its “environmental situation.” Intrigued with the concept, the president of the university, Sheldon Hackney, himself a former professor of history, agreed to join them in teaching that seminar in the spring semester of 1985. The seminar's title suggests its general concerns: *Urban University-Community Relationships: Penn–West Philadelphia, Past, Present, and Future as a Case Study*.

When the seminar began, Harkavy and Benson literally knew nothing about Dewey's community school ideas. They also knew nothing about the history of community school experiments

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<sup>4</sup>For further discussion on the history of the University of Pennsylvania's engagement in West Philadelphia, see Hodges and Dubb (2012), Etienne (2012), Netter Center for Community Partnerships (2008), Benson et al. (2007), Rodin (2007), and Maurrasse (2001).

and had not given any thought to Penn working with public schools in West Philadelphia. For present purposes, we need not recite the process of trial, error, and failure that led them, and their students, to see that Penn's best strategy to remedy its rapidly deteriorating environmental situation was to use its enormous internal and external resources to help radically improve both West Philadelphia public schools and the neighborhoods in which they are located. Most unwittingly, during the course of the seminar's work, they reinvented the community school idea. They developed a strategy based on the following proposition: Universities can best improve their local environment if they mobilize and integrate their great resources, particularly the "human capital" embodied in their students, to help develop and maintain community schools that function as focal points for creating healthy urban environments.

Observing the work of their students and their partners in the West Philadelphia community schools over a number of years led them to develop a key principle that has guided their thinking and practice in a wide variety of ways and situations. That principle can be formulated as follows: At all levels (K through 16 and above), collaborative, community-based, action-oriented service-learning projects, which by their nature innovatively depart from customary, teacher-dominated school routines, allow and encourage both teachers and students to participate democratically in school and classroom governance and functioning. Such projects create spaces in which school and classroom democracy can grow and flourish. In their judgment, as well as ours, that general principle can be instrumental in inspiring and developing effective programs for democratic citizenship in a wide variety of schools (at all levels) and communities.

Over time, the seminar's increasingly successful work stimulated a growing number of Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) courses (Penn's term for service-learning) in a wide range of Penn schools and departments, developed and implemented under the auspices of the university's Netter Center for Community Partnerships. ABCS courses focus on action-oriented, community problem solving and the integration of research, teaching, learning, and service, as well as reflection on the service experience and its larger implications (e.g., why poverty, racism, and crime exist).

To date, approximately 160 such courses that work with schools and community organizations to solve strategic community problems have been developed at Penn. In the 2011–2012 academic year, 59 courses, across six schools and 23 departments, involving more than 1,700 Penn undergraduate and graduate students were offered. Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of faculty members, from a wide range of Penn schools and departments, have revised existing courses, or have created new courses, providing innovative curricular opportunities for their students to become active learners, creative real-world problem solvers, and active producers (as opposed to passive consumers) of knowledge. That relatively rapid growth has resulted largely from the organizational innovation described in this article.

For example, in 1991, Professor Francis Johnston, a renowned expert on nutritional anthropology who had recently concluded a lengthy tenure as chair of the Anthropology Department decided to redesign a course, Anthropology 210, to address the community-identified problem of poor nutrition. It became the prototype for ABCS courses. Over the next few years, a widening circle of Penn faculty and students worked with Johnston in collaboration with local middle school teachers and students to understand the nutritional practices in the community. The course also sought to help solve the problem through a series of projects aimed at encouraging better nutrition. These included an educational program, a school-based garden, an in-school market

that provided healthy snacks, and a nutritional outreach program for the community. Anthropology 210's success not only influenced the anthropology department (which went on to develop an academic track on Public Interest Anthropology), but also inspired other Penn departments and schools to become involved (Benson et al., 2007; Johnston & Harkavy, 2009). Furthermore, it led to the development of the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative (a central component of Penn's university-assisted community schools) which engages and empowers youth, university students, and community members to promote healthy lifestyles and build a just and sustainable food system. Today, the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative works with 20 Philadelphia public schools, serving more than 10,000 students.

Moelis Access Science is another example of the reciprocal, democratic partnerships that Penn has developed through university-assisted community schools and ABCS courses. Begun in 1999 with initial support from the National Science Foundation, Moelis Access Science works to improve science, technology, engineering, and math education of both K-12 students and undergraduate and graduate students at Penn. Faculty and students from across campus provide content-based professional development for teachers and direct classroom support for implementing quality hands-on and small group activities. For example, *Community Physics Initiative* is an ABCS course taught by Department of Physics and Astronomy Chair Larry Gladney that links the practical and theoretical aspects of fundamental physics and is aligned with the School District of Philadelphia's curriculum for introductory high school physics. By creating and teaching weekly laboratory exercises and classroom demonstrations at a nearby high school, Penn students are learning science by teaching science to high school students while making contributions to physics education research and practice.

### PROMISING FINDINGS

Problems like poor nutrition, underresourced urban schools, and poverty are complex and systemic. We certainly make no claims about solving them. However, studies of the Netter Center's work have found important and positive outcomes for both Penn and West Philadelphia. For example, one study compared Penn undergraduates taking ABCS courses to those in similar courses without a community engagement component: 47% of ABCS students reported an increase in research skills versus 36% of non-ABCS students. In addition, students in ABCS courses more often reported an increase in their desire to act morally and ethically, to become an effective community leader, to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, to be concerned about urban communities, and to become a volunteer in the community (Johnston & Weinreb, 2002).

Penn students participating as classroom fellows (paid interns, work-study, or volunteers working in K-12 schools) through the Netter Center's Moelis Access Science program also reported positive outcomes: 95% reported an increased ability to present science and math ideas; 100% reported an increase in communication skills; 95% reported increased ability to work with children and adolescents; and almost half (45%) of new undergraduate fellows indicated that their experience with the program would be influential in their thinking about their career, indicating the possibility of teaching or entering the field of education (Access Science, 2007).

Surveys were conducted of teachers and 466 K-8 students enrolled in one of four afterschool programs operated by the Netter Center during the 2009–10 school year. Teachers reported that,



of the participating students who needed to improve, 72% showed improvement in their academic performance and 66% of the students improved their participation in class. The majority of K-8 students indicated that involvement in the afterschool program helped them with homework (95%), increased their confidence (92%), helped them do better in school (91%), and increased their interests in school day learning and school day attendance (83% and 73%, respectively; Netter Center for Community Partnerships, 2011).

The Netter Center also operates college access and career readiness programs at three high schools in West Philadelphia, including the Student Success Center at University City High School, which was established in 2010 with funding provided by the Department of Labor. In 2011–12, Netter Center staff mobilized 90 Penn and Drexel University students as graduation coaches at the Student Success Center to work one-on-one and with small groups of high school students. Four-year graduation rates at University City High School hover below 50%. Yet this team was able to help 94% of the 2011–12 senior class graduate, 70% of whom had postsecondary plans, and secure more than \$740,000 in scholarship and grant awards. Over the last 3 years, the school's AP and Honors course participation increased by 66% across grade levels and subject content. In addition, average daily attendance rose from 71% in 2008–09 to 83% in 2011–12 (AT&T, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Penn and the Netter Center have received significant recognition for civic and community partnerships. The Netter Center received the inaugural W.T. Grant Foundation Youth Development Prize that was selected by the National Academy of Sciences in 2003. This award honored the university-assisted community school program for its high-quality, evidence-based collaborative efforts that generate significant advances in knowledge while increasing the opportunities for young people to move successfully through adolescence with ample support and care. Recognition of this work has increased during the tenure of President Amy Gutmann and is an important component of the Penn Compact, her strategic vision for propelling the university forward in its core endeavors of teaching, research, and service based on the following tenets: increasing access and diversity, integrating knowledge across disciplines, and engaging locally and globally (Gutmann, 2004). Under her leadership, the university has received the Presidential Award of the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (the highest federal honor a college or university can receive for its commitment to community service) in both 2008 and 2012. And in 2009, Penn was named, along with the University of Southern California, "Best Neighbor" university in the national *Saviors of our Cities: 2009 Survey of Best College and University Civic Partnerships*.

Through a most generous naming gift in 2007 from Barbara Netter and the late Edward Netter (a Penn alumnus), the Netter Center has, among other things, been able to make a significant commitment in recent years to comprehensive evaluation of its work with the community by hiring a full-time evaluator. She is working with a distinguished committee of faculty advisors from across diverse disciplines at Penn, as well as a team of undergraduate and graduate student interns. This formative evaluation not only facilitates reflection upon and improvement of ongoing practice, but also helps the Netter Center identify priority areas that require increased focus and attention.

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<sup>5</sup>In March 2013, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission voted to close 23 Philadelphia School District schools, one of which was University City High School.

## ADAPTATION

Beginning in the early 1990s, a number of institutions began to express interest in the model of university–community–school collaboration being developed by the Netter Center and its school and community partners, what was then known as the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC). In 1987 and 1988, the German Marshall Fund of the United States supported education study tours involving WEPIC partners that resulted in a publication by the Brookings Institution (Nothdurft, 1989) entitled *Schoolworks: Reinventing Public Schools to Create the Workforce of the Future, Innovations in Education and Job Training From Sweden, West Germany, France, Great Britain, and Philadelphia*. Increasing numbers of visitors came to learn about the university-assisted community school program. Local and national press coverage, as well as the speeches and writings of the Center director and Penn colleagues, drew attention to the work at a time when colleges and universities, particularly those in urban areas, were just beginning to seriously explore campus–community partnerships and the service-learning and civic engagement movements were in their early stages (Hartley, 2009).

In 1992, the Center entered into discussions with the Wallace Foundation (then the DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund) about the replication of the university-assisted community school model, particularly the Center’s work at Turner Middle School, which was the most developed site at the time. The cohort of students involved in WEPIC’s school, afterschool, weekend, and summer programs were demonstrating better attendance, fewer suspensions, and improved academics. A planning grant creating the WEPIC Replication Project was awarded for an 18-month period to explore the feasibility of adapting the model nationally. The WEPIC Replication Project hosted a series of visitors and conferences, and then issued a request for proposals that were reviewed by its independent advisory board. A \$1 million implementation grant supported Miami University of Ohio (for work in Cincinnati), University of Kentucky–Lexington, and the University of Alabama–Birmingham for an initial 3 years, including training and technical assistance activities.

With additional grants from the Wallace Foundation and the Corporation for National Community Service’s Learn and Serve America program, 23 university-assisted community school programs were funded across the country through 2004, including 2- and 4-year colleges and research universities.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, the Mott Foundation funded the Netter Center to support the Foundation’s training efforts for the rapidly expanding 21st-Century Community Learning Center programs, particularly to focus on the role of higher education–community–school partnerships. Through 2005, 75 partnership teams came to Penn for training, far exceeding our original expectations of 35–40 teams.

The early adaptation activities also sought to create an informal network among the colleagues who were adapting Penn’s university-assisted community school model. Meetings of the site leaders were held at Penn as well as at the funded replication sites, including meetings in

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<sup>6</sup>The 23 colleges and universities that were funded are Bates College; Central State University; Clark Atlanta University; Community College of Aurora; Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis; Johnson and Wales University; Lock Haven University; Mercer University, Macon, Ga.; Miami University of Ohio; Morehouse College; New Mexico State University; Regis University; Rhode Island College; Slippery Rock University; Temple University; University of Dayton; University of Denver; University of Kentucky–Lexington Campus; University of Michigan–Ann Arbor; University of New Mexico at Albuquerque; University of Rhode Island; University of Southern Maine–Lewiston/Auburn College; and West Virginia University.

Lexington, Cincinnati, Birmingham, Albuquerque, and Denver. This network grew through annual conferences hosted by the Netter Center, as well as the numerous site visits to Penn and West Philadelphia university-assisted community schools, and the work occurring around the country was documented in the Netter Center's *Universities and Community Schools* journal.

At the same time, the Netter Center sought to support national networks in support of community schools. In 1997, it was one of the founding partners of the Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, to promote and advance community schools. More than 160 regional and national organizations are now partners in the Coalition. The Netter Center's director served as the chair from its inception until spring 2012.

With the naming gift to the Netter Center in 2007, the strategy for adaptation shifted from funding individual university-assisted community school partnerships to creating regional training centers, based at higher educational institutions that have demonstrated significant experience and commitment to the work. The long-term goal is to create a national network encompassing communities, cities, and regions across the United States.

In 2008, the Netter Center began supporting the development of multistate regional training centers on the university-assisted community school model. The University of Oklahoma-Tulsa was selected as the first regional training in the southwest. Although funding through Penn concluded in 2011, the Netter Center's Tulsa partners continue their important work through the Higher Education Forum of Northeastern Oklahoma, an anchor institution consortium comprising nine higher educational institutions and other community partners that links high schools to colleges through academic service-learning projects, college readiness, and career exploration. In June 2011, Tulsa Public Schools formally announced that university-assisted community schools would be its model for its high school reform plan and would work with the Higher Education Forum to implement this strategy. At each high school, an assistant principal has been assigned to work with the Forum and attend its monthly meetings. The associate superintendent for high schools in Tulsa committed to having the partnerships with higher educational institutions on the agenda of his monthly meetings with all principals. The Forum has also been asked to partner with high schools in Union and Broken Arrow Schools Districts in Tulsa County. Other partners in this work include the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce and Junior Achievement. In September 2012, Tulsa Community College's president offered to permanently house the Higher Education Forum.

In September 2011, the Netter Center selected the Center for Service and Learning at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis to operate the Midwest Center for University-Assisted Community Schools. The Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis proposal was selected from a strong pool of university applicants from across the country, based on the depth of its engagement in the community schools in Indianapolis and particularly the award-winning George Washington Community High School. In its 1st year of operation, the Midwest Center worked to deepen the model in Indianapolis, training to Indianapolis School District principals and principal licensure candidates, as well as provided professional development on university-assisted community schools strategies for the Metropolitan Nashville (Tennessee) Public Schools, which is using the community school model as a key component of its turnaround strategy.<sup>7</sup> The Midwest Center cohosted a statewide conference on family engagement and worked closely with United Way of Central Indiana on its elementary grades community school program, Bridges to

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<sup>7</sup>For more information on Nashville Public Schools' community schools initiative, see [http://www.communityschools.org/community\\_achieves\\_nashville.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/community_achieves_nashville.aspx).

Success. Staff has also made presentations at four national conferences. An Advisory Board from the Midwest region has been established to guide the project.

## A DEVELOPING FRAMEWORK

We recognize that local context is critical in the university-assisted community schools model—each higher education institution (whether a community college, college, or university) has different needs, strengths, and resources, just as local public schools and communities have distinct assets, needs, and interests. However, we suggest that there is a framework that helps to produce an optimally functioning university-assisted community school. The key elements of this framework, based on two decades of our own work and research and the experience and research of our replication sites, are as follows:

1. A central office on campus that coordinates university resources. For this work to sustain, it must become integrated into the mission of the higher educational institution, and not remain the effort of a few faculty members.
2. Engagement across the campus that involves multiple schools and departments.
3. A school principal who welcomes and encourages the partnership, and conveys this philosophy to the school faculty and staff.
4. A coordinator at the school site who is the link between the school, the community, and the higher educational institution. The coordinator may be an employee of the university, the school, or from the community.
5. Community school staff that are integrated into the school's operation, so that planning for and provision of supports for students, their families and the community are as seamless as possible.
6. Parent/community involvement through advisory boards or other mechanisms to advise on supports needed in the school and delivery of such services.

Numerous colleges and universities continue to adapt the university-assisted community school model. The University of Dayton is a key partner in the Dayton Neighborhood School Centers. Initiated after the end of court-ordered busing in 2002, the Neighborhood School Centers adapted the community schools approach believing that community building was the prerequisite to effective programming in the schools. Five neighborhoods and their elementary schools and local leaders, coordinated by the University of Dayton, began a process of building sustainable partnerships. The five Neighborhood School Centers, each with a local nonprofit as the lead agency, offer a diverse range of programming, all emphasizing development of the assets of youth and the community. The University at Buffalo (UB), through the UB Center for Urban Studies, is similarly advancing school and community development through a range of partnerships focused on neighborhoods in Buffalo's East Side. Futures Academy is the site for its "Community as Classroom" initiative that advances student learning and development through community improvement activities. The students study their neighborhood's history, especially the built environment, and work on projects to improve it such as the Futures Garden that transformed a vacant, derelict lot near the school into a community garden and ArtPark with the students' efforts and those of area residents and UB students. In Miami, Florida International University has established the "Education Effect," its university-assisted community school partnership with Northwestern High

School to improve learning and college access, which is funded in large part by JPMorgan Chase Foundation. The partnership is increasing the number of dual enrollment classes at Northwestern High, creating an aquaponics science lab, and bringing the high school students to Florida International University to learn about college life. Many others—University of Tennessee-Knoxville, University of California-Los Angeles, University of New Mexico-Albuquerque, University of Maryland-Baltimore, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, and Johns Hopkins University to name a few—are also developing a university-assisted community schools approach.

The partnerships between higher educational institutions and their communities that have adapted this approach demonstrate a range of positive impacts, including improved achievement in K-12 schools; application of undergraduates' and graduates' knowledge to local, real-world settings; growth of faculty involvement in engaged scholarship; and genuine, collaborative relationships between universities and their local communities.<sup>8</sup> University-assisted community schools have also enabled schools of education at many of these sites to assume new leadership roles within their institutions, as their concentration of relevant expertise puts them in a position to help formulate and guide engagement strategies with local schools. Through this role, schools of education can better prepare teachers to understand and implement strategies that support parent and community involvement, as well as a pedagogy that engages students in real-world problem solving.

Participation in the Netter Center's fall 2012 international conference, hosted in celebration of its 20th anniversary, is a powerful indicator of the ever-increasing reach of the university-assisted community school concept. The 2-day conference on "The Role of Higher Education-Community-School Partnerships in Creating Democratic Communities Locally, Nationally and Globally" drew more than 500 participants from nearly 80 colleges and universities and 110 local, national, and global organizations across the United States and seven other countries. The meeting featured a number of major plenaries and thematic sessions on key topics related to university-community-school partnerships, including college access; nutrition and health; science, technology, engineering, and math; arts and culture; education and citizenship; poverty and race; anchor institutions; and perspectives from university and college presidents.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Even with partnerships dating back over 20 years with schools and the community of West Philadelphia, an expanding group of faculty and students involved in academically based community service teaching and learning, and visible and sustained support for the Netter Center from President Gutmann, serious impediments have prevented Penn from realizing the potential of university-assisted community schools in practice. These impediments—including intellectual fragmentation, a discipline-based faculty rewards system, and the legacy of the ivory tower—have also had the impact of slowing Penn's development as a truly democratic, cosmopolitan, engaged, civic university (Hartley et al., 2009; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). They have reinforced, in Franklin's wonderful phrase, an "unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient Customs and

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<sup>8</sup>For Penn data, please see the Promising Findings section in text. For data on other sites, please see Harkavy and Hartley (2009). In particular, see pp. 19 to 40 for information on University at Buffalo, pp. 41 to 60 for Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and pp. 81 to 106 for University of Dayton. For data on Florida International University, see O'Neil (2011–2012).

Habitudes” (Reinhold, 1968), rather than helping to realize Franklin’s original vision for the university to educate students with “an *Inclination* join’d with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one’s Country, Friends and Family [original emphasis]” (Franklin, 1749/1962).

Indeed, university-assisted community schools now being developed at Penn and elsewhere have a long way to go before they can fully mobilize the powerful, untapped resources of their own institutions and of their communities, including those found among individual neighbors and in local institutions (such as businesses, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, and hospitals). Among other things, this will require more effective coordination of public and private funding streams and services. Government is indispensable in this process. Through financial incentives and the bully pulpit, government should encourage community colleges, colleges, and universities *to do well by doing good*—that is, to better realize their missions by contributing *significantly* to developing and sustaining democratic schools and communities (Harkavy & Hodges, 2012).

Specific steps for the federal government to help catalyze democratic higher education-community-school partnerships include the following:

1. Create a multiagency, multisector federal commission designed to help forge democratic civic partnerships between colleges and universities and their surrounding communities and schools. The commission would comprise local, state, and national government officials (including governors and mayors), as well as leaders from the private sector and higher education. The commission should convene a National Summit or White House Conference on Higher Education-Civic Partnerships that would help spur both a national conversation and appropriate action at all governmental levels and serve as a platform to challenge higher educational institutions to realize their democratic missions. It would, in effect, have a similar function to the 1947 President’s Commission on Higher Education, which President Truman “charged with the task of defining the responsibilities of colleges and universities in American democracy and in international affairs” (Smith & Bender, 2008, p. 84). This commission’s mission, however, would also be to put democratic higher education-community-school partnerships into practice.
2. The Commission should develop innovative strategies for improving the coordination of federal programs and funding streams to help catalyze the formation of local coalitions of civic partners and align federal efforts with partnerships that involve higher educational institutions. (Three Obama administration policy initiatives designed to revitalize distressed communities through place-based partnerships—Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, and Strong Cities, Strong Communities—involve colleges and universities as possible partners and begin to move in the direction described.)
3. The Commission should promote regional consortia of higher educational institutions dedicated to improving schooling and community life. For example, Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development is a consortium of 33 colleges and universities in the greater Philadelphia area that works to revitalize local communities and schools and foster civic responsibility among the region’s colleges and universities. Another example, cited above, is the Higher Ed Forum of Northeastern Oklahoma, a consortium of nine community colleges, colleges, and universities that is developing university-assisted community school partnerships with all high schools in Tulsa Public Schools, as well as the Union and Broken Arrow School Districts of Tulsa County.

4. Create prestigious Presidential Awards for outstanding local and regional Higher Education-Community-School Partnerships to provide recognition and further legitimize the work. Awards would be given to partnerships that make significant, sustained contributions to improving the quality of life in the community and the quality of research, teaching, learning, and service on campus.
5. Provide support for higher education-community-school partnerships that demonstrate community benefit, not simply benefit to the college or university, as well as transparent and democratic collaborations with local partners. In effect, federal support would be based on what we have termed the “Noah Principle”—funding given for building arks (producing real change), not for predicting rain (describing the problems that exist and will develop if actions are not taken).<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The noted Penn psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman coined the term “learned helplessness” in the late 1960s to describe passive and defeatist attitudes and behaviors that result from repeated failure. It is a truism that overcoming feelings of learned helplessness among the poor and disadvantaged is crucial if their lives are to be made better. It should also be a truism that overcoming learned helplessness in our institutions of higher education is essential for solving schooling and educational problems. In recent years, as we have discussed, learned engagement has developed among an increasing number of higher educational institutions through the development of university-assisted community schools. That engagement needs to be both deeper (more significant, serious, and sustained) and wider (involving many more colleges and universities). Nonetheless, we think that recent history indicates that university-assisted community schools are a promising approach for effective and efficient school reform, pre-K through higher education.

## AUTHOR BIOS

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<sup>9</sup>The recommendations as formulated here are adapted from Harkavy and Hodges (2012).

define their educational and civic purposes. His recent book, *To Serve a Larger Purpose*, coedited with John Saltmarsh, examines the roles of universities in democracies.

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