

**Eleanor & Brown: A National Initiative Commemorating  
Brown v. Board of Education and the Human Rights Legacy of Eleanor  
Roosevelt**

**National Issues, National Voices; Local Lives, Local Action**

BACKGROUND

Both constitutionally and statutorily the nation and the states call, in various words, for equal educational opportunity for all students. Yet, provisions in law, regulations, programs and practices vary so much in both quantitative and qualitative terms that far too many of our most economically needy students are educationally underserved by professional and even politically-established standards. While public rhetoric often departs on the upside from reasonable and universal expectations, in the case of expectations for students in economically disadvantaged circumstances and children of color, expectations often reduce the pitch of educational challenges they receive or the substance of the opportunity provided them—or both. The close tracking of school success and family background amounts to a vestige of racism and social stratification long called out in law and public rhetoric, but lurking in the daily discouragement of students and ultimately damaging poor provision of fair opportunity to succeed. America cannot afford to waste the brainpower and the “human power” of so many Americans. The costs are high on both sides of the ledger—lost opportunities and higher compensatory costs.

The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court is an occasion for the nation and for each community within the nation to reflect on how far we have come from the days of that unanimous declaration and yet how far there is to go. Doing so can, in the positive spirit of commemoration and the sobering aura of a great issue from our history, reach minds and hearts that may hold the principles of Brown but do not live the practices that would make it real. Or, can be a wedge to connect with—even challenge—hearts and minds that may acknowledge the ruling but believe that nature is not made by courts and that differences among groups of people are immutable so that they always, with only some exceptions, will be stratified as they have been in our nation’s history.

The Anniversary on May 17, 2004, will be a time of national attention, certain to be featured in all the media, in the statements of public officials, in the pulpits and in the schools. Yet a moment of attention is too brief for what must be done in public consciousness and in private conscience, in public policy and in professional action. The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) has joined with the Eleanor Roosevelt Center (ERC) to initiate, organize and convene gatherings of educators and civic leaders in communities with whom one or both of the organizations works. There is immediacy that capitalizes on existing relationships that are productive; impact that builds on current accomplishments; continuity carried by the core work that is going forward. We are calling this partnership of the two organizations and the joining of the themes of Brown and of Mrs. Roosevelt's life "Eleanor and Brown." It joins the depth of the courts' decision—depths still being plumbed—and its fundamental principals with the sweep Eleanor Roosevelt's call for universal recognition of human dignity and her practical leadership in the nation's depression and time of war. It is a message of determination, of hope and principle harnessed to practical action.

The Brown decision looked clear-eyed at the corrosive effects on human spirit and human potential of a society divided by race in social structure and public actions. The court could not outlaw attitudes but it could affect public policy, public programs and public behavior that infringed on the rights of others. And it did so. Its call for an integrated society of fair opportunity remains a call to action today.

Eleanor Roosevelt was the product of a society separated by economics and social groupings. Her life was a journey into consciousness of social issues and the development of personal and public conscience regarding actions and affiliations. She became a national and world leader for universal human rights. Her journey to this noble standing is an example for nations, communities and individuals today.

Education is a human right. Opportunity to receive an education is a civil right. Students who, as individuals or as groups, have been underserved with regard to opportunity need high performing schools to accelerate their return to the path of opportunity. To provide high performing schools for all of America's children of color or who live in challenging economic circumstances that can increase the burden on schools will require all that is encompassed by the 10-point system that the NUA has developed in conjunction with its partners in school districts, in universities, in educational membership organizations, in classrooms, statehouses, in city halls and in the business community.

## THEORY of CHANGE

The power of race and socio-economic class—and sometimes gender—to predict student performance in school is a power borne of treatment, not nature. Significant changes in the treatment can yield direct and significant changes in student performance. The treatment is, to simplify, in the home, community and school. At home a child's sense of self is formed early, and they become aware of expectations for their behavior. Values that are internalized become guides as children begin to determine how they will meet the world. Community values, learned by observation and by engagement at the store, church or street, grow in influence as a child becomes a youth. These values, or behaviors and attitudes that are observed most closely in the silences and shouts at home or on the street, may not reinforce the culture of school. Still, school has a student for 6+ hours a day and can make a big difference in a student's life success.

Surely, what a school does has profound effects on student success. But, the school treatment—i.e., instruction, curriculum, and student groupings—is formed in major measure by what become self-fulfilling projections (expectations) of performance. These too often become circular and when they begin with low expectations the circle is a downward spiral. The expectations shape the educational treatment that yields low performance that reinforces low expectations. And so on through a student's schooling. Often groups of students, by race or ethnic group or economic background, are subject to low expectations and their cycle begins. Changes in treatment will, when done skillfully, lead to changes in the statistical connection between demographic groups and performance. This in turn belies the underlying stereotypic beliefs that are reinforced when uninspired treatment—restrained by low expectations—produce uninspiring results, thus continuing validation of the predicted connection of “what you are” and how you do. There will, of course, be differences in student performance, but it should not be associated with their demographic group.

The changes in treatment can be neither cosmetic, nor sporadic. Much of the treatment that makes a difference in school performance is that of instruction, curriculum, organization, school culture and policies. All but the latter are the stuff of professional judgment. Policies are subjects of professional and political action. All are influenced by public views and public pressures. These in turn are formed on a foundation of beliefs about people and potential.

Offensive and ill-founded beliefs, and the defensive positions—about why “some people don't achieve and why schools do not adequately (or better) serve so many students—that rely on those beliefs (or give them currency) both act, separately and

together to undercut instances of success that serve as a reproach to prevailing expectations. They even veil success achieved in some schools with demographics similar to schools where success is infrequent. The variance of performance within school systems, and within demographic and economic communities, challenge the inevitability of low performance. The Gordian knot of expectations, treatment, performance and statistical/experiential association that reinforces the expectations' credibility must be cut. Some argue it can be cut by the heat of Draconian accountability. We, however, see it being cut by the light of consensus among an informed—and aroused—public linked with coordinated change of treatment in school systems and in classroom practice. The latter is the key to student performance; the former is a key to creating and sustaining changes in classroom and school practices.

The power of a change process must be proportional to the resilience of that which is to be changed. The power of beliefs, their resulting negative expectations for many students and the depths to which they infect policies, procedures, programs and practices will require comprehensive attack. Otherwise they slip, slid and keep on going. Over a decade of work in urban settings, NUA has formulated a 10-point system for high performing schools that addresses the way students are treated. It guides and reinforces changes from the classroom to the boardroom and from the school to the school system and the community. Four points, or principles, mark the compass that guides implementation of the NUA system:

- o All children are capable of exceeding high educational standards
- o Intelligence is modifiable, not fixed
- o Effective teaching is the heart of a meaningful school
- o The development of children and youth is the responsibility of everyone in the community

Our action plan is founded on the proposition that calls to principle can create constituencies for public leaders to make policy and direct action toward those principles. But change on the ground does not flow ineluctably or easily from lofty principle. While principle can get people on their feet, practical plans are necessary for those feet to move forward together. Public outcry for principle must not drown out professional plans to do the job of bringing principle alive. The public constituency provides motivation and comfort for policy and professional leaders, but does not supplant them. And, standing for long on the common ground of principle, even if dramatic events occur, requires engagement in both personal reflection and collective action.

These constituencies must be lashed to institutions in order to keep the drive of authority alive in the day-to-day work that animates principle. And the people in the institution called school—student, teacher and administrator—must be approached not only with exhortation, but also with direct experience. Thus the theory of change extends vertically down from high principle of universal equality of opportunity and human rights, and up to daily actions of a teacher bringing culture and colloquial language into formal lessons of standard subject matter. The theory of change also extends horizontally along each level of action to connect peers. Information that is immediate and local can be a wake up call, but without concurrent guidelines for drawing implications from the data and developing practical actions, the call can simply be a roar and the following motion simply exercise. Change is more likely with focused information of direct meaning to the audience, sent in local forms yet set in a larger context that brings both hope and urgency with concrete examples of similar situations and successful actions. The welling of public constituency generates two supports for professional action: distributed responsibility as communities pledge to do their part, and distributed leadership as the community joins in action with the school.

A similar duality arises in the school, when skillfully stimulated, guided and wedded to the stuff of curriculum and instruction: distributed responsibility for a student among the whole faculty and staff—“it takes a whole school to educate a student”—and leadership by each in their realm and for the whole distributed among the members of the school community. This web of support—which includes reinforcement through calls to principle—lower the high barriers of low expectations. The open hearts are accompanied by opened minds that will better, more urgently and more fully receive professional support that they can use daily in the practice of education.

#### PLAN for ACTION

The two organizations have intentions for a nationwide conversation sparked and supported by a coalition of education and civil rights organizations. That will have staying power well past the Brown anniversary, an event that will serve as a focal point and a trigger for ensuing action. With the small cities of the Hudson Valley, and larger cities across the nation in which NUA is active, there already is institutional purchase on the themes of Eleanor and Brown. These conversations will begin at the level of principle and purpose but will conclude at the level of joint professional and public action.

In addition to the twin pillars of the Brown decision and the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt--two guides for national and local action—will be the theory of change and the 10-point proven system for high performing schools of the NUA. The latter integrates a decade of school improvement lessons. In the Hudson Valley, the Eleanor Roosevelt Center is at work with a coalition of local business, school, civic and community organizations.. We will simultaneously initiate a national media and mobilization effort to be sustained over 18-24 months through organizational partners and the media, and local efforts where NUA or ERC are active. National averages about the achievement gap can alert individuals and communities to the issue, but they do not tell the local story that will concentrate attention and guide action.

To launch the local work we will assemble at the ERC on two successive occasions. The first will be between March 15 and May 1, with approximately 70 people in groups of two-four from:

- Five-seven “small cities” in the Hudson Valley, New York
- Three-four “small cities” in the northeast within driving distance of the Hudson Valley
- Newark, New Jersey
- Indianapolis, Indiana
- The Minneapolis, Minnesota area
- Seattle, Washington
- Birmingham, Alabama
- The National Urban Alliance
- Eleanor Roosevelt Center
- International Reading Association
- National Council of Teachers of English
- National Urban League
- The College Board
- The Council of the Great City Schools

The partnering organizations have intentions for a nationwide conversation sparked and supported by a coalition of education and civil rights organizations, which also have plans underway to use the Brown commemoration as a way to build on American values of fairness and equal opportunity. With the support of a coalition of businesses, large corporations and non-profit organizations, both local and national, and foundations committed to renewing public education a network will be built for continuation of activity beyond the Brown anniversary. The national conversation to be triggered by the Brown anniversary will be focused on the scope of the decision, but not limited to an event. With the small cities of the Hudson Valley, and larger cities across the nation in which NUA is active, there already is institutional purchase

on the themes of Eleanor and Brown. For example: Seattle, WA, is engaged in system wide “courageous conversations” on race and education, and issues of literacy with the NUA; Minneapolis and 10 suburban districts are engaged in a voluntary desegregation initiative spearheaded by culturally relevant and cognitive pedagogies that help deliver high content for educators through NUA professional development; Indianapolis is challenging what the federal Administration has called the “soft bigotry of low expectations” by demonstrating in growing numbers of schools that children of color challenged by financial and family circumstances can outperform wealthier students in surrounding townships, through a systemic change process that district leadership and the NUA have devised and conducted; Beacon, NY, is engaged in parent and educator professional development that provides tools for the adults who guide students in school and the home; Newark, NJ, has partnered with the NUA to develop significant achievement gains for its high schools and has used a community coalition to keep a popular superintendent in office in spite of attempts by some state and local leaders to oust her; the University of Alabama, Birmingham, the Birmingham Public Schools, the city business community, the NUA, The College Board, The Council of Great City Schools, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, are developing plans to create a district-wide high school reform initiative. National initiatives of the organizations will provide support for sustained local activity that begins at the level of principle and purpose but extends and takes hold at the level of joint professional and public action.

At the spring meeting, and with NUA/ERC assistance, local teams will formulate action plans for each community to focus the attention occasioned by the Brown anniversary on the persistent differences in student achievement associated with demographic groups (often called “the achievement gap”). This is not to suggest that every person will perform in all endeavors the same as all others. Rather it is to say that such differences are not due to, and shall not be associated in fact directly with, the race or socio-economic background of those individuals.

They will identify actions to be undertaken by the leaders meeting at ERC, including their commitment of resources. Collectively, the teams will develop, with the ERC, NUA and its partners, common plans for:

- Research- and experience-based editorial material about how achievement gaps are being closed in the localities where they work or in very similar localities, to be offered to local and national media;
- Local workshops—perhaps school-based in the larger districts, for clusters of schools in smaller locales. These workshops will involve both exhortation that draws on “Eleanor and Brown” as well as examples of how teachers and students expected by many to be at the

lower end of the achievement gap rise to the challenges of high standards. The workshops will bring together professional educators in pointed “job-alike” sessions about strategy and technique that are proofs that the exhortation can come alive through their work. The workshops also will bring the community and educators together, receiving common information and communicating aspirations, anxieties and commitments to one another. The workshops are to be reported on linked websites by designated reporters, including students and educators. We also would collect presentations of key speakers. They may, with other material, support a publication;

- Synergies with one another, whether they be joined by regional professional development programs that pool resources or provide peer assistance, or networking to enhance similar activities.

National support from NUA, its partners, ERC and a few selected organizations will help local groups focus on the achievement gap in their locale:

- A basic “Toolkit” of written materials ready for local customizing to use with local media, including editorial material, Public Service Announcement material, a PowerPoint on the 50 years of Brown, Eleanor Roosevelt’s life “markers” and legacy, and a media resource guide that is updatable, protocols for stimulating and mobilizing youth voices;
- Examples of using local data to clarify the existence and persistence of achievement gaps, and trends, of variance within the system, of identifying especially effective, or disappointing, situations;
- Annotated references to programs and places, local and afar, that have successfully addressed the achievement gap and sustained success;
- Resources on how districts succeed in distributing their most capable leaders and educators to schools that engage the greatest challenges, and how they achieve distributed leadership (and responsibility) within those schools
- A roster of speakers, including some ERC Medalists, NUA leaders, leaders from national partner organizations and colleagues;
- Guides for local workshops, perhaps keynoted by visiting speakers, that would engage local youth, educators, parents of students, civic leaders and the public in discussions about the roots of the achievement gap, and local and practical ways each in the community can become committed to actions aimed at eliminating those gaps;
- Links to national forums and outlets to amplify the voices of youth;



- References to curriculum ideas and examples that can be implemented in the current year as the Brown anniversary is commemorated or can be material for 2004-05.

N.B. Available resources will determine the extent of these supportive materials and of direct assistance.

This initiative will not be partisan, designed to pit Democrats against Republicans. It will, however, call to account questionable, though highly popular practices of using examples of a few especially successful schools to demonstrate that, for example, privatization “works” (implying it might be a general panacea). It also will illustrate how policies purported to enhance accountability often—even when they shed needed light on students or practices consigned to the shadows, also repress effective education, and do not yield educationally useful assessments of what students need to progress, particularly to progress past basic skills and formulaic study.

The second meeting will be timed to keep the momentum of the Brown anniversary, perhaps in early or mid summer. At that meeting the teams will report and reflect on their activities around the anniversary of Brown and plan actions in the 2004-05 school year. Again, these will be local, with national reference and support. There will be two major intentions for 2004-5:

- In 2004-05 a series of three-four forums locally or regionally with national resources that expand upon those enumerated for the spring activities.
- A year-long web-enabled pro-seminar for teachers to share their experiences reaching the students who have been “predictably” in the lower ranks to accelerate, enrich and enliven their educations.
- A continuing web-based collection of student voices, then amplified in material for the media and through presentations at national conferences
- A model protocol for local compacts that draw the community together in voice and action to support change in the school system, schools and classrooms so that resources are targeted to the classroom and teachers are assisted in examining their approaches to less successful students.
- A guide, with examples, for convening business coalitions informed about and committed to the aims of the local mobilization and similar efforts for and with local and regional non-profit organizations and philanthropies.

- Four examples of editorial pieces for local customizing.

The core of the community compact will be to empower public will about the connection of equity in education to high-performing communities and schools by urging public responsibility for educational opportunities where all children can learn.

To accomplish these two gatherings over the coming six months and the essential, intensive supporting activities will require \$75,000 in addition to the substantial in-kind services of participating organizations and school districts. The manager of the funds will be the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, with offices in New York and at The Council of Great City Schools in Washington, D.C. & The University of Georgia, Athens. As noted earlier, support will be sought from a range of sources for the wider scope of national activities to be undertaken, particularly those projected for the 12-18 months following the Brown commemoration and the summer meeting outlined here,