

August 2002

On meeting the needs of all students— Building community will for improving educational opportunity

I just finished reading *American Foundations: An Investigative History* (2001) by Mark Dowie. The book was introduced to some in an op-ed piece Dowie wrote for “The New York Times.” I would recommend it to anyone interested in a history of foundation giving and for a juxtaposition between conservative and liberal advocacy. Though the book is not as scholarly as Lagemann’s *Private Power for the Public Good*, it nevertheless reinforces the importance of our work with UP and a few of the grant giving efforts at foundations such as those recently dispensed by Carnegie, Gates and Casey. I cite an important passage below:

“What educational philanthropists seem to have learned after a century of cautious grantmaking is that the Jeffersonian dream [that an enlightened citizenry is indispensable to the proper functioning of a republic] is a vision with many components. To be attained, every level of education, every class of student, and every school district in the country would have to be nurtured. We ignore one branch or level of education at the peril of the rest. If money pours into private research universities while the quality of entering students decline, what purpose is served? If Wall Street’s education corporations [privatization initiatives] turn the corner and make a profit for shareholders, what purpose is served? If suburban children receive excellent education while inner-city youngsters struggle with illiteracy, what purpose is served? And if money is showered upon schools and school districts without attending to the social systems in which they are embedded, how can educational reform succeed?”

On reading Dowie, one is struck by the staying power and “patience” of conservative foundations and the conservative movement. Clearly the author hopes the reader will understand the socio-economic-political influence that Scaife, Bradley, Olin, Smith Richardson, the Pioneer Fund and corporate funders such as Walmart, Amway, the Gap have been promoting through support to, among others, the Hudson Institute, Heritage and Thomas B. Fordham foundations. Dowie quotes Peter Martinez of the MacArthur Foundation, a critic of privatization: “The problem is that there is not a strategy aimed at meeting the needs of a broad-based urban population.” Dowie also criticizes several American foundations for not recognizing the importance of national advocacy for those urban citizens most in need. He asks why “...few foundation trustees seem to realize that restructuring public education is not like inventing a heart valve or opening an orphanage. It requires a full generation of patience, as the glacial process of reform proceeds, innovation by innovation, district by district, school by school, classroom by classroom--constrained at every step by poverty, race, class and the attendant challenges they pose.”

As July becomes August. As we observe the hiring of a lawyer as Chancellor of NYC public schools. Contemplate and cry over an increase in child abduction. Observe wild fluctuations on Wall Street. React to resignation rumors of the country’s Secretary of State, and are saddened by the number of forest fires and whales beaching themselves in Cape Cod. It is appropriate to remind ourselves how important education reform is to this country. Lagemann is quoted by Dowie: “Expertise is necessary in a modern society, but efforts to nurture expertise without correlated efforts to promote education will erode the basis of democracy. Education is therefore the only way out of an impossible choice between unacceptable alternatives--on the one hand expertise, on the other democracy.” How does one diminish or erase the inseparable nature of democracy, race, poverty and education? One does only at the peril of a democratic nation.

Yesterday a piece I wrote for USA Today was published under the heading, "Child hostage who escaped serves as beacon in times of crisis." I write that "...all too often in this country people have said that it's a waste of money to spend federal funds on impoverished children of color because doing so hurts those people the money is intended to serve by steering them away from the lower-level aspirations and occupations that suit them and their abilities." Glenn Loury got it right in his op-ed piece in the Times this week: "We have pressing moral dilemmas in our society that can be fully addressed only when viewed against the backdrop of our racial history."

I recently wrote for USA Today that "...we need...more children such as Erica [Pratt] [of an economically challenged community in Philadelphia] who exhibit advanced thinking skills, such as the ability to solve problems and make the appropriate decisions. Erica teaches all of us to persevere rather than surrender to the challenges life often presents. Erica stands as a beacon for the capacity of all Americans to succeed in the face of adversity and challenge."

What also stands out for me is the power of leadership -- that provided by Marion in Newark, Pat in Indianapolis, Joseph in Seattle and John in Watertown, and Renee in Chicago of Operation Push. Mike through CGCS research has clearly marked several variables which can lead to sustain change and has documented gradual achievements being made by targeted systems. What broad band research does not capture are the individual stories of success occurring in places like Newark, Seattle, Chicago, NYC and Indianapolis. What we often miss are the growing number of individual acts of leadership in schools and systems. How does one capture the dramatic changes being made by Audra's high school students in Indianapolis (some going from quartile one to four)? How does one capture the leadership provided by Christine in her second grade class where students are producing stunning results on tests?

What I am reminded of is the importance of initiatives such as that which the IRA, the NUA and targeted superintendents have developed through our Urban Partnership for Literacy (UP). The mission is to mobilize communities of citizens, educators and scholars committed to all students and especially those children of color who live in disadvantaged circumstances. The goal is to provide advocacy and knowledge dissemination/utilization of best practice. An objective is to capture and disseminate leadership, systemic change and pedagogical principles manifested by many adults who serve tirelessly in support of children and youth. Armed with this information and working together with others who labor on behalf of kids it is our collective goal to persuade the public "...that implementing new systems will be worth the price."

Dowie is clear that "...there is, and always will be a tension between motives of fostering knowledge for instrumental purposes and for human welfare. Overlaying the tension, of course, is the age-old clash between traditionalism and progressivism, between the followers of John Calvin and those of John Dewey. I think it is clear where UP and like-minded individuals and groups decided to stand.

As we have written: We must stand for our convictions, apply our skills and marshal the resources for every student to succeed in school, work and life. Literacy is the key. Stand with us. Stand UP for literacy.

Enjoy the summer and warmest regards to all,

Eric Cooper