

Polarities of Change

Eric Cooper - www.nuatc.org

March 2003

John Naisbitt, in a seminal book called Megatrends, used a methodology involving newspaper analysis for tracking socio-political-cultural economic trends which he felt could be predictive of the future. In a later book, Global Paradox, Naisbitt challenges us to understand the aphorism that "less is more." Meaning, as an example, that one can measure the viability of a nation by how well the leaders provide for the contributions of individuals to the whole, or that the bigger the economy, the more important becomes its smallest players. One only has to read a few newspaper accounts these days to see that people are searching for options to what many feel are insurmountable problems -- while clearly recognizing the challenges and paradoxes we face.

Many of us work with children and youth who have seen a parent, relative or sibling murdered. Many urban children growing up in this country have parents in prison, face peer pressure to join destructive gangs (sometimes as a defense against the aggression that permeates their lives), are forced to sleep four in a bed, and only see their parents on weekends because the significant other work schedules forces them to leave home at dawn and return late.

Amos Oz writing in the NY Times recently implied that the evil of Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein's regime "...is deeply and extensively rooted in vast expanses of poverty, despair and humiliation. Perhaps it is even more deeply rooted in the terrible, raging envy that America has aroused for many years..."

The deep paradox of this country is that we aim to bring democracy to the world and yet at home we cannot address a growing social, education and economic problem where studies suggest that 5.5 million Americans ages 16 - 24 are out of work, out of school and depressed. We recognize the importance of education but when "push comes to shove" because of economic downturns we may turn our backs on those most in need, and deny adequate funding. We read about the deepening wealth index gap between whites and people of color and seemingly allow the message to dissipate among the cacophony of other pressing issues. But one cannot erase or diminish the impact that poverty, race and lack of education has on a democracy or the health of a nation.

Carol Johnson, superintendent of Minneapolis, was exhortatory with a gathering of educational leaders at a recent NUA symposium -- pleading with those assembled to recognize that knowledge without heart will not lead to sustained change. Those in the gathering understood that social barriers are often erected and allowed to stand through indifference.

Yet Superintendent Johnson's message was one of hope. It was an uplifting message which celebrated progress in her school system and elsewhere. She has noted that in her metropolitan area a coalition of school districts have also gotten together to provide school choice for city students. This was driven by leaders such as Kenneth Dragseth, superintendent of the 7,100 Edina Public School system in suburban Minneapolis. For reasons such as this and others Superintendent Dragseth was recently chosen by AASA as superintendent of the year.

Hope also springs eternal in Newark, New Jersey, where the fight to keep Superintendent Marion Bolden has brought together different political factions in the city. "People who would never, never be together are together on this...the good thing is at least some people are getting interested in education [in Newark]." Newark has also reported increases in writing achievement in all of its high schools for the first time in its history and deep improvements in targeted elementary schools. In Seattle, district students beat the state SAT average of 1054 and the national average of 1020. Since 1995, Seattle scores on the SAT have increased to 1058 from 1015, a 43 point gain. In Indianapolis schools such as Charity Dye and Joyce Kilmer, serving 84% and 92% African-American students, have surpassed the state average pass rate with 78.7% and 76.4% from one of 27.6% and 24.3% respectively. And in Stamford, Connecticut, a partnership of interested stakeholders are developing systemic strategies for accelerating achievement for those students who remain dependent on the schools for learning. There are other national trends which reflect change, but the challenges to reach critical mass in this country remain beyond our experience.

Carol Johnson evoked a Nigerian proverb in her comments at the NUA board symposium, it goes something like this: "The one who is being carried does not know how far the town is." Children and youth in this country need the support to help them understand that hard effort and commitment from adults will get them to common goals. But as Jack Wuest was quoted in a recent Bob Herbert column in The NY Times, "It's just heartbreaking...these kids need a fair shake [the 5.5 million young people wandering around without diplomas, without jobs and without prospects] and they're not getting it."

The new leadership required in this country demand those strategic alliances which can facilitate sustained change and the reaching of critical mass. These alliances as Naisbitt reminds us can "...facilitate the sorting out of what will remain local and what will be global, what will remain tribal and what will be universal...with the decline of the nation-state, the building of a single-market world economy, the spread of democracy, and the new revolution in telecommunications, the opportunities, the possibilities..." [for change] "...are far greater than at any time in human history."

Eric Cooper



www.nuatc.org