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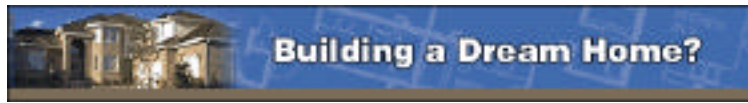
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LETTER SPOTLIGHT: ERIC J. COOPER

Challenges and cheers for urban schools

August 19, 2001

One of the biggest challenges facing this country and urban school systems such as Indianapolis Public Schools is closing the achievement gap. There are many explanations for why the achievement gap exists, some accurate, some not. Among them:

¥ Lack of preschool and kindergarten. It is recognized that for children to succeed they have to experience 3,000 to 5,000 hours of good preschool education. Sadly, many in Indianapolis may have only experienced 300 to 400 hours of appropriate preschool. This lack of exposure is exacerbated by the fact Indiana does not mandate full-day kindergarten.

¥ Economic disparities that deny sufficient resources to the educators who serve the students. Money does matter for good education; just ask those wealthier parents who may spend upwards of \$10,000 per year on private school versus the \$7,600 spent on public education in Indianapolis.

¥ A misinterpretation by those who assume that intelligence is fixed at birth, and that the learning capacity of poor children of color is limited. The authors of *The Bell Curve* did much to spread this false conclusion, implying that money spent on poor children is wasted because it steers them away from the lower-level aspirations and occupations best suited to their abilities. Clearly, research suggests intelligence is modifiable and affected by good teaching.

¥ Learning loss of students during the summer. Recent research supports the need for summer school, which strives to target the learning loss of disadvantaged children.

Indianapolis Public Schools officials have attempted to bring more resources to children, but because of budget constraints have not been able to address extended learning experiences from the fall through the summer. They recognize that students whose parents or guardians must work long hours and who lack adult support for guided learning on a daily basis are at risk.

Parents need to guide children through enriched learning experiences that teach how to apply and transfer reading, writing and math skills to other applications. To offset the lack of engaged time for some students, school systems are being driven to address these needs through intervention programs in the summer and after school. It might seem frivolous to some, but providing air-conditioned buildings would help in this effort.

Yet there is much to celebrate about IPS over recent years. Students are beginning to meet state achievement indicators in a growing number of schools; and data emerging from the Council of Great City Schools suggest that Indianapolis is surpassing other urban systems on several indicators. Equally important, there are examples of IPS students outperforming wealthier students in their ability to write and express themselves and perform advanced thinking demanded in higher education and the new workplace. Committed and talented teachers are engaging their students in ways not prevalently seen a few years ago.

More resources to sustain the changes under way are critical. School officials are working hard to bring additional resources into IPS. Hope resides in competition for support from Lilly Endowment and Carnegie Corp. of New York City.

Just as important, IPS is working hard to convince the Indianapolis community that an investment in the district's schools will pay off in the long run in property values and in human capital.

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