

## Finding Hope Among the Hopeless

It was an overcast, Thursday afternoon. The fog was rolling in across the Bay and the temperature was dropping. It was the kind of day that is more typical of summer than fall in the Bay Area.

It was late in the day and I was feeling particularly uninspired about my job. When I first started working as the Executive Assistant to Mayor Loni Hancock, I thought I had the best job in the city. I was at the center of power in local government, and I thought I was in a position to make things happen. From the very first day the job had been demanding, but in a good way. Every day I was presented with new challenges and new issues to work on. At first I thought that I was in a position to have an impact on issues I cared about—homelessness, drug abuse, and the plight of the city's youth. About 3 months into the job, my optimism had given way to the grim reality that change comes slowly in municipal government.

I soon realized that the Mayor's office was not a place where sweeping reforms would be launched and fundamental changes would be initiated. Even more depressing for me was the realization that rather than power, what I had was responsibility. I was responsible for figuring out what the city should do about the homeless who were camping out in the park behind City Hall. I was responsible for explaining to frightened residents why the police couldn't stop the drug dealers who were terrorizing their neighborhood. I was responsible for meeting with protesters who wanted to make Peoples Park into a national shrine, and old ladies who wanted their neighbors to trim their trees so that their view of the Bay would not be obstructed.

I was growing tired of Berkeley politics, and for the first time in my life I felt discouraged, despondent, and downright depressed about my work. Perhaps I had been too naive. Why should I have thought that crime and poverty could be solved by one city, even as they plagued communities throughout the United States?

The year was 1988 and crack cocaine and the violence that accompanied it were devastating the Black community in Berkeley. As the Mayor's

representative, I was frequently the person who had to respond to community complaints about drive-by shootings and crack houses that operated like open markets. I quickly learned that city government lacked the resources to solve any of the major problems facing residents. As the person most likely to hear the pain and anguish of the community and to be blamed for the city's failures, I had grown extremely frustrated after just 2 years on the job.

Feeling beleaguered and burdened by the responsibilities of the job, I was miraculously drawn back into education by the principal of a local high school who came to my office that foggy afternoon accompanied by one of his students. My friend George Perry recently had been assigned to serve as principal of the local continuation school, East Campus (a school for students who had been removed from the traditional high school due to poor behavior and/or grades). It turned out that he had been assigned to his new job as punishment for the trouble he had caused in the district. However, instead of scaring him into retirement as the higher-ups had hoped, the assignment renewed George's sense of purpose about his work in education.

He came to see me because I once had served as the student body president at UC Berkeley, and he wanted me to convince his student, John Peters, to run for student body president of his school. As George sang the praises of his student leader, I took a good look at John and immediately surmised that he was probably a street-level drug dealer. With gold teeth in his mouth, a thick gold chain around his neck, and a beeper at his waist, John fit a profile I had come to know well. I looked at John and then back at George, and my look revealed my confusion about what he had in mind. But instead of voicing my doubts, I listened as George told me why he wanted John to run for student body president and I listened closely as John told me about himself. Within minutes I understood what George was thinking. John was intelligent, articulate, and extremely charismatic. George knew that if he could co-opt John by convincing him to play a positive role at his school, he might be able to find a way to get other students to begin to take their education more seriously. John was a natural leader and George understood that he needed John on his side. He needed John to be a force for good at the school.

East Campus once had served as an alternative school for kids who did not fit in at the large, impersonal environment at Berkeley High School. Over time, it had become a dumping ground for troubled kids like John. Tucked away at the margins of the school district, East Campus was a school in name only. The first time I visited the school there were more kids in the parking lot blasting their car radios and smoking pot, than there were in the classrooms. In a city that took great pride in its com-

mitment to racial integration, the school was over 90% Black. Hardly any students attended class, and those that did seemed to be there in body only.

Despite the sorrowful state of the school, I was so taken by John and by what my friend George Perry was trying to accomplish, that I immediately was convinced that working at the school was where I should be, given my desire to make a difference. I saw the potential to transform this small forgotten school into a place that could become a genuine alternative for kids who were being killed and imprisoned each day because of the drug trade on the streets. Shortly after my visit, I left my job with the Mayor to join George as a teacher at East Campus.

### CONFRONTING THE "CRISIS" IN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I begin this book with this story about my entry into the field of education because it is reflective of how I have come to understand the promise and the potential of urban public schools in the United States. Like East Campus, many other urban schools have been written off as failures. Failure is the word used most frequently to describe urban public schools in the United States, because the lists of problems confronting these institutions is so long and daunting. Low test scores, low grades, high drop-out rates, poor attendance, and generally unmotivated students usually top the lists of failings. Burned-out and ineffective teachers, who care more about protecting their jobs than helping students, typically follow complaints about students. Those more intimately familiar with conditions in urban districts point to dilapidated and unsafe buildings, administrations hopelessly mired in politicized and inefficient bureaucracies, and an endless series of reforms that never seem to lead to genuine improvement (F. Hess, 1999).

If these characterizations were limited to a handful of urban schools or districts, the "problem" might not seem so daunting, but this is not the case. Urban school failure is pervasive. It is endemic in the nation's largest cities—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, and not uncommon in small towns such as East St. Louis, Poughkeepsie, Camden, and Compton. In fact, wherever poor people are concentrated and employment is scarce, public schools are almost always very bad. In many parts of the country, the problems present within urban schools are perceived as so numerous and intractable that the term "crisis" frequently is applied to describe the situation; and this is how it is described by those who haven't given up hope completely.

Yet, although the problems and issues confronting urban public schools in the United States are profound and deeply discouraging, characterizing their plight as either one of crisis or utter hopelessness is inaccurate. Nor do such grim portrayals serve as a genuine diagnosis of the problems or shed light on what should be done to address them. Such descriptions do, however, play an important role in influencing popular conceptions of urban schools, and ultimately they influence how policy makers approach the task of "fixing" the schools.

Were the situation in urban schools truly a "crisis," one might expect to see urgent responses from leaders at the local, state, and federal levels. After all, the education and welfare of millions of children are at stake, and if a crisis were genuinely perceived, would not drastic measures be taken to alleviate the suffering, not unlike the actions taken following an earthquake or a hurricane? However, even during a period in which educational issues are receiving more media coverage and more attention from policy makers than ever before,<sup>1</sup> there is a stunning lack of urgency associated with official responses to the issues confronting urban public schools.

Moreover, in everyday parlance, the term *crisis* typically is thought of as a temporary condition, a temporary although serious deviation from the status quo. Injured individuals and beleaguered communities affected by a storm or fire generally are not thought of as being in a permanent state of crisis. Even if the problems have devastating long-term consequences, over time the condition ceases to be described as a crisis. Eventually, there is a recovery and a return to a state of normalcy. Crises that persist or become more severe, like illnesses that take a turn for the worse and are deemed incurable, generally are characterized as chronic and debilitating conditions, unfortunate but permanent states for which solutions may never be found.

Similarly, while the term *crisis* may not appropriately characterize the situation in urban schools, those who describe them as doomed and hopelessly unfixable are also off the mark. There is no question that the problems of urban schools are entrenched and intractable. However, compelling evidence suggests that despite their failings and weaknesses, urban public schools are in fact indispensable to those they serve. Without any viable alternative available, urban public schools cannot be written off as rotten structures in need of demolition.

### THE INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTION

Despite the severity of the conditions present in many urban schools, and despite the intractability of the problems they face, these deeply flawed

institutions continue to exist in the United States. In fact, the term "urban" and the term "crisis" are often used interchangeably. The Great City Schools Study, a study of parents volunteers in 100 urban schools, has been described as a study of many do so with their parents enroll their children in the schools they regard as the best, hoping against all odds that their child attend through education and their children will be there when they are there.

I was reminded of these conversations with a group of inner-city Los Angeles parents in 1991. We met in a room in the most densely populated area of the city. It did not receive the attention of violence and the riot as the city whether the city was a state of brutal civil war.

As they described their ridden, drug-infested, and crowded public schools, they expressed a state of the mind that how happy they were that their children had added to the city's population. *menos niestros tenemos espaldas* out power of the problems in the city will be better.

In examining the public schools

institutions continue to serve millions of children throughout the United States. In fact, the largest school districts in the nation are classified as "urban" and they serve nearly one-third of school-aged children (Council of Great City Schools, 2001). In a profound demonstration of faith, millions of parents voluntarily take their children each day to the very schools that have been described as "desperate hell holes" (McGroarty, 1996). Certainly, many do so with reluctance and considerable consternation. In many cases, parents enroll their children only because they lack options or access to schools they regard as better or safer. However, many others do so willingly, hoping against the odds that for their child, or at the particular school their child attends, something good will happen, and a better future through education will be possible.<sup>2</sup> At a minimum, they may enroll their sons and daughters because they know that even at a failing public school their children will have access to a warm meal and adult supervision while they are there.

I was reminded of the difficult choices facing poor parents during conversations with Salvadoran refugees in a run-down neighborhood of inner-city Los Angeles. I was meeting with a group of parents at the Central American Refugee Center shortly after the Rodney King uprising of 1991. We met in an area of downtown LA called Pico Union, one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the United States and home to thousands of undocumented war refugees from Central America. Although it did not receive much media attention, it had been one of the epicenters of violence and looting during the riot. The parents I met with described the riot as the product of rising frustrations, and while others debated whether the outburst should be called a riot or a rebellion, these refugees of brutal civil wars termed it "*un explosion social*" (a social explosion).

As they described the perils they faced raising children in this crime-ridden, drug-infested neighborhood, they made me aware of how important the public schools were to them. They did not complain about the overcrowded classrooms, the absence of certified teachers, or the dismal state of the facilities. Instead, they spoke with genuine appreciation about how happy they were to have a safe place to send their children. The fact that their children were fed, and in at least one school provided health care, added to their sense of gratitude. "*Somos pobres, sin poder o derechos. Por los menos nuestro hijos teinen una educacion. Si, hay problemas en las escuelas, pero tenemos esperanza que el futuro de los hijos va estar mejor.*" (We are poor, without power or rights. At least our children have an education. Yes, there are problems in the schools, but we have hope that the future for our children will be better.)

In economically depressed inner-city communities like Pico Union, public schools play a vital role in supporting low-income families. Even

when other neighborhood services, including banks, retail stores, libraries, and other public services, do not exist, are shut down, or are abandoned, public schools remain (Noguera, 1995a). They are neighborhood constants, not because they succeed in carrying out their mission or because they satisfy the needs of those they serve, but because they have a relatively stable source of funding ensured by the legal mandate to educate children.

Urban public schools frequently serve as important social welfare institutions.<sup>3</sup> With meager resources, they attempt to address at least some of the nutritional and health needs of poor children. They do so because those charged with educating poor children generally recognize that it is impossible to serve their academic needs without simultaneously addressing their basic need for health and safety. For many poor children, schools provide a source of stability that often is lacking in other parts of their lives, and while many urban public schools are plagued by the threat of violence and intimidation, most are far safer than the communities in which they are located (Casella, 2001). The bottom line is that even when there is little evidence of educational efficacy, urban public schools still provide services that are desperately needed by poor families, and federal and state policies offer few alternatives.

In the absence of genuine alternatives, even failing public schools retain a dependent although disgruntled constituency base because they are typically the only social institution that provides a consistent source of stability and support to impoverished families. For this reason, those who castigate and disparage urban public schools without offering viable solutions for improving or replacing them jeopardize the interests of those who depend on them. Politicians who often lead the chorus of criticisms have largely failed to devise policies to address the deplorable conditions present in many inner-city schools and communities. Even in the few cases where drastic measures, such as state takeovers of troubled districts (most often, urban school systems), have been taken, the results achieved generally have failed to live up to the expectations or promises. Most of the popular educational reforms enacted by states and the federal government (e.g., standards and accountability through high-stakes testing, charter schools, phonics-based reading programs, etc.) fail to address the severe social and economic conditions in urban areas that invariably affect the quality and character of public schools.

The central argument of this book is that until there is a genuine commitment to address the social context of schooling—to confront the “urban” condition—it will be impossible to bring about significant and sustainable improvements in urban public schools. The complex and seemingly intractable array of social and economic problems in urban areas must be addressed and school-based policies that respond to these problems must be

devised; otherwise, pervasive school failure in cities across the United States will continue to be the norm.

Public schools are the only institutions in this country charged with providing for the educational needs of poor children. Given the role they play, it would be a mistake to allow them to deteriorate further or to become unsalvageable. Undeniably, they often carry out their mission poorly, without adequately serving the educational needs of the children under their charge. However, public schools in the United States are the only social institutions that cannot by law turn a child away regardless of race, religion, immigration status, or any other trait or designation (Kirp, 1982). Access to public education in the United States is complete, universal, and compulsory (Tyack, 1980), and, as such, it is also the only public service that functions as a form of social entitlement: a "positive right"<sup>4</sup> and social good provided to citizens and noncitizens alike (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). For all of these reasons, public education, even in the poorest sections of the inner city, constitutes a vital public resource. Rather than being regarded as hopelessly unfixable, urban public schools, particularly those that serve poor children, must be seen for what they are: the last and most enduring remnant of the social safety net for poor children in the United States.

Seen in this light, the problems confronting urban public school must be approached from a different perspective. Instead of castigating and decrying their failures, and inadvertently joining the chorus clamoring for their total demolition, those who recognize the value and the importance of the services schools provide must instead adopt a position of critical support. In the same way that it would be unwise for criticisms of overcrowded buses or trains to prompt calls to abandon mass transportation, those who deplore conditions in urban public schools must recognize that, despite their weaknesses, urban public schools are desperately needed by those they serve. Just as complaints about long lines and poor service should not be used to justify the elimination of public hospitals and clinics that provide health services to the poor and elderly, the failures of urban public schools should not be used as a rationale for their elimination. At least until a genuine, superior alternative for all children is available, public education, with all its faults and weaknesses, remains "the one best system," or at least the only system we have (Tyack, 1980).

However, critical support should not be confused with unquestioning loyalty to public education. Parents, especially those whose children are forced to attend the worst schools, generally have very little loyalty to the "system," and for good reason. The parents I spoke with in Pico Union appreciated the support their children received from struggling schools in their neighborhood, but in all likelihood would jump at the opportunity to enroll their children in better schools if it were possible. Few parents are

willing to sacrifice the needs of their children because they wish to show support for the democratic principles underlying the existence of public schools. Given the opportunity, most parents actively seek schools they think have the greatest potential to meet the needs of their children. Whether this occurs in a public, private, or charter school is generally less relevant than whether the school is accessible, affordable, safe, and educationally viable. Defenders of public education who refuse to recognize this reality of parenting undoubtedly will feel betrayed when those who were once their most reliable consumers, namely, poor parents, abandon public schools when provided with options they perceive as superior.

Critical supporters of public education must recognize that it is the rights of children and their families to a good education, and not a failed system, that must be supported. Critical supporters must not be afraid to honestly identify and call attention to the failures of the system, whether these are related to unresponsive leadership or the poor quality of teaching. Critical supporters must demonstrate active support for change and improvement, and, given the sorrowful plight of many schools, they must be open to considering a variety of strategies for innovation. This should not be interpreted as a naive willingness to embrace every new fad in educational reform that comes along. Rather, critical supporters should recognize that all reforms should be evaluated and assessed by the academic and social outcomes obtained by children. With calls for privatization gaining support and momentum, the only way to save public education is to radically alter it. Ensuring that the needs of students and their parents are treated as the highest priority, may be the most radical reform of all.

### PRAGMATIC OPTIMISM AS A GUIDE

This book was written to show how urban schools are affected by the social environment in which they are located and to put forward a set of strategies to transform, improve, and fundamentally restructure them. The ideas presented are the product of years of research, teaching, and service in urban schools throughout the United States. These years of experience have provided me with a strong sense of the grim reality present in many urban public schools, and also insights into what I believe it will take to make change possible. I characterize my perspective on the issues and problems confronting urban public schools as one of critical support and pragmatic optimism.

My pragmatism comes from personal and direct experience grappling with the problems facing urban public schools; and so does my optimism. As a middle and high school teacher in Providence, Rhode Island, and in

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Oakland and Berkeley, California, I have seen firsthand how hard it can be to work within schools and districts where the academic failure of large numbers of students has been the norm for a very long time. In such places, patterns of failure for certain kinds of students are so commonplace and so deeply entrenched that failure tends to be accepted as inevitable and unavoidable. Through research carried out at numerous urban schools, I have seen how easy it is for teachers and administrators to rationalize and therefore accept failure. Given the abundance of unmotivated and under-prepared students, dysfunctional and distressed families, unresponsive and incompetent administrators and teachers, and, most of all, misguided and foolhardy politicians, there is no shortage of compelling excuses for persistent failure. Yet, ultimately even this litany of charges just provides the person espousing them with a justification for the inability to make a difference with the children he or she serves. The tendency for some educators to cast blame elsewhere, while accepting responsibility for very little, provides me with a strong sense of pragmatism as I consider what it will take to bring about change.

Additionally, having served as an elected Director and President of the School Board in Berkeley, California, I also realize how difficult it is to reverse negative trends and change things for the better. Serving from 1990 to 1994, a period during which many schools faced severe financial hardships, I realized that my job was to manage what I came to regard as a miserable status quo. My responsibility as a board member required me to eliminate vital programs in order to balance the district budget. I was forced to take the heat for strained relations with our labor unions because we were unable to satisfy their legitimate demands for higher wages. Worst of all, I was forced to vote to expel some of our neediest students, setting them loose on the streets without adequate provision for their education or welfare, because they engaged in violent or dangerous behavior.

If I had not become a pragmatist from such experiences, I undoubtedly would have abandoned my interest in working for the betterment of urban public schools long ago. Pragmatism makes it possible for one to act even in difficult circumstances when one must accept and recognize the limitations of what may be possible. Pragmatism also makes it possible to avoid demonizing beleaguered administrators, angry parents, and frustrated teachers, because it allows one to understand the legitimate source of their resentment, even if it does not provide a way to adequately respond to it.

However, my pragmatism has not given way to cynicism or disillusionment. I remain profoundly aware of the unique potential inherent in education; it alone has the ability to transform and improve the lives of even the neediest and most downtrodden individuals. At the most basic

level, I know that all children, regardless of their race or class background, can learn and grow in positive and productive ways when provided the opportunity, and that even in the poorest communities it is possible to create schools that serve children well. I know these things not because of blind faith but largely from direct experience. I have taught in schools that were dumping grounds for "at-risk" adolescents, and I have worked with students who had been written off as incorrigible and unteachable. I have seen these same students learn, grow confident in their abilities, and aspire to achieve goals that previously seemed impossible.

### GAINING A PERSPECTIVE ON SUCCESS AND FAILURE

My faith in the possibility that education can serve as a vehicle of individual transformation, and even social change, is rooted in an understanding that human beings have the ability to rise above even the most difficult obstacles, to become more than just victims of circumstance. I have seen education open doors for those who lacked opportunity, and open the minds of those who could not imagine alternative ways of being and living. Like Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), I have seen education enable students to "perceive critically the way they exist in the world; to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 71).

My optimism is rooted in my faith in people. It is a faith affirmed by teachers like Timiza Wagner, who, unlike me, spent nearly 20 years teaching at East Campus, tirelessly working to instill a sense of hope among young people who had been written off as hopeless by the schools that served them. It is a faith that is renewed by finding schools like Henshaw Middle School in Modesto, California, where most of the children are recent immigrants, speak Spanish as their first language, and have parents who work at the dirty jobs that most Americans refuse to take. Yet, this is a school whose students consistently achieve at high levels (Carnegie Foundation, 1994/1995), and a school where parents are respected as genuine partners despite all the things they do not have. I have worked with other schools that provide an oasis of hope to children who live in neighborhoods and housing projects that seem unfit for human habitation, whose lives are so difficult and arduous that coming to know them well can be a painful experience. I also have had the privilege of working with schools that gradually have been transformed from dumping grounds for bad kids and poor teachers, into model schools that provide students with genuine alternatives from the uncaring, impersonal environments present in many

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urban public schools. Finally, I have observed teachers who consistently create educational magic in their classrooms, who incite and motivate their students to want to learn, who set high standards for themselves and their students and make it clear that not learning simply is not an option.

Experiences such as these enabled me to overcome the pessimism I felt while working in the Mayor's office: a pessimism that so often overwhelms those who work in urban schools in the United States. As a university professor, of course, I have the luxury to visit both good and bad schools, but unlike those I observe and work with, I get to leave the despair and return to the comfort of the university. I work with and speak to thousands of teachers, students, and parents, and I hear them express their frustrations about politicians who either do not understand or do not care about the conditions in inner-city schools. I also serve on national committees that are charged with studying the problems confronting urban education, and occasionally I am asked to testify before policy makers about what should be done. I use these opportunities to voice the concerns of those who are never heard because their plight and suffering simply are not seen as important.

Yet despite my extensive involvement, I still get to leave the schools whenever I want. I get to return to my office at the university where I can escape the daily grind and the mind-numbing routine of so many schools. I can escape the loud hallways and the tedious faculty meetings that drive even idealistic and committed teachers to cynicism or out of teaching altogether. I get to see the big picture, to keep one foot in and one foot out of urban public schools, and I am allowed time to reflect on what I have seen. I have time to review the data I have collected, to reflect on the stories I have heard, and the opportunity to write and speak about my experiences at some distance from the places where the drama of school plays itself out. I am mindful of the many privileges I enjoy in relation to this work, and I feel compelled to use my position to speak on behalf of those who do not possess similar opportunities and advantages. I do not take this responsibility lightly. My experience leaves me compelled to be accountable for my words and deeds.

When I compare my situation with the reality of most teachers, counselors, and administrators who work within urban public schools, or with the lives of the children who attend them, I am forced to reflect on my own life and the privileges I enjoy. As a former student in New York City's public schools, I am keenly aware that things could have turned out differently for me. Most of my closest friends did not go to college, much less an Ivy League university. The fortunate found dead-end jobs that provide them and their families with a degree of stability. The less fortunate are either dead or wasting away their lives in prison. The long list of those who met

such a fate suggests their demise was more than the result of poor choices made or a lack of self-discipline.

My personal fortune does not lead me to the conclusion that if I, a working-class kid from Brooklyn, can find success through education, then so can anyone else who makes the effort. Unlike individuals such as John McWhorter (2000) and Shelby Steele (1990), who use their personal success as a basis for castigating others, especially Black people, for laziness and anti-intellectualism,<sup>5</sup> my experience has taught me that there is more to achieving academic and personal success than effort alone. Children don't get to choose their parents, the neighborhood they'll grow up in, the school they'll attend, or the teachers to whom they'll be assigned. While growing up, I knew many kids who tried hard to do well in school, whose parents supported them and who valued education as strongly as did mine. Yet, most of them were not as fortunate. Due largely to circumstances beyond their control, their dreams and those of their parents were never realized, not because of a lack of effort, but because of a lack of luck and opportunity.

As the second of six children from working-class Caribbean immigrant parents, neither of whom graduated from high school or attended college, I benefited from having learned at an early age to understand the importance of education. Even though neither of my parents had the time or knowledge to navigate the school system, they still managed to convey the importance of academic success to their children, and succeeded in sending all six to some of the most highly regarded universities in the nation. We didn't attend elite private or suburban schools. There was no money for private tutors, computers, or expensive vacations. Yet, education worked for us, even though, for the most part, we succeeded in spite of the system, not because of it. As new immigrants, my parents rejected the idea that the skin color and culture made us racially inferior. We were taught that character and hard work mattered more than race, and that none of the White children we went to school with were inherently superior. Ours is an old success story, one of immigrants who are able to reap the rewards of American opportunity through hard work and determination. Yet, such stories do not negate the fact that, without a Herculean effort, the vast majority of those who are born poor, stay poor.

Now, as the parent of four children, all of whom have attended urban public schools, I continue to enjoy a position of privilege. Unlike me, my children have access to the resources available to most middle-class families—summer enrichment programs, music lessons, and foreign travel. They attend public schools but we have the know-how to make the system work for them and the resources to make up for what they do not receive in school. I know how to advocate for my children and I know how to help

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them navigate schools that consistently fail large numbers of students. My education grants me class privileges, and generally I am treated with courtesy and respect when I visit my children's schools. Unlike many other parents, I am treated like a valued customer: a client who has the ability and wherewithal to exit the system if I feel unsatisfied with the quality of service.

My experience as a parent and student in urban public schools has taught me that while effort is a key ingredient for individual success, for those who are born poor it is not a guarantee. My understanding of the broad patterns of failure and success in American society leads me to conclude that under the present conditions, academic failure for large numbers of poor and working-class children is inevitable. Although we may be in a "new economy" in which many jobs require advanced skills and education (Murnane & Levy, 1996), there is still a need for people who are willing to accept low-status, low-wage work. As long as some schools (suburban and private) are able to generate a sufficient number of academically qualified students for high-skill, high-wage labor, or as long as such labor can be imported, the failure of low-performing schools does not pose a problem for the economy.

Politically, the quality of schools corresponds closely to the strength of electoral constituencies. This is a point that will be developed further in Chapter 2, where I examine the effects of poverty and racial segregation on local control over schools. Since the end of World War II, political power has shifted in most states from the cities to the suburbs (Clark, 1985; Gratz & Mintz, 1998). Moreover, in high-poverty urban areas, voter participation tends to be low, and ties to political parties are often weak (Schorr, 1997). Cities increasingly lack the political clout needed to obtain much-needed resources from state government. In some cases, cities still serve as important centers of economic and cultural activity. But even when they retain a degree of viability, they are more likely to employ those who reside elsewhere than those who live within city limits.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the United States, failing schools are treated as local matters, and responsibility for improving them is delegated to those who reside in the communities they serve. This continues to be the case whether or not communities can generate the resources to address the needs of poor students. From afar, state governments have established academic standards and systems for holding schools accountable (Blasi, 2001; Elmore, 1996), even though it is widely recognized that there are many schools where basic "opportunity to learn standards" have not been met (Oakes, 2002). Of course, state governments do find ways to commit resources to an ever-expanding penal system that stands ready to absorb those who have encountered failure elsewhere.

The consistency of patterns of success and failure, both academic and ultimately economic, and the predictability of these patterns—their correlation with the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of children—explain why the problems of America's urban public schools are written off as inevitable. Although academic failure in urban schools may be lamented by politicians and deplored by the media, and although those seen as responsible may be viciously castigated, such posturing should not be confused with a serious response to the problem. Ultimately, the lack of a concerted and sustained effort to respond to failing urban public schools can be explained only by understanding that America simply does not care that large numbers of children from inner-city schools and neighborhoods are not properly educated.

This is not a conspiracy theory. For me, it is simply a starting point for my pragmatism. The plight of inner-city schools and many rural schools that serve poor children throughout the United States is not a secret or unknown fact. It is widely recognized that many urban public schools are places that should be avoided because they are dangerous, chaotic, and potentially damaging to those who go there. Yet, it also is understood that certain children—the poorest and neediest—will end up there. For this reason, the possibility that low-performing schools will be forced to close and that other schools will be required to educate their students, as called for in a new policy from the Bush administration, seems implausible. Just as it was true during the bitter and bloody conflicts over busing, it continues to be true today: There aren't many schools in affluent areas that want to serve poor children, especially those who are not White. For this reason it is highly unlikely that the new policy—various forms of school choice or even vouchers—will provide the least powerful children access to schools that are as good as those that serve affluent children.<sup>7</sup>

Urban schools and the children who attend them languish under third world-like conditions, even as President George W. Bush boldly promises to "leave no child behind." Millions of dollars from private and public sources are spent in the name of reform and restructuring, and an entire industry of education experts has been created to go about the work of improving America's schools, but the situation in inner-city schools remains largely unchanged.

In my travels across the United States, I frequently encounter a small number of effective schools that cater to poor children. However, I realize that their scarcity is not an accident.<sup>8</sup> In the San Francisco Bay Area, elementary schools such as Washington in Richmond, Emerson in Berkeley, and Hawthorn in San Francisco serve as living proof that it is possible to create schools that serve poor children well. Their existence, like the 4,000 high-performing, high-poverty schools throughout the nation identified by the

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Education Trust, reminds us that the problem is not the children but the schools they attend (Education Trust, 2002). Still, knowing that such schools exist forces me to ask why we continue to allow them to be exceptions amid a sea of miserable inadequacy.

The extreme disparities in wealth that pervade U.S. society are largely responsible for the plight of young people and the state of education in urban areas. However, the dearth of good schools is also the inevitable by-product of a system that is almost completely unaccountable to those it serves. Public education is one of few enterprises where the quality of service provided has no bearing whatsoever on the ability of the system to function. Even when there is little evidence that schools are able to fulfill their basic mission—educating children—the system continues to chug along and all employees get paid (some quite well). This is why I believe that the high-stakes exams that have been adopted in states such as Massachusetts and California are fundamentally flawed and morally irresponsible. The exams are used to hold students accountable for their achievement even though the authorities who have imposed the exams know that they cannot guarantee the quality of the education students receive.

As long as we are able to convince ourselves that simply providing access to education is equivalent to providing equal opportunity, we will continue to treat failing schools as a nonissue. We also will continue to delude ourselves with the notion that the United States is a democracy based on genuine meritocratic principles: a society where social mobility is determined by individual talent and effort. We hold on to this fantasy even as a quarter of the nation's children are denied adequate educational opportunity.

Ultimately, this denial relegates the problems and issues confronting urban public schools to the margins of public life in American society. The media frequently carries stories about deplorable conditions in urban public schools, but typically it does so as if they occurred far away in some third world nation. Occasionally, the media will report on the triumphant stories of poor children like Cedric Jennings, the lead character in *A Hope in the Unseen* (Suskind, 1999). Cedric manages to overcome tremendous obstacles while going to school in southeast DC, and he manages to succeed against great odds. Yet, even in telling his story, the idea that individual effort rather than structural change is the solution is reinforced. As a society we are generally far more comfortable extolling the virtues of individual responsibility and merit, even as the structural nature of the problems affecting poor kids and schools in poor neighborhoods go unexplored and unaddressed in policy.

The fact that the United States tolerates the failure of so many of its urban schools suggests that there is either a pervasive belief that poor chil-

dren are not entitled to anything better, or an active conspiracy to ensure that the majority of children who are born poor, stay poor. Whether we accept either of these explanations is ultimately less important than what critical supporters actually do to ensure that present and future generations of children are provided with the opportunity to attend better schools.

### LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF CHANGING URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of the goals of this book is to put forward a framework that can be used to guide the improvement of urban public schools, one that takes the social context—or what I have termed the urban condition—into account. Drawing on my research and teaching experience, and from a perspective based on pragmatic optimism, my starting point for such a framework is to recognize the limits and possibilities of what can be changed in the current circumstances.

My own thinking about limits and possibilities is influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972). Freire uses the concept of a "limit situation" in theorizing about his work in adult literacy. For Freire, illiteracy is much more than a failure to master the mechanics of reading and writing. It is rather a symptom of a larger condition of oppression and powerlessness and therefore cannot be fixed through traditional approaches to adult education. Instead, through dialogue and communication based on mutual respect and reciprocity, Freire calls upon educators to teach students to "read the world." This entails helping students to acquire an understanding of the forces that maintain imbalances in wealth and power so that the students can see their "situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation" (p. 73). It also involves a move away from fatalistic perspectives that lead individuals to accept and adapt to oppressive circumstances, and calls for the adoption of a critical stance toward relations of power.

Freire recognized that a critical perspective (he uses the term *critical consciousness*) is not enough to transform social conditions, so he calls on teachers to treat conditions of oppression as "limit situations": problems that require critical reflection, engagement, and praxis. By this he meant that in any historical period, the possibilities for change must constantly be assessed and reflected upon so that strategies for countering these conditions can be devised. Freire conceived of human liberation and social justice as states of being that people must aspire to and devise courses of action to realize. By viewing the constraints on their freedom and dignity as limited situations, Freire believed the oppressed would be less inclined to see

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their situation as having been ordained by God. He hoped that such a shift in perspective would open the possibility that the oppressed would consider ways to act on these constraints and gradually expand possibilities for a greater degree of freedom. Freire (1970) writes:

As they separate themselves from the world and locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations in the world and with others, men overcome the situations which limit them: the "limit situations." Once perceived as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality. . . . As critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit situations. (p. 89)

If we apply Freire's approach to understanding the limit situations that confront urban schools, there is a greater likelihood that we can devise creative approaches that make it possible to move beyond the dismal status quo. In the case of urban public schools, the constraints that stand in the way of change are both internal and external to school systems. Externally, the constraints are related primarily to the effects of poverty and social isolation on families in economically depressed inner-city neighborhoods. External conditions related to poverty invariably affect schools and have an impact on teaching and learning (Anyon, 1996; Maeroff, 1988; Schorr, 1997). Many inner-city communities have been in a constant state of economic depression for a very long time, and in many areas even the prosperity of the 1990s failed to significantly lower unemployment or bring about significant improvements in the quality of life (Phillips, 2002). The absence of well-paying jobs and a vibrant retail sector has converted many of these communities into what some economists refer to as "no zones"—no banks, no stores, no pharmacies, no community services. In the absence of a functioning formal economy, many residents generate income through the informal economy where many of the transactions and economic activities are illegal (e.g., drug trafficking, prostitution, gambling, "off-the-books" labor). Consistently, research has shown that when poverty is concentrated and poor people are socially isolated, the health and welfare of children and families suffer (Greenberg & Schneider, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987).

The role that local and state politicians play vis-à-vis urban schools and communities is another important external factor that influences the operation of schools. In many cities, the public school system is the leading employer, and the jobs available within the school system often offer higher pay than similar jobs in the private sector. The officials who manage schools are often quite powerful. The contracts that officials grant for

construction, food services, and maintenance constitute a significant source of revenue for external suppliers. When those responsible for schools treat the economic activities of the school system as a cash cow and source of patronage, educational issues often become a low priority. In such cases, it is not uncommon for resources that should be directed to support schools, to be redirected into questionable activities. Political corruption, instability in leadership, institutional indifference, and administrative interference and/or ineptness can all have a profound effect on the ability of schools to function (Anyon, 1996; Henig et al., 1999). Finally, when battles for political control of schools take on greater importance than fulfilling their educational mission, key players and constituencies can become too distracted to focus on the critical educational work that needs to be done.

A broad array of demographic and socioeconomic factors, including the arrival of new immigrants (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and neighborhood instability, also exert powerful influences over schools and the children who attend them. For example, as middle-class families have moved out of rust-belt cities like Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, and Hartford since the 1960s, the quality of schools has declined precipitously. Schools decline partially because there is less money available as the tax base is eroded, but also because when household income goes down and the percentage of low-income, single-parent families goes up, the challenges facing schools increase significantly. Likewise, other trends, such as housing affordability and stability, the accessibility of health care, and the impact of welfare reform, profoundly affect schools and the quality of children's lives.

These external constraints cannot be ignored or treated as factors that are beyond the reach of schools and therefore impossible to address. The tendency to ignore the environmental context is commonplace, even though a vast body of research has shown that external factors such as poverty play highly significant roles in influencing the quality of schooling provided to children (Anyon, 1996; Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks, 1972; Noguera, 1995c). Despite widespread recognition of the dire social problems confronting urban public schools, it is rare for politicians to devise policies that take social context into account. Instead, there are numerous examples of policies that treat schools uniformly and subject both rich and poor to the same laws and regulations.

Internal constraints also limit and hinder the possibilities for schools to improve. High turnover among superintendents, principals, and teachers adds to the sense of instability present in some schools and results in inexperienced professionals being assigned the most difficult and complex educational jobs (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Even when turnover is not as great a problem, urban districts often have large numbers of teachers who

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are demoralized and/or burned-out as a result of poor working conditions and low salaries. The morale of school personnel and the culture and organizational climate within schools and administrative offices have a tremendous bearing on the capacity of schools to change and improve. Genuine reform and improvement are impossible to achieve in schools where disorder and chaos are prevalent (Payne, 1984, 2001).

Similarly, inadequate facilities, which in many urban areas may include broken windows, poor heating and ventilation, and a wide array of cosmetic and structural deficiencies, as well as a shortage of instructional materials such as computers and textbooks, also constitute important internal constraints on schools. Finally, the common tendency to pursue costly reforms without a commitment to evaluate the effectiveness of new measures adds to the sense of demoralization experienced by school personnel and contributes to a profound cynicism among them about the possibility of reform itself. Commenting on the tendency of policy makers to issue new recommendations for reform without evaluating or learning from past failures, Sarason (1971) writes:

When you read the myriad of recommendations these commission reports contain, it becomes clear that they are not informed by any conception of a system. This is a charitable assessment. It deserves emphasis that none of these reports confronts the question of why these recommendations for changing this or that part of the system have been ineffective. More upsetting is the question of why so many people think the situation has not remained the same but deteriorated. Why, in the quiet of night, do so many people think that the situation is hopeless? (p. 15)

Many of the conditions described above are not unique to urban schools, but are present to varying degrees within schools throughout the United States (Cuban & Tyack, 1995; Wagner, 1994). However, they are more likely to be present and to be particularly severe in urban public schools that are located in economically depressed neighborhoods.

Yet, despite the real obstacles created by internal and external constraints, there are realistic possibilities for improvement and reform. The most compelling evidence that such openings exist in spite of these constraints is the existence of what are now recognized widely as "effective schools" that serve poor children and operate in low-income urban areas. Isolated and few in number though they may be, a significant number of schools that serve poor children manage to demonstrate that it is possible for students to achieve at high levels. Research on such schools has shown that they succeed both because they find ways to develop the internal capacity of schools to support good teaching and learning, and because they face the external constraints head-on (Haycock, 2002). They do this by ex-

explicitly devising strategies that enable them to cope with, and in some cases overcome, the obstacles present within the external environment. Such schools find ways to provide coats to children in the winter and additional food to children who don't eat regularly at home. By finding ways to mitigate the impact of external constraints, such schools provide a reasonable basis for pragmatic optimism.

Furthermore, possibilities for change and improvement are enhanced when capable and committed educators are organized to serve the needs of children. Programs such as the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco, Young Black Scholars in Los Angeles, and the Paul Robeson Institute in New York have been highly effective in furthering academic achievement of poor minority students.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the success of such programs is contingent on the availability of competent and committed personnel, a fact that often makes replication difficult. However, this fact should not negate the possibility that similar programs can be adopted to help schools to improve. Rather, it should underscore the importance of the most critical ingredient of school success—the availability of highly skilled and dedicated professionals without whom success simply is not possible. Furthermore, the success of certain interventions, as well as even the temporary success of certain schools, serves as proof that the possibility for transforming urban public schools is real.

Finally, and most important, the possibility for better education exists because children are fundamentally educable and capable of learning at high levels. This fact must be articulated repeatedly because in too many cases it is not the premise on which reforms are based. When the adults who serve children do not believe their students are capable of learning and achieving at high levels, they are less likely to provide students with an education that challenges them to fully realize their intellectual potential. Invariably, adults who question the ability of students to learn set lower standards and hold lower expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Most disturbing of all is the fact that such educators provide an education to their students that they would regard as unacceptable for their own children.

Working with an awareness of the limits and possibilities for school improvement, we are compelled to revisit the issue of commitment, effort, and will. While such subjective characteristics may not suffice as explanations for student achievement, they are indispensable features of any school change process. Put most simply, schools improve when people work harder and smarter (Elmore, 1996). When they invest greater time and energy into improving their practice and coordinating the services they provide to children and their families in a more coherent manner, increased achievement is more likely. This is not to suggest that hard work alone is all that is needed to improve urban schools. However, even if all of the key

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ingredients are in place and optimal conditions have been created to support teaching and learning, success will still require hard work.

The work required to improve schools that serve poor children entails much more than a mechanistic adherence to a set of prescribed reforms or the adoption of a new curriculum. One consistent feature of schools that succeed at educating poor children is that they are guided by a coherent mission: one that is embraced enthusiastically by teachers, students, and parents (Edmonds, 1979; Meier, 1995; Sizemore, 1988). Such schools almost always are led by dedicated and exemplary principals who motivate and inspire their staff while simultaneously generating a sense of accountability to those they serve. Successful schools, especially those that succeed over a long period of time, often have an intangible quality about them that produces high morale, and an *esprit de corps* that compels those who teach or learn there to approach their work with a sense of purpose and commitment.

I was reminded of this characteristic of effective schools when I went to see an old friend from college. I sought out my college roommate, Amateka Morgan, after nearly 20 years without contact, hoping that he might have some wisdom to share with my 17-year-old son Joaquin, who was about to enroll in college in New York City. We found Amateka working in a private Islamic primary school in the Williamsburgh section of Brooklyn. Two weeks before school was to begin, he was hard at work waxing floors, painting walls, and moving furniture. He explained that he recently had resigned from Girls and Boys High School (a large comprehensive public school in Brooklyn) where he had been employed for over 10 years as a science teacher and track coach. He told us that although he enjoyed working at the school, he had grown tired of hearing people say that if he could save one or two children, he would have accomplished something. Smiling broadly, he informed us, "At this school, we know we can save all of our children. The only thing limiting us is the size of the building. Even though we don't have facilities like the public schools we can do a better job because we love the children, and it shows in what they can do" (personal communication, September 2, 2000).

Without the kinds of qualities demonstrated by my old friend—commitment, enthusiasm, compassion, solidarity, and love—it is doubtful that public schools can be reformed. Individuals possessing such qualities also need support derived from structural changes aimed at easing the effects of poverty. However, without such individuals change may not be possible at all. The nature of work in urban schools is simply too difficult, the working conditions too harsh, and the external obstacles too numerous. Without the extra boost provided by an emotional or philosophical motivation for doing the work, success cannot be achieved. Unfortunately, such traits cannot be invoked by policy makers, or mandated by superintendents or school boards;

if they are not rooted within an individual's value system, often they cannot be cultivated. In some cases, individuals can be inspired to manifest these qualities, but they cannot be coerced to do so. Hence, to a large degree, the possibility for transforming urban public schools is contingent on our ability to find ways either to attract highly motivated and competent professionals to work in them, or to inspire and support those who are already there. Assessing the situation in urban schools with a healthy dose of pragmatism forces us to recognize that neither task is easy.

### IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

For nearly 20 years I taught and conducted research in several schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. These experiences provide the empirical basis for my analysis of the limits and possibilities of improving urban schools. Widely regarded as one of the most prosperous regions in the United States due to its proximity to Silicon Valley, the national center of the "new economy," the Bay Area would seem to have every ingredient needed to make the probability for success in public education high. Yet, like urban schools throughout the rest of the nation, public schools in the Bay Area exhibit most of the familiar signs of failure and distress, despite their location in this affluent region.

In the forthcoming chapters I will explain why public education in the Bay Area has largely failed to live up to its promise and potential. Through a series of case studies, I will show how several schools have been affected by and have attempted to respond to the challenges of the urban environment. I will do this by drawing attention to both the reasons for failure and the factors that have enabled some schools to produce a degree of success.

It is my hope that this book will not only inform readers about the peculiarities of this region, but also provide insights that can help us to understand what it will take to reverse trends in urban education generally. It is my hope that by grounding this analysis in the experience of real schools and communities, I will make a credible and realistic case for radically improving urban public schools. Drawing on my position of critical support and pragmatic optimism, I will describe how schools can respond to the forces of social inequality and fulfill the promise of American education. That promise is rooted in Horace Mann's belief that schools should function as the great "equalizer" of opportunity: an arena where inherited privileges do not determine one's opportunities (Tyack, 1980). Improving the state of America's urban schools necessarily will be a central element of any effort to realize that promise.

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## The Social Context and Its Impact on Inner-City Schooling

### RETHINKING THE "URBAN"

Increasingly, the term *urban* is less likely to be employed as a geographic concept used to define and describe physical locations than as a social or cultural construct used to describe certain people and places. Although demographers and planners may regard any neighborhood or residence within a standard metropolitan area as urban, in common parlance the term has attained specific socioeconomic and racial connotations. When media reports describe a neighborhood or group of residents as "urban," we can almost always be sure that those being described are relatively poor and, in many cases, non-White. Such references are made even more explicit when terms like *inner-city* are used instead of urban, or when they are replaced by more blatantly pejorative words such as *ghetto*, *slum*, *barrio*, or *hood*. However, with the change of language that came about with the attempt to use more sensitive words to refer to marginalized groups, *urban* is generally the more acceptable adjective used in reference to certain people who reside within certain neighborhoods in cities.

Changes in nomenclature reflect more than just ideological and political trends. The association between the term *urban* and people and places that are poor and non-White is tied to the demographic and economic transformations that occurred in cities throughout the United States during the past 50 years (Clark, 1998; Wilson, 1978, 1987). With the exception of a small number of "global cities," since the end of World War II cities across the United States have declined in importance as economic, political, and commercial centers. For many northeastern and midwestern cities, the decline began as early as the late nineteenth century as the textile, furniture, and garment industries moved south or out of the United States entirely in search of cheaper labor (Friedland, 1983). In the 1950s, federal policies

hastened the decline of cities as new highways were constructed, making it easier for the middle class to move out of cities to obtain a piece of the American dream: a single-family home located in the suburbs. With the advent of shopping malls and Levittown-style tract housing, suburban living became possible even for the working class (Gans, 1967). In the 1970s, continued de-industrialization and the globalization of the economy further eroded the economic base of many cities, particularly those that were dependent on a single industry such as steel production or auto manufacturing (Castells, 1998).

Court-ordered busing and the desegregation of housing and public education in the 1960s also played a role in the transformation of cities (See Table 2.1). With jobs and housing moving to the suburbs and African Americans—and later other minorities—moving to cities in greater numbers, many cities experienced a “darkening” and precipitous “White flight.” Declining White enrollment in schools and the gradual process of ethnic succession in neighborhoods dramatically changed the racial and socioeconomic character of cities. In several cities, “dark ghettos” (Wade, 1995) replaced White working-class neighborhoods, and more often than not the transition was neither smooth nor peaceful. Several cities—for example, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago—experienced protracted conflicts, some of which became violent, as a result of White resistance to school and neighborhood desegregation. Even in places such as the Bay Area where there was less open resistance to dismantling of racial segregation, genuine integration in the make-up of schools or neighborhoods was the exception and not the norm in most communities.

Despite the resistance, White backlash largely failed to deter the racial transformation of cities. In several of the largest cities, separate and distinct White neighborhoods—some poor, some affluent—still remain, but the majority population became non-White.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, changes in the

**Table 2.1.** White Flight—Percent Population White over Three Decades

	1960s		1970s		1980s	
	Percent White	Percent Change*	Percent White	Percent Change	Percent White	Percent Change
Berkeley	73.8	-14.6	68.5	-7.7	66.0	-3.8
Oakland	73.6	-16.2	59.2	-24.3	38.2	-55.0
Richmond	78.0	-9.9	51.6	-51.2	39.7	-30.0
San Francisco	81.6	-9.7	71.7	-13.8	58.2	-23.2

\* Percent change based on 1950s data. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

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racial composition of cities made it possible for Black and in some cases Latino mayors to be elected in major cities such as Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, and Washington, DC, during the 1970s and 1980s. Changes in the leadership of municipal governments in turn brought about changes in the make-up of the civil service and the administration of public schools (Bush, 1984; Pinkney, 1984).<sup>2</sup> By the 1980s, the transformation was nearly complete: Cities throughout the United States no longer wielded the power they once held within the American economy and politics, and increasingly they were disproportionately comprised of residents who were poor and non-White.

### THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA: CONTRASTING CONDITIONS IN HIGH-WEALTH AND HIGH-POVERTY CITIES

I want to examine four cities in the San Francisco Bay Area—San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond—in order to illustrate the challenges and dilemmas confronting urban public schools. These are also cities where I have done most of my research and teaching over the past 20 years. Although each city and region has its own particular history and unique cast of historical characters, many of the changes that have occurred in the Bay Area have occurred in cities throughout the United States. Hence, the region serves as an appropriate and useful locale from which to analyze and discuss trends in cities and schools that have transpired elsewhere.

In the Bay Area, two distinct national trends among cities are also evident: the emergence of high-wealth and high-poverty cities. Oakland and Richmond, two mid-sized, formerly industrial cities, vividly illustrate the problems and challenges confronting high-poverty cities. Following the end of World War II, both cities experienced substantial job loss when Kaiser Aluminum moved or reduced its shipping- and defense-related operations from the area. Economic changes also contributed to major demographic changes as White middle- and working-class residents moved away from Richmond and Oakland in the 1960s and 1970s (Moore, 2000).

With a declining tax base, the downtown commercial districts of both Oakland and Richmond experienced gradual deterioration. Once vibrant retail, financial, and cultural centers, these areas declined dramatically and became like ghost towns, particularly after 6 p.m. By the 1980s, vacant shops and boarded up office buildings filled the historic downtown areas, eventually outnumbering viable enterprises. It was during this period of eco-

conomic decline that Black leadership emerged to assume control of city government, including the police and fire departments, and the administration of public schools. The election of former judge Lionel Wilson in Oakland and George Livingston in Richmond broke the color barriers in politics and elevated the hopes and expectations of low-income, minority communities. Their ascension was heralded as a sign that better days were coming.

Unfortunately for the new leadership, changes in administrative leadership occurred during a period of fiscal austerity. Instead of delivering new programs and economic development initiatives, the new leadership met the high expectations of the electorate with lamentations about budget shortfalls and diminished public resources. As the number of impoverished residents increased in the 1980s, the situation worsened considerably. In the local media, both cities became known as havens for drug trafficking, drive-by shootings, and homelessness, and the plight of their public schools soon came to epitomize the widespread sense of despair. With the dreams of progress unfulfilled, faith in politics as the solution to local problems gradually dissipated.

The 1990s briefly brought signs of economic revival to Oakland and Richmond as the growth generated by the "new economy," especially in the high tech and biotech sectors, finally stimulated growth in other sectors. However, in comparison to their richer counterparts, the two cities continue to lag far behind. With the recession of 2000 still inflicting damage, it is now clear that those who hoped improved economic conditions in the two cities would lead to tangible benefits for low-income city residents, will have to wait a while longer. It seems more likely that in certain desirable neighborhoods a different scenario will play itself out and poor people gradually will be displaced by more affluent residents.

Whereas poverty rates increased in Oakland and Richmond in the 1970s and 1980s, San Francisco and Berkeley experienced a steady decline in the number of low-income households during the same period. Significantly, the decline in poverty largely was not due to government interventions such as the development of affordable housing or the enactment of rent control, although these policies were pursued and implemented in both cities (Nathan & Scott, 1978). Instead, San Francisco and Berkeley experienced a steady decline in the number of low-income residents as a result of rising property values and a dramatic slowdown in construction of low-income housing. Increasingly, poor and working-class people, especially African Americans, found it difficult to find affordable housing in the two cities and were forced to move to working-class neighborhoods in the suburbs. Both cities also have experienced aggressive and steady gentrification as neighborhoods, such as the Western Addition in San Fran-

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cisco and the Oceanview neighborhood in West Berkeley, saw the gradual departure of poor, elderly, and minority residents and their replacement by White, middle-class professionals.

Interestingly, although San Francisco and Berkeley did not experience the White flight that occurred in Oakland and Richmond, Blacks, and to a lesser extent Asians and Latinos, did rise to positions of leadership in both cities (See Table 2.2). Warren Widener became the first Black mayor of Berkeley in the 1970s, while Willie Brown, former Speaker of the California Assembly, was elected Mayor of San Francisco in the 1990s. Like Oakland and Richmond, minorities experienced significant employment gains in the public sector, including the public schools, over the past 30 years. The superintendency in San Francisco was a bastion of patronage for Italian American politicians until the first minority superintendent, Ray Cortinez, was appointed in the 1980s. Following Cortinez, a succession of minorities—a Puerto Rican man (Waldemar Rojas) and two Black women (Linda Davis and Arlene Ackerman)—have held the post. Berkeley appointed its first Black superintendent, Laval Wilson, in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, Blacks rose to positions of leadership throughout the city, including city manager and chief of the police and fire departments.

Although the contrast between the high-wealth and high-poverty cities of the Bay Area is striking, with respect to the demographic make-up of their schools the four cities share a great deal. In all four cities, the majority of children enrolled in the public schools are poor and minority. Of the four, Berkeley remains relatively integrated, with White enrollment in most schools hovering at 35–40%. However, in a city that is nearly 70% White, and where an estimated 25% of all school-aged children are enrolled in private schools, racial imbalance is still quite evident.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2.2.** White Flight—Changes in White Enrollment over Four Decades

	1960s		1970s		1980s		1990s	
	Percent White	Percent White	Percent Change	Percent White	Percent Change	Percent White	Percent Change	
Berkeley	46.2	45.8	<-1.0	39.6	-15.7	33.6	-17.9	
Oakland	30.9	13.5	-128.0	9.1	-48.4	6.1	-49.2	
Richmond	66.9	47.6	-41.0	33.5	-42.1	20.0	-67.5	
San Francisco	41.2	20.5	-100.1	14.8	-38.5	12.5	-18.4	

Source: School district website or archives.

In San Francisco the imbalance in the racial and socioeconomic composition of the public schools as compared with the city is even more dramatic. From 1975 to 2003, fewer than 10% of all students enrolled in the district have been White, compared with a White population in the city that is over 60%. White enrollment in San Francisco public schools is particularly noteworthy when one considers that as recently as 1968 it was as high as 40%. Much of the change in the San Francisco student population can be explained by the dramatic increase in Asian enrollment brought about by a steady influx of Asian immigrants during this 20-year period (Clark, 1998). However, the steady exodus of White working-class families, triggered at least in part by the advent of court-ordered desegregation and school busing, was equally important in prompting White flight from the public schools (Kirp, 1982). Like Berkeley, San Francisco still has a large White population (49.7%); however, much of this population is affluent and relatively few White households have school-aged children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In Oakland and Richmond, White flight from the schools mirrored White flight from the cities and neighborhoods (Moore, 2000). In both cities, an increase in the number of African American residents corresponded closely to a steady decline in the number of White residents. This pattern is captured most vividly through a perusal of high school yearbooks at Castlemont High School in East Oakland and Kennedy High School in Central Richmond. Both schools were predominantly White throughout the 1960s, and Kennedy High School was widely regarded as one of the best high schools in the Bay Area. However, as one turns the pages of yearbooks from the late 1960s, it becomes evident that as the number of Black faces increases, the number of White faces decreases. In the case of Castlemont, the White faces in the senior class are nearly all gone by the early 1970s, while at Kennedy the disappearance of White students was not complete until the end of the 1970s.

In the following pages, I will examine how changes in the composition of these cities and their schools influenced the character and quality of public education. The point of such an exercise is to illustrate the complex relationship between economic and demographic change in the social context and the challenges confronting urban public schools. Such an analysis will be used to establish a framework for understanding the limits and possibilities of schooling in urban areas today (See Tables 2.3 and 2.4). It is important to note the significant differences in the racial compositions of the four cities (over half of the population in both Richmond and Oakland are Black and Hispanic) and also the contrast in the percentage of households with school-aged children.

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**Table 2.3.** Economic Profile of Four Cities—Housing, Education, Employment, and Poverty Rates

	Berkeley	Oakland	Richmond	San Francisco
<b>Housing Tenure (%)</b>				
Owner-occupied housing units	42.7	41.4	53.3	35.0
Renter-occupied housing units	57.3	58.6	46.7	65.0
<b>Educational Attainment</b>				
< 9th grade	3.4	13.3	11.2	10.5
9th–12th grade, no diploma	4.4	12.8	13.5	8.3
High school graduate and equivalent	8.6	17.7	21.8	13.9
Bachelor's degree	29.9	18.0	14.1	28.6
Graduate/professional degree	34.3	12.9	8.3	16.4
Grandparents as Caregivers	30.2	34.6	35.4	27.6
<b>Employment Status</b>				
% unemployed in labor force	3.6	5.1	4.8	3.0
% not in labor force	34.2	38.4	38.1	33.7
% employed in labor force	62.1	56.5	57.0	63.3
<b>Poverty Rates</b>				
% families living below poverty level	8.3	16.2	13.4	7.8
% families with children under 18	24.8	47.0	39.4	24.5
% families with female-headed household	19.4	29.5	24.8	16.6
% families with female-headed household with children under 18	60.8	80.5	69.0	58.4
<b>Home Value (Homeowners Only)</b>				
% whose homes valued over \$200,000	85.6	55.6	35.1	83.8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

**Table 2.4.** Four Bay Area Cities by Race, and Percentage of Households with School-Aged Children

	Berkeley	Oakland	Richmond	San Francisco
White	59.2	31.3	31.4	49.7
Black	13.6	35.7	36.1	7.8
American Indian	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.4
Asian	16.4	15.2	12.3	30.8
Hispanic	9.7	21.9	26.5	14.1
Household with child	19.8	33.5	4.0	19.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

### RACE VERSUS SPACE: FRAGMENTATION AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES IN THE POSTMODERN CITY

Characterizing the differences among the Bay Area's four major cities on the basis of their wealth and racial composition, fails to accurately capture the complexity that is manifest at the neighborhood level. While there are a greater number of affluent households in San Francisco and Berkeley, and a greater number of impoverished households in Oakland and Richmond, all four cities contain affluent and impoverished enclaves. In fact, the differences in wealth and quality of life among neighborhoods is so pronounced and striking that, with respect to the socioeconomic character of an individual neighborhood, there are relatively few differences among the four cities.

For example, although the homes in the Point Richmond neighborhood are somewhat more affordable, the quality of life there is more like that of San Francisco's affluent Marina District than that of the Iron Triangle neighborhood located less than 2 miles away in central Richmond. With Point Richmond's waterfront homes abutting the San Francisco Bay, one does not feel even remotely connected to the city of Richmond where crime, poverty, and toxic emergencies are frequent and widespread. Similarly, neighborhoods in the Oakland and Berkeley hills, with their stunning views of the San Francisco Bay and proximity to the wooded open spaces in Tilden Regional Park, have more in common with each other than they do with the low-income neighborhoods located in the flatlands of both cities.

As real estate agents put it, "location is everything," but in the Bay Area, as is true in many cities throughout the United States, the cultural and economic boundaries separating neighborhoods are as important as

those created in San Francisco and a return of mid-century character of the city and living conditions. During the booming economic years in San Francisco, the belief in the Tenderloin and the flatlands and isolated neighborhoods that were prevalent elsewhere in the neighborhood. The grocery stores, banks or pharmacies in these neighborhoods are closed or have been driven out of business. Once were the pioneers.

Several class differences have been effectively eliminated in the proximity of the Fruitvale area in Oakland. The affluent neighborhoods in the area compare favorably with those in Berkeley. With its proximity to the Montclair area, the cafes, fast-food restaurants, and shopping centers in Oakland feels much more like Berkeley than it does to Oakland.

In Oakland, the proximity to the San Francisco Bay in the flatlands has allowed Latinos to move into the area in minutes, and the area has gained a reputation as though it were an English-speaking area. The area is considered a house of worship and a community center. (Porter)

those created by space and distance. Even in high-wealth cities like San Francisco and Berkeley, where rising property values, gentrification, and a return of middle-class Whites have transformed the economic and social character of the landscape, pockets of poverty remain. Disparities in wealth and living conditions actually have widened in these cities despite their booming economies and dramatic revitalization.<sup>4</sup> In Berkeley and San Francisco, the beleaguered communities where poor people are concentrated—the Tenderloin, Hunters Point, and the Mission District in San Francisco, and the flatland neighborhoods of south and west Berkeley—are cut off and isolated, economically and socially, from the prosperity that is prevalent elsewhere. Like their counterparts in Oakland and Richmond, such neighborhoods have a disproportionate number of liquor stores but no grocery stores; pawn shops and check cashing outlets are plentiful, but not banks or pharmacies. Furthermore, poor people residing in such neighborhoods are confronted with the realistic prospect that they eventually will be driven out of these cities entirely, as market forces make even what once were seen as undesirable areas, attractive to developers and Yuppie pioneers.

Several neighborhoods in the Bay Area vividly illustrate how race and class differences between neighborhoods serve as boundaries that effectively eliminate a sense of shared identity based on geography and spatial proximity. For example, although Montclair is located less than 3 miles from the Fruitvale area, in social, cultural, and psychological terms, these areas in Oakland might as well be hundreds of miles apart. Montclair is an affluent neighborhood located in the foothills of Oakland. It is a multiracial area comprising largely affluent families who reside in expensive homes. With its beautiful trees and stunning vistas of the San Francisco Bay, Montclair feels much more suburban than urban. In fact, with its sidewalk cafes, fashionable boutiques, and own neighborhood newspaper, Montclair feels much more like neighboring Piedmont (an affluent city located next to Oakland) than like part of Oakland.

In contrast, the Fruitvale area is a lower-class neighborhood located in the flatlands of central east Oakland and comprises predominantly Latinos, Blacks, and recent Asian immigrants. Although it takes only a few minutes to drive from Montclair to Fruitvale, once there, one literally feels as though one has entered another world. With its street vendors and bargain retailers hawking their wares in a variety of languages (none of them English), Fruitvale bears little similarity to its affluent neighbor. Its streets are congested with cars, trucks, and buses, and the mix of factories, warehouses, single-family homes, and apartments gives it all of the features commonly associated with immigrant enclaves in urban America today (Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002). The Fruitvale area is not even one of

Oakland's most distressed neighborhoods (Office of Economic Development, 2000). Unlike parts of east and most of west Oakland, it has a thriving low-end commercial district, and housing prices have been steadily rising for the past 10 years. Although they are located near each other and within the same city, it is clear that these two neighborhoods have little in common.

Interestingly, although schools in the Montclair and Fruitvale neighborhoods are part of the Oakland Unified School District, there are significant differences with respect to academic performance indicators and other characteristics. For example, Montera Middle School, which is located in Montclair, received a statewide academic performance index (API) ranking of 8, and an API ranking of 9 when compared with schools with similar characteristics (10 is the highest possible rank).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Calvin Simmons Middle School, located in the Fruitvale area, received a ranking of 1 on both sets of indicators. Table 2.5 shows how the two schools compare with respect to a variety of indicators.

Two schools in the same district; two neighborhoods located in the same city. Yet, despite their association with common jurisdictional and municipal structures, there are dramatic differences in the educational opportunities available to students and in the quality of education provided. How do we explain such significant variation among schools and neighborhoods located in the same city? Unless one subscribes to con-

**Table 2.5.** Comparison Between Montera and Calvin Simmons Middle Schools

	Montera	Calvin Simmons
Racial Make-up (%)		
<i>Black</i>	41.0	24.0
<i>Native American</i>	2.0	0.0
<i>Asian/Filipino</i>	18.0	17.0
<i>Latino</i>	8.0	55.0
<i>White</i>	30.0	3.0
API rank *	9.0	1.0
Parent education **	3.77	2.22
% free lunch	17.0	52.0
% credentialed teachers	74.0	51.0

\* Academic performance index, similar schools.

\*\* 1 represents high school graduate, 5 represents college graduate.

Source: Ed Data, 2002.

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spiracy theories and believes that there is a deliberate effort to shortchange poor communities, the only plausible answer must be that public institutions, in this case schools, reflect and respond to the characteristics—cultural, demographic, and socioeconomic—of the constituencies they serve. To a large degree, differences in quality can be explained by sheer political clout, or by what social scientists refer to as social capital (Putnam, 1995; Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001; Sampson, 1998). Constituencies that have the ability to effectively apply pressure on the public institutions that serve them often receive better service. This is more than just a matter of the squeaky wheel getting the grease. Poor parents may protest and organize in an effort to demand better services from schools and other public agencies, as they have on numerous occasions in Fruitvale and other parts of Oakland (Noguera, 2001b). However, those who manage public institutions often respond differently to different constituencies.

Differences in the way public agencies respond to the needs of their constituents became apparent to me when I served as Assistant to the Mayor of Berkeley from 1986 to 1988. During those 2 years one of my responsibilities was to find ways to respond to the crime and violence that dramatically increased with the proliferation of drug trafficking in south and west Berkeley neighborhoods during this period. After just a few weeks on the job, I learned that the police and other city departments responded differently to requests for service emanating from different neighborhoods. Consistently, the neighborhoods experiencing the most serious crime had the longest wait when urgent calls were made for police service, while residents in more affluent neighborhoods generally received prompt attention, even for relatively minor incidents. The difference in police response became even more apparent when I realized that the police department knew the precise location of what were referred to as drug "hot spots." These high-crime areas, in which drive-by shootings frequently occurred, were policed by a strategy that I came to regard as a form of containment. Although they regularly arrested street-level dealers and responded vigorously to violent incidents, they did relatively little to root out drug dealing altogether, so long as it was contained to certain neighborhoods.

In more affluent areas, the police department took aggressive action to prevent crimes by responding with speed and a great show of force to reports of prowlers or suspicious activity. But differences in response based on the needs of neighborhoods were not limited to the police department. For example, I was called on to help mediate a conflict among neighbors in the Berkeley hills who were involved in a heated dispute over whether a homeowner should be required to trim a tree if it blocked the view of his or her neighbor. The thorny dispute (no pun intended) pitted the right to see the sunset unfettered by branches against the right to allow the trees in one's yard to grow naturally. As the Mayor's representative, I was expected

to spend as much time as it took to help these neighbors find a resolution to this conflict. With easy access to members of the City Council and lawyers ready to file suit at a word's notice, these residents had no doubt that they would get the service from city government to which they felt entitled.

In contrast, when confronted by angry residents from south and west Berkeley about the inadequacy of police protection, the most common refrain from the police was that concerns about the civil liberties of suspected drug dealers prevented them from doing more to address the crime problem. In meetings with neighbors who were afraid to leave their homes because drug dealers controlled the streets, I often heard police say they were doing all they could given the resources available and the constraints placed on them by the courts. However, I knew from my own experience and observations that drug dealers, loiterers, or even panhandlers who strayed into wealthier neighborhoods could not expect a similar level of sensitivity to their civil liberties when police officers were called.

Scholars such as Coleman (1988) and Wacquant (1998) have argued that social capital plays a tremendous role in determining how communities are served by schools and other public institutions. A number of scholars also have used the concept of social capital to analyze and measure the tangible benefits that an individual or group may obtain from participation within social networks (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001). Bonds of reciprocity derived from participation in social networks and political influence generated by money and organization can produce better service from public institutions (Sampson, 1998; Woolcock, 1998). Coleman has argued that the quality of service provided in schools is directly related to the degree to which there are shared values and expectations between school personnel and the parents that they serve. The greater the degree of social closure, the more likely it is that service providers will feel obligated and able to provide high-quality service (Coleman, 1988).

The closure described by Coleman is generally a scarce commodity in inner-city schools and communities. More often than not, relations between parents and school personnel are weak, if not strained or even hostile (Noguera, 2001a). Wacquant (1998) has argued that poor inner-city neighborhoods often are served by public institutions that generate negative rather than positive social capital. Although the services they provide are essential, public agencies in the inner city, such as schools, hospitals, and police departments, often exhibit indifference and even hostility toward those they serve. Wacquant argues that public institutions actually contribute to the deterioration of the quality of life in inner-city neighborhoods when they treat residents with contempt and disdain. They can even undermine the efficacy of community efforts to improve conditions, through poor or inefficient service. Compared with middle-class residents who typically

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are able to exert control over the institutions that serve them, poor residents of inner-city neighborhoods are more likely to feel estranged and underserved by neighborhood-based public institutions. For that reason, they may perceive public institutions as the source of problems rather than as a valued community asset.

Working for several years in a variety of capacities, I saw firsthand how schools in the Bay Area failed to enhance the social capital of the communities they served. Often, the actors involved—school board members, administrators, and teachers—were completely unaware of their attitudes and behavior. For example, at one school I worked with in Oakland, the school receptionist, the first person to greet visitors and parents, had a sign on her desk that read, "This ain't Burger King. We do it my way here!" Although I am certain that she saw her sign as a joke, to a parent visiting the school for the first time such a greeting might be somewhat off-putting. In a similar vein, following a workshop on how to increase parental involvement at schools in Richmond, a principal seated at my table announced jokingly that she didn't want parents at her school to get more involved because they were "nothing but low lifes and crack heads." At yet another meeting that I held with a group of teachers in Berkeley to discuss negotiations over the union contract, I was told that teachers were concerned about the flight of White middle-class children from the district. One veteran teacher asserted that "the cream is leaving our schools, and we are being left with the dregs and the crack babies. If we don't do something soon to keep the kids from the hills from leaving, we will soon be just like Oakland" (Noguera, 1995c).

Such statements of contempt typically were matched by deep distrust and antagonism on the part of minority parents toward the schools that served them in all four cities. At a conference for parents in San Francisco, a group of Vietnamese parents told school officials that the schools were teaching their children to be disrespectful toward them. They complained that the longer their children attended the public schools, the more embarrassed the children became about the old ways and customs of their families. The parents also explained that as their children became more estranged from them, the children were more likely to join gangs and to get into trouble. Speaking with the assistance of a translator, one mother implored district officials to "teach our children to respect us so that we can help them" (May 15, 1998).

Similar concerns about the lack of respect displayed toward parents by school personnel were expressed in other schools throughout the Bay Area. At a tense community forum in Richmond held to discuss the causes of interracial violence in the schools, the only moment of intergroup solidarity occurred in response to a statement by a Latino parent. To rousing

applause from the diverse group of parents who were assembled, the mother of four asserted that "our children don't learn to respect each other because they see that even their parents are not respected by the schools" (October 7, 1999).

Even within the same district and city, differences in social capital among residents can be extreme. For example, while I served on the school board, parents from the Berkeley hills convinced the board to rebuild Cragmont Elementary School, even though the site had been declared a risk by the Office of the State Architect due to its proximity to an earthquake fault line. They did this by implying that they would campaign against a pending school bond measure and threatening to withdraw their children from the district if the school was not rebuilt. In contrast, parents in west Berkeley struggled to secure funding for their new school because the plan they supported called for comprehensive family services to be located at the school. The new proposal exceeded the original budget allocation for the school by \$1 million. To their credit, the parents succeeded in raising the funds with the support of well-connected and savvy fund raisers, but support from the district was minimal.

Differences in the way school districts respond to the concerns of parents cannot be explained merely by race or class bias on the part of school board members or district officials. In the case of construction funds for the two schools in Berkeley, both groups of petitioning parents were well organized, and both were multiracial in their make-up. I attribute the difference in the response of the board to differences in social capital. While affluent parents from the hills can use the threat of departure from the district as leverage, parents in west Berkeley have no equivalent weapon at their disposal. Both groups engaged in protest and presented demands to the school district, but only the more affluent constituency had the wherewithal to get the board to do what it wanted.<sup>6</sup> Individual and collective power, which is one of the by-products of social capital, has a profound influence on the ways that schools and other social institutions respond to the needs of their constituents in the Bay Area and elsewhere.

### INEQUITY AS A CAUSE OF TENSION AMONG NEIGHBORS

In many communities, race and class differences serve as boundaries that undermine the sense of community one might expect would be generated by spatial proximity. In the absence of bonds of solidarity that could be created through reliance on shared services, social institutions, and civic organizations, the significance associated with differences in status often

is increased. Even when they reside within the same neighborhood, individuals and families from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds often lack a basis for developing networks and connections that might enable them to transcend their differences in pursuit of common interests. In such neighborhoods, tensions can develop among residents when conflicting interests become politicized and when residents compete openly over resources or the direction of a neighborhood.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, this trend is most evident within neighborhoods such as West Berkeley, West Oakland, and the Mission District and Western Addition in San Francisco. Because of their attractive locations, each of these low-income communities experienced rapid gentrification during the 1980s. Since the 1990s, it is no longer uncommon to find poor and affluent residents living side-by-side in these communities. Yet, while they may share sidewalks, parks, and public libraries, low-income residents typically have little in common with the more affluent newcomers, and from a sociological standpoint, they might as well live in different worlds. Lacking the bonds that might be created through participation in civic associations, churches, or public institutions such as schools, these neighborhoods often experience considerable tension and conflict due to competition over various quality of life issues. In such communities, shared space fails to foster a sense of solidarity due to the perception that differences related to race and class are insurmountable.

I experienced these tensions firsthand while working as Assistant to the Mayor. During those 2 years, south and west Berkeley were in the midst of substantial demographic change, as affluent White professionals began purchasing homes in neighborhoods that historically had comprised working-class African American and Latino families. As mentioned previously, these neighborhoods also were besieged by a dramatic increase in crime and violence due to fierce competition among crack dealers over control of the drug market. One of my jobs was to meet with neighborhood groups to discuss crime prevention strategies and ways of making the police department more responsive to community needs. On several occasions, community meetings deteriorated into intense conflicts between new and old residents regarding how the police and city government should respond to the crime problem.<sup>7</sup>

In one case, a group of new, White middle-class residents began circulating a petition for the city to shut down a neighborhood park because drugs were being sold and several violent incidents had occurred there. This action incensed older, predominantly African American residents who deeply resented the idea that Greg Brown Park, which had been named after a young man who had been killed while serving in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, would be closed to appease the newcomers. In

contrast, the older residents saw the park as a vital neighborhood asset, and they called for greater police presence and supervised recreational activities for young people living in the area.

As the conversation became more heated and polarized, one of the new White residents charged that the elderly woman chairing the neighborhood watch meeting had a grandson who was selling drugs in the park. Rather than striking back, the previously combative woman lowered her head and admitted, "Yes, he's selling drugs and I don't know what to do about it" (November 16, 1986). To the White residents, her admission served as proof that their neighbors could not be trusted because of their complicity with criminal activity. However, for the mostly elderly Black members, the confession of their neighbor was evidence of the problem's complexity. In my private conversations with these older residents, they acknowledged that the roots of the drug problem were economic—unemployed young people and poor families had grown dependent on the income they gained from drug sales. Even though they felt the brunt of the violence inflicted by the drug traffickers, they were deeply conflicted about how to respond. Unlike their White neighbors who felt comfortable simply demanding that the police lock up the drug dealers, they believed that more was needed to address the economic and social dimensions of the problem. As one of the people responsible for mediating this dispute, I found it nearly impossible to arrive at a compromise that would satisfy both constituencies, because of the different ways in which each constituency defined its needs and interests.

Such cleavage among residents within neighborhoods and cities is reflective of patterns present in many urban areas throughout the United States. In many cases public schools, which once provided a basis for neighborhood solidarity, no longer serve this purpose because new residents either have no children (see Table 2.4) or send their children to private schools. Jane Jacobs (1961), one of the best-known writers on urban planning and design, has argued for years that diversity in terms of class, race, and usage, is important to the health, safety, and well-being of urban neighborhoods. But increasingly, urban areas are fragmented along these very dimensions, and urban public schools have become places that disproportionately serve the children of the poor and powerless: people who lack access to better educational options (Anyon, 1996; Kozol, 1991).

In cities such as Berkeley and San Francisco, where the overwhelming majority of residents are middle or upper-middle class, the public schools overwhelmingly comprise low-income African American, Latino, and Asian children (see Table 2.4). Even when a degree of integration in terms of race and class does exist, as in the case of most Berkeley public schools, there are significant differences in academic outcomes and per-

ceptions of service among the constituencies that are served. As I will describe in Chapter 4, finding ways to respond to the different needs of poor and affluent children in Berkeley schools has been as difficult as finding ways to respond to the conflicting needs of residents in south and west Berkeley.

Immigration is another factor changing the composition of schools and communities in the Bay Area (Clark, 1998). With new residents arriving from Latin America and Asia especially, and other parts of the world as well, new conflicts and tensions have emerged (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Low-income immigrants typically have settled in neighborhoods that previously were populated by African Americans. With their arrival, new tensions created by competition over housing, jobs, and public services, add yet another source of friction to the social fabric. In several Bay Area high schools, these tensions have resulted in violent confrontations among students, some of which have become quite large and dangerous (Noguera & Bliss, 2001). In contrast to the situation of middle-class newcomers in gentrified neighborhoods, schools have served as the meeting place for new immigrants and older residents in other parts of the region. However, more often than not, schools have been unprepared to respond to the needs of the new arrivals or to the conflicts that have accompanied their increased presence.

Due to the fragmentation that characterizes many Bay Area neighborhoods, mobilizing community support for public education often becomes a difficult and challenging task. With middle-class constituents largely absent from the school system, the ability of community residents to hold schools accountable is substantially weakened (Nocera, 1991). Affluent cities like San Francisco and Berkeley are still able to approve bond measures and supplemental taxes to support public schools because of the liberal sentiments of the community. However, additional funding has not led to community buy-in and support for public education. Moreover, with neighbors divided by race and class differences, and with public schools catering almost exclusively to the neediest segment of the population, it is not surprising that schools in affluent communities taken on characteristics more typically associated with inner-city schools despite their location.

Hence, the condition of urban public schools in the Bay Area, and in cities throughout the United States, is related less to the socioeconomic character of where the schools are located, than it is to the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the children that are served. Increasingly, the student population of schools in urban areas is poorer and more likely to be non-White than the overall population of the city in which the schools are located. With the exception of magnet and some charter schools, urban

schools generally serve an impoverished population, and more often than not, who is served has direct bearing on the quality of education that is provided.

### THE URBAN SCHOOL AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Although I could cite numerous examples of schools in the Bay Area that undermine the social capital of those they serve, I would be remiss if I did not also mention the growing number of schools that are actively working to develop supportive relationships with parents in impoverished communities. Following a growing national trend (Comer, 1980; Dryfoos, 2001), several schools in the Bay Area now have health clinics located on the site that provide a range of services (such as first aid, dental care, pregnancy counseling, and immunizations) to students and their families. During the 1990s, a number of schools applied for and received Healthy Start grants that allowed them to develop plans for after-school tutorial programs and other youth services.<sup>8</sup> At Lowell Middle School in west Oakland, the staff decided to use a school improvement grant to provide three meals a day to students because they realized that for many students school meals were their only consistent source of nutrition. The same school also provided children in need with coats in the winter and new shoes at the beginning of the school year.<sup>9</sup>

Several of the teachers I have worked with at Bay Area schools consistently extend themselves above and beyond their role as teachers to provide assistance to kids and families in need. Flora Russ, a teacher at Berkeley High School and coordinator of the Computer Academy, is legendary among students for her willingness to help kids find jobs, get into college, or get out of jail. Jeffery Duncan, an English teacher and girls basketball coach at Oakland High School, provided year-round tutoring to all his players. He also worked long hours to make sure that each of his players received a scholarship for college after graduation. Finally, Joan Cone, an English teacher at El Cerrito High School, led the effort to end tracking in the English department and to open up access to advanced placement courses. Her efforts and those of her colleagues made it possible for numerous minority students to win scholarships and gain admission to prestigious colleges.

These are just a few examples of teachers and administrators who actively seek to help students and their families in tangible and important ways. I mention them because even though their presence may not offset the effects of institutional indifference, they play important roles in pro-



viding personal support for many kids. For the students who have been fortunate enough to be served by these kinds of teachers, their presence literally has meant the difference between success or failure, school or jail, life or death. Moreover, the actions of these individuals, like those of the schools that have sought to provide essential services and closer ties to the families they serve, show us what it might take for schools to become genuine assets to distressed and disadvantaged communities. There is no question that such schools and teachers are desperately needed. The sad thing is that they are in short supply.

What sets teachers and schools like those I've just described apart from so many others is their willingness to broaden and redefine the traditional mission of schools. Given the hardships present in so many inner-city communities, and given the difficult circumstances that so many young people in these areas are forced to endure, such redefinition is essential. If urban schools are to become a source of support and stability to young people and their families in economically depressed urban areas,<sup>10</sup> they must find ways to address the academic and nonacademic needs of children that affect their welfare and ability to learn.

Of course, it is not fair or reasonable to expect that underresourced schools and overburdened teachers can do this on their own. Addressing the academic needs of poor children is more than most inner-city schools can handle as it is. To provide the extra services that disadvantaged children require, schools will need to form partnerships with local governments, churches, and neighborhood-based service agencies. A small number of such school-based partnerships already exist, such as the handful of schools supported by the Children's Aid Society in New York (Dryfoos, 2001). Beyond these small but valiant efforts, state and federal policies, backed by the requisite funding, are needed to ensure that all schools in impoverished areas have the ability to meet the needs of the distressed communities they serve.

In the following chapters, I will describe some of the ways schools in the Bay Area have grappled with the constraints, both internal and external, that limit their ability to effectively serve students. For the most part, these will not be success stories. The point of such an exploration is to uncover lessons about what it takes to create urban schools that are successful in serving the needs of children, so that we might gain some insight regarding how to approach the difficult task of improving urban public schools throughout the United States. I recognize at the outset that even these lessons may be insufficient as a guide for how to proceed with the work of school reform and improvement, but at a minimum they may serve as a source of renewed hope in the possibility that change can be brought about.

