

How Does Education in Urban Schools Compare to Suburban Schools?

AMY GOLBA

Communicated by Dr. Marsha Heck

ABSTRACT: The neglect for the educational needs of children in urban schools threatens the economic well-being of the nation. Unless the inequalities in education between suburban and urban schools are diminished, the schools and their students will always be victims of the divisions of race and class. All of these students say the Pledge of Allegiance to the same flag each morning in their classrooms repeating the words "...one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice to all." Children experience the irony of these words that they speak each day that they come to school.

It is better to light a candle.
Than to curse the darkness.
--Chinese Proverb

Many obvious distress signals seen in today's American urban schools include the increasingly overloaded and underfunded schools, confusion over actual goals and purposes, and a tendency toward a separation into two unequal class divisions within the public schools. Underlying these signals are the growing population of indifferent students, the emergence of students from single parent families, poorer and more culturally impoverished students, fewer teachers to cope with these students, and the increasing apathy of the more affluent public members (Frady, 1985, p.11). Our nation has sadly become a society where many people are concerned only for themselves with little concern for those who are less fortunate.

What is at stake is the future of a heterogeneous America, a place where there is equal opportunity for everyone, not just for those who can afford to pay for a good education and the chance to have a more prosperous life. America is a country of multiple cultures and people who come here from other countries must learn to deal with that. Those who do not want their children to be handicapped by the learning problems of others who have suffered generations of oppression, ignorance, and neglect, simply abandon the city schools that these students are integrated into and flee to richer suburban schools. Over 52% of Americans live in the suburban areas surrounding the large metropolises (Elam, 1993, p.196). Today, Blacks, Hispanics, and poorer children dominate 23 of the nation's 25 largest urban school

systems (Frady, 1985, p.13). This has raised a permanent fissure in our public schools and has separated them into two separate and unequal class systems - one suburban, privileged and mostly white; and the other inner-city, poorer and mostly non-white. Because we have not one monolithic national system of schools, but thousands of separate independent ones, providing an equal education and opportunities for our children is a concern that can be resolved at the local level. The education of all of our children needs to be addressed as one of our nation's top priorities.

URBAN TEACHERS: AN IMPERILED PROFESSION

No single thing is so central and important to our hopes for saving the public school system as the teachers, who are on the front line. Teachers have daily contact with the students and are the ones who struggle to revive our schools. But the continual worsening of conditions in urban schools for teachers - low pay, overcrowded classes, increased responsibilities, outdated and meager resources - are disintegrating the number and quality of teachers in them. The best teachers then move on to school systems that can offer them better working conditions and more pay - the schools in suburban districts (Farber, 1991, p.90). Teachers who want to give their students a quality education get frustrated with the poor conditions of inner city schools and end up looking for a school where they feel that they can sufficiently do their job. They look for a school system with plenty of financial resources to put into the school and where parents are an active part of their child's education. These schools are in most part the suburban schools where children come from financially secure homes. On the other hand, the majority of children in urban schools come from single parent families where the parent is most often holding more than one job in order to support the family. Because the parent is not able to be actively involved in the child's education, the teacher is also forced to take on the role of parent as (Farber, 1991, p.160). There is often not enough time to become an active part in their child's education.

Teachers face a large enough challenge in meeting the individual needs of the students in their class without having to deal with the atrocities outside the class which affect their learning. It is not uncommon to find that many teachers are either afraid to go into inner city schools, are offended by the setting, or are intimidated by the challenge of the situation that these schools present (See Figure 1). And often the teachers that do begin their teaching career in an inner-city school end up moving to a different school system -- in a suburban area -- or leaving the teaching profession entirely.

AMY GOLBA is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education with an endorsement in Secondary Math. This paper was originally written to meet the requirements for H340, *Foundations of American Education*, taught by Professor Marsha Heck, who encouraged the author by acting as a spokesperson for equality and cultural diversity. As a future educator, the inequalities that exist in education are a primary concern for the author, who has been aware of such issues throughout her life.

Figure 1

Percentage of Reported Discipline Problems in Schools

	Urban	Suburban
Absenteeism	81	35
Disruptive Class Behavior	53	30
Drugs	53	45
Theft	48	23
Violence	32	9

SOURCE: Farber, 1991, p. 235

Money is a major motive as to why teachers leave as well as the fact that the problems of the streets in urban schools usually end up spilling into the classrooms. Public schools lack feedback and incentives.

LOW STUDENT EXPECTATIONS = POOR PAY & CONDITIONS FOR TEACHERS

Salary becomes a major issue when considering the quality and worthiness of teachers in urban compared to suburban schools. For example, in 1991 a teacher in a suburban school got paid 20% more annually than a teacher in an urban school (Kozol, 1991, p.30). In addition, the teacher in the inner-city school faces a higher cost of living to live in the city. It seems that there should be a reward and not a punishment for teaching in inner-city schools. Teachers who remain in poor urban schools face the daily challenge of trying to provide an education that is equivalent to that which is provided to students in wealthier suburban schools. Not only are they faced with this challenge, but they also face the daily challenge of keeping their students from becoming victims of hopelessness.

Urban schools and teachers face many problems in educating their students. The buildings are often dilapidated with problems ranging from broken windows and leaky roofs to sewage problems. On a smaller scale, but not necessarily less important, is the lack of classroom materials available: no paper or chalk, blackboards that are broken and unusable, and textbooks that are outdated. These urban schools are often in crime infested neighborhoods and are surrounded by high chain link fences to shield their students from random and purposeless acts of violence (Elam, 1993, p.101). Teachers in these schools are expected to rise above these challenges to reach and educate their students. The students are expected to learn skills to survive in today's society out of textbooks that are 15 years old. They are expected to keep their minds on acquiring skills to help them lead a more prosperous life, while outside of their classes a war rages in the streets. While they are faced with these distractions, the students in suburban schools are enclosed in classrooms of security and comfort where learning is the only primary concern.

One teacher who works in an inner city St. Louis school says that he "feels cut off from educational developments in modern public schools. I've done without so much for so long that if I were assigned to a suburban school, I'm not sure that I'd recognize what they are doing" (Farber, 1991, p.92).

Although schools and teachers are obligated to provide equal educational opportunities to all students, this cannot be done when the materials are not readily available to them. Students in affluent suburban schools are more likely to perform at a higher level in part because they are provided with the scholastic tools that they need to do so. They have the most recent textbooks and technology (computers in their classrooms), invigorated teachers, and tutors and counselors if support beyond the classroom is needed. On the other hand, students from urban and often low income schools face outdated textbooks, leaking roofs, and classrooms without teachers because they just never show up. One teacher says: "We have teachers who only bother to come in 3 days a week and sometimes one of those days it is not until 9:30. They don't expect the kids to care about their education because they think that these kids aren't going anywhere" (Kozol, 1991, p.146).

In New York there is a huge disparity between the spending on education between the poorest children to the richest children. In the inner city schools the per student expenditure is \$5590, while in a suburban school the per student expenditure reaches close to \$11,000 (Kozol, 1991, p.101). The students in both school systems have the same educational needs, but the student of an inner city school receives only half of the amount of the student in a suburban school. The inner city schools and administrations are supposed to make these funds seem equal to those of higher funded school districts. The difference in spending between suburban and inner city schools is not always so extreme. When student needs are considered, however, the disparities in funding are enormous. Students of urban schools are often lacking in social skills in addition to academic handicaps that they carry with them because they do not have the resources to stay up-to-date with the latest in technology or someone to introduce them to the "hidden rules." Hidden rules are about the salient unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that an individual does or does not fit (Payne, 1995, p.21). This reinforces the point that equity does not mean simply equal funding. Equal funding for unequal needs is not equality. The need is greater in inner-city schools if these students are to have the same experiences and opportunities as those who are in suburban schools. The students of inner city schools often have few resources that they can bring into school - their parents are often dropouts, they live below the poverty line, lack proper health care, and know few people who have benefited from education (See Figure 2 and Figure 3). These inequities, which are only a small representation of the many that are faced by inner city students, hinder their educational future (Farber, 1991, p. 159).

So with the majority of quality teachers flocking to suburban schools to obtain higher pay, better resources and technology, and more pleasant working conditions, the teachers who are left in the urban schools are more likely to be mediocre and burned out with their profession. In this respect, it is hard to distinguish if the reason that 50% of inner city students drop out is because they become victims of the streets or because they receive no encouragement and only end up meeting resistance when they try to further their education. The children of urban schools begin with a

Urban -vs- Suburban Education

Figure 2

U.S. Median Income By Educational Attainment: 1993

Less Than 9th grade	Grade 9-12 (no Diploma)	HS Grad (Includes GED)	Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree & other
\$6500- \$11000	\$7100- \$14500	\$11000- \$21700	\$18000- \$29700	\$22500- \$38000

Number of Persons with Income (in thousands)

Less Than 9th grade	Grade 9-12 (no Diploma)	HS Grad (Includes GED)	Associate Degree	Bachelors Degree & other
13,157	15,529	53,853	11,183	36,000

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993)

degree of faith and optimism and seem to thrive during the first few years. Maybe they are lured by the drugs and alcohol or are unengaged by the teachers and schools which are supposed to educate them, but as they get older the number of students dwindle. Many faces stop appearing in the classrooms as early as 4th or 5th grade because they see no hope in being "equal" to those who are receiving a better education in a suburban school (Elam, 1993, p.100).

DESERTION OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The schools of this nation are only as strong as the communities of which they are a part (Frady, 1985, p.85). With less money available from federal, state, and local governments due to the fact that the money is being allocated elsewhere, schools are forced to rely on the people of their communities. But declining test scores, racial and social class prejudices, and inadequate school facilities have people abandoning the urban schools. These are the people that would benefit the schools. People are aware that the inner city schools are in trouble, but the citizens have lost faith in them and look outward to the suburbs to educate their children. They do not want to subject their children to the circumstances of overloaded classes, inadequate textbooks, and less capable teachers. It has become a brutal cycle. The flight of these students and their families out of the urban schools not only depletes the morale in the schools they have left, but reduces the tax base which affects the educational funding. The students that are left in urban schools are often those who come from broken homes and cannot afford to move

so that they can have a more privileged education. Thus, the strength and success of the suburban schools is in great part due to the support of the community around it whereas the downfall of urban schools is the lack of it.

EDUCATIONAL FUNDING: THE HAVES vs. THE HAVE NOTS

The basic formula for educational spending today is determined by a program called the "foundation program." A local tax based on the value of homes and businesses within a given district raises the initial funds for schools. Then, to compensate poorer districts, the state provides *sufficient funds* to lift the poorer districts to an estimated *equal* level of the richer districts. The state, however, does not provide funds equal to the level of the richer district, but instead gives only enough money to provide a minimum or basic education to the students in the poorer districts. This guarantees that every child receives an education, but it is not an "equal" education (Kozol, 1991, p.238-240).

The *sufficient funds* are determined by state officials, but due to the dynamics of politics they are shaped by what the richer districts determine to be enough. So, in turn, what we are doing is placing the education of the inner-city students in the hands of the supporters of the suburban schools. If the officials are to allocate more money to the poorer districts, then they will be the ones who are affected by additional tax levies on their higher incomes and property values. It also relies on what kind of education these individuals judge that the students of these inner city schools will need. Unfortunately, because of many preconceived racial, social, and cultural prejudices, state officials determining the school's financial needs believe that these students do not require as high of quality. They believe that these students need only to be able to have the abilities "...to hold a job as an employee of the person who was educated in the richer district" (Kozol, 1991, p.209). Children in suburban schools are educated to hold positions of power, while the children of inner-city schools are trained to be governed and to follow rules passed down from the more advantaged group. These factors have fostered the inequality of education among school systems for centuries and we only need to look to the individual schools themselves to verify this fact.

Figure 3

Percent of U.S. Persons Below Poverty Level, By Race and Ethnicity: 1990-1993

Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
1990	13.5	10.7	31.9	28.1
1991	14.2	11.3	32.7	28.7
1992	14.8	11.9	33.4	29.6
1993	15.1	12.2	33.0	30.6

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993)

CONCLUSION

Education used to be a poor child's ticket out of poverty. Now it is an element of the system that traps them in the lower class. For example, Kozol notes that "white suburban schools have approximately twice the funds per student as compared with urban schools" (Kozol, 1991, pps. 236-237). "Students are given a direct measure of their social worth and future chances by the amount of money they see being spent on their education" (Kozol, 1991 pps. 234-237). In today's society children who never learn to read, add and subtract, and write will never be able to lead a complete and prosperous life. They will be left behind by the rest of society because they are not being taught the essential skills that are needed for a lifetime of learning.

The schools and lack of education that they are providing are producing a generational cycle of poverty in the country that is casting a gloomy burden on our schools and society for the future. Many individuals stay in poverty because they don't know there is a choice...and have no one to teach them hidden rules or provide resources. Schools are the only place where students can learn the choices of the other social classes (Payne, 1995, p.125). Marshall Frady states that many of these children "have not had the kind of experience or ability that would allow them to think, plan or organize their thoughts and ideas" (Frady, 1985, p.111). Without these basic skills, their chances of being economically successful in today's competitive society is small. They will continually be overshadowed by those who have had a more extensive and advantageous educational experience. The children of poverty and those who are products of inner city schools will most likely remain prisoners of an extensive legacy of economic and social exile. Without a strong academic background they will be destined to low paying jobs and will be trapped in the urban ghettos of America. "The group that inherits pencils and typewriters in the age of the microchip will discover itself, unfortunately, without the aptitude for the best jobs in the coming century" (Gross, 1985, p.184). Their lost faith in schools as a means to a more prosperous life will be passed on to their children which creates a cycle of despondency and nourishes feelings of inequality and prejudice. By providing inner city children with an inferior education, we are merely increasing their chances at becoming future products of welfare, unemployment, or poverty. Cheating them out of an equal education is only creating future problems which we will pay for economically down the road through government programs funded by local, state, or federal taxes.

The neglect for the educational needs of the children in

urban schools threatens the economic well-being of the nation. Unless the inequalities in education between suburban and urban schools are diminished, the schools and their students will always be victims of the divisions of race and class. All of these students say the Pledge of Allegiance to the same flag each morning in their classrooms repeating the words "...one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." These children experience the irony of these words that they speak each day that they come to school.

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