

FILLING THE VOID: NON-PROFITS AS GAP FILLERS WHEN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS FALL SHORT

Ari Malman

I. Introduction

The issues facing contemporary urban school systems are infinite. But the bigger question is how the outside world is to deal with the ever-growing educational shortcomings in a time and age when the system often fails to provide necessary resources for its students in low-income communities. That is exactly where non-profit organizations can step in. With different funding schemes, by addressing unique needs of the students that often go overlooked, and through differing organizational structures, non-profits are invaluable in providing much-needed, hands-on support for urban school systems in America today.

II. Why Non-Profits Need to Step In

Much has been written about the inherent disadvantages that students in “urban” schools districts face. The numbers are staggering. For example, on average, sixty-four percent of students in inner-city schools receive free or reduced price lunches, indicating that their families are at or near the federal poverty line.¹ While the common notion is that the American education system could be the underprivileged students’ chance at escaping the cycle of poverty, and breaking into the middle class, statistics tend to reveal

¹ Cynthia Hudley, *Education and Urban Schools*, American Psychological Association (2013), <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2013/05/urban-schools.aspx>.

just the opposite.² Instead, the education that urban students receive is decisively insufficient.³

The statistics that prove that an urban education is far inferior to their suburban counterparts are endless, but a few patterns should be enough to get the blood boiling. Let's take a look at the teachers first. Mathematics classes in high-poverty high schools are twice as likely to be taught by a teacher who is credentialed in a different subject as are mathematics classes at low-poverty high schools.⁴ Likewise, and even more striking, science teachers are three times as likely to be credentialed in some other area other than science in the high-poverty high schools, than are science teachers in low-poverty high schools.⁵ It's not rocket science to figure out that students need to have science-credentialed teachers teaching them science, and math-minded teachers teaching them math.

Going beyond teacher credentials, teachers in high-poverty schools lack quality resources. These teachers more often report having to teach with outdated textbooks in short supply, outdated computers and other technology, and inadequate or nonexistent science equipment, materials, and labs.⁶ Similarly, the amount and type of college-

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Wirt, J., Rooney, P., Choy, S., Provasnik, S., Sen, A. & Tobin, R. (2004). *The Condition of Education 2004* (NCES 2004-077). Washington D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences. Source: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004077>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Freel, A. (1998). Achievement in urban schools: What makes the difference? *Education Digest*, 64(1), 17.

preparatory and advanced placement (AP) classes significantly lag behind schools that are placed in richer school districts.⁷

While deficient supplies, materials, and access to an equal opportunity to learn are pertinent benchmarks, the physical condition of the school can also play a part. The psychological effects behind run-down schools in urban areas are dictated by theories of stress and coping, as are numerous other aspects of the students' development, or lack thereof.⁸ As Evans and Kim explain it best, structural conditions such as physical decay or dirty bathrooms greatly undermine a student's ability to concentrate in the classroom, which in turn is a core indicator of low motivation and disengagement in students. The two also go on to explain that "[a] principal pathway for how poverty influences physical disease is elevated chronic physiological stress. Relative to their more advantaged peers, low-income children have more sympathetic nervous activity (e.g., elevated blood pressure), more elevated hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (HPA) activity (e.g., dysregulated cortisol), more dysregulated metabolic activity (e.g., elevated adiposity), and greater inflammation indicative of compromised immune function (e.g., elevated cytokines). These income-related alterations in markers of chronic stress with well-documented physical morbidity outcomes can begin early."⁹ In this sense, the stresses that often plague the urban students at home, which are generally associated with poverty in general, do not disappear once then student enters the schools building.

The disadvantages of the urban student are well-documented and often well-known. A significant lack of credentialed teachers, inadequate resources, decrepit

⁷ Id.

⁸ Evans, G. & Kim, P. (2013). Childhood poverty, chronic stress, self-regulation, and coping. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7, 43-48.

⁹ Id. at 44.

schools, and less advanced classes offered are just a few of the shortcomings. However, the next question, and the far more critical, is what can be done to fill these gaps that are left in the urban school system. That is exactly where the non-profit world can step in.

III. How Non-Profits Can Help Fill the Void

Let's first take a look at where the non-profits can fit in, and then turn to see how they're doing. While there are numerous organizations with like-minded goals, a few non-profits can come to mind easily when thinking about this area. Examples of these organizations include Teach for America, and City Year. Teach for America's mission is "to enlist, develop, and mobilize as many as possible of our nation's most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence."¹⁰ With this goal in mind, Teach for America aims not only to supplement the shortage of teachers in general, but also intends to fill those vacancies with credentialed teachers. Likewise, City Year provides year-long volunteers who work alongside teachers in the classroom. The reach of the non-profits can often differ, but their goals almost always align: to provide more support to urban students than they are currently receiving. In some instances, the non-profits work around the fringe, while in others, such as Teach for America, the teachers supplement the public school teachers by working directly in the classroom. While Teach for America and City Year are often the first organizations that come to mind, the focus of this section will turn to a purely local, Chicago-based organization called Urban Initiatives.

¹⁰ TEACH FOR AMERICA (May 4, 4:09 PM), <https://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/our-mission>.

Urban Initiatives was founded by Chicago natives Jim Dower and Dan Isherwood in 2003 in Cabrini-Green, historically one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.¹¹ As former Chicago Public Schools teachers and suburban soccer coaches, the duo started the program in response to the lack of extracurricular programs throughout the Chicagoland urban school district.¹² With this in mind, the co-founders created Urban Initiatives as a way to allow kids to learn, practice, and experience success through both in-school mentorships, and after-schools soccer programs. Urban Initiatives now contains programming in 50 K-8, urban Chicago schools. The interplay between non-profits and the public education system, mainly as a gap-filler when the public arena breaks down, should be discussed in terms of funding, different programming offered, and then by looking at the results thus far.

a. Funding

As seems to be the first issue in any area of education law and policy is the fiscal concern.¹³ While purely public education is funded and sponsored solely by the government, often with a combination of local, state, and federal money, the non-profits tap into primarily private funds to source their programs. This is perhaps one of the greatest differences between urban school systems and non-profits that aim to keep them afloat. For example, Urban Initiatives relies on multinational companies such as Stork, Grubhub, KPMG, and PepsiCo to provide both grants and annual consistent funding in order to have the ability to implement their programs. By not having to rely on the public

¹¹ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:16 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/who-we-are/>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Dick Netzer, *The Urban Fiscal Problem*, Thirteenth Annual Wherrett Lecture on local Government (1967), UNIV. OF PITT.

dollar, the non-profits are less susceptible to shortcomings of the government with respect to taxpayer money spending, as Illinois is currently experiencing with the budget passé. While a majority of the Chicago Public School teachers were on strike for contractual issues, Urban Initiatives' employees were not faced with the same dilemma.¹⁴ However, while the funding scheme can be viewed in a mostly-positive light, there are drawbacks for the non-profits. As governmental entities are charged with using public tax dollars to fund schools, private corporations have no such duty. If they want to donate, they do. If they don't, they don't. With respect to this, there are different consequences at stake for the payors. While CPS teachers might go on strike if they are not being paid adequately, the large private corporations may lose as little as negative publicity.

With the pros and cons of public versus private funding being established, it is critical to look at the driving forces behind the policy in each system, which ultimately can be chalked up as an advantage for the non-profits. Because the government funds the urban public school system, they have an inherent right to determine the curriculum, and every other aspect within the system. The consequences of the school system not performing to their standards, or acting with their goals in mind, is simple- they lose funding.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, as a general principal, the corporations that help fund non-profit gap-fillers often act in the background, as they have a corporation to run, and a profit to make, as their first priority. While they all most likely check in on the non-profits progress, they are not as hands-on and determinate of their programs, but rather

¹⁴ *Chicago Teacher Rally, March Through Loop after Walkout*, ABC7 (2016), <http://abc7chicago.com/education/chicago-teachers-rally-march-through-loop-after-walkout/1271780/>

¹⁵ Dan Beaeaupré et al, *Testing our Schools*, Frontline (2002), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/etc/guide.html>.

are more concerned with the positive public image they will gain by donating to these causes. With the differing funding schemes in mind, the focus now turns to the unique ways in which non-profits can address the students' needs.

b. Addressing different needs of the student

Urban Initiatives has three different programs: Work to Play, Take the Lead, and Play with Potential.¹⁶ Work to Play provides children in grades K-4 with the chance to belong to a soccer team, regardless of skill level. Children are taught important lessons about health, character, and teamwork by their coach. Membership means two practices and one game per week throughout the school year. Ongoing team participation depends on meeting academic and behavioral standards, as measured by their teachers on a weekly basis.

The next program that Urban Initiatives runs is Take the Lead, which engages the most promising and motivated Work to Play alumni in grades 5-8. Participants are nominated by their coaches, and fill the role of Team Captain on Work to Play teams. Through this opportunity, they learn the merits of leadership, academic persistence, and community service, all while navigating the significant period of early adolescent development. They participate in all Work to Play sessions plus engage with adult mentors in small-group, skill-building sessions and bi-monthly cross-Chicago Take the Lead Retreats.¹⁷

The last program is Play with Potential, which aims to maximize the health, academic, and social and emotional learning benefits of recess periods. The program is

¹⁶ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:25 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/what-we-do/work-to-play/>.

¹⁷ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:40 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/what-we-do/take-the-lead/>.

offered to all students in a school, K-8, and aims to maximize student's opportunities for physical activity, while promoting cooperation and teamwork.¹⁸

The three statements for the Urban Initiatives' programs demonstrate that their goals and priorities reach far beyond the students passing a standardized test so that the school will get their public funding. Instead, the non-profit programs focus on the development of the whole child, both physically and mentally. The Work to Play program instills in the students at a young age that health and character are serious traits as the child grows, and that they go beyond the four corners of the classroom. As the students progress into middle school, this focus continues, adding leadership and community service to Urban Initiatives enduring goal of focusing on the whole student. While it is fair to agree that Urban Initiatives is not directly on the line for poor test results of their students, there is a definite gap in urban school systems that does not adequately account for the whole student, including health, character, teamwork, and persistence. While test scores can be one measure of a students' success, there is a viable argument to be made that a student's well-being and likelihood of success are far more closely related to the needs that are being met by Urban Initiatives, and not by the school system itself.

One of the main arguments here is that the non-profits better account for the unique needs of the students in urban areas.¹⁹ As discussed previously, these

¹⁸ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:46 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/what-we-do/play-with-potential/>.

¹⁹ Rachel Cromidas, *Nonprofit Takes Aim at CollegeReadiness Gap in City Schools*, Chalkbeat (2012), <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2012/01/05/nonprofit-takes-aim-at-college-readiness-gap-in-city-schools/#.Vypp8OlgPzI>.

socioeconomic needs relating to stress and development are distinctive in urban areas.²⁰ With such programs as Play with Potential, non-profits are able to narrow in on problems relating to when the students are not under direct teacher or parent supervision, such as before and after school, and during recess. In an urban setting, it is all too easy and familiar for children to fall into the traps of drugs, gang-involvement, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school altogether, to name a few.²¹ By being able to focus on specific time frames when the students are prone to have more freedom, non-profits can directly work to provide stimulating activities for the students, instead of detrimental ones. Even in times of a short-recess break, students in urban communities are at risk from undesirable influences. If non-profits can provide a structured recess, and before and after school activities, then the students' likelihood of being negatively influenced can be reduced dramatically.

The last void that non-profits can help fill is that of parental involvement. While schools often don't have the time and resources necessary to encourage parental involvement, non-profits are able to devote specific programs and funds to the issue. Not only do non-profits such as Urban Initiatives encourage parental association, but they can also fill the void of proper support systems at home by focusing on consistency,

²⁰ Whitney Wright, *The Disparities between Urban and Suburban American Education Systems: A Comparative Analysis Using Social Closure Theory*, HOWARD UNIV. (2012), [HTTP://WWW.EFC.GWU.EDU/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/2015/08/DISPARATIES.PDF](http://www.efc.gwu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/disparaties.pdf)

²¹ *Gangs and Victimization at School*, National Center for Education Statistics (1995), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/95740.asp>; Sari Fromson, *The Culture of Drug Use During the School Day in an Urban School System*, TRINITY COLLEGE (2010), [HTTP://DIGITALREPOSITORY.TRINCOLL.EDU/CGI/VIEWCONTENT.CGI?ARTICLE=1033&CONTEXT=THESES](http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=theses).

accountability, and even discipline. Urban Initiatives takes the larger urban school district, and makes it feel small to the children. When they do this, the non-profit can act as the familiar support that the children often don't receive at home.

c. Continuing results

While non-profits can help fill many gaps that are left by urban school systems, they cannot fix the problem entirely. However, statistics are starting to prove that their work is paying off. For example, students in the Urban Initiatives' Work to Play program are 20% more likely to meet or exceed state standards on standardized tests than their classmates who do not participate in the program.²² Likewise, students that participate in the Play with Potential program are twice as likely to engage in prosocial behavior during recess than students at other schools.²³ And with the larger non-profits, the numbers are staggering. Teach for America has taught, tutored, and mentored more than 10 million students since its inception in 1990, and contains more than 50,000 active employees, including more than 20,000 teachers.²⁴ The non-profits are out there, with Big Brothers Big Sisters²⁵, and Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone²⁶ to name a few, yet we need more. If more and more of these types of organizations can get in the mix, just imagine the impact that could be made on young lives across urban areas in America.

²² URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:16 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/what-we-do/work-to-play/>.

²³ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:16 PM), <http://www.urbaninitiatives.org/what-we-do/play-with-potential/>.

²⁴ URBAN INITIATIVES (May 4, 2015, 4:16 PM), <https://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/annual-report>.

²⁵ BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF AMERICA (May 5, 2015, 12:32 PM), <http://www.bbbs.org/site/c.9iILI3NGKhK6F/b.5962335/k.BE16/Home.htm>

²⁶ HARLEM CHILDREN'S ZONE (May 5, 2015, 12:47 PM), <http://hcz.org>.

IV. CONCLUSION

The story is told all too often- when former Teach for America teacher Kelly Amis (Los Angeles 1990) sat down with two young men who she had taught when they were in elementary school and looked at a photo album from her teaching days, the young men would go on to detail the fate of student after student in the album: dead, dead, prison, dead.²⁷ The age-old story, often called the “schools to prison pipeline,” is even arguably the better outcome as compared to its alternative, namely being killed in gang wars. The urban school system continues to fail millions of underserved children across the United States today. As Geoffrey Canada puts it best, America’s school system is a failing business plan.²⁸ And it will continue to do so, unless outside forces step in to change the trajectory. While none of these outside influences is perfect, in its creation, or implementation, non-profit organizations are a fantastic place to start. By receiving private funds, and focusing on the whole child, non-profits are suited to turn the lives around of low-income, high-risk students. Urban Initiatives is just one example of the types of non-profits that can step in, but it proves to be a powerful illustration of what can be changed on the fringes of the ever-failing urban schools.

²⁷TEACH FOR AMERICA (May 5, 10:37 AM), <https://www.teachforamerica.org/top-stories/meet-statistics>.

²⁸ Canada, G. (2013, May) Our Failing Schools. Enough is Enough, Retrived from https://www.ted.com/talks/geoffrey_canada_our_failing_schools_enough_is_enough?language=en.