



Research Article

Building capacity in urban communities and schools: Community collaboration and willingness to pay increased taxes

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This research uses survey evidence gathered from more than 5,500 voters living in Wichita, Kansas (USA). The purpose was to better understand coproduction in community development organized around neighborhood schools. When this approach is combined with direct investment paid for through increased taxes, it can build community capacity and create opportunity for disadvantaged school children. This research found that, in spite of modernity, neighborhoods are still valued places for community development. Most citizens are willing to work collaboratively to improve schools and the neighborhoods where schools are located. In addition, taxpayers pledged support for increased investment in the education of disadvantaged schoolchildren. This pledge was honored by the passage of a referendum and the issuance of debt to support investment in neighborhood schools with the understanding that this debt would be retired through increased taxes.

Key Words: Community capacity, community development, coproduction, willingness to pay taxes.

INTRODUCTION

The concerns of urban communities and public education interact in ways that make them difficult to address independently. Concerns associated with social and economic disadvantage converge in urban public schools. Educational institutions, acting in isolation, do not have the capacity to answer these challenges (Chung, 2002; Sanders, 2003; Sawhill, 2006). This research involved input from more than 5,500 registered voters in Wichita, Kansas (USA) to better understand how a two part strategy might be employed to create the critical mass of resources necessary for meaningful

improvement of public schools and the communities where these schools are located.

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The first part of the strategy assessed whether community development is a viable option following decades of busing and major societal change. Specifically, the research assessed whether decades of change has extinguished the societal norm of coproduction in the form of parent-teacher collaboration. A second component of the strategy assessed whether sociogeographic community in the form of neighborhoods still has meaning and whether neighborhood schools can legitimately be expected to form the nucleus of a community development strategy. The second part of the strategy focuses on citizens' perception of school performance and willingness to pay increased taxes in support of investment in neighborhood schools. Willingness on the part of the community to pledge support for neighborhood schools is particularly important if opportunity is to be created for disadvantaged school children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban neighborhoods and the public schools that serve them are losing capacity as economically advantaged families abandon these neighborhoods and enroll in suburban public or private education (Clotfelter et al., 2004). This exodus from urban neighborhoods leaves those with the greatest need in fragmented urban communities (Anyon, 2005; Chung, 2002). As the proportion of disadvantaged children in urban public schools climbs, it becomes increasingly difficult for educational institutions to overcome social and educational deficits (Alexander et al., 2001; Stoll et al., 2000; Prais, 1997). Essentially, a combination of socioeconomic and racial segregation has returned as advantaged schoolchildren are withdrawn and disadvantaged schoolchildren concentrate in urban public schools (Vincent, 2006; Stoll et al., 2000; Picus, 1996).

While busing was instrumental in reducing segregation and discrimination in public education, it has also had unintended consequences including creating geographic and emotional barriers between parents and teachers (Chung, 2002; Goldring and Smrekar, 2000). Fragile family support systems, challenging living environments, and weak community institutions deny opportunity and seal the fate of economically disadvantaged schoolchildren (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Sanders, 2003; Chung, 2002; Nettles, 1991). Schoolchildren from lower-income households commonly begin their formal education behind their advantaged classmates and many never catch up (Anyon, 2005; Rouse et al., 2005; Bradley and Corwyn, 2002; Seldon et al., 2006; Lubeck and Garrett, 1990; Nettles, 1991; Sawhill, 2006).

Neighborhood schools reduce physical and, consequently, emotional distance between parents and teachers and they create opportunity for collaboration and coproduction of an improved education (Izzo et al., 1999). Comer and Haynes (1991) argue that collaboration between parents and teachers not only improves education but can be instrumental in strengthening connections between neighborhoods and schools. This means that collaboration between parents and teachers provides direct benefits for schoolchildren and indirect benefits in the form of neighborhoods as support systems for neighborhood schools. The community development strategy advanced here assumes that the neighborhood is a "community of choice." If residents are simply waiting for an opportunity to escape the neighborhoods in which they live, neighborhood schools can become traps that segregate, discriminate and fail to create opportunity (Glaser et al., 2003).

A return to neighborhood schools without sufficient investment in both neighborhoods and schools places schoolchildren at-risk of community segmentation that isolates based on socioeconomic standing. Neighborhood-based organizations (NBOs) can be instrumental in promoting collaboration between communities and schools. Ideally, NBOs connect individuals to community, citizens to government, and facilitate collaboration between public educational institutions and other forms of local government through a shared definition of sociogeographic space (Glaser et al., 2006). NBOs can also facilitate collaboration between citizens and police (Glaser et al., 1996). Unfortunately, disadvantaged urban enclaves often have long and troubled histories that include conflict and distrust between citizens and police. Community policing potentially contributes to and benefits from improved social connections between neighbors and between citizens and local government (Bass, 2000; Marschall, 2004; Glaser and Denhardt 2010). Research indicates that issues of performance, public safety and discipline in the classroom are conceptually intertwined in the minds of citizens. Therefore, issues of public safety and improved public educational performance go hand in hand (Glaser et al., 2011-12).

While community development and collaborative solutions are necessary, in most cases they are insufficient to transform urban public schools into vehicles that create opportunity for disadvantaged schoolchildren. The reality is that many urban public school districts have disinvested in educational facilities and the staffing of these schools. Therefore, substantial investments in urban public education are necessary (Glickman and

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Race			Age		
Caucasians	4632	83.7	Below 25	136	02.5
African-Americans	475	08.6	25-35	606	10.9
Hispanics	135	02.4	36-45	799	14.4
Native Americans	91	01.6	46-55	1222	22.1
Asians	59	01.1	56-65	1158	20.9
Mixed Race	71	01.3	Above 65	1620	29.2
Other	69	01.2	Household Income		
Education			Less Than \$20,000	498	09.7
Some High School	201	03.6	\$20,000-\$39,999	1267	24.6
High School	1023	18.3	\$40,000-\$59,999	1295	25.1
Some College	1682	30.1	\$60,000-\$79,999	848	16.4
College	1248	22.3	\$80,000-\$99,999	561	10.9
Graduate Study	449	08.0	\$100,000 & Above	688	13.3
Graduate Degree	983	17.6			

Servon, 1998; Turnham and Khadduri, 2004). There is considerable unevenness in the quality of instruction and not all teachers are equally effective at teaching disadvantaged schoolchildren (Sawhill, 2006; Wong, 2004). Clearly, improved public schools necessarily involves better teachers with the capacity to respond to the needs of disadvantaged schoolchildren. Generally, then, the transformation of urban public schools will require public investment supported by taxpayers if they are to create opportunity for both disadvantaged and advantaged schoolchildren (Glaser et al., 2011-12; Glaser, Bannon and Carrithers, Paper 5th Transatlantic Dialogue, Washington DC, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A proportional stratified random sample of 22,000 registered voters was selected from six board of education districts in the Wichita Public System. To address concerns about underrepresentation of low-income households and people of color, 100 percent of the voters from six precincts were selected, increasing the total case count to 25,366. The survey was mailed in the fall of 2005. An estimated 10 percent of the cases (2,553) had incorrect mailing addresses and 98 returned surveys were excluded from the study because of a large number of incomplete responses or responses judged unreliable. The following discussion of citizen perceptions and priorities is derived from 5,685 survey responses. The respondent profile Table 1 matches the study population fairly closely, with a few exceptions. Despite oversampling, people of color they are underrepresented.

It is also worthy of note that citizens 65 years of age and older disproportionately responded to the survey.

Validity and reliability are important and challenging concerns in all research but are particularly important in the case of survey research soliciting responses from a broad-base of citizen respondents. In response to these concerns, the research team spent several weeks meeting with a broad array of public school system stakeholders to make sure that the content of the instrument was inclusive and the presentation of survey items made sense from the perspective of both school officials and responding voters.

RESULTS

Historically, parents were expected to coproduce or at least work closely with teachers to tailor the education of their children to fit their particular needs. The first section of the findings provide an assessment of whether decades of busing and important societal changes have altered the basic nature of parent-teacher collaboration. The three items in the first part of Table 2 (Part 1a) indicate the community still believes neighborhood schools promote parental involvement (89.6%) and that communication between parents and teachers improves discipline (87.7%) and performance (88.5%). Generally then, parent-teacher collaboration and expectations related to coproduction of education appear to remain the norm.

The findings reported in the second half of Table 2 (Part

Table 2. Part 1: Collaboration between Community and Schools

"Neighborhood schools promote increased..."	Percentages			
	1	2	3	4
Part 1a. Parent-Teacher Collaboration				
..parental involvement in the education of their children	01.2	09.2	59.5	30.1
..communication between parents and teachers to improve discipline	01.4	11.0	59.6	28.1
..communication between parents and teachers to improve performance	01.2	10.3	60.6	27.9
Part 1b. Neighborhood-School Collaboration				
..sense of belonging because schoolchildren go to school close to home where friends and family live	01.3	6.7	57.7	34.4
..communication between neighbors about the activities of schoolchildren	01.7	12.6	62.4	23.3
..volunteerism and the willingness of neighborhood residents to assist in the education of schoolchildren	01.7	11.9	61.9	24.6
..investment in homes and residential property near neighborhood schools	01.8	15.3	62.4	20.5
..investment in neighborhoods by business	02.3	23.3	57.5	16.9
..cooperation between neighborhood residents, schools and community police officers to make neighborhoods safer	01.4	08.1	64.1	26.4
..investment in neighborhoods by neighborhood organizations	01.5	14.1	64.6	19.8

Likert Values: Strongly Disagree= 1, Disagree= 2, Agree= 3, Strongly Agree= 4

1b) more broadly describe whether neighborhood schools contribute to the glue or the social functioning of neighborhoods. In other words, if neighborhood has meaning and if neighborhood schools contribute to social connections between neighbors, then the results found in Part 1b of Table 2 should reflect the importance of these connections. The evidence indicates that approximately 92 percent of the respondents believed neighborhood schools promoted a sense of belonging, because schoolchildren were allowed to go to school close to home where friends and family live. Nearly 86 percent of the responding citizens expected neighborhood schools to promote increased communication between neighbors and volunteerism on the part of neighbors in support of neighborhood schoolchildren. The findings also indicate that neighborhood schools are expected to encourage neighbors to invest in the neighborhood. Citizens were somewhat less likely to see a connection between neighborhood schools and business investment.

The final two items in Part 1b of Table 2 are especially important for collaborative relations between neighborhoods and schools. Public safety is one of the most basic ingredients of quality of life. No parent wants to live in a neighborhood or send their child to schools that are unsafe. Community policing attempts to strengthen bonds of trust between citizens and police to

facilitate information exchange necessary to prevent and solve crime. Consistent with this understanding, nearly 91 percent of the responding citizens regarded neighborhood schools as a catalyst for improved cooperation among neighborhood residents and between citizens and police, resulting in improved neighborhood safety.

The final item in Part 1b of Table 2 indicates the vast majority (85 percent) of responding citizens expected neighborhood schools to promote increased investment in neighborhoods via NBOs. In other words, most citizens felt that neighborhood schools provide a catalyst that encourages investment in neighborhoods channeled through NBOs.

The summary findings reported in Table 3 provide a graduated assessment of community support for public schools beginning with general perceptions of performance and culminating with assessment of willingness to pay increased taxes to support investment. The first item in Table 3 assessed whether citizens see connections between neighborhood schools and educational performance. Nearly 82 percent of the respondents expected neighborhood schools to increase the quality of public education.

Table 3. Part 2: Performance, Pledge and Willingness to Pay

Performance & Willingness to Pay for Investment	Percentages			
Neighborhood Schools and Performance*	1	2	3	4
Neighborhood schools promote increased quality in public education	02.9	15.2	59.8	22.1
Pledge of Support: Disadvantaged Neighborhood Schools*				
I support ending busing and a return to neighborhood schools if extra investments were made in schools in low-income neighborhoods to help disadvantaged schoolchildren catch up with other students	05.9	11.7	41.6	40.7
Willingness to Pay for Investment**	1	2	3	4
Pay higher salaries to good teachers who are willing to teach in low-income neighborhoods with the greatest need	08.6	19.9	41.4	30.1
Make extra investments in neighborhood schools serving disadvantaged schoolchildren to help them catch up	07.2	14.4	44.1	34.3
Build new or renovate existing schools if necessary to eliminate busing, allowing schoolchildren throughout the community to return to neighborhood schools	07.4	21.4	49.9	21.3

Range of N= 5464-5535; *1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree;
**1=Definitely Not Willing to Pay, 2=Probably Not Willing to Pay, 3=Probably Willing to Pay, 4=Definitely Willing to Pay

The second item in Table 3 provides a straightforward assessment of commitment to neighborhood-based strategies to improve public education. Overall, the vast majority of the respondents (82.3%) pledged support for ending busing and returning to neighborhood schools with the knowledge that extra investment will be needed in schools in low-income neighborhoods to help disadvantaged schoolchildren catch up with more advantaged classmates.

The three items reported in the last section of Table 3 assess willingness to pay for investments in neighborhood schools serving disadvantaged schoolchildren. Two of the items more narrowly focus on willingness to pay for meeting the needs of economically disadvantaged children, while the third item focuses generally on willingness to pay for brick-and-mortar investment in neighborhood school facilities. It is one thing to pledge support for public investment and quite another to be willing to pay increased taxes to support investment. Survey results can provide useful information about propensity to pay but there are no guarantees survey results necessarily translate into successful bond referendums in support of increased taxes. While there are no guarantees, there is evidence that the willingness to pay measures employed here have predictive validity.¹ Survey results indicating willingness to pay increased taxes in support of investment in public education were confirmed through successful bond referendums used to fund investments in school facilities.

Urban public schoolchildren come from economically, ethnically and educationally diverse backgrounds. Therefore, urban schoolteachers must have the capacity to recognize and overcome a variety of challenges and educational deficits not faced in suburban schools. While it is clear these concerns are a formidable challenge, it does not necessarily follow that taxpayers recognize and are prepared to pay to address these concerns.

The first item in Table 3 indicates nearly three-quarters (71.5%) of the responding taxpayers recognized the need for and were willing to pay increased taxes to fund higher salaries for good teachers willing to teach in low-income neighborhoods. Similarly, more than three-quarters of the respondents indicated a willingness to pay additional taxes in support of investment in neighborhood schools serving disadvantaged schoolchildren. Finally, consistent with previous findings, nearly three-quarters of the taxpayers reported a willingness to pay increased taxes to build new or to renovate existing schools to eliminate busing which would allow elementary schoolchildren to return to neighborhood schools.

Table 4 presents partial correlations controlling for education, income, and age. Partial correlation coefficients below the diagonal include all respondents, while those above focus more narrowly on African-Americans. Two summated indices (Parent-Teacher Collaboration and Neighborhood-School Collaboration) were created using the items reported in Table 2.² Partial correlation coefficients controlling for education, income

Table 4. Collaboration, Performance, Pledge and Willingness to Pay
 Partial Correlation Coefficients: Controlling for Education, Income and Age

African-Americans / Overall	01	02	03	04	05
Part 1. Collaboration between Community and Schools					
01. Parent-Teacher Collaboration (index)	-	.80	.62	.47	.24
02. Neighborhood-School Collaboration (index)	.74	-	.73	.49	.28
Part 2. Performance and Willingness to Pay for Investment					
03. Neighborhood Schools and Performance	.62	.73	-	.41	.25
04. Community Pledge: Disadvantaged Neighborhood Schools	.38	.43	.40	-	.35
05. Willingness to Pay for Investment (index)	.25	.27	.26	.40	-

Coefficients below the diagonal include all cases. Cases above the diagonal are African-American respondents. All partial correlations $p \leq .001$. See Note 2 for a detailed description of the summated indices in this table.

and age provide insight about the extent to which these two forms of collaboration are related in the minds of citizens. Table 4 indicates citizens in general ($r=.74$) and African-Americans ($r=.80$) in particular, saw a strong connection between parent-teacher and neighborhood-school collaboration.

Table 4 also provides insight about the extent to which citizens saw connections between the two collaboration strategies and expected neighborhood schools to yield improved performance. The community in general and African-Americans in particular, saw strong connections ($r= .62$) between parent-teacher collaboration and expectations that neighborhood schools will bring improved educational quality.² Similarly, there were strong connections (overall $r=.73$; African-Americans $r=.73$) in support for neighborhood-school collaboration and expectations neighborhood schools would bring improved performance.

The results found in Table 4 indicate moderate partial correlations (overall $r= .40$; African-Americans $r= .35$) between the community pledge to make extra investment in schools serving disadvantaged children and overall willingness to pay increased taxes to support investment in neighborhood schools.²

This research assumes community-based solutions such as those proposed here are necessary but not sufficient to create opportunity for all classes of schoolchildren. The challenges of poverty and public education are many and varied. This requires simultaneous investment by government, community agencies and the community itself to create a critical mass of resources necessary for meaningful change. Findings reported in Table 4 reveal weak partial correlations between support for parent-teacher collaboration ($r= .25$) and willingness to pay increased taxes. Similarly, there was a weak connection ($r= .27$) between support for collaboration between neighborhoods and schools and willingness to pay

increased taxes in support of investment in neighborhood-based education. The empirical evidence found here indicates some citizens may view community development organized around neighborhoods and increased taxes in support of investment as independent options or alternative courses of action.

DISCUSSION

The growing divide between advantaged and disadvantaged citizens threatens the wellbeing of urban communities. Good public schools can be instrumental in creating opportunity and closing this divide. Unfortunately, the concerns of urban public education and poverty are considerable and intertwined which makes them exceedingly difficult to resolve independently. This research explored how community-based collaborative networks might be formed to promote symbioses between community and schools.

Symbiosis as it is defined here takes two general forms. First, neighborhood schools are intended to narrow the physical and emotional distance between parents and teachers with the intent of creating the opportunity for parents to coproduce the education of their schoolchildren. Decades of busing raises legitimate questions about the meaningfulness of parent-teacher collaboration. This research found that in spite of societal change, parent-teacher collaboration is still a broadly held norm.

A second, equally important, collaborative strategy requires neighbors to come together to build the capacity of neighborhoods to host neighborhood schools. Once again, there are legitimate questions about the meaningfulness of sociogeographic community and the legitimacy of a community development strategy that encourages collaboration between community and school. This research found broad public support for

strategies that stimulate symbiotic connections between neighborhoods and schools. Networks potentially involve collaboration between a variety of governmental and nongovernmental organizations to create opportunity for schoolchildren. NBOs are a particularly important instrument for bringing neighbors together to make neighborhoods better hosts for neighborhood schools. NBOs can facilitate collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental agencies. When organizations collaborate through NBOs, they are more likely to optimize the use of resources based on community rather than organizational well-being (Callahan and Holzer 1994). This research found the vast majority of citizens expected neighborhood schools to stimulate investment in neighborhoods channeled through NBOs.

Community policing can be instrumental in bringing neighbors together for purposes of community development and can orchestrate contributions to neighborhood improvement through a variety of public and community organizations including public schools. Community police officers are expected to develop an intimate understanding of the unique character of each neighborhood they serve and to use this understanding to guide network collaborators, including local government, in how best to tailor the use of limited resources based on this unique character. This interaction between community and police potentially narrows the divide between citizens and government and can encourage coproduction of safe neighborhoods and schools. Consistent with this idea, these findings indicate more than 90 percent of the responding citizens expected neighborhood schools to increase cooperation between neighborhood residents and between schools and community police officers.

CONCLUSIONS

Pluralism and societal segmentation based on narrow bands of self-interest raise legitimate questions about symbiosis. This research explores three potential forms of societal division. First and foremost, a neighborhood-based strategy and a return to neighborhood elementary schools should give special consideration to issues of race. While it is unrealistic to assume prejudicial divisions have been erased, this research provides a practical assessment of the potential for race-related impediments to symbiosis. The findings indicate African-Americans are somewhat less likely than Caucasians to see positive returns from symbiosis between neighborhoods and schools. Consistent with broad-based community support, findings reported here show differences in household income are not an important source of

difference in support for either symbiosis or willingness to pay increased taxes.

Finally, the community must accept responsibility for the education of other people's children. If those without schoolchildren are unenlightened in terms of their self-interest and are unwilling to accept responsibility for the education of other people's children, then there are legitimate questions about symbiosis. In contrast to these concerns, the evidence indicates households that do not have children attending urban public schools are as likely as those with schoolchildren to expect positive returns from collaboration between community and schools.

Realistically, a combination of community-based intervention and increased taxes is required for meaningful improvement; particularly in the case of disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools. This research found more than four-fifths of the responding taxpayers were prepared to pledge support for a return to neighborhood schools with the understanding that a disproportionate investment would be made in schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. Nearly three-quarters indicated a willingness to back this pledge by paying increased taxes in support of investment in neighborhood schools serving disadvantaged schoolchildren. In contrast to reservations about the potential for symbiosis, African-Americans are particularly willing to pay increased taxes in support of investment in neighborhood schools.

In many, if not most cases, a combination of community-based interventions and investment funded by increased taxes will be necessary to produce meaningful change. Weak correlations between neighborhood-based development and willingness to pay increased taxes provide evidence that the typical citizen does not recognize both coproduction and increased taxes to fund investment will be needed for meaningful improvement. The reality is meaningful progress addressing entrenched poverty requires coordinated investment including community development and additional tax dollars. A return to neighborhood schools without investment that transforms neighborhoods and schools does not bode well for disadvantaged schoolchildren.

Nearly two decades ago the community examined here launched a community-based collaborative venture referred to as the "Neighborhood Initiative." The Neighborhood Initiative was essentially a community-based collaborative venture much like the one called for in this research. The Neighborhood Initiative was successful in enlisting collaboration between

governmental and nongovernmental organizations including NBOs. Unfortunately, the Neighborhood Initiative lost political traction as a result of change in local government leadership. Since the demise of the Neighborhood Initiative, two school bond referenda generated more than \$600 million have been passed to fund school facilities improvements. This research provides evidence that if the Neighborhood Initiative had been implemented during the same time period as passage of the school bond referenda, this may have laid the foundation for meaningful change.

NOTES

Note 1.

The community examined here was resistant to paying for infrastructure improvements to public schools and made no major investments in school facilities for a number of decades. A change in the superintendent of schools and community engagement philosophy generated increased public support for investment in public school facilities. A large community survey (1999) preceding a referendum (2000) using measures much like willingness to pay measures employed here predicted the passage of a \$284.5 million bond referendum. The three measures used to measure willingness to pay in this manuscript are part of a series of willingness to pay items that predicted the passage of a \$370 million bond referendum (November 4, 2008). The passage of this referendum is particularly worthy of note in that it passed after the national economy began the historic slide into recession in 2008.

Note 2. Summated Indices and Self-Anchoring Items

Part 1. Collaboration between Community and Schools

- **01. Parent-Teacher Collaboration Index** -The three items (Strongly Disagree= 1, Disagree= 2, Agree= 3, Strongly Agree= 4) found in the first section of Table 2 formed a summated index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .929$) with scores ranging between 3- 12.

- **02. Community-School Collaboration Index** -The seven items (Strongly Disagree= 1, Disagree= 2, Agree= 3, Strongly Agree= 4) reported in the second half of Table 2 formed an index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .916$) with scores ranging between 7-28.

Part 2. Performance and Willingness to Pay for Investment

- **03. Neighborhood Schools and Performance** -The first self-anchoring item reported in Table 3

(Strongly Disagree= 1, Disagree= 2, Agree= 3, Strongly Agree= 4).

- **04. Community Pledge: Disadvantaged Neighborhood Schools**- The second self-anchoring item reported in Table 3 (Strongly Disagree= 1, Disagree= 2, Agree= 3, Strongly Agree= 4)

- **05. Willingness to Pay for Investment (index)- The three items found in the last section of Table 3 formed an index** (Cronbach's $\alpha = .709$) with scores (Definitely Not Willing to Pay= 1, Probably Not Willing to Pay= 2, Probably Willing to Pay= 3, Definitely Willing to Pay= 4) with scores that ranged between 3-12.

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