

Schools and Neighborhood Revitalization: An Invitation to New Thinking

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There is little argument that the health of schools is linked to the health of neighborhoods. People often make neighborhood selections based on the perceived qualities of local schools and neighborhoods with less than performing schools lose their competitive advantage to attract the residents they need. Ask anyone in municipal government why their city is losing population and they will say: "schools".

In many cities there are significant school transformation efforts underway, but these are seldom linked to efforts in the same cities to revitalize neighborhoods. Schools are gradually being improved but there is no intentional way to link that improvement to positive changes that may be occurring in the neighborhood. At the same time community development efforts often fail to involve local schools and the networks of families they represent. Efforts to transform schools and revitalize neighborhoods should be linked in ways that are mutually reinforcing but most often they are not.

In addressing the issues that face local schools the focus is often on large scale systemic changes. These are needed and valuable. In considering the potential linkages between local schools and neighborhood revitalization, however, it is necessary to think small - to begin with the local school and the neighborhood – as a way of finding solutions that better connect schools and neighborhood revitalization. This brief paper is an invitation to practitioners to begin that kind of thinking.

The path that connects schools and neighborhood revitalization is not as well traveled as it could be. As community development has become more sophisticated and project-driven, the idea of strengthening and connecting to local institutions has sometimes been moved back in importance – relegated to the "soft" side of the work. But if neighborhoods are going to succeed and be competitive as places, schools have to be part of the mix.

Given the will and the necessary resources there are lots of ideas offered by experts in education about how schools can become better performing. Coming from the community development field, however, I look at schools through a different lens. I see schools as community institutions with networks of people and leaders. As community institutions, they contribute to how the image of a neighborhood is defined. They are a kind of sub-market of people who make a number of residential decisions – either voluntary or involuntary - about the neighborhood and whose decisions need to be influenced through local level interventions. In my work in a number of cities and neighborhoods around the country I find that while the overall image of the public school system is perceived as bad, individual schools – even those in struggling neighborhoods – often seem to be working. Their image is often worse than their reality.

Coming from this place leads me to ask questions about how community development work can be better aligned to enhance school image, improve school performance, and improve the educational and social outcomes for students and school parents. In other words, is it possible to position the work of neighborhood revitalization in ways that strengthen local schools? How can neighborhood revitalization efforts better capitalize

on school improvement efforts? There is a need to think differently about the tools of neighborhood revitalization – to ask questions around better connecting pieces to achieve multiple outcomes.

A word about housing. It is important not to limit the idea of housing intervention to just building buildings or adding supply. In a neighborhood revitalization context, effective housing strategies must focus as well on building demand, i.e. enabling people to make the choices that are best for them in the marketplace. In considering the connections between schools and neighborhoods this leads us to consider the choices and constraints school families confront. It calls for strategy development to remove constraints and influence choices for individual and neighborhood benefit.

So what do we do? What are some specific ways neighborhood revitalization can be organized to help schools? Here are four areas where it can make sense to begin re-thinking.

1. Address the mobility rate in schools as a housing issue. We know that school mobility, i.e. the rate of turnover in a classroom during the year, has an impact on student performance, social development, and the overall effectiveness of the classroom. We also know that the unpredictability of the housing situation of working poor households causes them to move. Yet there is very little attention in the housing and community development field focused on using housing program tools to address this issue.

A strategy focused on addressing the mobility issue might involve any or all of the following components:

- Housing counseling targeted to school parents to help them address issues that impact their housing situation and their involuntary mobility.
- Home buyer education targeted to school parents to help them move into home ownership
- A small revolving loan and grant fund administered by a local CDC to help households with down-payment assistance or small assistance payments for adjusting to rent increases or to help them maintain themselves in rental units
- Housing development with some targeted marketing to school parents.

None of these are new ideas. They are all being done in various ways and in various places. But seldom are they carried out intentionally to impact the school mobility rate. This invites us to think about how housing interventions can be organized and targeted to impact school mobility.

2. Help teachers buy houses. This approach was pioneered by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago during the early 1990's. LSNA saw that helping teachers live in the neighborhood could improve morale and enhance their performance. NHS of Santa Fe also developed a similar effort in one of the highest cost markets in the country. They found their efforts to help teachers buy a home through a special down-payment assistance program impacted positively teacher loyalty to remain

in the system. One teacher, who purchased a home near the school where she taught, spoke about the benefits of having her students see her outside the classroom. Having teachers live in the neighborhoods where they teach can be an important revitalization outcome. At the same time, as the issue of teacher recruitment and retention grows in importance, more cities are looking at how they can help teachers with their housing situation.

3. Use neighborhood revitalization tools to make the areas around local schools safer. A few years ago I was on a site visit to a local grammar school on the South Side of Chicago where ACORN the national community organization had been working on curriculum development and parent organizing. ACORN also had a CDC that was redeveloping vacant houses all over the city. It just so happened that there were four vacant houses across from the school, being used for drug sales, and directly on the path where kids passed on their way to school. It turned out there was no connection between ACORN's work inside the school and the neighborhood surrounding the school. It seemed there was a missed opportunity to leverage the social capital being developed through the partnership with the school to impact the conditions around the school in ways that could make the paths to school safer.

Again this is a case of using existing tools like housing development and home rehab lending in a more focused and strategic way. In the early 1990s, Neighborhoods Inc. of Battle Creek, Michigan focused some of its acquisition and property development activity around Lincoln School in the Washington Heights neighborhood. Not only did this effort make the area around the school safer, since the properties were the site of drug sales, but it also helped the organization build a relationship with the local school.

The "Broken Windows" theory suggests that crime takes root where physical conditions begin to slide. In other words physical disorder begets social disorder. We have "Drug Free" zones around schools, but we also might want to think about "Blight Free" zones as a way of arresting decline around schools and making the paths kids travel less threatening.

4. Market schools. Urban schools suffer from terrible images, often times undeserved. But urban schools seldom take action to impact how the school is perceived. In other words schools, by failing to address their image, become prisoners of the image others have of them.

In my work I have interviewed dozens of realtors who work in inner-city neighborhoods. Consistently, they reveal little knowledge about local schools and any positives that may be occurring there. A typical example was a realtor in Rochester, New York who claimed to be knowledgeable about a particular neighborhood in the city and actively worked there. Yet he was unaware of a nationally recognized Math and Science Academy that was located in this neighborhood. One might say the realtor should be more knowledgeable about the neighborhood. But more to the point is the fact that neither the city, the school district, nor the local neighborhood association figured out a way to put themselves on the radar screen of realtors – people who are constantly asked the question: "How are the schools?"

Schools, like neighborhoods, need to be competitive in attracting demand. The school, like the neighborhood, can be considered a product that has to be marketed to potential customers. Schools, even those that may not be performing up to standards, are still

community assets and need to influence how they are perceived. In Grand Rapids, Michigan at least one school, located in the Garfield Park neighborhood, has begun to address the issue of how they are perceived by developing a simple brochure. This brochure describes the school and its programs, and putting forth an image that is positive.

We know that when neighborhoods, even those perceived as troubled, set about to change their image, positive things can happen. Buyers who might have been turned off by the neighborhood's image now consider it as a possible choice. Neighbors begin to see positives they had previously ignored. Schools can learn from those examples. It is a mistake to believe that positive actions will on their own change the image of a place or a school. Those positive actions have to be accompanied by intentional efforts designed to alter how things are perceived.

Here are some things schools and neighborhoods could do in collaboration to market schools and improve school image:

- Develop a marketing strategy that addresses market segments the school wants to attract and influence. Such a strategy would look at how best to communicate to those market segments based on the strengths present in the school
- Hold an open house for realtors active in the neighborhood so they can become more acquainted with the school.
- Hold a similar open house for neighbors and neighborhood leaders so they can become more confident about the school as a neighborhood asset.
- Do a sales brochure, like the one in Grand Rapids that describes school positives, student achievements, and examples of parent involvement.

Is this just fluff? While it is true that none of these actions will directly impact student achievement, they actually might begin to help people feel more loyalty to their local school. In the community development field there are many people who are invested in defining places as problem filled. While this can be helpful in attracting grant dollars, it can often obscure the true reality. Many times places work better than most outsiders perceive they do, and schools may have the same problem. Intentional efforts to change image are both necessary and appropriate.

4. Link schools to community building efforts. In many neighborhoods there are a range of efforts aimed at revitalization. Not enough of these efforts engage schools as community institutions with leaders and networks of parents. Is there an added value in connecting schools to community building efforts? If neighborhood development is ultimately about changing people's confidence in the neighborhood's future then it would seem there would be a logical connection. Neighborhoods need to be confident that their schools are functioning as well as possible and schools – both teachers and parents – need to be confident about the neighborhood. In my work in a number of neighborhoods I am struck by how little school staff know about what is happening in the neighborhood around them. They often perceive the neighborhood as much worse than it really is. Yet

again there is often little effort by local community development organizations to change that perception.

Here are some ways a local CDC might connect with local schools:

- Recognize teachers as community assets. Lawndale Christian Community Development Corporation did this with an annual dinner. They recognized the contributions teachers make to the overall development of the community and they created an opportunity to communicate what they were doing to revitalize the neighborhood.
- Sponsor a half-day training on neighborhood revitalization and how issues confronting the neighborhood are being addressed. Combine this with a tour that shows off neighborhood positives.
- Develop with the school a series of service projects that engage kids with neighbors
- Develop curriculum with the local school around neighborhood history, neighborhood architecture, and basic urban planning as a way of helping kids understand what is special about their place. This is being done in a number of places and curriculum for elementary school use is available through the American Planning Association.

These simple actions only scratch the surface. They cost little but they require a different way of thinking about making connections that benefit both schools and neighborhoods.

This paper is an invitation to think differently about the connections between schools and the work of neighborhood revitalization. It leads to some further questions:

- Can cities begin to provide demonstration support for school marketing efforts?
- Can community development intermediaries and other entities that support neighborhood revitalization fund demonstrations of CDCs making connections with local schools?
- Can foundations concerned with education support focused housing interventions aimed at reducing involuntary school mobility rates.
- Can CDCs deploy program tools in partnership with schools and in ways that can add value to schools.

This paper does not propose a Big Idea. Rather it invites a set of small scale actions that can begin to lay the groundwork for understanding in practice how efforts to educate children and revitalize neighborhoods can work to mutual benefit.