

## **Gentrification and Public Schools: It's Complicated**

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The return of white, middle class families to big city public schools seemed like a pipedream for many decades. In Boston, it has been a slow, steady march for a number of years. In other cities, including Washington, DC, New York and Chicago, it has more recently picked up steam. For families and educators who have been in these schools all along, it sometimes feels more like a steamroller. A school that for decades was made up of lower income Black and Latino students can shift within a few years to a predominance of white, middle class students. The new parents get involved in ways that the school hasn't seen in decades, welcomed by many as a breath of fresh air.

Following a generation of white flight, a new set of realities has come into play. White, middle class young adults who grew up in the suburbs are increasingly seeing the value of city living, and settling into urban neighborhoods. Sometimes this is with active support and encouragement from community developers seeking to stabilize and improve lower income neighborhoods. Once settled into their new urban homes and starting families, some have faced job insecurities and unanticipated declines in home values that eliminate the options of moving or paying for private schooling. Some parents want to send their children to schools that have a diversity that they wished they had experienced growing up.

In Boston, a handful of public schools across the city have for a decade served families who in previous eras would have bailed to the suburbs as soon as their children reached school age. The commitment of these families has spawned reenergized parent organizations, new school-community partnerships, and raised tens of thousands of dollars annually.

This trend is the envy of many big cities across the country. Yet there is a downside that must be addressed to ensure that all families benefit from such a resurgence.

Last summer, I interviewed parents and staff of several Boston Public Schools that have undergone this revival. The head of a local community development corporation had charged me to document what these families do, so that she might support the low-income families living in her organization's subsidized housing to employ similar strategies to get a successful public education for their children. For, even with this mini-resurgence, big city public schools are uneven at best. They require care and feeding, vigilance and advocacy to ensure quality education.

The results of this research provide a sobering warning.

Not all families approach their children's schooling with the belief that they have options. I found that those who do go to great lengths to decide whether to send their children to the public schools. Ad hoc research groups form among friends as soon as they have babies. They visit schools, create spreadsheets, vet references. Families who decide to go with the

public schools then enroll their children together, resulting in a support group to navigate the complexities once they are in the door. Frequently, they are not shy about meeting with the school principal with their demands before their children ever set foot in the school.

Every family could benefit from such a support group and such advocacy. Yet both tend to stay within the networks who know each other upon entry.

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For many Blacks and Latinos raised in Boston, childhood memories still sting of school bus rides across town met with racial violence during the volatile era of court-ordered desegregation in the mid-1970s.

In short, barriers for low-income immigrant families and families of color to the activism deployed by white, middle class families stem from an array of factors: not just lack of time or know how, but distrust and discomfort with the system. Often, these factors include accumulated experiences where people in *their* networks were not treated with the respect and deference afforded white, middle class families.

This difference in engagement is too often blamed on the deficits of low-income families and families of color. At least as often, it stems from the shortcomings in the way our institutions have treated them compared to white, middle class families. I have heard endless stories from parents of color who are brushed aside by school secretaries, told by teachers that their sons have ADHD and need to be put on drugs, and had their children kept back when their academic performance warranted them being pushed ahead. As a white parent, I never experienced any of these things. And I might not have taken such stories seriously if I hadn't heard them repeatedly, across the city and across the country. Research studies bear out these patterns.

So what does this have to do with the returning middle class families?

Of course, we want to encourage middle class families to invest in urban neighborhoods and the public schools that come with them. Their activism typically contributes to expanded school offerings, new equipment, upgraded playgrounds – resources that all schools deserve. Their demands can bring needed attention and accountability to school problems.

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At one community discussion about the Boston Public Schools, a white professional stood up and waxed about how he and his friends were sending their children to the local public school, and how it had improved as a result. "For who?" I asked. "Did test scores improve because of a change in who was attending the school, or did they go up for *all* students?" His answer was, "I don't know. I hadn't thought about that."

This is an example of one way that the return of the middle class can be problematic. Test scores go up, and the appearance of success takes the pressure off of the school to address the underlying barriers for low income students and students of color. These barriers often include curriculum that does not connect to the reality of such students, a school culture that denigrates their home culture (whether consciously or unconsciously), discipline that disproportionately singles them out, and a general attitude that their families are not assets, but liabilities to be kept at arm's length. The white, middle class families "fit in" more readily to a system that values their culture and problematizes others.

New families use their professional skills and political clout to bring in resources and hold schools accountable. At what cost, and for whom? Organizers working with public schools in Boston and Washington, DC describe eerily similar dynamics, where the activism of the new parents has undermined existing systems that supported lower income families. A monthly morning coffee and discussion group that attracted Spanish-speaking parents is suddenly supplanted by a highly organized, more traditional parent organization of professionally educated parents. Less formal structures that have provided lower income parents of color with a voice and support network find themselves marginalized by the better organized groups. They no longer get the attention of school leadership and don't feel welcomed by the new organizations due to a vast cultural gap that neither side fully understands.

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## **Cross Race Dialogues**

These challenges can be addressed, but first must be named. In Boston, the YWCA facilitates Community Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in schools across the city, providing a safe container for holding such conversations. Over the past five years, the Boston YWCA had held Dialogues in eight Boston schools, engaging 240 parents/caregivers, teachers and school administrators. In each school, a racially and ethnically diverse group of 15 to 25 people agrees to meet for five facilitated sessions. The focus is on building understanding across difference, identifying the ways in which race and ethnicity impact the school and actions that can address identified issues.

"I would have never considered joining the [parent organization] board." This was the opening perspective of one parent of color who participated at the Roosevelt School. A year later, she became the parent organization co-chair.

The Roosevelt K-8 School has held four Dialogue series over the past five years, and is where the greatest impact can be seen. The school has closed the racial achievement gap. While the dialogues by themselves did not close this gap, the YWCA attributes the success at the Roosevelt to the number of years they have been at it. Each year's cohort meets and builds upon the work of prior years' participants. Over time, this has created a critical mass of people and actions that have led to a true culture shift within the school. The dialogues have enabled parents and staff to be more thoughtful and strategic about identifying inequities and their root causes. For example, when they identified the lack of diverse

representation in the parent organization, they went beyond the superficial barriers. They understood that diversity was more than numbers; it had to include meaningful voice and leadership by parents of color.

### **Cross Class Parent Organizing**

“What’s the point of speaking up? The white people never listen to Latinos anyways,” said Yesinia in Spanish to the room full of parents who had gathered for the weekly Friday morning parent meeting.

In Washington, DC, community organizers from Teaching for Change have been working in several schools to bring together Black, Latino and white parents across differences of race, class and language. The group that Yesinia participated in had been meeting for months to address the issues that affect them in their school.

These meetings have provided a forum to build relationships and work together to address shared concerns. In one school, the selection of a new school principal provided a focus for their effort. In order to select a representative group of parents to serve on the District’s Principal Selection Panel, the parents had to grapple with the question: “What does it mean for a group to be representative of all parents at this school?” These conversations paved the way for parents to form a cross-class, bilingual Parent Teacher Organization at their school, and to vote in a leadership team of predominantly Black and Latina women and with equal representation of professional class and working class parents.

The role of the organizer has been important in Teaching for Change’s efforts to bring together parents of different socio-economic classes and races. Without skilled facilitation, such a group might have easily perpetuated the initial discomfort and distrust, and lost its focus on quality and equity of education. The work is not finished, and there are still layers of power dynamics to be unpacked. However, parents continue to build on a strong foundation, which is now also supported by a new principal who a representative group of parents was able to select.

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