

# Community Development and Education

## *A Shared Future*

By Laura Choi

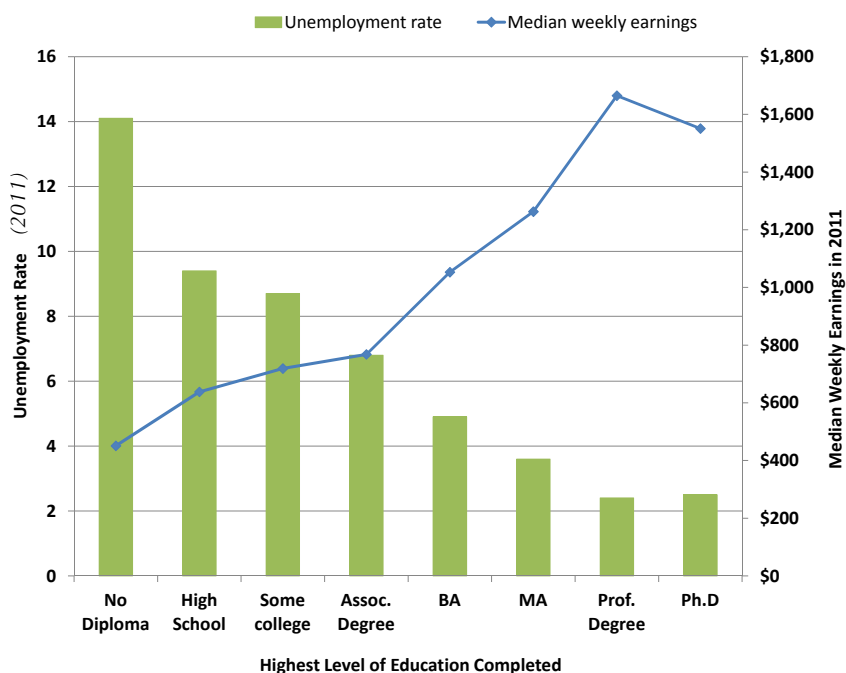


## Introduction

What is the common link between higher wages, lower unemployment, reduced incarceration and crime, longer life expectancy and better health, and increased civic engagement? The theme of this issue of *CI* gives the answer away: increased educational attainment is tied to each of these positive outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Active recognition of this linkage is central to making headway on community development goals, as low-income children tend to have worse educational outcomes than their higher-income peers, a challenge that shadows low-income children throughout their lives. Of course, a complex set of individual and neighborhood factors influence educational outcomes, including parental education, school quality, socioeconomic status, peer effects, health, and neighborhood conditions. But what is interesting about this set of factors is that some of them lie squarely within the domain of community development. Yet, despite the crossovers between education and community development outcomes, the two sectors have historically operated independently of one another. Generally speaking, educators focus on in-school factors while community developers focus on neighborhood factors—a somewhat false dichotomy, given the critical role that schools play in neighborhoods.

This distinction between in-school and out-of-school factors has led to a growing divide within the education sphere. Over a decade ago, education reformers gathered under the slogan “No Excuses,” as an indication of their refusal to accept poverty as an excuse for low achievement. Wanting to take immediate action where they could, they prioritized school-related changes, such as teacher quality and accountability, charter schools, and smaller class sizes. In contrast is the movement known as the “Broader, Bolder Approach,” which emphasizes the importance of non-K-12 school factors, such as early childhood education, health, social development,

**Figure 1. Education Pays**



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey

and poverty, in improving academic achievement among low-income students. Despite their shared end goals, the two camps are often in conflict over how to best achieve them. In a recent speech, Secretary Arne Duncan of the U.S. Department of Education called for an end to what he calls “the wrong education battles,” which includes the debate over the impact of in-school influences, like teachers and principals, on student achievement, versus the impact of out-of-school influences, like poverty and poor health.<sup>2</sup> “Well-intentioned advocates on both sides present policy choices as an either-or choice—not as a ‘both-and’ compromise, however imperfect, that needs to be ironed out... In the wrong education battles, tough-minded collaboration gets dismissed as weakness, not as a way to work out a breakthrough win for children,” said Duncan.

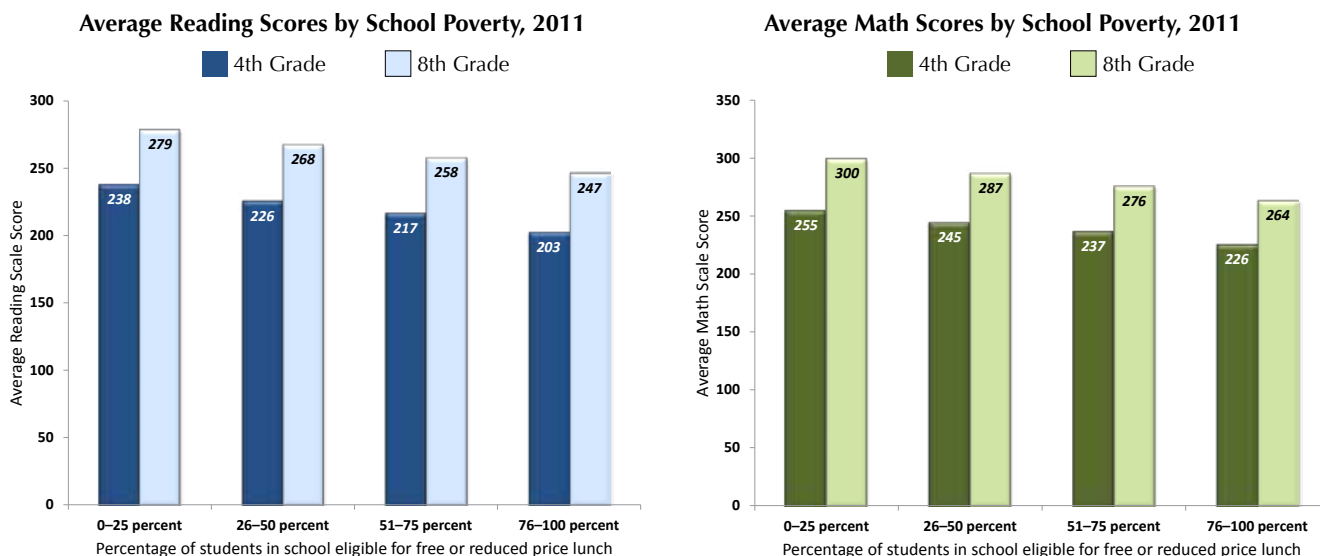
The issue of public education in America is notoriously thorny, complicated by matters of politics, public funding, labor unions, and accountability—it’s enough to scare off any well-intentioned community developer. And while community developers are not educators, and would be wise to leave the reform of pedagogy and instruction to the experts, the community development field has a central role to play in working to improve the educational outcomes of low-income youth. While there are certainly examples of the “tough-minded collaboration” that Duncan encourages, such as the efforts by CDFIs to finance charter school facilities serving low- and moderate-income (LMI) students,<sup>3</sup> the field has struggled to more systematically

apply its comparative advantage in working to reduce poverty and improve household and neighborhood stability toward educational ends. This article examines the intersection of education and community development, with a particular focus on recent efforts to improve achievement among low-income students through better collaboration across sectors.

### Inequities in Education

The widely cited Coleman Report published in 1966 demonstrated the significant influence of socioeconomic factors (such as the economic status of a student’s peers, family, and neighborhood) on student achievement.<sup>4</sup> Almost fifty years later, a wide body of research confirms that those findings still hold true. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that in 2011, schools with higher proportions of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL), a proxy for student poverty, had lower average test scores in both reading and math at the 4th and 8th grade levels (see Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, socioeconomic disadvantage shows an inverse relationship to high school graduation rates; as student FRL eligibility increases at the district level, graduation rates decrease.<sup>6</sup> New research by Sean Reardon of Stanford University shows that the achievement gap between affluent and low-income students grew by about 40 percent since the 1960s, and is now double the black-white achievement gap (see the article “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap between the Rich and the Poor” in this issue).

**Figure 2. High Poverty Schools Have Lower Average Test Scores**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

This achievement gap is closely tied to household level factors. Some of the strongest predictors of educational outcomes for youth include parental education and household income, yet even very specific household traits, such as the number of books in the house or parental vocabulary levels, can impact a child's educational trajectory.<sup>7</sup> But children from poor households tend to live in poor neighborhoods, and thus face not only their own household disadvantage, but also a number of neighborhood-level characteristics that are correlated with educational outcomes. Beyond the obvious issue of discrepancies in school quality,<sup>8</sup> children from low-income neighborhoods often contend with more local crime and violence, greater housing instability, fewer community resources such as libraries and after school programs, and weaker social networks, particularly with respect to adult role models. On the whole, the economic composition of their neighborhoods matters for students; research has shown that having high-income neighbors has a positive effect on school readiness and achievement outcomes for youth, even after accounting for individual and family characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

It is troubling, then, that residential patterns over the past forty years indicate that neighborhoods have become increasingly segregated by income, suggesting that low-income youth have fewer opportunities to interact with middle- and higher-income peers and adults. A study from the US 2010 project at Brown University found that in 1970, 15 percent of families were in neighborhoods classified as either affluent or poor; by 2007, this share doubled to 31 percent, reflecting the growth in neighborhood income concentration at both ends of the income spectrum (with fewer families living in middle-income neighborhoods).<sup>10</sup> As the authors note, "Income segregation is particularly salient for children because it leads to disparities in social context and access to public goods that are particularly relevant for children, such as educational opportunities and school quality."<sup>11</sup> This point is reinforced by recent research from the RAND Corporation, which takes advantage of Montgomery County's large inclusionary zoning policy and its scattered site public housing program to study the effects of increased economic integration on educational performance. The study revealed that over a period of five to seven years, children in public housing who attended the schools in affluent areas of the district far outperformed in math and reading those children in public housing who attended the elementary schools in higher poverty areas.<sup>12</sup> Inclusionary zoning policies, which mandate that a given share of new construction be affordable for low-income households and thus help foster mixed-income neighborhoods, are a boon to the select low-income children that get the opportunity to attend economically integrated schools,

but how can the community development field address the persistent challenges facing schools with high concentrations of students in poverty?

### Improving Partnerships between Communities and Schools

Numerous strategies have emerged in recent years to comprehensively address the unique educational, health, and social development needs of low-income children. Perhaps the best known is the highly publicized Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), which takes a holistic approach to educating low-income students by integrating a high-performing charter school with after-school, parental education, social-service, health and community-building programs.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, the Department of Education (ED) launched the Promise Neighborhoods program, modeled after HCZ, which provides funding for the planning and implementation of a "complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions of both educational programs and family and community supports, with great schools at the center."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Choice Neighborhoods program in 2010, which aims to transform distressed neighborhoods and public and assisted projects into viable and sustainable mixed-income neighborhoods by linking housing improvements with appropriate services, schools, public assets, transportation, and access to jobs.<sup>15</sup> A strong emphasis is placed on local community planning for access to high-quality educational opportunities, including early childhood education. A key component of these federal programs is the required alignment across participating agencies, which include ED, HUD, and the Department of Justice, demonstrating the importance of taking an integrated approach to improving neighborhoods and schools.

In addition to these efforts at the federal level, locally driven initiatives to support broader partnerships between public schools and their surrounding communities have also emerged. For example, six years ago in Cincinnati, more than 300 leaders from the education, nonprofit, community, civic, and philanthropic sectors came together to form the Strive Partnership, under the common goal of improving the educational success and career readiness of children from the region. The Strive Partnership aligns the efforts of these multiple entities through the infrastructure of a common set of core metrics tied to the Partnership's shared goals, such as kindergarten readiness, high school graduation, and postsecondary retention and completion (see the article "New Civic Infrastructure: The 'How To' of Collective Impact" in this issue of *CI* for more information). The improvement in outcomes catalyzed and supported by Strive's approach has been held up as a successful example of collective impact, defined by John

Kania and Mark Kramer of the Foundation Strategy Group as, “The commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.”<sup>16</sup> Kania and Kramer are careful to point out that, “collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives.”<sup>17</sup>

The community schools movement also draws upon the principles of collective action in its approach to improving educational outcomes. Using public schools as a hub, community schools build relationships among educators, families, community-based organizations, business, health and social service agencies, and youth development organizations to implement activities that promote high educational achievement and use the community as a resource for learning.<sup>18</sup> The community schools approach builds upon the idea of “joint use” of district-owned school facilities by non-district entities,<sup>19</sup> but it’s not simply a matter of co-location of services; community schools focus on fostering strong partnerships and strategically integrating diverse services to achieve specific, measurable results.<sup>20</sup> A critical component of the community schools approach is a full-time “community school coordinator,” who is responsible for overseeing and integrating services in a coordinated fashion, while also participating on the management team for the school. In the absence of such coordination, each individual service used by a student occurs in isolation, and the likelihood

of identifying a critical service gap that may have multiple downstream effects is diminished. By strategically integrating across schools and community services, the community schools approach aims to meet the full spectrum of a child’s educational and developmental needs, with the primary purpose of improving educational outcomes (to learn more about a community school approach in Oregon, see the article “Schools Uniting Neighborhoods: Community Schools Anchoring Local Change” in this issue of *CI*).

## Conclusion

This is not to suggest that any one of these specific programs or approaches will be the silver bullet for improving educational outcomes for youth. But all of the approaches noted above share a common feature – cross-sector alignment. This resonates with the growing conviction within the community development industry that multi-sector approaches can more effectively transform communities than the siloed single sector approaches of the past. In engaging more intentionally and systematically in initiatives that aim to support the educational achievement of LMI students, the field can deepen the impact of its efforts in affordable housing, workforce development, accessible financial services, place-based revitalization, and community development finance, all of which help foster an environment where children can learn, thrive, and succeed. Community development experts should seek out opportunities to build relationships with local education integration initiatives, such as the Strive Cradle to Career

**Figure 3.** *What Happens in a Community School?*

Key Areas for Programs and Services	Expected Outcomes
<b>Quality education</b>	High-caliber curriculum and instruction enable all children to meet challenging academic standards and use all of the community’s assets as resources for learning.
<b>Youth development</b>	Young people develop their assets and talents, form positive relationships with peers and adults, and serve as resources to their communities.
<b>Family support</b>	Family resource centers, early childhood development programs, and coordinated health and social services build on individual strengths and enhance family life.
<b>Family and community engagement</b>	Family members and other residents actively participate in designing, supporting, monitoring and advocating quality activities in the school and community.
<b>Community development</b>	All participants focus on strengthening the social networks, economic viability and physical infrastructure of the surrounding community.

Source: Coalition for Community Schools

Network or the Coalition for Community Schools. They can also engage with metropolitan planning partnerships that work with local schools districts, such as the efforts of UC Berkeley's Center for Cities and Schools.

Just as the challenges and resources facing each community are unique, the appropriate responses and opportunities for community development engagement with schools must be locally driven. There's no single

answer for how to best link community development with schools, but systematic integration and strong partnerships should be seen as fundamental to any approach that is taken (see the section "Linking Community Development with Schools" below for ideas on partnership). As Secretary Duncan emphasizes, we can no longer afford to take an "either-or" approach to education—we must consider how we can improve the "both-and" solutions.

## ***Linking Community Development with Schools***

*Adapted from "Connecting Public Schools to Community Development" by Connie Chung<sup>21</sup>*

*Community development organizations can link up with schools in a variety of ways, depending on their institutional experiences, focus, and capacity.*

### ***Public School Facility Development***

Community development practitioners can use their real estate and development expertise to support a school district's efforts to build more neighborhood-oriented school facilities. Some community groups have worked to bring new public schools to their neighborhoods by developing and leasing property to school districts. Community development practitioners can also use their development expertise to assist in the rehabilitation and enhancement of existing school facilities.

### ***Affordable Housing Development***

Developers of affordable housing can boost the long-term viability of their projects by investing in the quality of nearby schools. Similarly, community development groups can make neighborhood improvements near a public school to attract families and qualified teachers to a neighborhood. Improving schools and the surrounding area can be a particularly useful strategy to support the success of mixed-income housing projects. A high-quality school in the neighborhood can entice home buyers to purchase market-rate units in a mixed-income development. Additionally, community development practitioners can work with schools to develop workforce housing for teachers, enabling school staff to live in the communities they serve.

### ***Economic Development***

Schools are often the largest institutions and employers in a neighborhood, making them an invaluable partner in economic development efforts. Community development organizations can harness this economic influence by linking schools with the local business community and labor force. Some communities are also partnering with schools to provide job-training and trade school classes for community members.

### ***Joint Uses***

Community groups can also promote the shared use of facilities between schools and other community entities. The joint use of a library or a park, for instance, offers an effective solution in urban areas where land for new community facilities is not readily available. In rural areas, shared use projects can make economic sense for communities that must concentrate their resources.

### ***Transportation***

Community development organizations can work with public school districts to alleviate neighborhood traffic concerns. Many community development organizations are advocating the placement of schools within walking distance of residential areas and transit stops. These transportation strategies not only reduce school traffic in neighborhoods, but also help to address childhood obesity by encouraging children to walk to school. **CI**

# Endnotes

## Community Development and Education: A Shared Future

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## The New Civic Infrastructure: The 'How To' of Collective Impact

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## The Widening Academic Achievement Gap between the Rich and the Poor

1. This article is a condensed and updated version of: Reardon, Sean F. "The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations." In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard Murnane. © 2011 Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10065. Reprinted with Permission. <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/whither-opportunity> Online appendix is available at: [http://www.russellsage.org/duncan\\_murnane\\_online\\_appendix.pdf](http://www.russellsage.org/duncan_murnane_online_appendix.pdf)
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3. I use data from 19 nationally representative studies, including studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Long-Term Trend and Main National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) studies, U.S. components of international studies, and other studies with information on both family background and standardized-test scores. Although these studies vary in a number of ways, each of them provides data on the math or reading skills, or both, of nationally representative samples of students, together with some data on students' family socioeconomic characteristics, such as family income, parental education, and parental occupation. Although the specific tests of reading and math skills used differ among the studies, they are similar enough to allow broad conclusions about the rough magnitude of achievement gaps.