



Spring Symposium

The Importance of Vibrant Cities in Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education

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and
Tom Bates

April 1, 2005
University of California, Berkeley

The following is a transcript of the Center for Cities & Schools Spring 2005 Symposium. The bi-annual symposium series brings together speakers and participants that reflect the research, practice and policy disconnects between cities and public schools. The Spring Symposium featuring two speakers in this vein; Pedro Noguera, a renowned scholar and activist on urban education; and Tom Bates, City of Berkeley mayor. Housed in the Institute of Urban and Regional Development (IURD) at Berkeley and affiliated with the Graduate School of Education (GSE) and the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP), The Center for Cities & Schools is committed to bridging the fields of education and urban policy to create equitable, diverse, and livable cities and schools. Through education, direct service, and research, the Center aims to make visible the connections between cities and schools and to foster a collaborative environment linking the university, public schools, local governments, community leaders, and neighborhood residents toward achieving goals that embrace public policy, urban planning, and educational practice.

Pedro Noguera is a professor in the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University. An urban sociologist, Noguera's scholarship and research focus on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions in the urban environment. Noguera has served as an advisor and engaged in collaborative research with several large urban school districts throughout the United States. He has also done research on issues related to education and economic and social development in the Caribbean, Latin America and several other countries throughout the world. From 2000–2003 Noguera served as the Judith K. Dimon Professor of Communities and Schools at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. From 1990–2000 he was a Professor in Social and Cultural Studies at the Graduate School of Education and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California, Berkeley.

Tom Bates is Mayor of Berkeley, California. Mayor Bates is a Californian native and Cal graduate who taught at Berkeley and was instrumental in the adoption of healthier food policies for Berkeley and Oakland school districts.

Pedro Noguera

The idea of bringing an academic who studies these issues with a policymaker, who works on these issues is, I think, a good model. I applaud the Center for Cities and Schools for what they are doing to get people to think about these important connections across policy institutions, which doesn't happen nearly enough.

I did an interview with the Oakland Tribune yesterday and one of the questions posed to me was an interesting question for us to consider. She asked, "How can it be, that the San Francisco Bay Area, which is so well known as a progressive and innovative part of the country, with great diversity, the premier public university in the country — and we have Stanford, which some of us don't like to acknowledge — how is it that we still end up with public schools that are not benefiting nearly as many as they should?"

I think the disconnect is that those who are served by the public schools are disproportionately poor people and that the great wealth and affluence of this area doesn't touch the public schools, except in some limited ways. So the potential for creating very powerful and effective public schools is there, but it is not realized. It is not realized because we have largely not had the leadership. When I say leadership, I don't mean a single mayor, I mean leadership at many levels; leadership at the schools, and the community to bring about the kind of connections that are necessary to bring about the change to create the kind of public schools we need.

It is interesting because about 20 years ago, the former chancellor of Berkeley, was heading a group called Bay Vision 20:20 which was based on this idea that we needed to think long-term about transportation, the economy, and education across municipalities. We couldn't think about Berkeley solving its problems on its own without thinking about how it affected Oakland, San Francisco or Richmond. We are too interconnected and we needed to have some plan that went across these jurisdictions to really think through how we will create not only a livable, but healthy environment in the future. I mention this because, like many good ideas, this one never got followed through on. Again this is a reflection of great potential, great thinking, but little in the way of policy. I want to touch on that today as I talk about that potential.

My positions on these issues came from working as Berkeley Mayor Loni Hancock's assistant while I was still a graduate student at Berkeley. I was young and naïve and so I thought I could solve the problems of the city. In my portfolio, I took on crack cocaine, drug trafficking, homelessness, and economic development issues and it took me about two months to realize that I had a whole bunch of responsibility and absolutely no power to solve any problems. So I was actually the one sent out to explain why we couldn't solve these problems. It was an awfully frustrating experience and one I look back to frequently.

One of the problems in this area, and not just Berkeley, but Berkeley epitomizes this, is that very often our energy is focused more on protest than on problem solving and that is part of the reason that we don't accomplish a lot. In so many issues that we were dealing with, education was part of the solution and part of the problem. That is, if we couldn't find ways to inspire a generation of youth to keep going to schools and expand their opportunity, they were going to sell drugs. They had very few other options.

It was also said to me that our schools were completely inept at being able to educate and so we had this revolving door where we would arrest people and they would be embraced by another crop of drug dealers. The same was true with homelessness. How do you enable adults to become self-sufficient so that they can have jobs and so that they can pay rent and not be dependent on local government? Education could prepare them for those jobs. But again, there was dissidence between our institutions for adult education and the homeless so although you would think that this is a part of the solution, making that connection was the trouble. So over and over again I would say that that is not just true locally, but internationally.

The United Nations and the World Bank started to realize that the best way to address poverty in the world is through the education of women. Women tend to be the primary providers for families, they tend to have less education, and they tend to generate more income when they have more education. That is, you can actually reduce poverty in the world by simply focusing on the education of women. Not to say that you should ignore men, because we have been ignoring African American and Latino men, but now every state in the country has more women than men in college.

The United States needs to pay attention to this because, particularly for African American and Latino men, the absences have become a crisis. Clearly education should be a part of any serious strategy for addressing the economic development and social problems we face locally, nationally, and internationally.

The question is, how do we start to realize the potential? I would start by saying that, coming back to what I said earlier, part of the problem is the fragmentation of our community. The ways in which race and class divide us, prevents us from realizing the potential. I think it is most there, but Berkeley tends to still be a relatively integrated district and I think that poses its own set of challenges, which I think is important and we can talk about further, but it's different from Oakland or Richmond, or even San Francisco where the vast majority of students served are very poor. What we have to acknowledge is that the issues related to poverty are indeed educational issues. Oakland public schools have to serve the needs of those children, but can't do so by themselves. I can't say that loudly enough because when I worked at Lowell middle school in Oakland, two thirds of the children did not live with their biological parents. Think about that. How do you work with families when two thirds of the children are being raised by grandparents, relatives, foster care, and group homes?

Forty percent of the children at Lowell had some sort of respiratory problem, from asthma to chronic breathing disorders. My colleague at Harvard, Gary Orfield, who has been doing work on the connection between sight disorders and reading problems found that over 10 percent of the children that can't read, can't do so not because they have trouble reading, but because they have trouble seeing. It is so ironic that we have a law called No Child Left Behind that ignores the basic needs of children. You can't see, you can read. It is so interesting that the slogan No Child Left Behind came from the Children's Defense Fund. When Marian Wright Adelman came up with the term, it wasn't about testing kids as much as possible; it was about how in a wealthy nation we need to make sure that we provide for the basic needs of children.

To understand what it is like when you live in a nation like that, it is important for us to look at other countries. In Ireland, what they call the deprived areas around Dublin, there is a large housing development and while they have many of the social problems that we associate with poverty — teen pregnancy, single parent households, and drug use — they do not have the kind of deprivation that we have, particularly for children. Every child has preschool, every family has access to day care, and every family has health care. As a result, their children are not victimized. We are far from there, but so much of the problems we see in Oakland, and even Berkeley, where the numbers are fewer, when you look closely at the numbers on who is not achieving, you find that the poorest kids, the neediest kids, are also the kids that are most likely to be punished.

We quite often punish kids because of their needs. I want you to think about that for a moment. We often punish kids because of their needs. I saw this in Berkeley when I was the president of the school board and we did the expulsion hearings. Its not to say that the kids didn't do anything wrong — they always did do something wrong — but once you spent time learning about the kids, who they were and where they came from, you said, who are we expelling? It was the kids in poverty, the kids in group homes, and the kids that had been victimized their entire life who made mistakes. Our question became, "do we put them out on the streets or do figure out some other way to respond to their needs if we have the resources to do it?"

There has to be a better way and the community has to do it. This is a community that is strong, particularly in Berkeley where there is great support for public education. But we have to have a more expansive view than we do and we have to understand that if students basic needs are not met, their ability to learn and their ability to grow, is far more limited and restricted. We also have to recognize that when public institutions cater exclusively to only the poorest people, invariably what happens is that those people get short-changed. The same way they get short-changed in school, they get short-changed in hospitals and in any other institution. I would argue that conservatives get this better than progressives, because conservatives recognize that when you have a captive market — when you have a monopoly over the services provided — people have no choice. Where are the incentives to serve that constituency well? I am absolutely sure that without any health insurance, and without either the social or cultural capital to demand access to good schools and good teachers, you are going to get short-changed in the same way. So one part of the effort to improve our schools has to be responding to the families they serve. It must be.

The big advantage that middle class families have over poor families is choice. If they don't like something, they can just leave. "If I don't like it, we'll move." "If I don't like it, we'll fight it." Middle class parents get responded to differently. They are treated differently; they are treated better. When I was a parent in Berkeley, it was like that over and over again. The differences in race and class compound our ability to improve our schools, and we know that our schools are so necessary for creating the quality of life that is so necessary for communities.

We have got to recognize that part of doing that has to mean building the capacity of schools. There are two approaches that have been found effective elsewhere that we can learn from. Alice Water's work supporting [Martin Luther] King [Elementary School in Berkeley] and some other schools around gardens, as an example of what is being called civic capacity building. When you see communities where education is no longer the job of only the district, but also the city, of the nonprofit sector, of the business sector, that is when schools are fully embraced — when we say, "these are our schools," and we will ensure that no kid that needs a coat in winter goes without a coat, and no kid that needs a tutor doesn't have a tutor, because we have educated people right here that could provide that tutoring, and that no teacher has a shortage of paper, and there are no connections between our schools. In the cities where civic connection is happening best — cities like Columbus Ohio — where the schools are led, not by the superintendent, but by the mayor and other city leaders who are able to champion schools in the same way you see mayors championing football stadiums. In New York City right now, Mayor Bloomberg's whole re-election campaign has been about building a stadium for the Jets so that they can bid for the Olympics in 2008. He won't even be the mayor then! But he planned that far ahead. I wish that his dedication for that project would be matched by his commitment for education and bringing those kinds of resources into the public schools.

We recruit teachers to New York City from the third world. This great country can't bring its own people into teaching. We need teachers from the Caribbean and the Philippines to come and work in our schools. We can't even keep them because we put them in schools that are so inept, so disorganized, so out of control, that they last about a year and it is not worth the green card, and they say, "I am going to go back home."

We have a teaching shortage throughout this country in urban areas, but it is not because we have a shortage of teachers, it's because we have a shortage of teachers willing to work under those conditions. The teachers are out there; they just aren't signing up and they aren't staying. Looking at Liz Fuentes here in the audience, who actually taught my kids — we need a future generation of teachers that are willing to do this work. It is a crisis. In Los Angeles every year, they hire teachers and have them work with 30-40 students in classes and then we wonder why those kids aren't doing well, I wonder why LA has a drop out rate that exceeds 50 percent, I wonder why it is that when we implement these high stakes exams here in California, it is projected that maybe 50-60 percent of the people there will not get diplomas. What is the state going to do if you end up with that many young people that have no diploma, who will be less able to take our productive jobs? This is what is passing for educational policy today.

I was at a conference for a robotics competition two weeks ago, sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, where kids throughout New York City spend their Saturdays and Sundays and stay after school to build robots for this competition. I was talking to one group whose mentor was the head of technology for a major company and he explained to me that these are kids who demonstrate the potential and understanding; the problem is not the kids. The underlying assumption about why schools are so bad, why the drop-out rate is so high, why the test scores are so low, is that there is something wrong with the kids and when we make that assumption, we can throw up our hands.

It is amazing what happens when you take very poor kids and put them into good schools. For example across the street from Laney College, you have a school where the kids are doing rich internships, and the students have to do an oral exam where they show their mastery and they go way beyond the performance on a standardized test — they want you to achieve competence and mastery. Schools like these only serve a few students, but it is an example of what you can accomplish when you bring together resources for our children in these schools.

So the other point I want to mention is the development of social capital for our kids. What we know from the research on social capital is that it is the power of networks and connections that expand opportunity. Students

that are working at their fathers, or their uncles, or their friends' company over the summer do so, not because they are so talented, but because they are socially connected. Those connections follow them their whole lives and make them appear much more talented than they are. What do poor children lack? They lack those connections. They need those types of connections to expand their opportunity. We have to find ways to expand connections through new mentorships and internships to help to expand their circle of networks. Without them, that they are stuck in communities with no resources. We need to build those connections both between and across communities, which is so important to expanding opportunities. We should think of our public schools as being as vital to our social infrastructure as our streets, our utilities, and our health facilities. We should be thinking in those terms. From civic leadership — from the mayor to the churches to the business sector — public education must get that kind of support and attention.

The New York City subway system is a good example of a thriving public good. At one time, many of the subways were unfit and unsafe. There was a debate in the city about whether to privatize the system, but that was ultimately defeated; it had to remain a publicly-run system. We have seven million people a day riding around in the subways, four million people a day going to work. It is an international hub of transportation. I think the New York subway system is the eighth wonder of the world. But the amazing thing about it is its equity. For two dollars, you can get within a two hundred mile radius. When you get to the West Side or the Bronx, it is clean, it is safe, and no matter what part of the city you are in, the standard is the same. It should be like that for the public schools. It shouldn't be that if you live in Chabot that you get a nice, safe, and clean school but if you live in West Oakland it's a whole different thing. It shouldn't be that way. It should be that we have leadership that ensures that poor kids get as good an education, in terms of teacher experience and in terms of facilities as everyone else.

We need to draw on our university system. I am so glad the Center for Cities & Schools is doing what it is doing but need more. There are faculty here that have worked with the community on some of these issues, but it is still sporadic, it is still isolated cases. I know we had Chancellor Tien's Berkeley Pledge, do we still have the Berkeley Pledge? I think it's gone now, but it was the idea that the university should build the schools around it. Universities should be more involved than they are. But this is not just a Berkeley issue. I spent three years in Cambridge and the public schools there are just as bad as anywhere. There is no connection between the two great local universities — Harvard and MIT — and the public schools. The lack of social responsibility and the lack of commitment the universities have to the cities in which they are located has to change. To do so will take high-level leadership that begins to direct resources to these communities.

To conclude, I would like to go back to the point I made about the protest mentality. I am a protester, I have been involved in many protests. But as a school board member, at a time when we were cutting budgets, we were faced with some tough choices in the early 1990's. Do we get rid of the music program or the kindergarten? The community would say, "don't cut our programs!" My response would be, "okay, how do we solve this problem? What should we cut? Should we get rid of that secretary? Should we get rid of the custodians and clean up after ourselves? We have limited resources and the pie is not getting any bigger, and fighting each other over it is not helping us figure out how to solve these problems. I know we are good fighters." There is blood on the streets in Oakland over the Oakland public schools. But guess what? Our kids are going to school everyday and we are not getting any closer to creating the kind of schools they need. There education is now.

Responsible adults need to be much more mature than we are. We need to put aside our differences and ask, how can we begin to solve some of these problems? What is a reasonable way to resolve our budget crisis? What resources can we tap into to make up for some of the shortfall? But for that to happen, we have to be willing to make the sacrifices, we have to be willing to make the compromises, we have to be willing to engage each other. I hope, because I know there are a lot of good folks in this community that that can happen. If we talk about building and realizing the potential that there is, it's not simply about having good plan, it's about implementing those plans. It is about the ability to work across our differences. It's about achieving consent and acting on it. Thank you.

Tom Bates

First of all let me just acknowledge my assistant, Julie Sinai, who works with me on issues of children and education. She has a background of working not only with preschools and early childhood education, but has also worked in the school district for a number of years working with school-linked programs. I was very very blessed to have Julie come work with me. Let me say that to begin with that I am actually in my twenty-seventh year of elected public service.

The issue I am most concerned about is the idea that things are interrelated and interconnected. There has to be some change of service delivery if we are to improve children, families, schools, and neighborhoods, so I authored a number of bills in that regard. One of which was for the integration of services — we were trying to get people to look past the silos of their bureaucracies so that we aren't having services delivered in isolated bureaucracies. Institutions working with individuals and families need to figure out how to bring resources together to make them fit for that family, rather than just services from a particular funding source. It has been very difficult to accomplish; in fact, I am still working on that and I hope that we can see some results in that regard.

But let me tell you, when I ran for mayor, it sounded like I was running for the school board, because everything linked back to the children. These are not school problems, these are problems for the community. Children are everybody's responsibility. They are my responsibility as the mayor because they are with us before school, after school, as well as nights and weekends and all summer. They are everybody's responsibility, not just the schools responsibility. I am fortunate to have Julie come work for me to assist in developing city programs to address these issues.

We recently held an education summit, out of which were adopted some strategies that are attempting to make a difference in people's lives. First of all, the city was doing all kinds of stuff — all kinds of programs — and we estimate that we were spending somewhere in the neighborhood of \$5 million locally, with \$2-3 million matched for other programs.

We have after school programs, we have recreation programs, we have youth programs, we have all sorts of programs like BYA [Berkeley Youth Alternatives], and we have programs that deal with youth drop outs and children. Do we know that these are successful programs? No. Do we know that they are making a difference? No. But we hope so. It is very difficult to know; you provide the service and opportunities for the kids, but does that change their lives? I don't know. I think it does, I hope it does. We do have all kinds of programs that youth are involved in.

However, we have to understand what we can do when resources declining. We used to have \$12 million and now we are attempting to cut another \$9 million. Money is being taken away from us. State governments aren't helping us; in fact they are taking money away. They took \$1.6 million from us, they are cutting back on Section 8 housing voucher funding, and they are cutting back on housing in general. So what does that say? It says we have to get our own act together. We have to figure out a way to move our communities and work on these problems. The kids are the ones suffering from these cuts. That's where I have decided to put my efforts and I hope to say that I have made a difference in that regard.

Out of the education summit, we started what we call the Berkeley Champions for Kids. This is a program in Berkeley that hasn't been hugely successful, but we are building and working on it, and we are very excited about the prospects. The first thing we want to set an example for businesses by establishing a City of Berkeley program that allows city employees to take time off and do volunteer work with at-risk kids. When they do so, the city will match every one of their volunteer hours with an hour of pay. So for 40 hours of volunteer work, you will receive 40 hours of pay. That program is just starting, we are really excited about it, we have the resources, and we have people signed up. More people are interested in doing it, and we do want to go to fast because we want to make sure it works. As you know, we have downsized our city workforce. But what does the research tell us? Research tells us that people who are volunteering with kids are doing better on their jobs, and they tend to stay on the job longer. Programs like this have been successfully implemented in the private sector.

We have also asked local employers to start similar programs as well as to make monetary donations to Berkeley Champions for Kids. We have to use our resources; we'd like every major employer, like the University of California, to help us in the future and for them to make voluntary contributions. We have started to work with the University of California on a summer program. We talk about education all the time and what we can do better, but one of the things we know for sure is that during the summer, kids, particularly low-income kids, fall behind and it is difficult to get them caught up.

Julie and I had the opportunity to go to a conference in Chicago recently and I mention this because the mayors of many cities are taking over the local school districts. Many of the cities that are doing this have experienced positive results. I am not advocating that for Berkeley, but we do need to work together on making our schools better. When you look at cities like Cleveland and New York where the mayors are actually assuming the leadership of the schools, they are experiencing nice turn arounds. We started a program here where Scholastic Book Company gives us books at a very low cost. We then we went to Cal and talked to the school of education on various ideas and then we went to Cal Corps and asked if they would be interested in starting a summer reading program. They agreed, and now we've got 550 kids from South and West Berkeley involved. This year we are hoping to work with 1000 students and will begin combining literacy education with learning about nutrition and physical education. So we will work with Cal Corps, community organizations, our recreation centers, and Berkeley's Graduate School of Education — we are very excited about that prospect. Best of all, the city didn't have to pay for any of this. We were able to privately raise funds — telephone companies, gas companies, and some other people are able to step up. The program only has a \$60,000 budget for the summer, but it will make a lot of difference to a lot of kids lives.

Another thing that is very near and dear to me is that I am working very close with a group called the Alliance, a group that has brought together the University of California, Berkeley, the school district, and the city to figure out how we can all work together. We have done some good work and we recently held a retreat to focus on building relationships and gain knowledge on these issues. As the mayor, I have been working to get mental health programs into the schools to provide opportunities for kids to access mental health services and we are now getting dental screening into the schools. We are also working with Berkeley's School of Optometry to provide optometric screening. I was surprised to hear the statistic that Pedro mentioned on eyesight and reading. I know ours is an important program to address this issue. We are trying to get a health center — hopefully at Longfellow School — to serve the students and the community around that area. We also want to figure out how to get more school nurses into our schools.

Here in the City of Berkeley, we want to figure out how to get people out of their own silos and do something different. It is very difficult to change, but we have the opportunity to integrate all of those programs. We need to learn and work with families because we know that most kids have problems at home, and these problems are more concentrated in West and South Berkeley. We are trying to figure out ways to get them more involved and engaged. For example, we started an outreach program to 16-24 year olds through Vista College. We have arranged a scholarship program to go to Vista College, and we are having a job fair so that kids know there are other options. I love this job but it is very frustrating because our schools and programs are under-funded and under-staffed. We have a two-by-two committee and only one school board member and 27 people from the city, police, health center, but nobody from the schools, and it is very difficult to get classroom teachers to get involved, so I will stop there and say thank you very much.

Acknowledgements

The Center for Cities & Schools would like to greatly thank all of our Spring 2005 Symposium participants and attendees. Thanks to our featured speakers, Pedro Noguera and Tom Bates, for providing their time, expertise, and insights into these important issues. Thanks to Oakland Councilmember Nancy Nadel for introducing Dr. Noguera. Thanks to UC Berkeley freshman Yahya Abdul-Mateen for introducing Mayor Bates.