

**GETTING TO GO IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM:  
Remarks to the Planning Group for the Kansas City Roundtable on Access and  
Opportunity**

Clarence Stone

There is an African proverb that says: When you pray, move your feet. Action at the ground level is extremely important.

The school reform movement is now more than 20 years old. This means that there is a lot of concrete experience to draw on. That experience points to four major challenges.

- One is that of sustaining the effort. We can learn from George Washington. He was not only our first president, but a great general. A secret to his military success, it is said, was his ability to keep an army in the field. One of the keys to school reform is to keep the troops engaged despite some inevitable setbacks.
- A second is the importance of gaining inside leverage. If reform is ultimately to be successful, it has to consist of more than pressure from the outside.
- A third is the need to transform the character of school politics, to change it from a defensive game of guarding turf into a broad and constructive politics of the whole community.
- A fourth challenge is to break down the inner walls of disadvantage. Yes, all children can learn and a good classroom experience is essential, but ultimately effective schooling depends on a wider climate of hopeful expectations and positive aspirations.

These are in ascending order of difficulty, but they are all related. Let me start with the first, sustainability. The challenge comes from the fact that we live in a fractured world in which there are many demands on everybody's time, and no one seems to have a long attention span. In the face of these conditions, I offer two examples of how to meet the sustainability challenge. One is Kentucky's Prichard Commission. The other is El Paso's Collaboration for Academic Excellence. Both are bodies outside the school system, but both work with educators and community members to promote reform and enlist an active constituency of support. One is funded largely by business donations; the other is housed on a university campus (UTEP) and strongly supported by the president of the university. Neither is a shoe-string operation; both enjoy significant and continuing backing, financial and otherwise. Neither organization is a lone operator; each is the center of a network devoted to the cause of school reform. In both cases the central operation is run by a full-time professional of extraordinary ability and deep commitment. Both directors have an inclination to cultivate alliances and work closely

with the grass roots as well as with the grass tops. In short, a full-time operation is vital in sustaining reform momentum. It is a way of keeping an army in the field.

Now let me turn to inside leverage. With any organization, it is hard to maintain pressure from the outside. Those on the inside have set ways of doing things, and they have privileges they want to protect. If the inside mode of operation hampers performance as it sometimes does, then some force on the inside needs to put a new dynamic to work. In El Paso this was done by professional development, with an emphasis on training a new cadre of principals. We also know from efforts at police reform that a new chief and a few new captains is not enough. Reform has to penetrate to the sergeant level at least. Creating a new internal dynamic can be carried even further. An interesting move is to encourage students to organize around the idea of enhanced academic opportunity and improved performance. That, however, depends on having sympathetic administrators in key places who can see the advantage in pushing from the bottom up.

My third observation is about politics. In many circles a dreaded word, politics to many people is only about opportunistic pursuit of personal and partisan advantage. Yet it is also a word with an ancient and honorable heritage. In this tradition, politics is ultimately about the common interest. It is the process of working through the particulars of clashing interests and overcoming any resentments based in past injustices. The positive face of politics comes from a realization that, despite differences, “we are all in this together” – that members of the community can combine efforts in such a way as to do things that are not otherwise feasible. Is it possible to experience this good side of politics? I cite Mobile, Alabama, as a well documented example of a place where a constructive form of politics took shape around school reform. Though I know less about it, the First Things First campaign in Kansas City, Kansas, may be a parallel case.

On Mobile’s process, the Director of the Local Education Fund commented: “It’s not rocket science. It’s political science.” Though not my favorite way of hearing the message, it is an approbation of politics – of the process of transcending particular differences and past resentments for the sake of shared well-being.

Our most intractable conflict is that of race. As many people have observed, slavery is the original sin of the American nation. More than 200 years after the signing of the Constitution, we still suffer the consequences of the 3/5 compromise. Hence we know that compromise in and of itself is not the answer.

Sometimes the question is where to start. One approach is to find common work, even if *initially* around narrow tasks. That at least is what a timely bit of history suggests. Will Alexander was the Director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation., an organization that worked in the Deep South in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was an especially troubled time in the nation’s racial history, but the Commission sought to work the ground for better days. From his experience, Will Alexander said: “The best way to change [people’s] minds about each other is to set them

to work on some common task.” This echoes the African proverb mentioned earlier: “When you pray, move your feet.” Tackle some tangible task.

However, in many places the main problem is not something that is easily reduced to a concrete task. It is the big political question of who controls the school district, and that question is often framed in racial terms. Let me offer an illustration from my eleven-city study. Two of the cities were Atlanta and Baltimore. In both places, the school system was the first and biggest gain African Americans made in moving from a position of powerlessness to some degree of power sharing. About 30 years ago, in both cities there was a tacit understanding. Blacks would run the schools, but whites would control development in and around the central business district. That was the trade-off. Many other issues went unaddressed despite the fact that in each city there was a sizeable poor, Black population largely isolated from the main body of opportunities in the metropolitan area. Schools were not part of a strategy of opportunity expansion for young people. To the contrary, in both cities the school system became what critics began to call “an employment agency.” It provided jobs and material opportunities for the middle class but for complex reasons performed badly in educating poor kids.

Once such a pattern takes hold, it is hard to dislodge it. It has a tendency to be self-perpetuating. To the Black community, white-led school reform often looks like the launching of a power struggle, with employment opportunities at the center. (El Paso’s Collaborative for Academic Excellence is an informative example of how to put school reform into a different framework.)

If for whites school reform is all about performance and accountability narrowly understood, that is, all about what test results the classroom can yield, then deadlock may be in the making. There is limited opportunity to find common ground. Especially if school reform touches such matters as altering the role of seniority in teacher assignment, then African Americans may see it as essentially an assault on their power and position, especially the position of those in the middle class. Whites may then throw up their hands and say there is nothing they can do. They may simply turn their backs on the school system. This was the case for a time in Atlanta, and it remains somewhat the case in Baltimore today.

Behind this political misalignment is a tendency to separate academic performance from the larger world of expectations, hopes, and aspirations. Consider the following. In school reform, one of the recurring patterns is that elementary schools are easier to turn around than high schools. Why is that the case? It may be that the world of elementary education can be more readily sheltered from some of the harsher features of life. High school students get the full brunt of those realities and what it means for their futures.

One of the realities for many metropolitan areas is a decentralization of population, development, and jobs. But the area’s poor and minority population remains heavily concentrated in the center. School performance and accessible opportunities are inversely related. Yes, heroic efforts by a few households can overcome the odds, but for

most kids the odds are unyielding. It is one thing to talk abstractly about the discrimination of low expectations and blame teachers. It is something different to fathom the many ways that those low expectations pervade society. Low expectations are rooted in stereotypes and practices far beyond the schoolhouse door. This is the inner wall of disadvantage that must be penetrated if sustainable progress is to be secured.

Disadvantage operates not only within urban schools, but beyond as well. It has to do with more than who has well qualified and committed teachers and who does not. That is only part of the picture. It also has to do with how adolescents see the larger society, how they experience the kind of respect it offers, and the range of opportunities they encounter. Here is where constructive politics can come into play. Suppose the political challenge is framed, not as an issue of racial control, but rather as one of how to advance more young people into the mainstream of society and into productive areas of the economy. If it can be kept front and center, this is a framework that offers a lot. In the first place it is morally solid because it is about young people and our obligations to coming generations. Second, it is consistent with a concern with social order and public safety. The teen years are difficult. A neglected youth is inclined to be disorderly and is susceptible to crime. Channeling into the mainstream is good prevention. Third, this agenda contributes to the area's economic strength. Even though it involves spending money up front, it is an investment in the future. It holds promise of an important long-term return.

But a broad agenda is only a framework. Success depends on the details. What are the concrete things that can be done? What trade-offs keep racial cleavage at bay? Take one of the thorniest issues. I'll use my home area of Washington, DC, as an example. The collective-bargaining contract for the public schools gives full sway to seniority. Principals have limited capacity to recruit teachers they deem appropriate for their schools. Seniority-dominated transfer rules govern who has first claim on an open position. That may work in a factory setting, but it is a cumbersome way to run a school system.

Unions like seniority, but they also like to avoid a shrinking employment base. Whether understood or not by local officials, there is a trade-off. Consider the DC experience. Charter schools now make up 25% of the school enrollment in Washington, DC, and the proportion grows each year. As a consequence, employment in the regular public school system is in decline.

The superintendent understands that this pattern is at work, and he is making adjustments accordingly. He has now negotiated special exceptions for a few of the regular public schools to give them more leeway at the school-site level. They are exempted from many of the system-wide rules. In the judgment of some, these schools have become charters in all but name. What the teachers union has a voice in becomes smaller step by step.

If not modified in a significant way, the seniority rule protects a shrinking base of jobs for older teachers, but offers very little to junior faculty. And it does not do much

for quality instruction in the classroom. A matter like this should not be handled as if it were a strictly private matter between workers and management. It is a matter of community-wide concern with a strong bearing on the quality of education. A number of innovative alternatives to the seniority rule are now in operation in places like Denver, CO, and Montgomery County, MD, and the teachers union has been a party to working out the particulars. To the extent that job security is an important and worthy concern, details can be worked out, especially if the private sector is willing to take a hand in creating relevant employment pools. Pension portability is another factor that can be brought into play. The point is this – if quality classroom teaching is the issue and a variety of players are willing to engage in the needed give and take, a solution can be worked out.

The advantage of having a broad agenda is that no one element of the community should have to bear the full burden of change. If the teachers union is being asked to yield to a need for flexibility in teacher recruitment and assignment, then the union has every right to ask what others are contributing? What is the business sector offering by way of internships and apprenticeships for students? What about partnerships and supplemental funding to get extra resources into the neediest schools. Or what about a broad-based campaign to raise salaries, upgrade training, and improve retention for those who provide early childhood education? State funding and scholarship assistance could provide a much needed boost.

Within the local public sector, is the library system being asked to evaluate its mode of operation? A survey in Philadelphia revealed that when a library serving an affluent white neighborhood was compared to its counterpart serving a low-income Black neighborhood, the former had six times as many books for children and youth as the latter did. Such inequities need to be addressed. With some innovative programming and strategic attention to shaping book and other collections, libraries can play a valuable educational role in lower-income neighborhoods. They could play a valuable role in countering the summer fall-off that affects many children from less advantaged households.

The idea is not to fix on a given set of particulars for all cities and their metropolitan areas. Specifics should be worked out politically in a way that constructively fits a given area. My general point is that the combination of particulars should blend in such a way that everyone gives on some matters, but receives on others. And the combination of giving and receiving advances the overall well-being of the area. If that is done, it is not necessary that everyone be of the same mind. They need only feel that the overall direction is positive and that each element of the community is part of a system of give and take.

Our widest challenge is a world that inclines too readily toward defensive politics. Ours is a society that plays the blame game skillfully. Hence much of our politics is about distancing ourselves from others, seeking comfort zones, and sometimes even demonizing those who don't share our outlook. If defensive considerations prevail, we cling to long-held views about how things should be done. The world is sufficiently

complicated and the springs of human behavior sufficiently complex, that it is easy to find justifying examples of whatever favored position we want to defend. Sticking to what is in place is the easy way, but it is not very productive in the field of public education.

The question is whether we are willing to move beyond that stage, embrace a politics of construction, and build bridges to those with a different perspective. Can we see ourselves, not as stakeholders defending a dearly held interest, but as members of a civic community in need of learning from one another and assisting one another. As Martin Luther King said: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” That is the reality underlying democracy. For that reason, we need to learn from one another, not simply for the sake of learning, but in order to be able to live constructively together. Because we have a ways to go, it is good to remember: “When you pray, move your feet.”