

In the Midst of Transformation: Reflections from the Bay Area Coalition For Equitable Schools

by LaShawn Routé Chatmon

I recently attended a national conference where hundreds of educators, parents, policy makers, and community leaders gathered to discuss innovative ways to ensure that high school students in this country are ready for college, work and life. On my way home, as I sat in the airport reflecting on my experiences, I phoned a colleague to talk about the implications of the conference for our work in the Bay Area. As I spoke excitedly about my ideas and questions, a gentleman seated next to me kept murmuring, “That’s not going to help you solve the problem” and “You are not addressing the real issue.” Eventually I hung up the phone. Taking a deep breath, I asked him, “What is the problem as *you* see it?” His reply was so striking that I wrote it down: “I feel that you have a noble charge. Educators do some of the most heroic work in the country. But really, and I say this sadly, in a free-market economy, I have no vested interest in whether or not you succeed in your endeavor. If American kids can’t do the work, then I will find someone else [from another country] who can.”

Setting aside my righteous indignation, I was reminded that in our efforts to transform schools and districts, we must be prepared regularly to confront the fact that we may not possess the collective interest, let alone the moral imperative, to educate all of our children to high levels. The man I met in the airport was misguided perhaps, but not spiteful or mean. His assertion was simple. As long as he could get workers elsewhere, the current educational system is increasingly irrelevant. He argued that as long as students in this country continued to graduate from high school without the requisite skills, knowledge and interpersonal competence; he and others like him will remain pessimistic about the promises of educational reform.



What intrigued and alarmed me was what was missing from his analysis: a lack of acknowledgement that all of our lives are inextricably linked, that the persistent under-performance of black, brown, immigrant, and poor children in our education systems does affect all our communities. His comments made me think about our apparent inability as friends and neighbors collectively to find a compelling answer to the question, “If someone else’s child is not learning, what does that have to do with me?”

I realize the statements made by my airport acquaintance may just be the musings of one individual, but if you listen carefully, you will hear similar sentiments expressed by politicians and business leaders who lay all the responsibility for creating the next generation of citizens, leaders, and workers on schools, rather than on a combination of factors, including education

“We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whatever we do, it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

– Ron Edmunds, *Effective Schools* research pioneer, Harvard University, 1982

such as community development, housing segregation, and employment. The late Dr. Asa Hilliard III, educator and scholar, warned in *The Maroon Within Us* that “there are no pedagogical solutions to political problems. In a historically oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which denies their political origin and meaning.” Educational attainment remains the most significant precursor to quality of life. And so long as educational quality and access are correlated with race, geography, and income level, we have considerable work before us. The gentleman in the airport both dissociated himself from the notion of investing in schools (much less wider communities) and claimed that schools need to get better at producing young people who can think critically, solve problems, and communicate.

In effect, his personal resignation rendered an entire generation of young people expendable. To whose children was he willing to assign this fate? Where, exactly, does he – do we – think young people who drop out or graduate without requisite skills and knowledge go? What do we think they do? Do we see ourselves connected to young men we pass on street corners, to the young artists, activists, and leaders openly resiting acculturation and traditional pathways of “success”? Do we see ourselves connected to the alarming incidents of violence and murder of black and brown men between the ages of 16 and 24? Are we all okay just as long as those young people and their families don’t live next door to us? What values would we have to share to believe we had something to lose (besides money) for not playing an active role in the success of other people’s children?

The Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) has been working to build the capacity of people to transform the educational experiences and outcomes of underserved students in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area for more than 15 years. BayCES supports people in urban districts and schools undergoing reform efforts to improve their individual and team performance through a research-based coaching approach led by a team of professionals with extensive educational, administrative, and coaching experience. We believe that the interruption of historic patterns of inequity that permeate urban schools requires a fundamental shift in the relationships among students, families and teachers. This means not merely changes in instruction or curriculum, but changes in the ways schools, districts, and community members listen, engage, and do their work together.

In 1996, BayCES launched a Small Schools Initiative based on the belief that achieving educational equity would require smaller, more personalized schools in which each student could be known well and supported to learn and thrive. As a leader of the small schools effort, we supported the design and opening

of more than 40 new small schools and learning communities in Oakland, Emeryville, Berkeley, and San Francisco.

Today, adults and students speak in compelling ways about how the effects of a small school created an opportunity for them to be seen, supported, and challenged. We see and hear from students who assert that their lives have been changed through the relationships they have developed with adults who expressed care and pushed them to produce excellent work. We see groups of adults taking responsibility for the learning and success of cohorts of students: responsibility for students’ academic preparation, for providing access to a world beyond their block, for encouraging them to make meaning of and take responsibility for the awesome, challenging world they will inherit. We see parents learning and leading cycles of inquiry, making informed decisions about school policies and practices, and asking questions about student learning and results. School communities are holding Data Nights, Exhibitions, and Portfolio Conferences. High school graduate college-going rates have increased to nearly 70 percent with half of those students attending four-year colleges.

LaShawn Routé Chatmon on BayCES’s Leadership

In 2007, I accepted the post of Executive Director, a tremendous opportunity after seven years with BayCES as the Director of the Oakland High Schools Redesign Initiative. I am honored to follow my predecessor Steve Jubb, whose visionary leadership, tremendous intellect, and commitment to creating equitable schools and systems placed this organization at the forefront of educational reform.

Just five short years ago, no one would have believed these changes possible. Our effort has resulted in a transformed educational landscape with people primed to make good on the promise of the right to a quality education for every student and family in our cities.

These transformations were not mandated or legislated. Each began as a story. A story told by one parent and then another and another about the hopes, dreams, and fears they held for their children in school. These transformations occurred as parents and educators acting out of their own self-interest and preservation, took organized steps to create new possibilities in their city. Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a leading faith-based organization, proves daily that committed parents and neighbors can create change and make a difference in the lives of people in their neighborhoods. Their effort

Continued on next page

ignited the Small Schools Movement in Oakland. It will be the renewed efforts of parents, community members, OCO, and organizations like theirs that will hold us accountable for the outcomes our young people deserve.

At BayCES we believe people create change. Plans, policies, and practices are all necessary but insufficient elements to creating lasting change. Dramatic change is possible when these fundamentals are aligned with peoples' shared vision, values, and actions. The current state of educational inequity is not merely the consequence of technical problems of pedagogy and instruction; effective techniques for teaching reading, for example, already exist. Yet in every urban city across this country black and brown students are reading two to three grade levels behind their white peers. How do we explain this phenomenon? This gap persists because people are not working together in ways that enhance their performance and potential to solve the considerable challenges they inherit in urban school contexts.

To realize transformation in schools and districts BayCES operates with the following beliefs:

- Educational transformation and equity can, will and must be achieved at the classroom, school, central office, and community levels. We inspire, provoke and expect positive change, acting as “merchants of hope” sometimes in the face of all evidence to the contrary.
- People have the capacity to solve problems of inequity and low achievement in their schools, when provided the necessary knowledge, support, and conditions. Positive change is supported by the development of mutually respectful and trusting relationships.
- High-performing school communities use data to inform their action, practice honest reflection through ongoing cycles of inquiry, regularly examine student work and performance, and provide each other with timely, corrective feedback.
- Our role as coaches is to increase the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity of education leaders and stakeholders to take effective action toward equitable practices, policies, and outcomes.
- Facilitating conversations about the effects of bias is necessary, not to lay blame but to find better ways to educate all our children. Progress toward educational equity requires alliances across differences of race, class, language, gender, sexual orientation, and ideology.

The next phase of our work and next generation of leaders will have to move beyond initial reform conditions to implementing with greater precision the instructional quality required to accelerate student

performance in an environment of internal accountability and honest dialogue. It will require school communities to provide authentic ways for young people to display their mastery. It will include the creation of spaces where tone, decency, and personal regard permeate school culture. It will require every student to be seen, heard, and supported to discover unique gifts and talents. But most important, it will require that people who are willing, committed, and knowledgeable actually take up the charge.

At every turn on this journey, BayCES has witnessed transformations. Courageous leadership exhibited by everyday people. Parents demanding excellence for their students, initiating the passage of board policy and birthing a small-schools movement; students contributing to the design of their learning environments; teachers and principals working collaboratively to solve individual problems of student learning. We are encouraged by the progress to date, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to increase the capacity of leaders at every level of the system, because we know that the consequence of failure in our effort is not simply reflected in low tests scores, but in the very lives and life options of black, brown, and poor children and families.

To my airport acquaintance, I leave you with a belief articulated best by Dr. Hilliard: “There are no pedagogical barriers to teaching and learning when willing people are prepared and made available to children. If we embrace a will to excellence, we can deeply restructure education in ways that will enable teachers to release the full potential of all children.” At BayCES, we are committed to a vision larger than providing employees for you to hire.

Related Resource

For a 2001 examination of Oakland's new small autonomous schools effort, please see “Oakland's Community Propels Change for Equity: The Small Schools Initiative's History and Challenges” in *Horace* Volume 18, Number 4, Spring 2001. The article is available online at www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/horace/18_4/18_4_toc.html.

For a more recent examination of at the impact of the small schools movement in Oakland, please see, “New Small Schools Evaluation,” a recent report to the Oakland Unified Board of Education. The report is available online at <http://boe-webextender.ousd.k12.ca.us/attachments/8739.pdf>.