



THE EDUCATIONAL  
**Forum**

# Looking for America: The Disassociation of Urban Youth

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## **Abstract**

*Many educational initiatives have been and continue to be based on a macro-social system understanding of communal roles, values, norms, interactions, perceptions, and realities. This practice neglects the unique impediments and social norms that exist within the myriad of micro-social systems in the United States. This work draws attention to the disassociation of America's inner-city youth through an analysis of educational initiatives and macro-social system beliefs that have prescribed a macro-social system remedy for micro-social system ailments.*

As with other close presidential races, waves of slander, mudslinging, half-truths, and truths told out of context continuously crashed against the social conscience of American voters during the eight months preceding the November 2, 2004 election. A central issue—beyond the war in Iraq—that was dissected, presented, and misrepresented in three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate, was the eroding fiscal canyon between the wealthy and impoverished. Data published in a six-year longitudinal review of wealth conducted by Kochhar (2004) for the Pew Hispanic Center added credence to this contention. The report revealed that from 1996 to 2002, the net worth of European-American households increased, while the net worth of African-American households decreased and the net worth of Hispanic households—though relatively stable throughout the period—was 14 times below the \$88,651 average net worth of European-American households (Kochhar 2004).

Numerous community-based factors have been identified as contributors to the growing inequalities among the macro-social system that dominates mainstream American society and the various micro-social systems within it that continuously

vie for recognition, social validity, and economic opportunity. Many politicians have exploited these social inequalities through their promotion of seemingly theoretically sound, but recklessly implemented, social and educational reform programs. Once their sponsored legislation becomes law, the responsibility of ensuring the success of the initiative is passed to state agencies, community-level leaders, and educators. These programs often have proven tedious at best and socially regressive at worst in promoting social validity, high-quality education, and economic opportunity for subgroups living within the framework of mainstream society's continuum of economic prosperity and social reputability. Is this due to the gross incompetence of individuals at the local level charged with transforming legislative jargon into working programs? Or, is it a matter of deep philosophical misunderstanding and misalignment between service providers (state and local agencies and educational entities) whose social reality and norms are grounded in the macro-social system and the targeted service consumers whose social reality and norms reflect one of many micro-social systems?

These were primary considerations when examining the misconceptions of macro-based educational and social policies within the context of micro-social systems' realities. This work includes ameliorative measures that consider micro-social system thinking rather than mainstream macro-social system thinking. The intent is not to propose a need for cultural or philosophical alignment between macro- and micro-social system participants. Rather, this analysis provides a view of the social conditions and constraints inner-city youths encounter as they seek opportunities for success that are aligned with the macro-social system, such as financial stability, status, and social connectivity (Sheley 1995; Sanchez 2004). Once constituents of America's macro-social system have a better understanding of life as they do not know it, they will be better informed and prepared to suggest legislation, initiate and design programs, and implement policy and programs that facilitate the association of members from all micro-social systems.

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### ***Historical Premise***

Over the last 70 years, a substantial amount of research has centered on the societal forces that bombard and shape the decisions and lives of inner-city, urban youth. These works date back to the landmark study by Shaw and McKay (1931) who sought to understand better the interdependence between community, family, and gang participation in youth delinquency. More recent work analyzed community and neighborhood characteristics and their influences on adolescents (Bernard 1987; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993) and the influence of economic factors (Chase-Lansdale and Gordon 1996; Kohfeld and Sprague 1988). The six-class social model presented by Warner (1960), however, is the most appropriate starting point in understanding the social disassociation of urban, inner-city youth from macro-mainstream society.

Warner's (1960) six-class social model ranged from lower-lower to upper-upper classes and examined the social roles of individuals within each class, as well as what was required for an individual to move up to another class. Warner's (1960) work contended

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that an individual could not transcend effectively his or her social class without understanding and internalizing the values and norms of the class above him or her. Conversely, individuals who exist within a certain class would have difficulty understanding the social realities of an individual from a class below his or hers without having first lived in that class. As professionals and stakeholders seek to implement federal, state, or local at-risk youth intervention programs or educational initiatives,

many do not understand the factors that contribute to the disassociation of individuals from minority groups, especially those in inner-city, urban areas.

### ***Cyclic Poverty and Joblessness***

Hoffmann (2003) examined data from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study of 24,599 eighth-grade students, as well as data from a subset of 10,806 students of the original group during their tenth-grade year, to ascertain the connection between community-level characteristics and individual-level variables in predicting delinquency. Hoffman's (2003) work provided powerful data about the effects of poverty and joblessness on student educational success. A common misconception of many professional educators is that an organized teacher with multiple strategies and good classroom structure is all that is needed to impact children's opportunities for success—a line of reasoning that is contingent upon a closed-system ideology. This ideology assumes that once the classroom door closes and the bell rings, students' backgrounds and the community in which the school is located become inconsequential. Data presented by Hoffman (2003) found that societal factors inherent in many inner-city, high-poverty areas exert pressures that crush this theory. In areas saturated with high male joblessness and high poverty, school involvement had virtually no impact on redirecting students from delinquency. According to Hoffman (2003, 773), "The attenuating impact of school involvement on delinquency is more substantial in urban environments that have low rates of male joblessness." He (2003, 773) further contended that "using the results to estimate the expected value of delinquency suggests that there is a positive relationship between school involvement and delinquency in areas of high joblessness; the anticipated negative relationship occurs only in areas of low joblessness."

To better understand the social stresses that affect the association of inner-city youth, Hoffman (2003) considered both a nationally representative sample and an urban subset. Juxtaposing the two, Hoffman (2003, 777) found that "stressful life events significantly affect delinquency in the general population, while monetary strain significantly affects delinquency in urban communities." Indicators (Hoffman 2003, 760) of strain for the

larger general sample included “family moves, parental divorce or remarriage, job loss among parents, and serious illness or death among family members.” He found that when money is of primary concern, attention to other areas of social existence is sparse and random at best. With time, a youth may be able to move beyond a divorce or adjust to relocating to another community. Unfortunately, without money, basic life-sustaining needs consume poverty-stricken, inner-city youths, and macro-social alignment is a distant secondary concern.

Monetary strain was tested via two indicators. The first question asked whether or not money was important, and the second question asked each participant if he or she expected to graduate from high school. If an individual stated that money was important, yet he or she did not expect to graduate from high school, monetary strain was denoted as considerable. If students are more concerned with securing money than education, school-based initiatives that aren’t focused on creating job opportunities or aligning students with skills to seek high-paying employment will prove futile. Further, if teachers do not connect content with future employment and practical application, the content may become inconsequential. Thus, school becomes inconsequential.

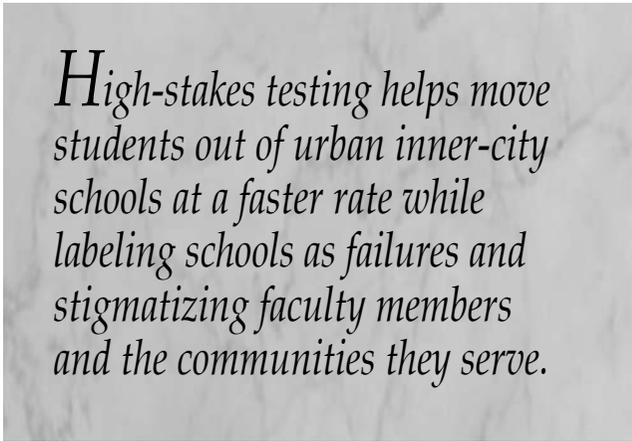
### *Rating Success by Failure*

Educators have a unique charge in this conundrum. Educators must educate to move traditionally disassociated groups forward in the social continuum, regardless of social constraints, lack of resources, student misalignment of mainstream social capital (Crosnoe 2004), and the challenging conditions faced by inner-city, urban schools. Urban, inner-city schools and their adjacent communities experience the highest degrees of social inequality, poverty, and poor teaching conditions (Cobb 1995; Horton et al. 1994; Campbell 2003; Sanchez 2004). Campbell (2003) contended that the federal government and American society fail the majority of urban, inner-city youths, as evidenced by dropout rates as high as 47 percent for Hispanics and 61 percent for African Americans, even though both groups combined represent only 25 percent of the U.S. population.

Educational legislation, such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), centers around callous, rigid rules that retain students who aren’t on grade level in select academic subjects and rate schools with high

numbers of English language learners or economically disadvantaged students using the same criteria for judging suburban, affluent schools and students—namely standardized tests that reflect the social capital of the macro-social system (Campbell 2003; Crosnoe 2004).

NCLB also rates schools on their weakest points. Under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards, schools are not judged and rated on areas of excellence; rather, AYP rat-



*High-stakes testing helps move students out of urban inner-city schools at a faster rate while labeling schools as failures and stigmatizing faculty members and the communities they serve.*

ings reflect each school's lowest performing subgroup or indicator. Schools that do not meet AYP-established criteria, such as test scores, test participation, and attendance, are publicly humiliated when school and district "test scores are now routinely published in newspapers" (Amrein and Berliner 2002, 5). This humiliation is passed on to admin-

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istrators, teachers, students, and entire communities. Amrein and Berliner (2002, 6) further uncovered that in 17 of 27 states fully engaged in high-stakes testing (testing that has implications for consequences), "low average class scores may warrant the displacement or removal of teachers or administrators." This humiliation and fear oftentimes motivates teachers and administrators to partner in their efforts to encourage certain students to leave school and pursue a GED or home schooling. In other words, educators don't want low-performing students affecting their rating.

Under this type of system, schools are encouraged to retain borderline and struggling students in grades that precede the administration of high-stakes tests to limit the number of low scores, thereby, artificially inflating campus-wide ratings. According to Campbell (2003, 18), this type of solution causes grave concerns since "grade retention based on associative and predictive models is one of the most powerful predictors of dropout status. Thus, one begins to question who benefits from this legislation and how does this legislation create a more inclusive community when, in actuality, more students are dropping out?" Misaligned educational initiatives centered on high-stakes testing, public humiliation, and school-wide sanctions do little to promote true academic success. Instead, they promote creativity by educators who are told to improve or face the scrutiny of an uninformed public.

Offenberg (2004) followed a cohort of students from urban Philadelphia schools for three years and found that high levels of urban student mobility often invalidated school-based statistics that were used to identify schools most in need of reform. For example, Offenberg (2004, 344) found that "40.2 percent of the students completing first grade did not attend the same school continuously for the next three years." A resulting scenario under NCLB could be that imposed sanctions to incite improvement at a school that did not meet the prescribed AYP standards are irrelevant because, within three years, 40.2 percent of the students targeted by the corrective sanctions are gone.

In their analysis of the 27 states that mandate high-stakes testing or graduation exams, Amrein and Berliner (2002) uncovered that African-American and Hispanic students were disproportionately tested, compared to their European-American peers. Further-

more, students in low socioeconomic areas were subjected to testing at a higher level than middle- to upper-class students. Amrein and Berliner (2002, 57–58) posited, “After the implementation of high school graduation exams, academic achievement apparently decreases. . . . Indeed, on balance, these analyses suggest that high-stakes and high school graduation exams may tend to inhibit the academic achievement of students, not foster their academic growth” as indicated by low ACT, SAT, and Advanced Placement scores. This hypothesis has widespread implications because students who are most in need of education to pursue macro opportunities are offered tests contrary to true educational equity and assistance. Of the 27 states studied, 25 withhold graduation from students who do not pass exit-level graduation exams. Again, a disproportionate number of minority youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds were involved.

Despite the intent of policy makers and implementation entities guided by a macro-mainstream society ideology, NCLB is not a force that aligns students with the macro society; rather, it is a continuation of a misguided idea that is essentially widening the gap between micro-social systems and the macro-social system.

### *Dropping Out at First Grade*

Peer relations have been studied for decades; however, it was not until recently that attention shifted to early elementary school students. Estell et al. (2002) pointed out that before their two-year longitudinal analysis of 92 African-American first-grade students from two poor, inner-city schools, the youngest sample groups studied were fourth- and fifth-grade students. Previous work primarily focused on adolescents in grades six through nine, within which peer groups remained quite stable and the values of these groups guided social interactions, including academic goals. Understanding the influential power of peer associations among 6–8-year-old students is important for educators who try to comprehend the variables that place a child on a trajectory for success or failure.

In their analysis of educational trajectories, Estell et al. (2002) ascertained that there were four distinct profiles of boys and three distinct profiles of girls based on ICS-T, a highly reliable standardized measure. The four male profiles were high competent, aggressive-competent, low academics, and risk. The three female profiles were the same as those for the males, with the exclusion of the risk profile.

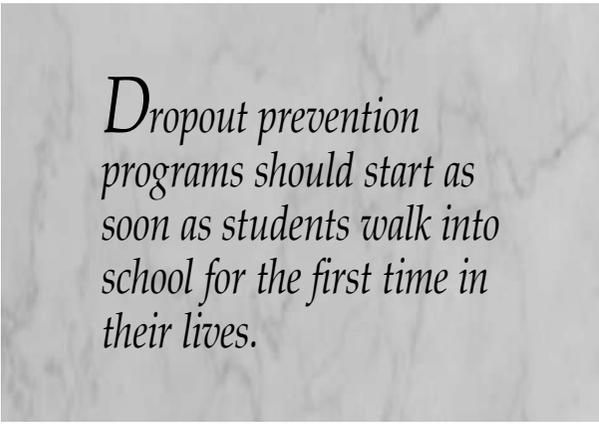
These profiles (Estell et al. 2002, 520) consisted of 18 indicators divided into three subsets: “aggression (AGG: fights), popularity (POP: popular with boys, popular with girls, lots of friends), [and] . . . academics (ACA: good at math, good at spelling).” The students were rated by their teachers and then tracked for a two-year period to ascertain profile shifts.

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Estell et al. (2002, 519) pointed out that a commonly held belief about the formation of children's academic aptitude is that "parental influences have been held to be of primary importance until adolescence. Especially in the area of achievement, it has been argued that prior to adolescence, parents and teachers should have an overwhelming effect on achievement." The data presented by Estell et al. (2002), however, indicated a different occurrence. Profile membership did change from the first year of the study (first grade) to the second year of the study (second grade), yet changes in group constituency was based upon selective affiliation. Students changed profiles to better align themselves with peers who shared similar characteristics. The implications of these profile shifts are best illustrated through this example: A student in the high-competent group his first-grade year realigns himself with the aggressive-competent profile his second-grade year. Though this is a seemingly minor change in peer association, it has grave implications for the child's future. As delineated in previous research and models, this shift is predictive of a poor outcome, including a high probability of dropping out of school (Estell et al. 2002). If educators are unaware of the power peer relations have at the elementary level, without intervention by school personnel, students could remove themselves from successful academic trajectories.

In the larger picture of the disassociation of youth, it is critical to create early elementary educational initiatives aimed at promoting high competence trajectories as desirable and attainable. Dropout prevention programs should not begin in middle school or high school. They should start as soon as students walk into school for the first time in their lives. Dropout prevention programs "aimed at promoting engagement in school may need

to focus not only on children's academic abilities, but their ongoing affiliative patterns and social roles from school entry on" (Estell et al. 2002, 526).



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### ***Making Academics Normative***

Within economically strained, disorganized communities, youths have a plethora of negative, destructive influences vying for their attention. The social conditions of areas replete with high male joblessness are less than ideal communities in which to rear children.

When one realizes that crime and drug abuse are companions to joblessness in engendering social disorganization, the true negative impact of high unemployment becomes more lucid (Hoffman 2003). If monetary strain is paramount in urban areas and unemployment is high, crime tends to be the only option in satisfying basic needs, as well as the desire for material items such as clothing, cars, and jewelry. Being exposed to crime as a feasible solution is nearly unavoidable.

In disorganized communities, few extra-familial remedies exist to help youths with guidance and direction (Sanchez 2004). There is, however, a research-based solution: presenting academics as a concept that is larger than school and essential for success.

Legislators, policy implementers, and educators must understand that a youth's cognitive process is influenced powerfully by his or her association with delinquent peers or deviant peer groups (Warr 1993). Children live in two worlds: one that consists of their chosen peer group with its unique culture, values, and norms, and another that consists of their family "which may complement or clash with that of school and peers" (Warr 1993, 247). In Warr's (1993, 256) analysis of 1,726 individuals aged 11–17 in the National Youth Survey, he found that familial "communication and emotional closeness generally have no countervailing effect on peer influence." Hoffman (2003) arrived at a similar conclusion. His data revealed that parental impact on youths living in high male unemployment areas is extremely limited. Estell et al. (2002) found that first- and second-grade children selectively associate with peers on the basis of shared values, and Howes, Hamilton, and Mathenson (1994, 261) revealed that as early as preschool "socialization experiences help shape [a] child's particular behaviors with peers."

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Programs created to address the needs of inner-city urban youths must emphasize alignment of social norms and values with those of the macro society. Under the constraints of NCLB, this means that the time spent on standardized test preparation must be balanced with time spent preparing students for life beyond their immediate community via practical, applicable, and realistic opportunities to explore and understand the norms, values, roles, and social interactions analogous to the macro-social system. In an analysis of 68 youths, 34 of whom were participating in a mentoring program, Keating et al. (2002, 731) stated that "mentoring was successful in helping to decrease problematic behaviors, suggesting that exposure to caring adults helped youth to feel better about themselves and to engage in less destructive behaviors toward themselves and others."

High-stakes test scores often are not rewards in the eyes of inner-city youths. Therefore, academic achievement must be presented as a key that unlocks the shackles around their minds and futures. Once students view academics as essential, the more particular items, i.e. standardized test scores, attendance, and deviant behavior, can be addressed, and disassociation will begin to dissipate.

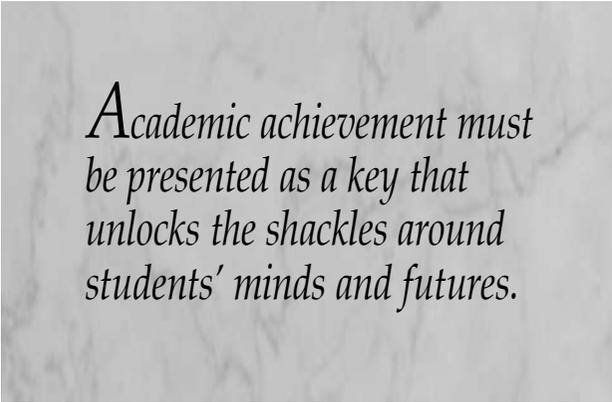
### *Playing Keep Away*

Since parental influence cannot be linked directly to attenuating delinquent behavior promoted by deviant peers or groups, one might wonder if any social force exists that can effectively diminish their negative influence. Fortunately, there is one factor that is effective. However, its clarity and simplicity is complicated by its practicality. Though familial attach-

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ment and communication can guide children's choices about peers with whom to associate, the time students have available to spend with deviant peers is a significant factor.

Warr (1993, 251) found that "the interactions between delinquent friends and weekend time were strong and statistically significant for five of the six offenses examined: marijuana use, burglary, alcohol consumption, petty larceny, and grand larceny. Cheating was the only exception because it occurs only in educational settings." The less time individuals spend with deviant peers or groups clearly equals a lack of access to deviant ideas, actions, and misdirected time. Warr (1993) found that most deviant behavior occurred on the weekends and in other situations where youths had access to unstructured, free time.



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The direction that policy makers, policy implementation entities, and educators must take is one that provides students opportunities to engage in positive activities not only during the school day, but most importantly after school and on the weekends. When the bell rings, youths must not be pushed out of the halls and onto the streets.

They must be invited to stay and participate in programs that align the social vision of micro- and macro-social systems. Youths must understand that opportunities are for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographic location. More money and effort must be expended in creating mentoring programs, after-school programs, and weekend activities for youth at risk of dropping out or turning to crime.

### ***Social Disassociation***

A multitude of programs designed to ameliorate long-standing social inequalities in standards of living, levels of education, and opportunities for the future have been designed without considering and understanding the norms, values, social interactions, and impediments inherent to America's various micro-social systems. Assuming that all micro-social systems are the same is one error; however, it is superseded by a greater error in perception. Creating educational initiatives that are based on the perception of macro-social interactions, norms, values, and roles is the primary contributor to social disassociation. Macro-based programs and initiatives are designed to address long-standing social-educational problems with the wrong solution. In the end, the incorrect solution merely adds to more disassociation.

Viewing all micro-social systems differently is possible once policy makers and policy implementation entities realize that their reality of social interactions is not everyone else's reality. Step one is understanding that differences do exist between macro-social systems and various micro-social systems. Step two is recognizing the unique features among the various micro-social systems. Step three requires designing programs that are firm in their resolve, yet flexible in their implementation. Effective educational initiatives and

programs do not seek to displace micro-social system norms, values, and roles. Instead they understand and build upon established norms and values, yet work through and beyond micro-system social impediments.

### ***Conclusion***

American political leaders cannot promote social progress abroad while neglecting their obligation to secure the same at home. If the world continues to move forward while this country's society continues to fragment between the financially secure and the financially vulnerable, America may see, in the not-so-distant future, a repeat of the riots of the 1950s and 1960s as the disassociated lash out against the macro-mainstream social system.

Education always is and will be the answer. Its current misguided manifestation is not what is needed to ameliorate and reconcile the differences among the macro-social system and the various micro-social systems. High-stakes testing does little for youths attending schools in impoverished urban centers. It only helps move students out of urban inner-city schools at a faster rate while labeling schools as failures and stigmatizing faculty members and the communities they serve. Money and resources should not be spent on a disproportionate barrage of standardized tests, piles upon piles of unread reports compiled by organizations expending countless work hours, and ever-increasing tiers of educational bureaucracy.

The education-based answer lies in the creation of programs that not only recognize macro-level impediments, such as joblessness, monetary social stressors, deviant peer associations and influences, and the lack of community-based support systems, but that address these factors. New programs should create distance between youths and deviant peers in a manner that addresses academic and affective needs.

Students must realize that they belong to a community that values them, and that their greatest contribution to the community is their own education. This can be accomplished, in part, by redirecting the use of time and funding during the school day. Time and money once largely dedicated to expensive teacher training focused on high-stakes test-taking can be used to offer students opportunities to become greatly involved in the macro-social system. Activities that focus on connectivity to the macro society, such as excursions to university youth days, university extra-curricular events, art exhibits, cultural fairs and exhibits, civic leadership projects, after-school programs, and volunteer opportunities, provide youths venues in which to interact with professionals and explore future possibilities (Cross 2004; Keating et al. 2002; Sanchez 2004; Lewis-Charp et al. 2003). Visits to a city's corporate hub or financial center would allow students to see first-hand, the applicability of math, economics, and government. Visits by representatives from the macro-social system, such as financial consultants, government officials, civic leaders, and business people should be arranged. Once established, these activities can be expanded and reinforced through after-school and weekend programs supported and funded by personnel and monies once dedicated to narrow initiatives. Well-rounded and balanced programs, if founded upon a true understanding of the social realities and encumbrances of children living within micro-social systems, have great potential to connect and associate youth with the macro-social system with which they have a full right to participate, enjoy, and enhance.

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