

School Social Workers and Urban Education Reform with African American Children and Youth: Realities, Advocacy, and Strategies for Change

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Abstract

After over 40 years of education reform policies and strategies, America continues its need for systemic education reform. The greatest challenge confronting the nation remains within large urban metropolises where large numbers of minority students attend underfunded and low-performing schools with low standardized test scores and high dropout rates. African American children and youth constitute over 50% of all students in urban school systems. The social work profession has a long history of advocacy with urban minority students dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. Yet, the appropriate body of knowledge that either conceptually or empirically documents practice methods by school social workers practicing within urban school settings with African American students does not exist. In a solution-oriented presentation with implications for school social work practice, advocacy, and research, the author will first review past and present education reform measures. The discussion then turns to ways in which the social work profession can address major issues of education reform with a clear understanding of the educational needs of urban African American children and youth using macro, mezzo, and micro practice measures.

Key Words: education reform, social work advocacy, social work practice, urban school systems

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, changing demographic and economic patterns and past inequalities continue to alter the landscape of schools; as such, America continues its systemic need for education reform. The greatest challenge confronting education reform is within large urban metropolises where large numbers of minority students attend underfunded and low-performing schools with low standardized test scores and high dropout rates. The social work profession has a long history of advocacy with urban minority students dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. However, despite the linkage between social work values and education reform, there seems to be little movement inside the profession that addresses the complexities of urban education reform. “Even though the goal for equal educational opportunity is supported by the values held by the social work profession, the profession’s commitment to its achievement and record of accomplishment are not what they should be” (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996, p. 7).

Urban America contains the nation’s 25 largest school systems and is populated by minority majorities, mainly African Americans and Hispanics. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (McKinnon, 2003), 47% of those attending inner city public schools are African American, and they constitute another 25% of those attending urban public schools. In all, 76% of all students within the domain of inner city and urban residences attending elementary and secondary education (grades 1-12) are African American children and youth (Jamieson, Curry, & Martinez, 2001). What is more, while the general rate of poverty in the U.S. for children under 18 was 16% in 2001, for black children the rate was 30%, with 4 out of 5 impoverished African American families residing in urban communities (McKinnon).

The educational needs of African American youth are disproportionately affected by the problems associated with urban public schools. In terms of school performance, the problems are multifocal for urban African Americans. A 1998 study released by *Education Week* revealed that most students in urban public schools were failing to perform at the basic level of educational achievement (Viteritti, 1999). In the same study, only 40% of 4th and 8th graders in urban districts had satisfactory scores on national reading, math, and science exams, whereas “nearly two-thirds of all students in suburban and rural districts met or exceeded standards” (Viteritti, p. 7). Many black children drop below grade level starting in elementary school and continue to fall behind each school year until, by age 16, at least 35% are below grade level (Yeakey & Bennett, 1990). According to Viteritti, black students usually achieve only 75% of the academic scores obtained by white students on standardized achievement testing.

While the national dropout rate was 7% for all African American youth in 2001 (McKinnon, 2003), dropout rates for African American youth in some urban/inner-city areas ranged from 40-60% (The Civil Rights Project, 2000).

All youth face the daunting task of negotiating the realities of the 21st century, its changing job markets and its demand for expertise and specialization of technical skills and services. However, urban African American students additionally face the longstanding reality of high levels of unemployment and underemployment, high poverty rates, and high rates of family disruption within their communities. Because of these contingencies, urban school-based practitioners need special training in the development of skills that promote and advance the educational needs of urban black students. Yet, many school social workers lack basic knowledge concerning the African American experience and are therefore ill-equipped to work in urban school settings with a majority black student enrollment (Allen-Meares, et al., 1996; Frey, 2000; Spencer, 1998; Townsend, 2002).

If the social work profession is to follow its historical role as an instrumental advocate for change and social justice in the education of urban minority youth, then the profession faces a formidable task in crafting public policy initiatives and practice intervention for working with African American youth in urban school settings. In general, the social work profession needs a new approach to policy and practice in urban school settings. This includes: (a) a better understanding of the urban black experience; (b) a focus on understanding social welfare policy issues that are salient to urban school reform; (c) advocacy for policy reform and enforcement; (d) research on urban African American education; and (e) theoretical perspectives that are relevant to practice with urban black youth.

In a solution-oriented presentation with implications for school social work practice, advocacy, and research, the author will first review past and present education reform measures. The discussion then turns to ways in which the social work profession can address major issues of education reform with a clear understanding of the educational needs of urban African American children and youth. Elements of the knowledge base needed by the professional social worker in the urban school setting will be examined. Public policy strategies and initiatives that reflect social work values and education reform will be demonstrated. This includes some discussion on charter schools, school vouchers, and special education. As part of strategies for change at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels (i.e., the generalist perspective), this article analyzes the multiple roles that the social work profession can play in urban education reform. Finally, theoretical explanations and intervention strategies that will facilitate social work practice with urban black youth and their families will be discussed.

School Social Work Practice

School social work is a task-oriented field of practice with practitioners involved in multiple roles including administration, leadership, advocacy, tutelage, mentoring, casework, mediation, group work, and career, health, family, and socialization counseling. School social workers assist and advocate for children's welfare and educational needs; inform teachers of differences in cultural values; engage in program development; act as liaisons between families, teachers, and school administrators; engage in training teachers; advocate for resource procurement for children; promote diversity; contribute to the social work professional knowledge base; provide information for school systems; examine school-related social and environmental factors identified as important; and develop relationships with neighborhood and community agencies.

In outlining challenges foreseen in the future for school social workers, social work scholar Edith Freeman (1998) comments that as the field changes due to internal and external pressures, opportunities may become more limited and competitive. The privatization of public education will change the way in which related school personnel such as school social workers, psychologists, and counselors are allocated and thus will breed competition for scarce local, state, and federal funding. School-based practitioners will face greater competition due to increased accountability mandates, specialization of services, more emphasis on block grant writing, managed care policies, changes in staffing patterns, and a demand for outcome-based evaluation invention leading to best practices. External challenges include assuring procurement of block grants to those who need them most, a response to policymakers, interpretation of managed care policies, the increasing reality of privatization, community building and revitalization efforts, and greater advocacy for consumer inclusion (Freeman, 1998; Hare, 1996). Private organizations that are contracted to provide services will be concerned with economic efficiency and efficacy of dollars spent—this may directly challenge and call to action the social work profession to advocate for the educational needs of schools in resource-poor communities.

The privatization of social services and child welfare systems around the country will most certainly change the structure and function of practice for school-based professionals. For example, due to the increased emphasis on specialization, social workers now enter the school setting in more than one role (Freeman, 1998). It is possible in the future (and it may already be occurring) that social workers may be in the same school but employed by different funding sources, serving in different capacities (e.g., as therapists, consultants, evaluators, health care professionals, etc.).

Past Approaches to Education Reform

National education policy during the reform period of the 1980s did not directly confront the dynamics of urban education and the problems of disadvantaged communities, as attempted during the reform period of the 1960s and the War on Poverty. A conservative movement calling for government retrenchment of federal educational subsidies fully blossomed during the Reagan administration¹ (Day, 1989). The ideal was that reform would come from organizing community interest groups once the federal government returned control of funding back to states and local school systems (Galster, 1996; Marcoulides, & Heck, 1990).

The first Bush administration followed the Reagan Era agenda with *America 2000*, calling for the expansion of Head Start; the creation of “new schools” designed to use technological advancements to facilitate teaching methods and learning; and the promotion of regional, organizational, and administrative autonomy with principals having expanded power to direct school initiatives. This plan continued the reduction in federal oversight, as prescribed during the Reagan administration, with block grants becoming the source of funding for federal dollars. The Clinton administration followed its predecessors with *Goals 2000*, which was an extension of the Bush administration’s agenda toward reform. As a federal regulation *Goals 2000* insisted that: (1) all children will come to school ready to learn; (2) at least a 90% graduation rate will be achieved; (3) student proficiency will be demonstrated with 4th grade, 8th grade, and 12th grade competency testing; (4) American students will be first in math and science achievement; (5) all adults will be literate and have the ability to compete in a global economy; (6) schools will have drug free environments; (7) parents will increase their participation in the education of their children; and (8) enhanced professional development programs for teachers will be implemented and promoted (Allen-Meares, et al., 1996).

During the 1980s and 1990s the federal government, politicians, and scholars debated on the best avenues to measure student achievement as a prerequisite for federal funding. Astutely, several advocacy groups in the form of commissions and task forces emerged² to address the educational needs of disadvantaged urban public school students (Lytle, 1990). Despite the clamor of advocacy groups, a consensus was reached on the need to place greater emphasis on standardized testing and staff credentialing, with teacher and administrator competency overshadowing the myriad of problems associated with urban education reform: unabated intergenerational poverty; high rates of low-income, single-parent households; the continuation of urban sprawl and blighted infrastructures; high unemployment and underemployment rates; a

growing disconnection between school systems, neighborhoods, and communities; and the persistent problem of biased curriculum and instruction that promotes a monolithic approach to teaching, learning, and pedagogical practices (Lipscomb, 1995; Spencer, 1998; Taylor, 1995).

What resulted from public school education reform measures during the last two decades were lofty policy mandates and elaborate projections with little in the way of demonstrative outcomes that put a solid backing on “what works” in the reform of urban education (Townsend, 2002). None of the goals of the Bush (*America 2000*) and Clinton (*Goals 2000*) administrations have come to fruition. According to Lytle (1990), the reason commission and task force reports on urban education had so little impact was because of a lack of follow-through on the implementation of suggested strategies. At the local level, concerned organizations and advocacy groups lobbying for measures of equality as a means of urban education reform were minuscule in terms of carrying out a public mandate. There was no substantiated implementation of *programs* and *practices* to follow the rhetoric of well-intended reports (Lytle). Most programs were underfunded and therefore were never fully implemented. For those programs that did demonstrate success, as Kunjufu (1990) contends, “...like most governmental programs just when people are beginning to remove the bugs and idiosyncrasies from the operation the monies end” (p. 35).

Current Reform Measures

Today, the debate and movement toward national education reform is rooted in several longtime problems within the American educational enterprise. First, just as in the past, there is continued concern over the nation’s inability to keep pace with the educational achievements of other industrialized nations. This issue concerns the nation’s ability to produce qualified individuals to maintain and advance technological innovations. Juxtaposed to this is the impact of technological advancements and a shift in large sectors of the nation’s manufacturing base to developing countries. Thus, fewer labor workers are needed in the United States, while there is greater need for specialized professionals and technocrats. Second, the debate over state versus local control of education systems is in reality a battle between school districts with adequate local tax revenues opposed to taxable subsidies for those of low-income communities (Viteritti, 1999). Third, there is a rise in special interest groups in the development of school choice issues.

The continuation of past reform efforts help set the stage for passage of the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (Bush, 2001), and its claims to promote the values of both *equality* and *excellence* in teaching and learning. Issues related to

educational excellence pertain to student achievement through standardized testing, teacher education and credentialing, and administrative accountability. Issues related to equality are characterized by smaller classroom sizes and the quality of educational systems based on fairness in the distribution of resources. Conservatives backed NCLB because it mandated accountability through standardized testing, teacher certification, and reform of failing schools. Liberals endorsed it because it pinpointed issues of equality such as smaller school classrooms, professional development for teachers, teacher certification, after-school care, and youth safety programs.

Overall, the realities of past education reform policies have not been solely about the business of *equality* and *excellence* but more about market reform and who should bear the cost of the nation's educational needs. Measures to change the structure of education systems (e.g., site-based management, block scheduling, and de-tracking) did little to espouse "measurable improvement in the education of children" (Sipple, 2004, p. 9). Despite the diminished funding of educational programs for the poor during the early reform era, federal legislation did encourage and facilitate extensive parental involvement, along with greater accountability measures in the form of a greater focus on evidence-based practice and effectiveness evaluation. There was also an increased emphasis on the use of concentration grants specifically designed to enhance teacher competency and develop innovative programming (Lytle, 1990). In general, education reform measures during the 1980s and 1990s rescinded the chokehold that the federal government attached to funding procurement for states and gave local communities greater opportunity in the design of educational programs that fit the needs of their children.

To this end, a short-term assessment of NCLB reveals many of the same characteristics found in previous education reform measures: unfunded or underfunded mandates with lofty goals. To illustrate, congressional authorization of NCLB for fiscal year 2003-2004 called for \$32.01 billion dollars in funding. Yet, after signing the bill into law, President Bush put forth a budget for fiscal year 2003-2004 that called for only \$22.61 billion in education spending—a decrease in the funding needed to carry out the reform mandate of NCLB (Fagan & Kober, 2004). Ultimately, this will cut funding for 26 education programs. Among them are the Comprehensive School Reform Program (\$233 million), four teacher quality programs (\$1.1 million), rural education programs (\$168 million), and five education technology programs (\$112 million). What is more, although research has consistently shown that smaller classrooms correlate with high levels of student achievement (Viteritti, 1999), the Bush administration rescinded the 100,000-teacher initiative to build more schools that was enacted during the Clinton administration. Thus, while

accountability and educational excellence are stated as the cornerstones of the current reform movement, left behind/underfunded are issues of educational equality and the plight of the truly disadvantaged, as found in many of the nation's urban communities.

Social Work Practice and Urban Education Reform

Two decades have passed since the implementation of a conservative agenda toward federal education policy, as characterized by the Reagan administration and both Bush administrations. Yet, the appropriate body of knowledge that either conceptually or empirically documents practice methods or theoretical development by school social workers practicing within urban school settings predominated by African American students does not exist. While there are some scholars who have given attention to the problems impeding urban educational success (mainly African Americans), the overall efforts of the social work profession have been anecdotal and insufficient, considering the magnitude of the problem (Spencer, 1998). There are only a few empirical studies within the literature that are directly or indirectly related to school social work methods with African American children. Most concern health related issues such as HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, contraception, and juvenile justice. There are no longitudinal studies directly related to urban education systems with predominately African American populations that examine outcome-based intervention methods developed by the social work profession. Furthermore, the idea of studies examining pedagogical practices and the role of curriculum content on the educational outcomes of urban minority youth has been a non-existent entity in the school social work literature. Subsequently, public policy initiatives that are based on objective findings from school social work research methods in urban communities are lacking (Spencer, 1998).

Social work scholars (Allen-Meares, et al., 1996; Freeman, 1996, 1998; Spencer, 1998) contend that structural inadequacies must be addressed if there is to be successful education reform in urban communities. Reforming structural inadequacies must be considered within the rubric of school choice measures such as charter schools, school vouchers, and the restructuring of school systems. Reform must also include comprehensive measures that address both internal (e.g., poor academic standards, inadequate teaching materials, student and teacher alienation, and inflexible institutional structures) and external (e.g., social welfare and health care systems, impoverished single-parent households, and stressful home environments) factors that impact urban education systems. Allen-Meares et al. posit the role and interest of school workers in education reform can be conceptualized as either school-based or systemic:

School-based reforms attempt to change the way teachers, parents, and pupils interact. Elements of systemic reform include creating competency standards for pupils and the educational staff, designing training programs to enhance the skills of teachers, increasing incentives for students to complete various school-related tasks, and designing new and innovative ways to offer the curriculum (p. 7).

With the advent of the current educational reform era, school social workers have been viewed as important in providing supportive services for special needs students and assisting school personnel with tasks that reinforce learning in students. Educational reform focuses on such areas of improvement as the need for innovations, new paradigms, back-to-basics, student performance improvement, higher teaching standards, and community control (Freeman, 1998). Simultaneously, educational reform is being influenced by policies such as the inclusion of children with disabilities, diminishing federal resources, and other laws or external policies (Allen-Meares, 1996). School social workers can impact reform by introducing innovative ideas and paradigms that further the education of students, reinforce their development, and address these concerns. The school social worker's unique perspective and training can effectively assist students in order to improve their academic performance. However, to be effective within urban school systems with majority black youth, social workers must assist in the design and development of strategic plans that correspond to the educational needs of this population. Moreover, with the myriad of social ills that many urban black youth face and the degree of their magnitude, as discussed earlier in this presentation, the social work profession should place greater emphasis on supporting public policy initiatives that will improve urban school systems.

Strategies for Change

School social workers in urban settings can effectively impact the system by focusing on macro, mezzo, and micro practice measures that are specifically designed for urban environments. They must formulate strategies that address the particular concerns and needs of students, parents, families, communities, and school personnel within urban school environments. Policy advocacy and leadership by school social workers are necessary skills that should be at the forefront of any strategic agenda. This will require specialized skills of social workers who practice in urban school settings. At the macro-level, practitioners must focus on social and public policy initiatives that reflect the allocation of resources and the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery systems. Mezzo-level intervention includes the examination of specific community

needs in the formulation of reform strategies. Micro-level interventions must address theoretical ways of understanding, new approaches to practice interventions, the need for a greater reliance on empirically-based studies, program evaluation, and building bodies of knowledge based on practice wisdom gained from experience in urban school settings.

Macro-level Practice

Leadership and Public Policy Advocacy

There should be no mistake that improvements in leadership and policymaking toward education reform is one of the most important roles that the social work profession can undertake and is a long overdue task. Freeman (1996) asserts that policymaking is a missing variable within the discussion of school social work. Policymakers seldom consult school social workers in formulating policy initiatives. "Therefore, school social work's responsibility is to initiate ongoing contacts, especially during periods when key policy decisions are being made that affect education, school social work practice, and families and children" (Freeman, p. 132). Social workers must participate more in public policy forums related to education reform. They can empower neighborhood and community leaders by informing them of political and legal issues related to federal, state, and local funding proposals.

School Choice

The development of school choice issues³ through the creation of charter schools and school vouchers⁴ programs will change the structure and function of existing urban public school systems as they create competition for education dollars. According to Marcoulides and Heck (1990), the debate on school choice as a means of reform has rekindled the political debate over equality versus excellence in education. School vouchers are an issue of educational equality whereby federal or state educational funding is given directly to families to select private schools of choice outside of the public school system; the use of vouchers as a cure for the ills of urban public school education is a highly contested debate (Viteritti, 1999). However, many African American communities have chosen in favor of vouchers as a variable reform measure.

Each urban community must weigh the values, advantages, and disadvantages of school choice programs. The objective is to determine "which schools do a better job addressing the needs of students whose learning is negatively influenced by economic and social background" (Viteritti, 1999, p. 83). Paraphrasing, it would not be out of character for social workers to advocate and

promote a particular school choice alternative in or out of their service area. School social workers can organize community forums to bring organizers and school personnel together to discuss reform issues and community needs. Planning and participating in local workshops, seminars, and other forms of professional teaching are necessary components of building strategic initiatives within communities. Coalition building among community leaders will facilitate understanding and empower communities to make appropriate choices.

Research

An integral part of school reform policymaking for urban African American communities lies in research on black culture in education. Nontraditional philosophy and curriculum innovation based on cultural paradigms in education is an under-researched area, with little in the way of empirical investigation by the social work profession (Frey, 2000). There are a group of issues that researchers have identified as critical in the education of African American youth. These issues consist of information on resource allocation, African American family systems, growth and human development, neighborhood and community risk and protective factors, peer relationships, strengths and resilience, socioeconomic conditions, learning styles, pedagogical practice, and differential treatment of black children by teachers, administrators, and counselors (Lipscomb, 1995). As issues of educational equality, all of these areas and other related issues need more research in order to foster greater clarification prior to any objective attempt at policy advocacy aimed at urban education reform. As community-based advocates, school social workers need to become effective researchers in the development of a knowledge base, practice wisdom, and intervention models based on the educational needs (such as those cited above) of urban African American families.

Public-Private Partnerships

Within the debate on school choice, the issue of public-private partnerships will become one of increasing significance. The trend toward such partnerships means that social workers should be active in negotiations to develop mutually beneficial and nondiscriminatory relationships between communities and business industries. Local and state businesses are now sponsoring a wide variety of school programs in order to develop members of their future workforce. As urban revitalization projects unfold, the attraction of new high tech industries often hinges on the production of a local workforce. In many cases, this is coordinated with local public school systems. Students can gain vocational education skills that lead to jobs, and some can even acquire professional experience through internships.

Mezzo-level Practice

Community Advocacy and Involvement

Encouraging parents to become involved in their child's educational process is an important role for the school social worker. As an advocate, school social workers can engage school personnel in a collective effort to recruit parents for participation on committees and to volunteer their time. The often-heard complaint citing a disconnection between schools and their surrounding communities is in reality a call for advocacy; therefore, school social workers must exercise leadership skills to help families, parents, and students.

The Communities In School is an excellent social work approach that utilizes neighborhood-based organizations to work with schools (Lewis, 1998). This model uses micro, mezzo, and macro social work skills to work in the school environment. Leadership skills are used to collaborate, fundraise, network, and organize the community (Lewis). School social workers collaborate with the community agencies to build stronger institutions and advocacy networks. Social systems such as juvenile justice, child welfare, and schools are encouraged to work more closely as a network of teams, with a primary focus on advocating for and intervening in the best interest of students. Furthermore, school social workers utilize a full range of clinical services (i.e., family, group, and individual treatment modalities) to promote strategies for change and improvements in the education of children and youth.

Community and School Consultation

The social worker, as a consultant, can play an extremely effective role by assisting school personnel in effectively enhancing academic achievement in urban communities. Informing school staff on the educational needs of urban black families can also include teaching them to operate from the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1996). School staff can be taught to view people, institutions, and situations from the strengths that are inherent in the person-in-environment context. Likewise, student personnel can be instructed on the importance of education as an empowerment tool that enhances self-worth and increases self-efficacy.

As community advocates and consultants, social work practitioners can attend community meetings and forums to both receive and provide information that will assist community residents in the school choice process. To prepare for this professional task, social workers should stay abreast of local, state, regional, and national research findings that will directly and indirectly impact school choice in their service area. Information on legislation, school-funding

projects, charter schools, vouchers, and the implications of standardized testing results are all important. Practitioners must take this information and help families formulate strategies and contingencies that will best service their particular needs within specific situational and contextual narratives.

Micro-level Practice

Cultural Competency

The development of school-based practitioners who are culturally competent for practice with urban African American children and youth should be given greater attention and focus by social work education programs (Frey, 2000; Spencer, 1998). Past movements to enhance cultural diversity in the educational process have failed to examine the specific context of African American culture to any demonstrated satisfaction (Allen-Meares, et al., 1996; Frey; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; Spencer). There is a strong contingency of researchers (Boykin, 1978; Boykin & Ellison, 1995; Frey; Haynes, 1993; McAdoo, 1997; Spencer; Townsend, 2002) who support the notion that the examination of cultural and institutional bias are central to understanding why many African American students have problems achieving academic success. For example, Boykin maintains that traditional education systems devalue black culture in favor of mainstream culture. He further stresses that the problem is made worse by the social stigma of “being black” and compounded by the status of being a minority. According to Boykin, this “triple quandary” experienced by many black youth as part of their socialization process is primarily promoted in the school environment. Coupled with the experience of growing up in poverty, Ogbu (1991, 1993) refers to this as a “case like” situation where the negative impact of group membership and low socioeconomic status causes a sense of double stratification for many black children. Kunjunfu (1988) attributed low African American student achievement to six factors: low teacher expectation, inadequate parent support, low student self-esteem, lack of relevant curriculum, negative peer influence, and low economic status. In order to promote culturally competent practice and combat cultural and institutional bias in urban school systems, school social workers will need special training and skill development. Table 1 provides an overview of skills identified within the literature for culturally competent practice with urban African American children and youth.

Table 1. Competence Skills Needed for Practice in Urban School Systems

<p>1. A better understanding of issues related to cultural, racial, and ethnic educational norms and differences (Freeman, 1998; Frey, 2000)</p> <p>2. An awareness of historical experiences that shape community development and the conditions of people who live there (Spencer, 1998)</p> <p>3. Knowledge of contemporary community dynamics including economic conditions (Allen-Meares et al., 1996)</p> <p>4. Skills and ability to deter student suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates (Dupper, 1994)</p> <p>5. Knowledge and skills to reduce the incidence of school violence (Astor, Behre, Fravil, & Wallace, 1997)</p> <p>6. Ability to assist in the identification, prevention, and counseling of substance abusers (Logan, Freeman, & McRoy, 1990)</p> <p>7. A thorough knowledge of community health issues and advocacy for preventive measures (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1992)</p>	<p>8. An understanding family functioning, dynamics, types, and structures (Logan, Freeman, & McRoy, 1990)</p> <p>9. Ability to identify individual, family, and community strengths (Hurd & Edwards, 1995)</p> <p>10. Attentiveness to bias in curriculum and instruction (Frey, 2000; Hurd & Edwards, 1995)</p> <p>11. Familiarization with the special educational needs of minority children as well as their over-categorization and placement in special education programs (Frey, 2000; Logan, Freeman, & McRoy, 1990)</p> <p>12. The skills to monitor, assess, and advocate for student and family mental and physical health care needs (Frey, 2000; McAdoo, 1997; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1999)</p> <p>13. The ability to proactively intervene with juvenile justice systems concerning the needs of youth (Logan, Freeman, & McRoy, 1990)</p>
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Another promising intervention, although needing more research, is the development of Afrocentric rites-of-passage programs (Banks, Hogue, Timberland, & Liddle, 1996). This culturally-based program helps teach youth self-pride, family unity, community values, and personal responsibility. As a form of socialization group work, rites-of-passage programs can be instrumental methods of practice intervention with at-risk urban African American youth. School social workers should explore the possibility of using such programs in the school setting. In many ways, social workers have a unique opportunity to foster positive relationships in urban communities with the ultimate goal of improving students' academic performance. Social workers can train school personnel in culturally competent skills for servicing diverse populations. This effort will further a school's ability to educate ethnically diverse students; this is extremely important because it fulfills a major goal of educational reform and the need for school systems to be more tolerant and sensitive to all populations (Spencer, 1998).

Theory and Practice

Because social workers draw on a variety of theories, paradigms, and skills, they can be effective change agents within the educational reform environment. Ecological, systems, and empowerment approaches provide social workers with potential tools for intervening in the complex and multidimensional educational reform environment (Allen-Meares, 1992, 1996; Lipscomb, 1995). To help students, the educational institution must effectively use theoretical perspectives such as the ecological perspective, systems theory, and empowerment theory to respond to the various systems that interact with the school system. Families are empowered when they understand available options and strategies that will maximize youth potential. For example, the school social worker can use the empowerment approach to strengthen students and their families through the development of problem solving, advocacy, and personal mastery skills. Simple issues that lead to difficulties for many urban school students such as negative mannerisms, gestures, inappropriate attire, and antisocial attitudes can be addressed with parents and their children. Because of school social workers' unique perspective and training, they can effectively assist urban students in combating psychosocial and institutional barriers found in urban environments that will impede their academic performance if unaddressed.

Clinical Practice

The reality of standardized testing as mandated in NCLB will leave some teens completing the 12th grade yet not graduating from high school due to

unsuccessful testing outcomes. This reality is already impacting states such as Texas, Florida, and North Carolina where mandatory testing has already started. Such an ordeal is not only catastrophic for transitioning adolescents, it is emotionally traumatizing: In Texas, where the model for NCLB was first tested, the evidence shows that while mandatory testing has increased academic proficiency (as evidenced by increased percentages of successful testing outcomes), school dropout rates have increased concurrently, particularly for urban African American and Hispanic students (Brown, et al., 2003). The social worker can work with families to lessen their emotional distress while providing support, advocacy, and guidance. This will mean assisting youth with GED testing, vocational programs, junior college options, and other pathways.

In the urban community, as systematic education reform continues, clinical practice will require more individual advocacy as school social workers will need to engage in sustained creative, preventive, and proactive methods in making every effort to see “no child left behind.” It will become increasingly important for school social workers to help students and their families needing assistance with school standardized testing requirements. “If unabated, it [mandatory standardized testing] will result in an even wider academic gulf between African American children and dominant-culture children” (Townsend, 2002, p. 230). Urban school social workers will find that a necessary component of direct practice will consist of assisting students in the development of skills for negotiating and navigating the educational system. In doing so, the social worker can address barriers to student achievement by advocating for change within the educational system and holding schools accountable for adhering to student rights. Thus, academic counseling, tutoring, specialized group work, and mentoring programs will become increasingly important.

Conclusion

In many ways, the current era of education reform is truly a shift in the culture of the American educational enterprise in that socioeconomic status is not the determination of achievement status; instead, only performance counts. Generalist social work practice in the educational setting has enormous potential for influencing social and educational change. At each level of practice—macro, mezzo, and micro—the school social worker uses his or her skills to impact student performance, teaching standards, or other educational reform issues. Unfortunately, school social workers need more education and training related to their power and influence within the educational setting. This article gives some direction for understanding the central and powerful role that school social workers can play in urban educational reform, a role that

allows them to be a driving force within the educational reform arena.

Given appropriate education and training, school social workers can meet the challenges of urban education reform by empowering children, families, and communities in the pursuit of academic success and prosocial outcomes. As a prerequisite in fulfillment of these goals, social work education programs must produce practitioners who are politically astute, grounded in grass-roots advocacy, and who have the ability to design programs and strategically coordinate collaborative services that are suited for children and youth in urban school systems. This may require specialized training and certification programming. Conversely, such an effort must first start with the development of academic faculty members who specialize in education reform and who thoroughly understand the African American cultural ethos—nothing less will suffice.

Endnotes

¹ This conservative anti-federal welfare movement, rooted in the 1964 Barry Goldwater presidential campaign, launched a vicious attack on the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, which had increased the federal government's role in public education spending for the disadvantage in the mid-1960s. See *Reconstructing The American Welfare State* (Stoesz & Karger, 1992).

² These groups included the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1988; the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1988; the Committee on Policy for Racial Justice, 1989; the National Governors' Association; the United States Department of Education; and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

³ School choice issues include public charter schools, school vouchers, home schooling, and the restructuring of public school systems. Charter schools have become a popular alternative to traditional public school education, particularly in urban areas where communities have adopted non-traditional education models. As a product of public policy research, charter school laws allow a portion of schools to secede from public school systems yet continue to receive public funds. The idea is that communities, neighborhoods, and even private organizations can form their own schools with the use of a publicly granted charter or license. The criteria to form a charter, although varying from state to state, calls for a unique situation whereby the formation of a school meets the particular needs, concerns, or area of specialization expressed by the constituents petitioning to form a charter (Galster, 1996).

⁴ School vouchers are the annexation and redistribution of partial or total public educational dollars, in which individuals can choose to succeed from failing school systems to schools of choice (Viteritti, 1999).

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