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*In many cities the current effort to improve school systems includes reinvigorated urban collaboratives through which school representatives, higher education, the corporate community, and community-based organizations work together. These efforts must embrace two crucial strategies if they are to be successful. First, they must attack both "vertically systemic" issues of the K-16 pipeline, as well as "horizontally systemic" deterrents such as a student's poor health, family stress, and community violence. Second, the collaboratives should seek to develop their efforts around a spirit of moral imperative. This should be a compelling idea that binds collaborative workers and their fellow citizens into a renewed sense of cohesiveness and community.*

# **Another Reconstruction?**

## ***On Moral Imperatives and Urban Education Reform***

### **Urban Collaboratives and American Education Reform**

During the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, the turmoil and social change in America's cities produced renewed focus on urban K-12 school systems. As an extension of an idea first appearing in the 1890s, collaborative enterprises once again grew like topsy-turvy. [1] Public school systems and neighboring corporations joined forces with area colleges and universities and community-based organizations to pool wide-ranging community resources in order to help solve the crises of the nation's inner-city schools. The collaboratives often were funded with small grants by major private entities such as the Ford Foundation, and they developed often in concert with umbrella efforts of organizations such as the College Board. Nationwide, their programming included a whole range of projects. There were university-produced curriculum guides for high school students interested in college. There were summer programs for high school teachers committed to continued university-level study as a way of enhancing their teaching skills. There were summer programs for talented high school students interested in sampling university life. There were adopt-a-school endeavors whereby corporations, neighborhoods, and universities provided laboratory equipment, guest lecturers, and other assistance to specific schools. Indeed, in the late 1980s, some cities even were making plans for the merger of universities and K-12 systems, e.g., the developing Boston University-Chelsea Educational Partnership. With truly noble goals and hard work, the collaborative efforts clearly helped some people.

Still, with the late 1980s and early 1990s, the urban collaborative movement as well as new funding programs of the U.S. government seemed to be having little significant impact on the plight of the urban K-12 student. The

sad statistics need not be recited yet again. The key point, as most know, is that the nation continued to lose a whole generation of poor and minority children and that most of these citizens were Black.

Today, in the mid 1990s, another wave of collaboration is sweeping the nation. These efforts represent essentially the same elements of a community as their predecessors did, in some cases even an overlap of specific participants. On the other hand, more cities have collaboratives in place, and these efforts function with new sophistication. Most operate with new knowledge about the problems they confront produced through community studies sponsored in part by The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Ford Foundation, and other groups.

For those who have been involved in the collaboratives of the 1990s, this new knowledge now sounds like a litany. The basic skill of reading and the basic area of knowledge called "algebra" are the gate-keepers for academic progression. There is positive correlation between those who cannot read and/or those who fail algebra and those who drop-out, and this pattern in turn makes the middle school a crucial juncture in the whole urban-education pipeline. But there also are less clearly defined problems. Even when students can succeed with reading and algebra, they still can be defeated by "systemic" barriers. These deterrents consist, first, of "horizontally systemic" problems. Perceived as a given time-and-place snapshot of the problems in an individual's life, the "horizontal" perspective connects lack of educational performance to such problems as family stress, poor health, teenage pregnancy, and violence. Systemic deterrents also consist of "vertically systemic" issues. These may be perceived as what happens to an individual over time as the student moves through the educational system, i.e., as the student often is hindered by poorly planned transitions from kindergarten to elementary school or from middle school to high school or indeed high school to higher education. Faced with these systemic issues, many K-12 teachers have little time or energy to teach at the high level they desire. Further, they often have not been trained for the complicated "systemic reality" they confront in their classrooms.

The litany for the new collaboratives also includes more sophisticated methodology. The group must develop and employ precise information regarding the nature of the systemic issues. This need is especially important in determining which strategic interventions of the past have actually had a *documentable* impact. In order to be able to measure the success or failure of reform efforts, some of the more advanced urban collaboratives are now indeed turning to the development of sophisticated K-16 statistical baselines, derived from studies of urban students tracked over time as they progress through the educational pipeline. The studies are focusing on critical indicators such as attendance and participation in selected academic courses and programs.

At the same time, urban universities with strong research orientations are seeking to broaden their faculty reward structures to encourage greater faculty research of immediate service impact in the surrounding community.

These strategies taken collectively represent a new, probably vital orthodoxy for advanced urban collaboratives, especially as these, in tune with this more specific, bottom-line orientation, are also revamping their own internal operations to become more inclusive, involving not only the educational institutions but also government, business, and the community. In concert with the American Association for Higher Education, The Pew Charitable Trusts are helping lead the development of this new understanding through the project entitled "Community Compacts for Student Success" and the spin-off endeavor, the potentially massive plan to establish K-

16 councils in cities all over America. Community Compacts, described in more detail elsewhere in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* by Kati Haycock and by Nevin Brown, are highly structured organizations modeled in part on the earlier Boston Compact, with executive directors as well as task forces on data, programming, media, and governmental relations.

As individuals involved in the Birmingham Compact, a tight coalition involving the city school system, two community colleges, a comprehensive research university, major corporations, and other community partners, we are convinced that this endeavor will bring substantive progress to K-16 education in our city and, hopefully, in others. The first and foremost reason for our optimism is Cleveland Hammonds. One of the most effective school superintendents in the nation, he provides what collaborative workers long have known to be a critical ingredient for successful collaboratives -- strong, high profile leadership for the collaborative that communicates a vision for change. In addition to Hammonds' vital role, however, we believe that the Birmingham Compact will succeed because it is not only working with the new litany but is also showing considerable signs of the additional influence of a moral imperative.

### **Social Cohesiveness, Social Change, and Moral Imperatives**

The presence of a compelling, passionate idea or sense of social mission may well turn out to be a vital factor in the success or failure of the urban collaboratives. The history of American society and of others suggests this to be case. If the new "systemic reality" about American public education teaches us anything, it is that the K-12 experience in American cities has suffered traumatically because social problems once addressed by a functioning community are no longer being confronted by that community. When a society -- much like an individual -- experiences rapid social, economic, or technological transitions, its cohesiveness of values can break down. And when this happens people live in "a distended society," as Robert Wiebe has explained in his classic book, *The Search for Order*. [2] Under these circumstances, private institutions such as banks and insurance companies, not to mention families, as well as public institutions such as governments, schools, and police forces have a hard time agreeing on what is important, on what their daily concerns and actions should be. This translates into wide spread "dysfunctionalism" experienced both individually and collectively in the form of crime, lack of learning, poor health, and other social problems. At one time solved by a society able to function with a sense of true community, these social problems now go unsolved.

But all is not lost. With the passage of time and considerable trauma, ultimately values and institutions catch up with the new material order. Yet time does this for us only if its passage includes the appearance of a moral imperative helping catalyze the formation of a new consensus on values and the role of institutions.

The "search for order" notion suggests that, despite all the sophisticated social science and other types of knowledge we can marshal through the new urban collaboratives committed to K-16 improvement, the reform will lack significant long-term success unless it is connected with a moral imperative in the lives of the collaborative workers. These collaboratives must aid their entire communities, not just their school districts and other education partners, in

rallying around this cause. For without a new sense of community virtually all accurate insights into problems and solutions in public education will produce, at best, a few more lives with realized opportunities (granted, a significant feat) and an article on some scholar's vita – not enough.

Throughout history, moral imperatives for communities, whether cities or nations, have derived from an array of political, economic, ethnic, and religious sources. They will continue to do so in the future. This, however, is not necessarily an easy time for some communities to connect with a truly compelling idea. As modern Americans, we have been accustomed not to look to ourselves for such social passion. In the context of the Cold War, the former-Soviet Union gave us our cohesiveness, a defensive one but nevertheless an effective one. Remember that when Alabama's Carl Elliot and a few others in Congress wrote the National Defense Education Act, their first draft of the legislation was offered as the National Education Act and appeared bound for defeat as *just* a proposal to help educate Americans. However, when they shrewdly slapped the word *Defense* on the title of the bill, pragmatically appealing to fears of *Sputnik* controlling outer space and a Bear marauding over the West, the bill became a law with appropriation. To all appearances the Cold War is over, and as we look around it is hard to find a moral imperative that truly grips us as a nation. So we must look not just within America, but likely to our own communities or to our own states or perhaps our own regions of the nation. To reiterate, such causes are there. They may vary greatly from locale to locale, but they all involve legitimate passion and moral certitude and the feelings that bind people together.

### The Moral Imperative for the Birmingham Compact

At least this is the tentative message from Birmingham and perhaps from some other Southern cities. Here, out of a tragic history, the moral imperative for the Compact has not been hard to find. Indeed, the Birmingham Compact probably did not discover its moral imperative as much as the moral imperative helped create the Compact. The central compelling idea behind this collaborative is racial equality. Because of the section's experience with slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement, it is understandable that this idea would be so poignant. One can approach the matter from the perspective of heart-break -- lynching, bombing, gross offenses, Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." One also can approach it from the perspective of recent accomplishment, which, indeed, constitutes a virtual social revolution in the 1970s and 1980s. Birmingham now has a new racially mixed political power-structure with a Black scientist, Richard Arrington, Jr., as mayor, a new economy with an urban university, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), as the largest employer not just in the city, but in the state.

From either perspective, and both are vital, the issue of race has been the abiding idea in Birmingham for decades upon decades, possibly since the founding of the city in 1871. Hence it is understandable that, at least so far, race-change has been a powerful idea in the city's Community Compact and shows signs of providing a new sense of cohesiveness in the community overall. Certainly racial life in Birmingham is far from what it should be. The same urgings and actions on behalf of racial equality coming out of Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York City must continue to be present in Birmingham. But because of its relatively unique regional experience with race, the idea of racial equality probably has a higher profile in the public consciousness of Birmingham and per-

haps in other Southern cities than in many places beyond.

### **Birmingham, Southerners, and a Third Reconstruction**

For what it might offer on how moral imperatives work, how they are perceived, and how they have impact, it is instructive to speculate more specifically on how the current pursuit of racial equality seems to be affecting the newly created Birmingham Compact. To do so is risky. It is risky because the Compact could always fail, and if it does this speculation will only make that failure more difficult. It is risky because ideas are impossible to analyze with scientific precision -- their strength in society is their inherent amorphousness. Likewise, the Birmingham Compact as part of the Pew/AAHE project has only just begun to function. Even speculation about its inner core some might consider premature. Still, a pattern about its core thought seems to be emerging from a number of different sources, including two years of intense community discussions.

This thought has arisen from initial meetings of the Board of Directors and the Advisory Committee, meetings easily confused with therapy-group sessions. It has appeared in the normally wrenching process of drafting goal and strategy statements and grant proposals, and out of a special two-day planning retreat at Twin Pines Conference Center, out in the woods fifteen miles south of Birmingham. The thought also has been expressed in a thousand or more one-on-one conversations with Compact members. In even more focused form, this thought has emerged from confidential conversations with Compact leaders Cleveland Hammonds, a Black male from North Carolina, and with his deputy superintendent, Waymon Shiver, a Black male from Georgia whose savvy insights spring out of thirty years with the civil rights movement; and from conversations involving the Compact's executive co-directors, a White female from South Carolina named Barbara Lewis, a Teacher Education faculty member at UAB, and Samantha Nesbitt, a Black female from Tennessee serving also as administrative assistant to the superintendent and as Director of Communications for the school system. Finally, understanding of the core thought in the Birmingham Compact has derived from honest conversations with Pew/AAHE representatives, especially Nevin Brown of Washington, D.C., a White male from California who began his career with the Southern Regional Council and its Mobile, Alabama civil rights endeavors, and with Cecilia Cullen, a White female from New Jersey who has received major acclaim for her path-breaking leadership in New York City public education.

These sources suggest that the Birmingham Compact is motivated not just by an intense desire to improve Birmingham's K-16 system as a vehicle for bringing greater racial equality to the community of Birmingham. These Compact workers seek to provide another chapter in a well defined story of regional and urban race-change. In this sense they are modern thinkers, people seeking to be unencumbered by denials about the past, trying to apply the lessons of the past as they shape the future, trying to bear what C. Vann Woodward has called the Burden of Southern History. Much like Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's epic novel, *All the King's Men*, they look to their history for motivation and true lessons for the future. [3] If the American Civil War remains the foremost watershed in American history, what followed that conflict, Reconstruction, is implicitly the more energizing idea for these Birmingham Compact workers and perhaps other Southerners, too.

The term *Reconstruction*, of course, connotes the programs offered by the U.S. government in its effort to "reconstruct" the South at the end of the Civil War. Although politics and economics helped motivate the programs, race no doubt was

the central factor. Reconstruction delivered the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, as well as crucial civil rights laws. It abolished slavery and emphasized that Blacks theoretically had rights as U.S. citizens. Measured against the stated goals of Reconstruction leaders, however, not to mention the daily life of Southern Blacks, Reconstruction of the South failed on racial matters. Even by 1900, it was clear that there would be race-change only up to the hypocritical notion of "separate but equal." More to the point, the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War provided much of the rationale for what C. Vann Woodward and other social critics have called the Second Reconstruction, the civil rights movement of the 1960s. As a result of demonstrations led by Reverend King, Congress finally provided another spate of legislation including the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. By the 1970s, this movement had produced significant gains in the South. Schools and jobs reflected less segregation, and Southern Blacks not only voted, but increasingly assumed positions of political leadership at the city, county, state, and in some cases national levels. Still, as the year 2000 approaches, it is clear to those of the Birmingham Compact, even those not grounded in the details of the civil rights movement, that the Second Reconstruction also failed to deliver Southern society into a condition even approaching racial equality. [4] They know too well that indexes on health, economics, crime, education, and housing demonstrate striking disparities between Southern Blacks and Southern Whites.

Still, two powerful lessons from the First and Second Reconstructions are on the minds of the people of the Birmingham Compact. First, the reformation of Southern race relations has not occurred in full because the target of the efforts has been too limited in a geographical sense. Granted, slavery was "a Southern problem," but its root ideology of racism was not. As Gunnar Myrdal and later Reverend King both urged, and as twentieth century racial violence in Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles underscored, racism always has been an "American dilemma"; and the South as but part of America can experience the full gamut of racial change only when the rest of America does. [5] Second, Reconstruction leaders of both the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries overestimated what could be accomplished with essentially legal and political reforms while they underestimated the need for systemic changes in economics and education and the relationship between the two. Although a careful study of history makes both errors understandable in the context of the times, most members of the Birmingham Compact do not sit by and just ponder all this as "understandable" – they are passionate, action-oriented reformers as much as they are intellectuals.

Some visitors to Birmingham find it curious that such cohesiveness can exist within a community group in modern America. That curiosity is not surprising. After all, if most of the seventy-five Birmingham Compact members are of the middle class and if many successful social reforms historically have come out of the American middle class, in *contemporary* America middle class leadership has produced little reform on the urban scene. Equally significant, Birmingham Compact members have wide-ranging professional backgrounds. They include corporate, political, and neighborhood leaders, teachers and administrators of both K-12 and higher education, health care specialists, attorneys, and business people. They are representative of many ethnic groups, though most are African American and Anglo. Some are from families long in the South, others not.

Despite the diversity, however, they stick together. They talk honestly with each other in Compact meetings. They do not engage in behind-the-scenes politicking. They listen to each others' views as if they were at a Bible reading. They

disagree. They change positions. Sometimes they raise their voices. Usually they do not. No one seeks to stay in the limelight. No single component, whether corporate, neighborhood, K-12, or higher education, seeks to control or seems paranoid about sharing credit. All members appear at ease with the role of the executive directors, who have sought a "bubble up" approach to management rather than a "top-down" strategy.

Why have these people jelled as an urban reform group and as people who basically trust each other? In a general sense, regardless of their varying knowledge on the specifics of Reconstruction history, they share an awareness of the lessons of past Reconstructions and they share social ideals of the 1960s, when many of them were students or young adults. They understand the implications of Southern Blacks living predominantly in Southern "inner cities;" and they are deeply troubled that these citizens, while having all the legal rights established by the First and Second Reconstructions, will not have anything approximating a middle-class American life unless their success in education improves dramatically. In most cases, these advocates of change do not dissent from the state-level education reform movement that swept over most Southern states in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some, indeed, cut their teeth on the state efforts. In all likelihood, the urban reformers probably represent a *second* wave of education reform in the South. Assembled initially during the 1970s to form relatively low profile "partnerships," they recently have been further activated by two crucial factors. First, there is the relatively recent force of their cities' "urban ethos," as Blaine Brownell has written, "the civic yearning for a functioning, stable, and prosperous community," in Southern cities one often "fashioned in the crucible of race." Second, and obviously connected to the first factor, there is a growing realization that the state plans, the first wave, often were influenced by state-wide politics, politics too connected to historic rural interest groups to address effectively the problems unique to cities. [6]

In this sense, therefore, the urban education reform movement in Birmingham, and perhaps elsewhere in the South, is being experienced as a type of Third Reconstruction. It is energized by a historic moral imperative, the most forceful kind, that happens to be about American racial progress. It is focused on providing educational equity for the poor and minority students of the city who are predominantly Black. It is premised on the fervent ideal now being documented by social science that fewer school drop-outs, better academic performance, increased progression to higher education and greater success once in college, collectively, represent the vital strategy for Southern Blacks to achieve a life of greater "equality" -- good health, good options in employment and personal life, good housing, secure retirement years. It is delivered by people who may not have the word *Reconstruction* on their lips but who consciously seek to reform Southern society in concert with the racial ideals of Reconstructions.

If the past helps motivate the current enterprise, striking differences still exist between this most recent Reconstruction effort and its predecessors. Unlike the First and Second Reconstructions, this one has derived as much out of forces internal to the region as external. It has involved no invading Yankee troops or carpetbaggers or scalawags, no actions by the Supreme Court, Congress, U.S. marshalls, freedom riders, or poll watchers from Oberlin College. If the cause for the movement involves all too much violence, as children gun down each other in lunch rooms and school yards, that violence rarely has been targeted at those seeking to solve the problem as it was in the First and Second Reconstructions. Likewise, in contrast with the earlier movements, this one has had virtually no political partisanship. In

today's city efforts, Republicans, Democrats, and wide ranging independents are working shoulder to shoulder, not futilely fighting over which party will benefit from reform and how. Perhaps the most notable difference, however, is the reversal in sectional dynamics. In the First and Second Reconstructions, reformers by and large sought to change Southern society as an end in itself; relatively few had plans for race relations in the rest of America. Today, the collaborative workers of Birmingham who would reform Southern race relations want progress not just to benefit fellow citizens of their city and region; they seek substantive change out of a new regional pride. If this pride no doubt evolved out of defensiveness regarding their region's racial history, it now motivates them to help the rest of America solve its national dilemma of racial inequality.

### Coda

It goes without saying that the most effective solution to the plight of the urban schools can come from the government of the United States. In the past, when the forces of that government have been truly marshalled through national moral imperative and visionary leadership, more often than not we have gotten excellent results. Victories in World War I and World War II and the placement of a human on the moon illustrate this obvious point. If it wants to, the United States government can improve the nation's urban schools, and it can turn to higher education as one of its paths to this success. The U.S. government performed with striking success in upgrading America's agricultural and technical productivity with the Morrill (Land Grant) Act of 1862, an act helping ensure America's rise to world power in the twentieth century. Now, to help ensure America's vitality in the twenty-first century, the U.S. government can have the same type of success in developing the new frontier of our cities through providing the current Urban Community Service Program (originally designated as the Urban Grant Act) the same type of support it gave the Land Grant Act. [7]

As Mayor Richard Arrington has said, for an equivalent commitment to be made to our urban frontiers, we must shift the formula of progress from one of "material capital" to one of "human capital," a transition already underway as a result of the high technology revolution with its emphasis on higher standards of learning. [8] Until the national solution arrives, however, it is incumbent upon us to turn to ourselves at the community level. With the new methodology targeted at bottom-line results joined to an idea of compelling local impact, solutions likely can be found. To reiterate, the idea of racial equality is not necessarily the functional imperative for all communities. Each community must examine its own past and present and find a uniquely persisting idea evoking social passion and ultimately a renewed sense of community.

Admittedly, to emphasize the role of the moral imperative can be dangerous; morality and social passion obviously have been used for hurtful causes. But we probably have no choice but to take the risk and try to keep balanced people in charge. No major reforms in American life have occurred without powerfully unifying ideas. Indeed, perhaps if urban education collaboratives look into their own experiences for this cohesive force, the consensus they ultimately reflect not only will let their new strategies be successful in improving urban K-12 education but will become a rallying point for a sense of community throughout their cities. And for the moment let us assume that this type of success can happen. If we are so fortunate, perhaps in time there can be a buoyancy emanating from our cities that revitalizes America's sense of community, permitting a new *national* meaning for

the term *Reconstruction* that includes more than race and education.

### *Suggested Reading*

1. During the early 1890s, several cities, notably Chicago, spawned networks of urbanists committed to improving local social services. These groups often included representatives of higher education, elementary education, corporations, and the burgeoning movement of social-welfare volunteerism. See, for example, Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 22-25. Modern urban collaboratives assessed in the context of unfolding waves of urban reform is a rich topic awaiting full exploration.

2. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), *passim*.

3. Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1946). On the modernist or existential viewpoint in the South connected to Jack Burden, see Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 360-68; and Tennant S. McWilliams, *The New South Faces the World* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 2-4. See also C. Vann Woodward's seminal *The Burden of Southern History* (Third ed., Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 3-26, 187-234, and 281-88.

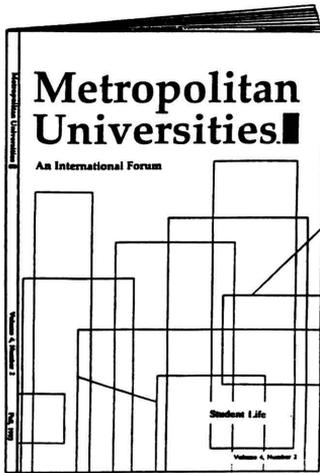
4. Of the hundreds of fine works on this subject one of the best remains J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). But also see Woodward's thoughts in "The Political Legacy of Reconstruction," and in "What Happened to the Civil Rights Movement?," in *The Burden of Southern History*, pp. 89-108 and 167-186.

5. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (2 vols.; New York, 1944); Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

6. On "urban ethos" and Southern life, consult Blaine A. Brownell, *Urban Ethos in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975).

7. The Land Grant Act of 1862 is assessed in Allan Nevins's *The Origins of the Land Grant Colleges and Universities*, Washington, DC: Civil War Centennial Commission, 1962, p. 28. It would be interesting to compare this national investment in agricultural and technological education with current national investment in educational solutions of urban problems.

8. Richard Arrington, Jr., *Birmingham: The Reality of a New South Experience* (Birmingham, AL: The University of Alabama at Birmingham, 1985, p. 7.



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