Universities and Public Schools: A Partnership Whose Time Has Come

By Susan H. Fuhrman & Nancy W. Streim

Even after a presidential election that featured too little discussion of education, few Americans would not know that our public schools often fail the students who need them most, particularly those in the inner city. One promising strategy for lessening this systemwide deficiency involves enlisting new external partners to collaborate in school improvement, including for-profit companies, foundations, community-based organizations, and colleges and universities.

Each of these partners has much to offer, but the vote here is that colleges and universities—because of the resources they bring to bear, but also because of their stake in public schools’ success—are best equipped to do the job. As higher education leaders ourselves, we are admittedly biased, but we also speak from direct personal experience: our past involvement in creating Philadelphia’s Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School and the Penn Partnership Schools network, and our current efforts to create a range of partnerships between Teachers College, Columbia University, and public schools in the surrounding New York City neighborhood of Harlem.

These efforts have not only expanded educational options for children, but also completely sold us on the value of, and the imperative for, higher education’s being deeply involved in community development. Indeed, at Teachers College in late October, we convened a working conference of university and public school leaders from New York state who believe, as we do, that the moment is ripe for a new era of university-public school partnerships. The potential benefits for both sets of partners are huge, and the failure to realize them could in turn spell failure for the broader enterprise of American education.

Why universities? The answer lies in the problems that public schools face, and that underlie education’s achievement gaps in general.

More than a century ago, John Dewey argued that education is not merely knowledge received by students in sterile classrooms, but is instead an ongoing process of active engagement that occurs in churches, streets, communities, homes, and all the other theaters of life.

Of course, the corollary of this view is that the performance of a child in school is a reflection not only of the quality of her teachers, but also the supports and challenges in her home and community life, her economic and social well-being, and her mental and physical health.

We believe that universities, with faculty members working across a range of fields and disciplines, have the breadth of expertise to help public schools address all these issues. At the same time,
universities have access to the highest-quality research and empirical knowledge to implement new models for schooling. And because they themselves are in the business of education, they understand firsthand the imperatives and challenges involved.

The last point underscores the stake that universities hold in public schools’ success. The students struggling in public school classrooms today are the students who—should they make it that far—will struggle in university classrooms tomorrow. If they arrive on the steps of higher education needing significant remediation, that becomes the universities’ problem to solve. Surely, for the most selfish of reasons, it is in the universities’ interest to fix the problem at the beginning of the pipeline rather than at the end.

Moreover, universities are also neighbors. Often they operate—and their students and many of their faculty and staff members live—in or next to poor communities. Beyond a moral obligation to be of service, universities can apply resources so that everyone prospers from strong and safe environments, accessible institutions, and a broad array of economic and educational opportunities.

The case for universities as the partner of choice for public schools is evident. But the path universities must follow to make such partnerships work is less so. Here, from our own experience and that of others, are some of the factors we believe are essential for success.

**Mutual respect.** Too often, the divide between theoreticians at universities and practitioners in public schools is never bridged. Each camp believes that it knows best and that the other is incapable of “getting it.” In fact, whether the players acknowledge it or not, education at any level is a continuous loop between theory and practice. Academicians, for their part, base their ideas, results, and curricula on what occurs in the field. The goal should be to acknowledge and maximize this exchange and constantly harvest its fruits.

**Sustained commitment.** Successful, sustained partnerships are built on honest relationships and equal levels of commitment to agreed-upon goals. Making partnerships of any kind succeed takes time. The partners must learn one another’s strengths and weaknesses, adapt to one another’s cultures, and simply observe, over time, the programs they have implemented together to see what works and what needs improvement. Similarly, it takes time for fears, mistrust, and resistance to be overcome. At a minimum, a single cohort of students should have moved through a school before a partnership can be declared a success.

**Quid pro quos.** There must be genuine, agreed-upon benefits for both partners. The university that sends its researchers into a public school merely to obtain data will generate little more than resentment. Instead, universities must approach partnerships with the stated aim of improving student outcomes—and then take accountability for the results. They must also be willing to provide tangible benefits, such as professional-development opportunities for teachers, the assignment of on-site specialists and interns to decrease students-to-teacher ratios, and access to campus resources.

At the same time, the public school that looks merely for a handout will soon alienate its academic partner. Instead, the school must commit to a climate conducive to both research and change, with buy-in starting at the top and emanating across staff members, parents, and other stakeholders. All of this must result from careful assessment—both beforehand and ongoing—of where common ground lies and where the impact will be greatest. Technology? The arts? Mathematics? The answers depend on a painstaking effort to address the range of supports needed to ensure that all students reap the desired academic and social benefits of the partnership.

**Engagement of all stakeholders.** If, as Dewey maintained, education is a product of all societal
institutions, university partners must work to engage other institutions to make a university-public school partnership work. These other forces include community leaders and parents; city, school board, medical, and mental-health leaders; and teachers’ union officials.

All of this takes not only time, but also hard work, the commitment of financial resources and people power, and, above all, the mobilization of political will. Obviously, there are risks for the higher education partner. If public school students perform poorly, it will reflect negatively on the university. If the university withdraws, the public school loses resources and the university loses credibility.

But the alternatives are far riskier. Schools and students will continue to fail. Universities will continue to be castigated for their indifference, generating ill will in their surrounding communities—and they will continue to be flooded with students who are unprepared to succeed in higher education and who require expensive and difficult remediation.

On the other side of the coin, the rewards of success are surely what we all hope for: a productive education pipeline; improved knowledge and practice of what works in schools; the closing of achievement gaps; the restoration of the U.S. education system as the world’s finest; and the revitalization of American competitiveness in the global economy.

Plus partners on the ground gain something more on the personal level. Three years ago, our university-assisted school partner, the Penn Alexander School, graduated its first class of 8th graders. Judith Rodin, then the president of the University of Pennsylvania, spoke at the ceremony, which the whole community attended. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

As educators, we had never been prouder.

Susan H. Fuhrman is the president and Nancy W. Streim is associate vice president of Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City.

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