

EDUCATION

Community Action for School Reform, by **Howell S. Baum**. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. 297 pp. \$68.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-7914-5759-1. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 0-7914-5760-5.

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In *Community Action for School Reform*, Howell Baum tells the story of a partnership between a group of Baltimore community activists and a university that took the community approach to improving education in a declining blue collar neighborhood. This urban community is typical of many others in the United States: Many of the children leave school with little preparation for adulthood; most parents have modest incomes, many are single, some are unemployed, many have not graduated from high school, and a small but growing number are Spanish-speaking immigrants.

The author describes how the partnership between a university professor and a community leader gradually expanded through parent organizing into the Southeast Education Task Force, comprising community activists, school staff, service agency and nonprofit organization staff, pastors, and parents. This "community" was constantly recreated over the next eight years as the project changed direction and pace, but included over 1000 people who participated in Task Force activities including interviews, work groups, symposia, community meetings, and workshops. All these people lived, worked, sent their children to school, taught or attended school in southeast Baltimore, or just cared about the area or education.

Baum's account raises the question of whether community activists can organize local people and use knowledge to improve children's education. This question is important in the light of current tenuous relationships between urban school systems and their constituents. But in southeast Baltimore, individuals and groups interested in urban schools came together to create a critical

mass of activity by galvanizing people, building networks, obtaining resources, and planning and implementing programs. Three areas illustrate the breadth and variety of this activity. First, children benefited from the implementation of school-based tutoring and health and social service programs. In one school, the Task Force's efforts resulted in the construction of an addition to house 250 students in an overcrowded elementary school, while in several other schools, facilities were repaired. Second, the Task Force recognized parents' central role in education by training them in community organizing, and providing parent education, GED, and conflict resolution programs. These programs helped parents communicate with school staff in many different, more effective ways. Third, the Task Force built community capacity to act on education by conducting research and disseminating information. Equipped with this knowledge, community members began to talk confidently about schools, and were empowered to examine issues that were important to educators and parents, question practices, make proposals, and carry out plans.

Thus, we observe how community action can enhance a community's capacity to act on education. We witness the development of relationships and understand how human, material, and financial resources can be brought to bear on schools and social capital created. However, a paradox emerges as we see firsthand the challenges that faced the activists as they set out to get schools, families, and communities to use new knowledge in educating children. At times, the extraordinary energy from parents is met head on by resistance from a self-absorbed and defensive school system that disparages community experience and knowledge. Building groups and networks, particularly those that extend far enough to give purchase to children's learning, is complicated, disjointed, and fragile.

Baum is forthright in his conclusion that the effectiveness of community action is uncertain. While the Task Force was successful in implementing programs to aid parents, the schools' administrative policies, teaching practices, and the children's level of educational achievement were not visibly different. Nor were the community conditions, including poverty, racial discrimination and segre-

gation, and substandard housing, medical and child care, that impinge on families' abilities to raise healthy children who are ready to learn. As Baum recognizes, the blame for some of these conditions could be placed on specific culprits, but most reflect public policies and were beyond the control of the community organization.

There are many potential audiences for this book, including community-minded teachers and school officials, community-engaged university faculty, community organizers, funders, and social agencies. These individuals believe that grass-roots school reform efforts are essential for the improvement of urban education, but experience has taught them that the inevitable logistical and personal challenges involved can be overwhelming and often result in feelings of despair. The Baltimore experience will enhance these individuals' awareness of both the potential and limitations of community action in achieving urban school reform. In the Preface, Baum says, "This book chronicles a journey" (p. ix). *Community Action for School Reform* provides readers with valuable ways to think about the terrain while making it clear that they will still have to work it out as they go.

Closing the Book on Homework: Enhancing Public Education and Freeing Family Time, by **John Buell**. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004. 160 pp. \$49.50 cloth. ISBN: 1-59213-217-0. \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 1-59213-218-9.

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In this sequel to his critically acclaimed and popular work, *The End of Homework*, John Buell advances his argument against homework. *Closing the Book on Homework* is based on the assumption that homework, as it is currently constituted, is an ineffective and burdensome practice. Buell argues that homework is especially burdensome for families today because most are overwhelmed by job demands.

Buell's analyses broadens the academic debate concerning the efficacy of homework. He associates homework with larger cultural

dreams and anxieties about work itself, and he links homework to the emergence of modern global capitalism and examines homework's relevance to character development necessary to sustain a functioning democracy.

Buell contends that the crux of the debate on homework centers on academic studies purposed to determine an association between hours of homework and academic performance. He emphasizes that although findings suggest that students who do homework are likely to have better grades and higher test scores, there is no evidence that homework causes improved performance. Buell states further that those in favor of homework fail to acknowledge studies that show no correlation between homework and students' performance.

Specifically, Buell raises the notion of class biases in relation to homework. He argues that proponents of homework claim that parents in poor communities want their children to be assigned substantial homework for the development of self-esteem and the skills needed to escape their plight. The author suggests that there are historical reasons for these requests. In a provocative discussion on the history of work and homework, Buell maintains that poor, working, and middle class parents press schools for more challenging curricula that result in more homework and testing. He points out that for these parents, such curricula are vital to keep the American dream of success and affluence alive.

Broadening Buell's perspective on the history of work is his discussion of business and industry in the United States. He contends that business leaders and their values continue to dominate not only public policy but also public discourse as well. Buell points out that business executives routinely celebrate homework today. He further argues that even if homework fails to produce more intelligent workers, it does aide the acclimatization of what corporations want: workers who are used to and will not complain about long work hours and days.

Establishing the argument that, at best, homework contributes marginally to academic competence and fails to explain the success of highly regarded foreign school systems, Buell expands his discussion to the global economy. The author contends that