

The Bigger Picture

Ricky Silvestre

The Problem Is Not with the Individual

The drop-out rate is higher in inner cities than it is elsewhere. Is that the fault of the individual young people who can't make it in school? Is it the fault of the schools? While some people look for answers to those questions, I feel we need to step back and take an even broader view. If we want to make education work for inner-city kids, we have to look at the big picture. The problems don't lie just in the individual or in the school. There are problems in the larger community that have to be addressed as well.

The Stress of Poverty

Many young people struggle with everyday obstacles that make it hard if not impossible to achieve an education. When you are poor, you have to spend a lot of time struggling to survive. When your bills pile up, it's hard to sleep. What



are you going to do for food? How are you going to protect your kids? When the third week of the month comes around and you're running out of food stamps, what do you do? The cost of public transportation is going up, so you can't afford to get where you need to go.

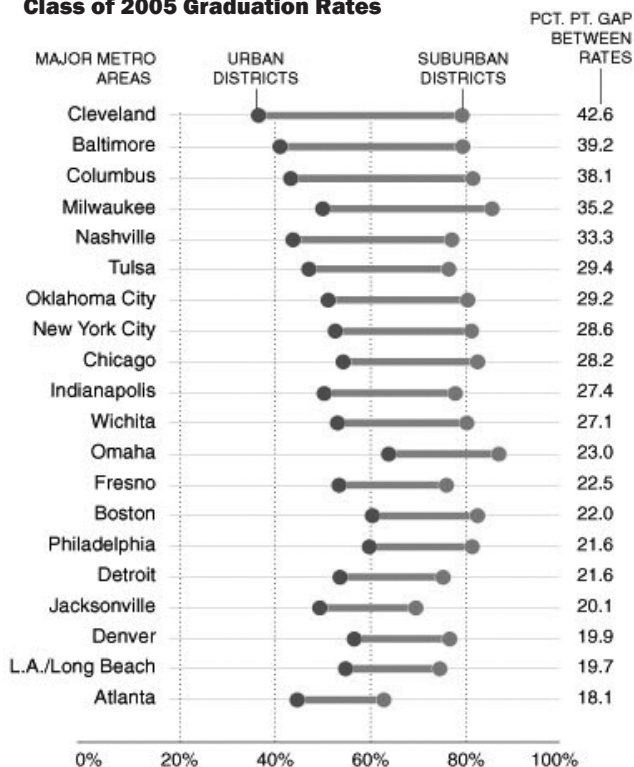
What happens when birthdays or holidays come around? If you have no money, Christmas can feel like the worst time of the year. It's not that Christmas should be all about shopping, but the cultural message in this country is so strong. If you can't buy things at Christmas time, you feel alienated from the whole culture. Humans want to "fit in." We want to feel like we belong. But being poor makes us feel outside of mainstream culture.

Surviving

Life becomes a game of staying alive day to day, which de-prioritizes longer-term goals, like getting an education. People are focused on surviving in the moment rather than planning for the future. If you're in survival mode, you don't think about bettering yourself.

A lot of the kids I grew up with felt like they had their backs up against the wall. A phrase that

Class of 2005 Graduation Rates



The nation's graduation rate rose slightly from 1995 to 2005, but the already large gaps are continuing to widen between urban and suburban districts of some metropolitan areas.

Source: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, "Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap."

I hear a lot when I talk to people is, "No one really cares. So why should I care?"

Drug dealing looks like easy money. Young men of color have a high chance of going to prison (see the article on the next page on the school-to-prison pipeline), so they ask: why should I waste my time in school? It doesn't look like I have a future anyway.

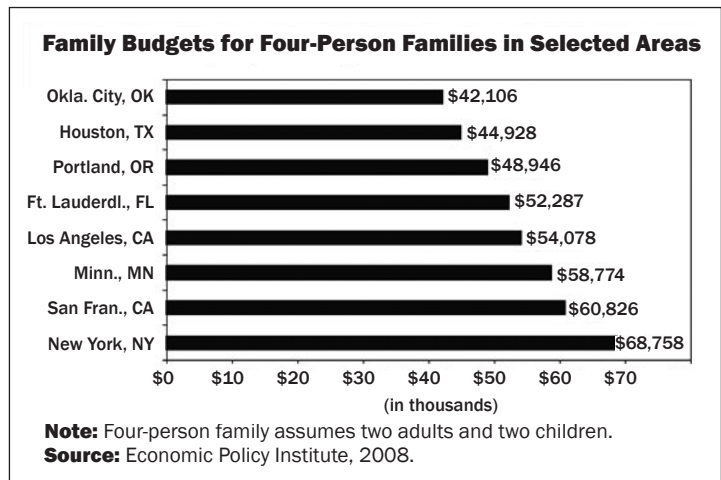
When I was in ninth grade, there were times when I didn't feel safe getting to school. I had to catch a bus in Crips territory and go to school in Bloods territory. I knew kids who would take the long way through the city so that they wouldn't pass through enemy territory on their way to school. If you're an inner-city student, just getting to school can be risky. How important is education when your safety is in jeopardy?

Finding a Road to Freedom

My scholastic troubles started in sixth grade. I went to four different middle schools and I failed ninth grade twice before I decided to drop out. School was always presented to me as a requirement, not as something that could actually be meaningful in my life. "If you want to stay out of juvenile detention," my parole officer told me, "you have to go to school." School was presented as mandatory – something I had to do in *exchange* for my freedom as opposed to a *road* to freedom.

How would things have been different if I got the message that there was a place for me in this society – in the bigger picture? But I never did get that message until I found Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA), a community agency and adult education program in Boston.

In 2007, five years after I got injured in a car accident and became a paraplegic, I decided to get my GED. I started taking classes at IBA. The first few months were difficult. I lacked self-confidence and my attendance was not great at first. IBA never gave up on me and would call me every time I missed class. Their effort to keep me involved provided the motivation that I was



According to the Economic Policy Institute, a family of four in the U.S. needed an average of \$48,778 to get by in 2008. More than one third of U.S. families earned less than that. (The U.S. poverty line, as determined by the federal government was \$22,050 at this time.)

Sources: <www.epi.org/publication/bp224>; <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/09poverty.shtml>>

missing in myself. Because of the support of all the IBA members and staff, I was excited about school for the first time in my life. I passed my GED test in 2009. I felt like I was at the top of Mount Everest – I had such a sense of joy and accomplishment.

I decided to try taking college classes, which IBA offered in collaboration with Bunker Hill Community College. Again, I had setbacks. My wheelchair broke, so I couldn't get to class. Then I got sick and spent several months in the hospital. No matter what happened, IBA staff always figured out how to keep me up to date in the class so that I could finish it and do well in it.

Questions I Still Have

How can we help people realize that education really could improve their lives and help them have a future? And, meanwhile, what can we do about the bigger picture, which leaves so many people feeling like they have no future?

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