

Putting School & Community on the map





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Linking School Reform,
Neighborhood Revitalization,
and Community Building



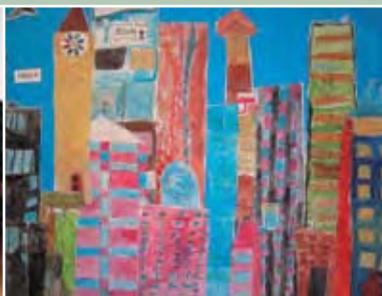
about enterpriseAtlanta

Enterprise Atlanta is an affiliate of Enterprise Community Partners, which was founded in 1982. Enterprise Community Partners has raised and invested \$7 billion to improve low-income communities. As a national intermediary, Enterprise Community Partners has produced more than 190,000 affordable homes and strengthened hundreds of communities in just over two decades. Since coming to Atlanta in 1994, Enterprise Community Partners has invested more than \$64 million to help seven community-based organizations produce more than 1,200 affordable homes. Enterprise Community Partners believes that housing is the cornerstone of healthy communities; however, we understand that housing alone is not enough. Enterprise Community Partners works to forge partnerships that address a broad array of community development issues, including education, safety, economic development, employment, and resident empowerment.



about
MCLC

The Mechanicsville Community Learning Collaborative (MCLC) was founded in 2001 as an education initiative of Enterprise Atlanta. Based in the Mechanicsville community in Atlanta, Georgia, MCLC is a school-anchored community development initiative funded by the Annenberg Foundation's Community Learning Collaborative Program. The goals of the program are to encourage local collaboration and to build strategic alliances to increase student achievement, improve educational quality, and encourage neighborhood revitalization in select historically underserved urban communities.



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about the project director

Clara Hayley Axam is director of Enterprise Atlanta and a former member of the cabinets of Mayors Maynard H. Jackson and Andrew J. Young. Axam served as president and CEO of the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta. This agency steered a 15-neighborhood community development planning initiative and coordinated public-space improvements as Atlanta prepared for the 1996 Olympic Games.

As deputy superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, Axam was responsible for operations and implemented a state-of-the-art facilities plan that still guides the Atlanta Public Schools.

about the author

Leslie T. Fenwick is dean of the School of Education at Howard University and a professor of educational policy. A former visiting scholar in education at Harvard University, Fenwick's published research focuses on educational equity, the principalship, and urban reform. Her commentary articles have appeared in *Education Week* and *The Boston Globe*.



acknowledgements

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Healthy neighborhood revitalization and community capacity building do not occur when community residents are marginalized and voiceless. The undertaking to improve the quality of

schooling and housing in Mechanicsville occurred because of the vigilant participation of Mechanicsville residents who freely shared their hopes and dreams and their experiences and perspectives.

Together, we shaped the MCLC vision. Without the collaboration of a committed school, government agencies, and civic organizations, this important work would not have been accomplished. We thank our loyal partners: Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta Workforce Development Agency, Atlanta Housing Authority, Atlanta Police Department, Atlanta Technical College, the Center for Black Women's Wellness, City of Atlanta Mayor's Office, Enterprise Baltimore, Innovative Learning Concepts, Fulton County Juvenile Court, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System, Mechanicsville Civic Association, American Red Cross, Ropheka Rock of the World, Smart Start Georgia, SUMMECH Community Development Corporation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Operation Weed and



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MCLC engaged an extensive evaluation process in order to assess the effectiveness of the school reform, neighborhood revitalization, and community capacity building initiatives that resulted from this project.

We are grateful to Angelicque Tucker Blackmon who meticulously designed the evaluation logic model and led a perceptive team of researchers responsible for gathering the data which supports this monograph. The Student Achievement/School Reform Research Group included Melanie Carter, Charlyn Harper Browne, Leslie Fenwick, Arcella Trimble, Clemmie Whatley, and Franita Ware. The Community Capacity Building Research Group included Milano Harden and Kelly Lewis. The Neighborhood Revitalization Research Group included Thomas Boston and Edward Davis. The Project Strategies and Development Research Group was coordinated by the Wellsys Corporation.

Finally, we thank Tippi Hyde for editing this monograph. Her expertise and diligence are greatly appreciated.



preface

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Fourteen years ago, as we prepared for the 1996 Olympic Games, Atlanta focused on the deplorable condition of its inner-city neighborhoods for the first time in many decades. The public, private, and nonprofit sectors of Atlanta began to seriously examine the importance of a revitalized core of inner-city neighborhoods to the economic well-being and social vibrancy of our city and our region.

Suffering from years of neglect and disinvestment, Atlanta's inner-core neighborhoods were high-crime areas, full of unkempt vacant properties and dilapidated housing and void of retail services needed by their residents. Families faced real threats to their children's well-being and worried about their future, problems exacerbated by the failing public schools in these communities. And yet, as Atlanta began the work of creating an Olympic legacy to endure long after the lights had been turned out on the world stage, it became clear that residents of Atlanta's inner-city neighborhoods held tight to dreams we all share—dreams of vibrant communities where residents live, work, play, and raise healthy, well-educated children.

I suppose that's where I first got the bug—the passion for working to revitalize Atlanta's inner-city neighborhoods. I served as the president and CEO of the Corporation for Olympic Development. As we worked to articulate the communities' visions for transformation and develop plans that would guide neighborhoods in the realization of those visions over the next two decades, we discovered quickly that one key stakeholder was not fully engaged in our efforts—Atlanta Public Schools.

So to many, it was no surprise that shortly after the Olympic legacy experience, I took a position with Atlanta Public Schools, where I could be significantly involved in the facilities management of the district. Were those years enlightening! I discovered a new passion and a new challenge—advocacy and support for the education reform needed to improve our city's schools so they could be a foundation for lasting community revitalization. I also came to understand just how deep the chasm was be-



tween educators and developers, despite their common goal—vibrant neighborhoods where families are safe, well housed, and embrace the value of quality education.

It would be years later before I would find myself drawn to an opportunity to blend these career experiences and demonstrate the value of leveraging the interdependence of education and community development to create sustainable community change. That opportunity was the Mechanicsville Community Learning Collaborative (MCLC), which started its work in 2001. Its origins, though, come out of years of hard work, investment, and hope.

In the 1990s, the Annenberg Foundation invested an unprecedented \$500 million in a variety of school reform initiatives across the country and leveraged \$600 million more as part of the Annenberg Challenge to reinvigorate and to fulfill the promise of American public education. The challenges of the Annenberg Challenge were great, but no greater than its possibilities. In Baltimore, Enterprise Community Partners received an Annenberg Challenge grant to start Baltimore New Compact Schools, a collaboration with the schools and residents of the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. The work of transforming public schools as part of a neighborhood's revitalization efforts raised test scores and literacy skills and changed children's educations. The results led Annenberg and Enterprise to embark on a venture to intentionally integrate education reform and community development for sustainable community change in other neighborhoods in the country. In Atlanta, this was the beginning of what would become MCLC.

MCLC focused on systematically transforming the lives of children who live in Atlanta's Mechanicsville neighborhood and attend Dunbar Elementary School. MCLC employed a comprehensive community development strategy based on Dunbar being a point of leverage for community change in Mechanicsville and vice versa. We hoped to learn from this pilot what work could be done at the intersections of com-



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munity building, school reform, and neighborhood revitalization, how it could be done, and what difference it would make. We acknowledge that work done at this microlevel of one school and one community is very different from large-scale institutional reform, but we think that there are important lessons from our experience for practitioners, scholars, and residents that can inform efforts to achieve large-scale impact.

Though we have reached the end of our five-year grant, we recognize that if we are committed to overcoming generational poverty, improving our struggling schools, and revitalizing our neighborhoods, there are still many years of hard work and investment ahead. We are well aware that it will be several years before we have the longitudinal data to document the effects of our efforts on Mechanicsville and in the lives of the children our program touched. Indeed, we may never know the full effects. But for all those who are interested—whether you are a school or civic leader, a developer, a community resident, or parent—MCLC offers to you our story and our lessons. And while there is nothing herein that will lessen the hard work and the investment required, we want to offer hope that this work is possible and can make a difference.

Overcoming poverty takes more than money and time. There are no simple solutions. It requires resilient relationships on the streets and in city offices and the civic hallways. It is not easy, but we must believe, and we must have hope.

As Enterprise Community Partners founder James Rouse was so fond of reminding us, *“What ought to be can be, with the will to make it so.”*

Clara H. Axam, *Director*
Enterprise Atlanta



executive summary

Based in Atlanta Public Schools' Dunbar Elementary School, the Mechanicsville Community Learning Collaborative (MCLC) initiative was funded by a five-year \$12.5 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation.

Established in 2001, MCLC was born out of a desire to catalyze a chain reaction of school and neighborhood improvements by testing the hypothesis that school reform can be the anchor and catalyst for broader community investment and neighborhood rebuilding. MCLC's mission was to systematically transform the lives of children who live in Mechanicsville, a low-income neighborhood in Atlanta, and attend Dunbar, an underperforming elementary school in Mechanicsville. Specifically, the project had three goals:

1. to improve students' academic achievement by strengthening the public schools that educate them;
2. to build community capacity by enhancing the social and civic fabric of the community; and

3. to support revitalization of the community's physical infrastructure.

An extensive research design was engaged to evaluate MCLC's work. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to assess the impact of this five-year project to improve Dunbar Elementary School and revitalize the Mechanicsville community. The evaluation logic model was tiered and examined outcomes in four areas: student achievement, school reform, community capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization. The evaluation process had an explicit empowerment focus—to document residents' perceptions about the value and impact of the project for themselves and their community.

MCLC learned several important lessons from its work to transform Dunbar Elementary School from an underperforming school to an engaging one and Mechanicsville from a neglected community to vibrancy. These lessons can inform the policy and practice dialogues about connecting school reform, commu-



nity capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization:

- ***Believe that the vision of a healthy school and community can be achieved for and with the existing community residents.*** Actively resist the notion that the school and community are beyond recovery. Resist replacement capacity notions of school reform and neighborhood revitalization that encourage exporting the original residents and building new neighborhood infrastructure for new residents. Embrace community redevelopment models that build the capacity of the current residents and indigenous neighborhood organizations.
- ***Engage an asset-based approach to mobilizing school personnel and community residents.*** Embrace community redevelopment models that build the capacity of the current residents and neighborhood organizations. Build indigenous ownership for the interventions that are implemented. Over time, it is this ownership that will sustain the systemic change required to transform the community.

- ***Understand that the intermediary organization must be an adaptive learning organization that will need to assume various structural roles and engagement strategies to accomplish its mission.***

These roles may include broker-informant, initiator, political strategist, community enabler, and neighborhood ally and mentor. Each of these roles is defined by the relationship being engaged. Identify and support project leadership that is credible to both community residents and external stakeholders. Relationship building within the community and between the community and external stakeholders who have resources—money, time, and power—to affect the proposed interventions is critical to success. There are multiple closed systems within a neighborhood that must be opened and then linked to achieve maximum leverage for systemic change. Once linked, there is the challenge of connecting the respective and collective systems to a larger community. The intermediary must know when to play what role to



the benefit of the affected community.

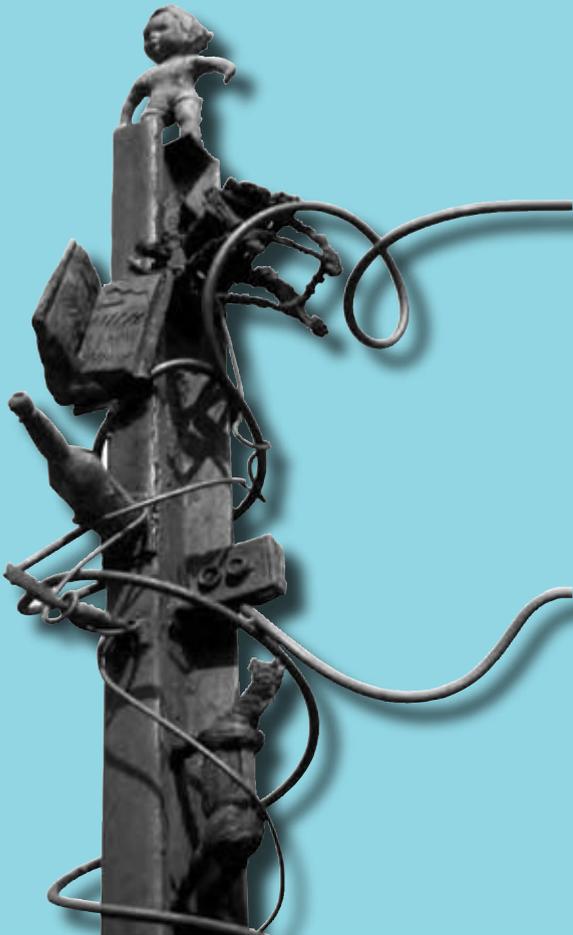
- ***Appreciate the maturation stages of identity, reflection, transformation, and vibrancy through which the school and community must evolve.*** This maturation must take place in order for the school and community to sustain and take full advantage of the interventions that are implemented. Be prepared to facilitate community leadership through these stages. Respecting this life cycle is at the heart of community capacity building. The school and community must mature to the point that each is prepared to take responsibility for sustaining the systemic change essential to school and neighborhood transformation.
- ***Invest in a sustained and visible signature initiative.*** Housing has been the more notable example of visible signature initiatives in community redevelopment projects. The MCLC experience proves that school reform can be used as the fulcrum for broader community engagement. There are benefits to using the school as a signature initiative.

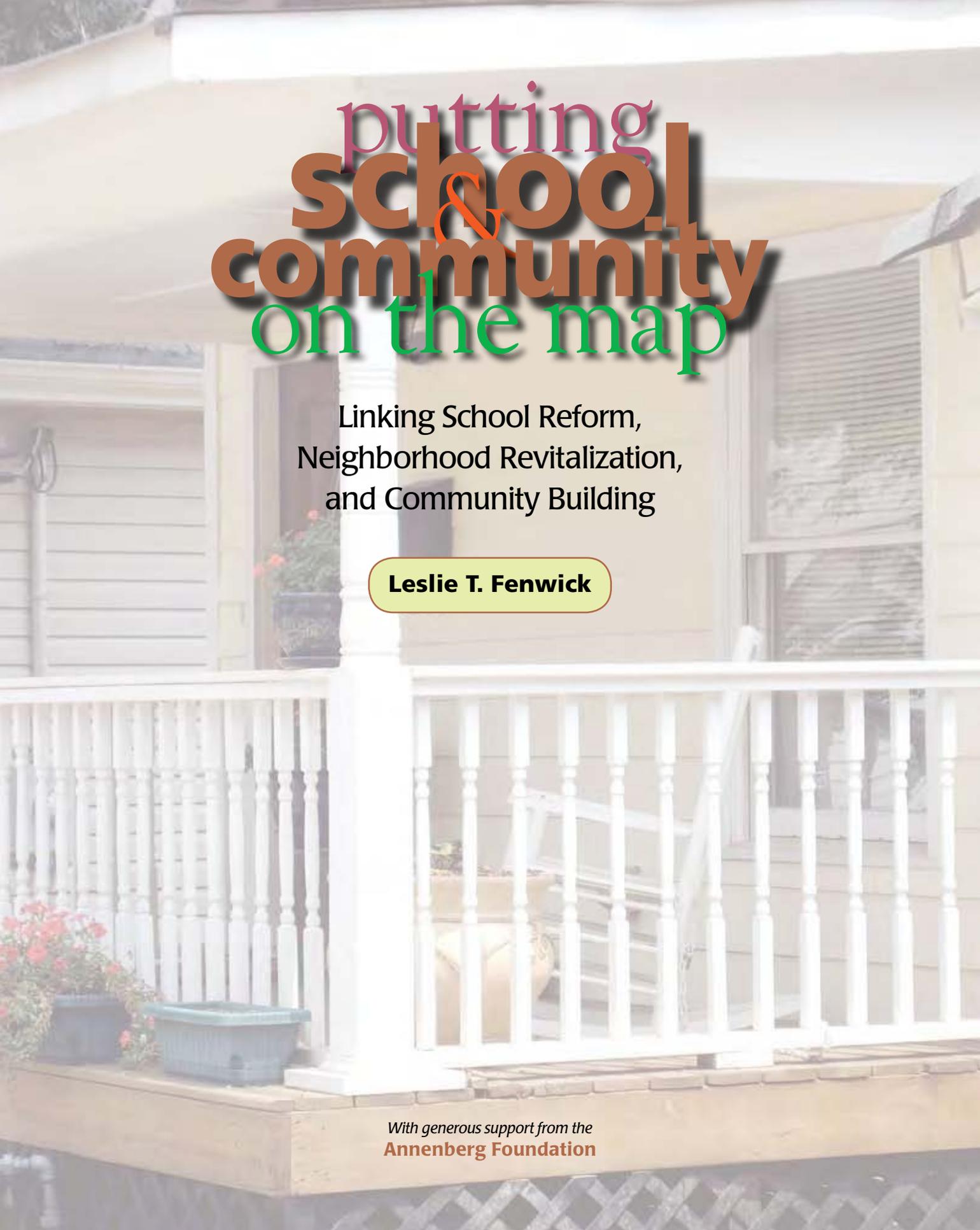
School reform is a motivating force for both initiating and sustaining community change. School reform is also critical to encouraging residents to assume responsibility and ownership for the health and welfare of their school and community.

- ***Focus initial school reform efforts on principal effectiveness and teacher quality.*** Explicitly link professional development of the principal and teachers to instructional priorities and desired student achievement outcomes. Resources should be used to implement interventions that will improve the school climate and support student achievement outcomes.
- ***Financially support and partner with the neighborhood's existing community development corporation (CDC) to improve housing, remove blight, and increase neighborhood green space.*** By doing so, the intermediary builds community capacity for managing the physical redevelopment of the neighborhood and supports real-time "sticks and bricks" improvements to the neighborhood.



- ***Be willing to share information, relinquish decision-making authority, and transition power to neighborhood residents and their organizations.*** Invest in community leadership training and mentoring that facilitates community residents' ability to grow as effective decision makers and power brokers. Strategically link neighborhood organizations to local government, philanthropic organizations, developers, and business leaders. Recognize that community leadership must be politically connected in order to induce changes in city policies, private sector investment behaviors, and funding policies. Facilitate access and involvement that will lead to building ongoing relationships.





putting School & community on the map

Linking School Reform,
Neighborhood Revitalization,
and Community Building

Leslie T. Fenwick

With generous support from the
Annenberg Foundation

Introduction

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For too long, reform movements have occurred in separate silos. Conventional wisdom proclaims that school reform is to be championed by educators and that community capacity building and neighborhood revitalization are the enterprise of real estate developers and civic leaders. Despite these conventions, research shows what educators and developers have long known: Good schools and thriving communities go together. Where you find one, the other typically exists. Schools are conveyers of societal priorities. The value of a community is reflected in the quality of its schools.

Armed with this commonsense perspective, the Mechanicsville Community Learning Collaborative (MCLC) was created with the charge to “erase the boundaries between school and neighborhood improvement” (Proscio, 2004, p. ii) by anchoring neighborhood revitalization and community capacity building efforts in school reform. MCLC’s work was based in Dunbar Elementary School, the lowest performing school in the Atlanta Public Schools district during the 2001-2002 academic year. Dunbar is located in Mechanicsville, one of Atlanta’s most physically blighted neighborhoods.

It is no small undertaking to get educators, city planners, and real estate developers to talk to one another, jointly problem solve, and collaborate toward a common good. There is general agreement among community residents and leaders in education, business, and politics that providing quality education in urban school systems is problematic. Nonetheless, there is fundamental disagreement about the nature of the problem and its solution. In their study, Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux (1999) asked business and non-business respondents the question, “What do you see as the major challenges in the area of children and youth, especially in education?” Business respondents were more likely to mention workforce preparation and crime as their primary concerns. Non-business respondents, however, were more likely to



identify children’s health and wellbeing, social problems, insufficient school funding, and teacher quality as the major challenges facing children and schools. Further, local control of schools is supposed to empower parents and community residents. This rarely happens in poor and minority communities. Too often, “insiders or predators eager to exploit the school for their own benefit” short circuit the work of deep and lasting change (Stone, 1998, p. 293).

Before MCLC could fulfill its mission, it had to overcome numerous challenges. One challenge was the change environment itself. In an analysis of reform in four urban centers—Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Washington, DC—Henig et al. (1999) found that Atlanta, much like the other cities, is strong in its civic capacity to engage in economic development and downtown redevelopment, but weak in its civic capacity to accomplish educational improvement. Unlike the other cities, Atlanta’s parent organizations and community groups appeared to play a more peripheral role in educational improvement. Henig et al. (1999) concluded the following:

Atlanta respondents were more likely to characterize educational decision making as a specialized arena; when they do indicate that decision making is open, they are less likely than respondents in the other cities to name parent or community groups as key education players. When Atlanta respondents were asked to name education players, almost every Atlanta respondent (95 percent) named either the mayor, council, or city government in general; half mentioned business or the chamber of commerce, and just under half mentioned the superintendent or school board. (p. 166)

In addition, systemic reform initiatives in Atlanta have not garnered much grassroots support or enthusiasm among lower- and middle-income African Americans. There is a complicated racial dimension to this reality. Henig et al. (1999) found the following:



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Many key figures promoting broad efficiency-oriented reform initiatives were whites, who either lived in the suburbs or sent their children to private schools. Most, if not all, of those who opposed [the reforms] were African Americans with children and family members in APS [Atlanta Public Schools]. (p. 170)

Research literature clearly shows that the only way dysfunctional schools and neighborhoods can be transformed is by building community capacity. Most contemporary neighborhood revitalization initiatives seek to use the school as the initial and critical site for recalculating urban real estate values, relocating low-income minority populations outside of metropolitan boundaries, and importing middle- and upper-income residents to newly upgraded urban centers. In this neighborhood revitalization scheme, schools that serve high percentages of minority and poor students are particularly vulnerable for two primary reasons: (a) from the developer's perspective, these schools are situated near valuable underdeveloped land; and (b) from the school district's perspective, these schools are underperforming and desperately need fiscal resources to address chronic deficiencies.

MCLC sought to actualize an alternative to this old paradigm. In the MCLC model, neighborhood revitalization is viewed as an opportunity for urban development and school reform to be accomplished as an integrated strategy—in full partnership with community residents. In this model, effective educators, indigenous community leaders, responsive civic and business leaders, and real estate developers who are committed to fit and able housing for the urban poor manage and negotiate sometimes competing goals. They collectively work to improve educational outcomes and life chances for the community's children by sustaining authentic community engagement and responding to the recommendations and interventions offered by vested stakeholders.

MCLC's work was gritty with fits and starts that yielded important lessons. Prime



among these lessons is the realization that school reform is a motivating force for both initiating and sustaining community change. School reform is also critical to encouraging residents to assume responsibility and ownership for the health and welfare of their community. Further, this project confirms that America's urban centers are worth salvaging.

MCLC's work forcefully challenged troubling operating assumptions about community change. Will the primary methodology for neighborhood revitalization continue to be exporting the poor? If so, capacity building becomes a charade for replacement capacity: dispersing original residents and creating new infrastructure for new residents. The MCLC model provides hope for healthy and thriving communities built with and for the current residents of urban neighborhoods. MCLC's work also affirms that the transformation of our nation's urban cities can only be as successful as our collective will to eradicate the isolation and ills of poverty.

There is a strange and disconcerting psychological relationship between one's residence and personal identity.



the Alchemist of change:

Mechanicsville Community Learning Collaborative

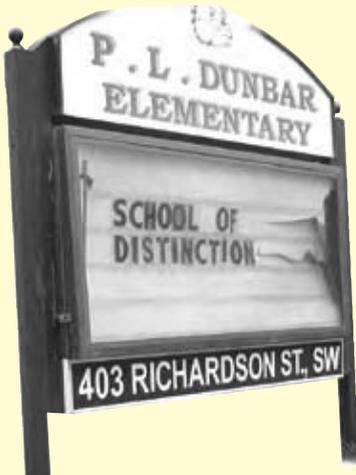
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MCLC is a school-based community development initiative of Enterprise Atlanta, a nonprofit organization devoted to providing affordable housing and supporting community development in Atlanta's low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. Established in 2001, MCLC was born out of a desire to catalyze a chain reaction of school and neighborhood improvements by testing the hypothesis that school reform can be the anchor and catalyst for broader community investment and neighborhood rebuilding. MCLC's work was informed by a theory of change that asserts that access to meaningful educational experiences is a significant variable in determining the quality of life for community residents.

Based in Atlanta Public Schools' Dunbar Elementary School, the MCLC initiative was funded by a five-year \$12.5 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation. The ambitious and multifaceted effort sought to improve the quality of the community's elementary school, build fit and affordable housing, strengthen Mechanicsville's neighborhood organizations, reduce crime, and develop neighborhood-based retail and commercial businesses. MCLC's mission to systematically transform the lives of children in Mechanicsville who attended Dunbar was achieved via three goals:

1. *improving students' academic achievement by strengthening the public schools that educate them;*
2. *building community capacity by enhancing the social and civic fabric of the community; and*
3. *supporting revitalization of the community's physical infrastructure.*

Though school reform initiatives are ubiquitous, MCLC's strategy to link and leverage school reform with community building and neighborhood revitalization was unique and thorny. Linking healthy systems and functional bureaucracies is a lofty goal. What, then, does it mean to "link, leverage, and collaborate"



with fractured systems, especially when generations of community residents and school personnel believe they have been written off? Is it even possible to raise student achievement in a poorly performing neighborhood school while simultaneously revitalizing a struggling community?

Potholes in the **Field of Dreams:** Barriers to Engaging Whole School and Community Change

When MCLC began its work in 2001, Dunbar was one of the district's lowest performing schools and slated for likely closure. Perhaps the clearest sign that the school had been discounted and dismissed was its incorrect street address. City and district directories list Dunbar as located at 403 Richardson Street. Not only is this address incorrect, nothing is located at 403 Richardson Street! Dunbar actually sits at the corner of Whitehall Terrace and Fulton Street. The school is literally "not on the map."

With Dunbar's dwindling student enrollment, transient principal leadership, and high teacher turnover rates, it was virtually impossible to create and sustain a vision of instructional adequacy, let alone excellence. Dunbar's 32-year-old building was dim and dilapidated. Too many teachers believed that the school was a toxic place with students who were uneducable and beyond help. The school, which sat in a "drive-by" community, was paralyzed in its dysfunction. Nearly 70 percent of Mechanicsville residents were unemployed, and 54 percent did not have a high school diploma. The poverty rate for Mechanicsville was 87 percent, and the median household income was \$9,401. Almost 20 percent of the neighborhood's 450 acres were vacant, and the standing structures were decrepit eyesores. Indigenous community organizations found it difficult to overcome neighborhood neglect without commitments and resources from city and school district officials. Civic and business leaders viewed



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Mechanicsville as a community so riddled with intractable economic and social problems that it was beyond intervention. Community residents were suspicious of neighborhood revitalization efforts which they viewed as impositions from “the money people who leave nothing changed.” Despite the bleak reality, residents held hope and a passion for a brighter future for the community they called home.

making **Bootstraps:**

Cultivating Leadership, Partnerships, and Community Assets

Meaningful reform is inclusive, reflective, and emerges from a shared vision. Toward this end, MCLC engaged an explicitly participatory approach to project design, implementation, and evaluation. MCLC’s first objective was to position itself as an effective intermediary that was accessible to community agents, capable of assessing community problems, and proficient at garnering resources to resolve these problems.

Structurally, MCLC achieved this objective by acting as a broker-informant promoting a web of relationships among community organizations (whose members understood the depth and breadth of the community’s challenges) and external stakeholders (who provided access to a network of resources necessary to resolve problems). In this way, MCLC inspired people and organizations to take actions that they otherwise might not have taken. MCLC used two engagement strategies to facilitate its structural role as broker-informant. These engagement strategies also enhanced the project’s visibility and credibility.

First, MCLC created a resource collaborative and an advisory council. The resource collaborative served as a forum for service providers, community leaders, and residents to model collaboration and to maximize resources to better serve Mechanicsville. The advisory council was comprised of urban educators, members of neighbor-



hood organizations, Mechanicsville residents, officers from philanthropic and public agencies, business executives, and civic leaders. It was designed to provide feedback and offer recommendations about all aspects of MCLC's work. The aims of the advisory council and resource collaborative were to ensure broad and diverse participation in devising and implementing strategies for community improvement, provide an opportunity for regular and informed reflection about MCLC's work, expand funding to support community-based initiatives, and grow collective ownership and a connected wisdom about resolving the community's problems.

Second, MCLC commissioned a community assets study that found over 25 organizational assets in Mechanicsville. During the course of this study, MCLC's Family Self-Sufficiency Framework (see Table 1) was developed to identify the project's components, core values, program foci, and desired outcomes.

As a *broker-informant*, MCLC became the preferred point where internal and external ties converged. Through formal and informal networks, MCLC shared information with community residents and external stakeholders. In this way, MCLC tried to reduce its risk of being marginalized as a remote, elite organization only fleetingly connected to the community. In its role as broker-informant, MCLC maintained a subject-object or vertical relationship with the school. MCLC led while Dunbar and the Mechanicsville community were the objects of intervention. In order to increase project momentum, however, MCLC had to evolve beyond its role as broker-informant. MCLC expanded its repertoire of roles to include initiator, political strategist, community enabler, and neighborhood ally and mentor.

It is not uncommon for neglected urban schools and communities to be targets of reform. Too often, however, they suffer through cycles of interventions that are ill-informed or poorly implemented. This reality contributes to community distrust and inertia, especially when reform is externally orchestrated. In its role as *initiator*, MCLC's



Table 1. Family Self-Sufficiency Framework

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Framework Components	Core Values	Program Foci	Desired Outcomes
School Reform	Effective school leadership and quality teachers produce positive changes in school culture, school climate, and student achievement.	Comprehensive school reform models and programs Leadership development for the principal Professional development for faculty	More effective principal leadership Improved teacher knowledge base Revised school improvement plan Improved student achievement Increased student engagement in learning
School Facility	The contemporary school building is architecturally sound and safe and has modern ventilation, lighting, and technology.	Technology integration Facilities improvement Safety improvement	A renovated school building and campus A modern school and campus conducive to teaching and learning
Supplemental Programs	Students benefit from enrichment programs that expose them to social and cultural resources in the community.	Afterschool program Summer school program Extracurricular programs	Expanded learning opportunities for students Increased participation in afterschool, summer school, and extracurricular programs Increased attendance rates and academic achievement
Parent Involvement	Consistent and meaningful parent involvement solidifies district commitment to the school and encourages productive and sustained principal leadership. Strong connections between the school and neighborhood signal community health.	Capacity building for Dunbar's Parent Teacher Association (PTA)	Increased parent participation in the PTA and school activities and programs

Continued on page 11



Table 1. Family Self-Sufficiency Framework (continued)

Framework Components	Core Values	Program Foci	Desired Outcomes
Early Childhood Development	Prekindergarten education is essential. It positively impacts students' school readiness, encourages parents in their role as their children's first teacher, and increases the likelihood that community residents will be active participants in the PTA and use the school's family learning center.	Home visitation program Advocacy for the prekindergarten program	Increased school readiness of prekindergarten students Increased parent knowledge about early childhood learning More community resources available to parents to support their children's enrollment in early childhood learning centers
Workforce Development	Steady employment and a livable wage are essential to family stability. A family's economic stability positively impacts children's well-being and academic achievement, as well as neighborhood stability and safety.	Soft skills training programs for adult residents	Increased participation in the labor force by adult residents
Community Capacity Building	Individuals should feel good about where they live. Healthy communities have a positive image and engender resident commitment. Employment preparation, participation in the labor force, cultivation of residents' civic leadership skills, and improved community safety contribute to the community's capacity and power.	Leadership training for residents Youth development Health Safety	Increased capacity of residents to identify community problems and mobilize resources to resolve community problems
Neighborhood Revitalization	Affordable and fit housing is essential to community stability. Community participation in the crafting of the neighborhood redevelopment plan increases residents' capacity to sustain various interventions. Additionally, the presence of a productive school raises expectations about the relevance of the school to neighborhood revitalization projects.	Community forums Technical assistance to the neighborhood's community development corporation (CDC)	Updated community redevelopment plan approved by the City of Atlanta as the official plan for neighborhood development in Mechanicsville
Collaborative Institutional Partnerships	Collaboration between MCLC, community agencies, the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), and Atlanta Public Schools (APS) can increase retention of Dunbar students and their families during the neighborhood revitalization process (thus reducing outmigration from Mechanicsville).	Facilitation of communication and relationship development between groups with resources, policymaking bodies, and Mechanicsville's community organizations	Creation of unprecedented collaborative partnerships between AHA, APS, and community groups Retention of Dunbar families and students during the HOPE VI revitalization

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engagement strategy was to build trust by modeling best practices. MCLC collaborated with school personnel and community residents to identify needs, conceptualize programs in response to those needs, and to develop, implement, and manage these new programs. In many ways, MCLC had to jump-start the change process. MCLC implemented programs in the school and community, most notably the afterschool program. As a result of MCLC's efforts, Dunbar housed one of the district's only after-school enrichment programs, which was provided by Innovative Learning Concepts.

Change is often characterized by conflict and resistance. In its role as *political strategist*, MCLC negotiated resistance to change in the school and community. MCLC's primary engagement strategy was conflict resolution and the promotion of functional partnerships. The programmatic focus was integrating community capacity building and neighborhood revitalization. One mechanism for preempting conflict was to engage and support the programs and initiatives of Mechanicsville's strongest community organizations such as SUMMECH Community Development Corporation (SUMMECH), the Center for Black Women's Wellness, and Ropheka Rock of the World (Ropheka), a job training and placement agency. MCLC's support to these organizations was financial and political. Financial resources funded community-based programs. Politically, MCLC connected these neighborhood organizations to more established external organizations with similar missions. As political strategist, MCLC facilitated the following relationships: Ropheka and the Atlanta Workforce Development Agency; SUMMECH, the Atlanta Housing Authority, Columbia Residential Developers, and community residents; and Innovative Learning Concepts and Dunbar. These partnerships increased each organization's capacity and credibility. More importantly, the neighborhood organizations progressed from delivering programs solely funded by MCLC to being trusted providers who were positioned to receive funding from foundations and other agencies (MCLC, 2006).



Rather than continuing to orchestrate an increasingly dense web of relationships, MCLC employed a series of programmatic strategies to support its new role as community enabler. As *community enabler*, MCLC removed barriers to success by providing expertise, resources, and oversight to ensure that the implementers could do their work. In this structural position, MCLC's programmatic focus was school reform. MCLC assisted Dunbar's principal and leadership team with developing an integrated school improvement plan. The plan was informed by data MCLC obtained from school climate surveys disseminated to Dunbar's principal, leadership team, teachers, staff, parents, and students. MCLC facilitated the principal's presentation of the plan to Atlanta Public Schools' Board of Education. As community enabler, MCLC worked with Dunbar's leadership team and faculty to achieve the following instructional priorities:

- implementing two research-based comprehensive school reform programs to improve student achievement and literacy;
- providing leadership training for the principal;
- providing professional development for teachers (these workshops were aligned with the adopted comprehensive school reform programs);
- filling critical school personnel positions that were not funded by the district (positions included a dean of academics; teachers for art, vocal music, physical education, and Spanish; a media arts specialist; a technology coordinator; instructional reform facilitators; a social worker; a counselor; and a school nurse);
- instituting afterschool and summer enrichment programs for Dunbar students;
- acquiring new books for the library;
- building a computer lab for the school and providing faculty with laptop computers;
- filling a school security officer position and improving the school's safety program; and
- renovating the school building and campus.



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With progress underway at the school, MCLC turned its attention to the other components of its mission: community capacity building and neighborhood revitalization. To integrate and accomplish these ends, MCLC again expanded its role and became a *neighborhood ally and mentor*. MCLC embraced a subject-subject or lateral relationship with the neighborhood organizations that were viewed as advocates for change rather than objects of intervention. MCLC acted as an advisor to school and neighborhood stakeholders who began to assume more leadership and responsibility for the change process. The engagement strategy for this structural position was collaboration and integration. Here, the programmatic aim was to encourage community capacity building by establishing advocacy partnerships. These advocacy partnerships accomplished the following:

- increased Dunbar parents' and Mechanicsville residents' knowledge about and use of pre-employment training and job placement services;
- provided leadership training and technical assistance to community residents;
- facilitated community forums that connected Dunbar parents and other Mechanicsville residents to existing neighborhood organizations, programs, and plans;
- supported youth development by placing Dunbar students in various community programs (such as summer and afterschool enrichment programs coordinated by Innovative Learning Concepts, teen pregnancy prevention programs delivered by the Center for Black Women's Wellness, and the Youth Leadership Academy);
- supported Dunbar's Parent Teacher Association (PTA);
- convened forums for community residents to update the Mechanicsville Community Redevelopment Plan; and
- improved the quality of the housing stock and public housing in Mechanicsville.

As an adaptive learning organization, MCLC grew into several roles during the life of the project. Table 2 explains the relationship between MCLC's structural roles, en-



gagement strategies, programmatic foci, and strategic partnerships. Absent sustained resources and informed interventions, Dunbar and the Mechanicsville neighborhood would have continued to be stymied by their dysfunction. Despite the best efforts of their families, the life chances of children captured in the neighborhood's concentrated poverty would have been extremely limited. How was this predictable path of decline stopped and turned around? Through its structural roles as broker-informant, initiator, political strategist, community enabler, and neighborhood ally and mentor, MCLC increased the school and community's capacity to create a better urban future. MCLC's participatory engagement approach and tiered programmatic strategies further enhanced its efforts.

Will the primary methodology for neighborhood revitalization continue to be exporting the poor? If so, capacity building becomes a charade for replacement capacity: dispersing original residents and creating new infrastructure for new residents.



Table 2. The Relationship Between MCLC’s Structural Roles, Engagement Strategies, Programmatic Foci, and Strategic Relationships

Structural Roles	Engagement Strategies	Programmatic Foci	Strategic Partnerships
Broker-informant	Lead	School reform	Atlanta Public Schools
	Leverage		Dunbar
Initiator	Build trust	School reform	Dunbar
	Model best practices	Community capacity building	Innovative Learning Concepts (ILC)
Political strategist	Resolve conflict	Community capacity building	Center for Black Women’s Wellness
	Build the capacity of the strongest neighborhood organizations	Neighborhood revitalization	Mechanicsville Civic Association
			Ropheka
SUMMECH			
Community enabler	Link	School reform	Atlanta Public Schools
	Collaborate		Dunbar
			Innovative Learning Concepts (ILC)
Neighborhood ally and mentor	Collaborate	Community capacity building	Atlanta Housing Authority
	Integrate	Neighborhood revitalization	Center for Black Women’s Wellness
			City of Atlanta Mayor’s Office
			Dunbar



beyond the deficit model

Currently, Dunbar enrolls nearly 247 students. All of the students are African American, and 98 percent are eligible to receive free/reduced lunch. Once described as a “remediation school environment,” Dunbar now enjoys a reputation as a school with rich programming (MCLC, 2005). In her analysis of the instructional environment at Dunbar, Carter (2006) identified the features of the invigorated instructional environment and the school climate outcomes that now characterize Dunbar (Table 3).

Table 3. *The Instructional Environment and School Climate at Dunbar Elementary School*

Features of the Instructional Environment	School Climate Outcomes
Institutional determination	A collective persistence to exceed district expectations of Dunbar
Instructional energy	Excitement generated around teaching and learning that is manifested in schoolwide and classroom practices
Pedagogical authority	Teacher and principal responsibility for the teaching and learning environment
Explicit expectations of learner excellence	A collective belief in the capacity of students as evidenced by enhanced and multiple opportunities to be excellent and observe excellence
Professional resistance to externally-initiated change	A collective will to make instructional change responsive to the unique learning needs of Dunbar students
Learner confidence	Learners’ assertiveness in co-constructing their individual and collective instructional environment
Teacher capacity	Teacher awareness, use, and refinement of instructional strategies that facilitate optimal student learning
Leadership empowerment	Broadened perspective of the role of the principal as instructional leader, including a commitment to act as a teacher-student advocate and to compete ably for district and community resources for the school

Figure 1A. CRCT Reading Scores for Dunbar, APS, and Georgia Fourth Graders from 1999-2004

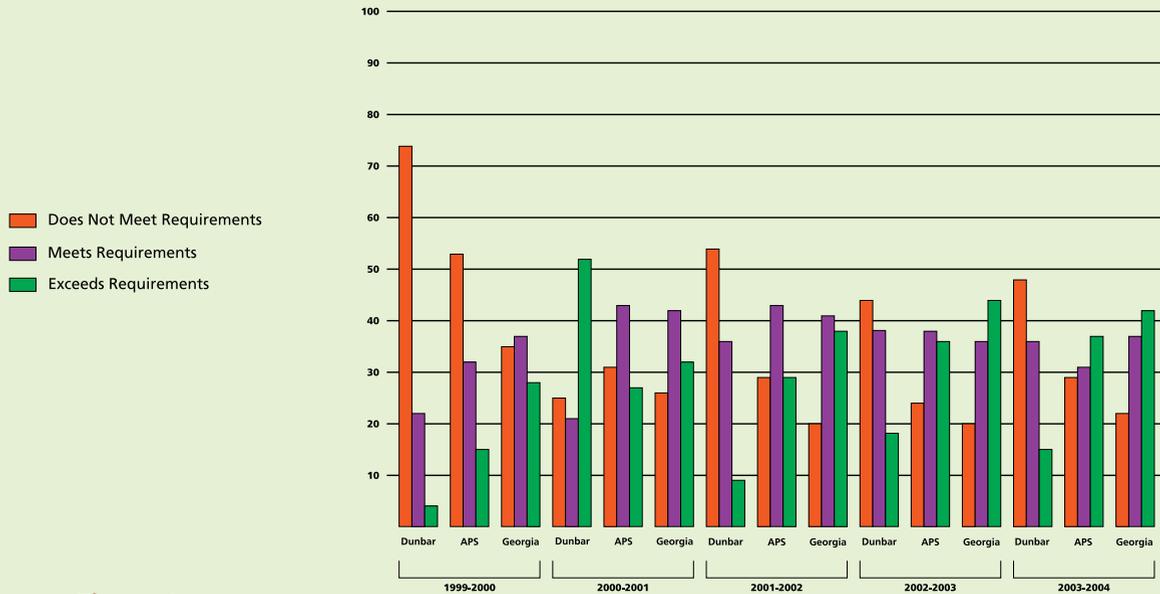


Figure 1.

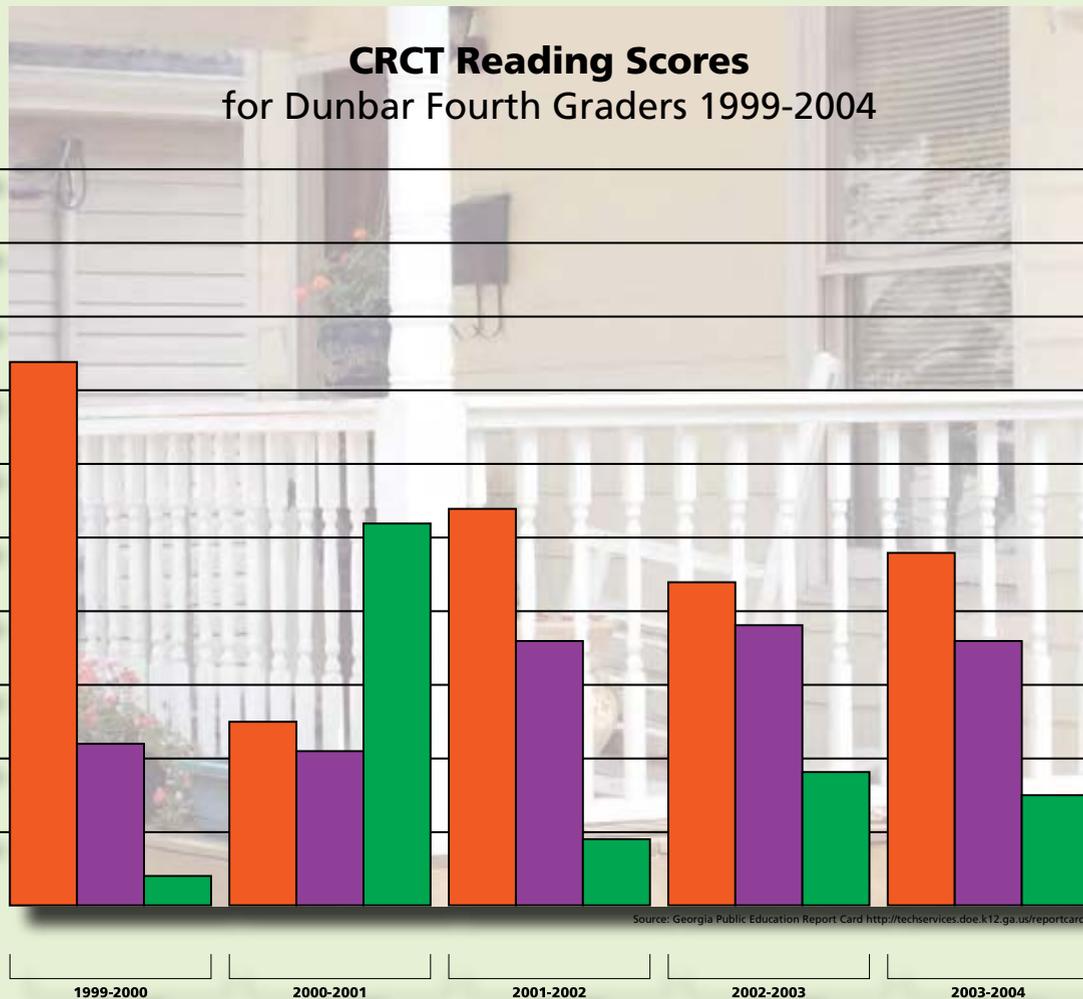


Figure 2A. **CRCT Math Scores**
for Dunbar, APS, and Georgia Fourth Graders
from 1999-2004

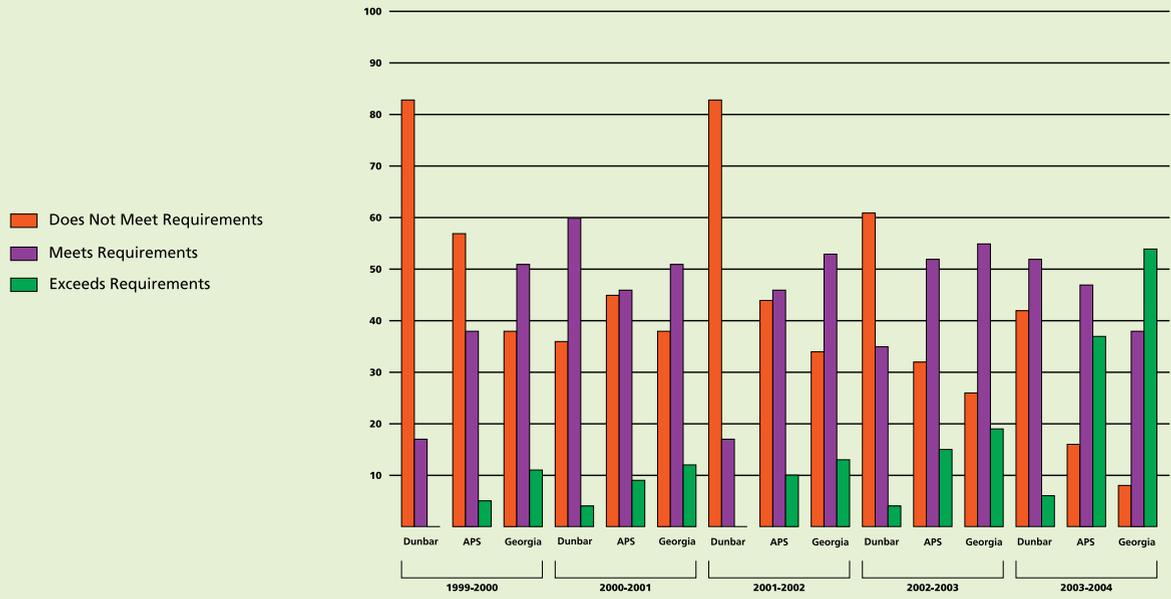
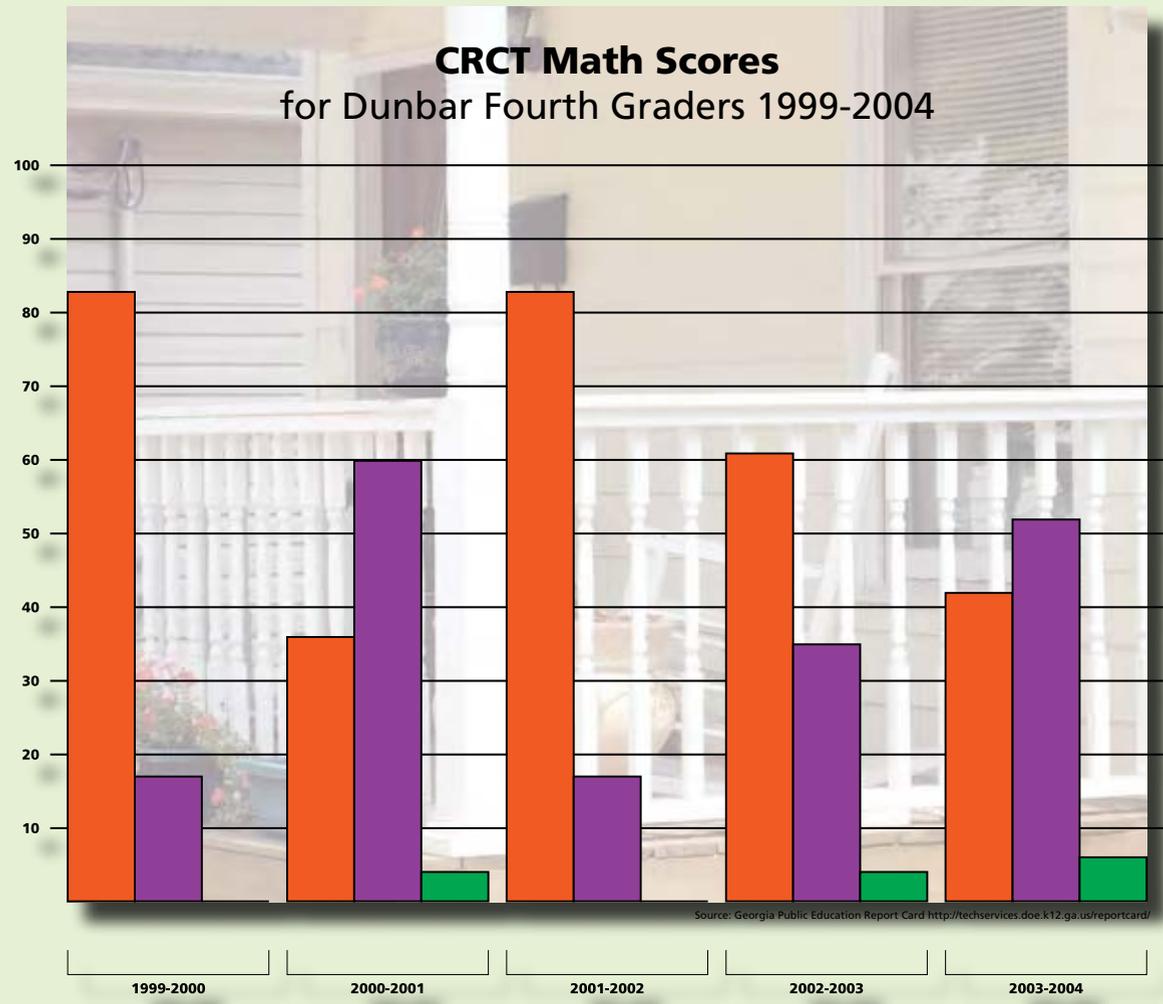


Figure 2.



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Dunbar is not the school it was in 2001. For 2003-2005 academic years, the school met annual yearly progress (AYP) as outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which now requires schools to meet criteria in three areas: test participation (for both mathematics and reading/English language arts), academic performance (for both mathematics and reading/English language arts), and a second indicator (i.e., an additional student performance goal set by the district). Dunbar met AYP in all three areas (MCLC, 2005).

Dunbar's performance on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) has also improved (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The CRCT is a state-mandated end-of-the-year assessment designed to measure how well students in grades 1-8 have mastered Georgia's reading, English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies curricula. In the 1999-2000 academic year, only 26 percent of Dunbar's fourth graders met the CRCT standard in reading, and 17 percent met the standard in math. By the project's third year (2003-2004), 51 percent of fourth graders met or exceeded the standard in reading, and 58 percent met or exceeded the standard in math (MCLC, 2005). Dunbar made such dramatic progress in increasing the percentage of students meeting or exceeding requirements that it was recognized by Atlanta Public Schools for being the district's most improved school.

Though significant gains have occurred, Dunbar's performance continues to lag behind that of Atlanta Public Schools and Georgia (see Figure 1A and Figure 2A)

The pace of improvement has continued at Dunbar. At the conclusion of the 2004-2005 academic year, 88 percent of fourth graders met or exceeded the standard in reading; 82 percent met or exceeded the standard in English/language arts, and 81 percent met or exceeded the standard in math. For making strong gains on the CRCT during the 2004-2005 academic year, the Georgia Department of Education awarded Dunbar a bronze banner. Additionally, the school was named a Georgia School of Distinction.



on the Front Line of School Reform

Dunbar's principal and school leadership team reported that MCLC improved the principal's capacity "to negotiate with the district for necessary academic support resources." School leaders also described the professional development training and support they received as "empowering" because it helped "to cultivate open communication with APS [Atlanta Public Schools] and provide greater access to district resources."

Prior to the reform, school leaders described Dunbar teachers as "apathetic and disconnected from students and the school" and "unwilling to go the extra mile." Today, the principal and leadership team believe that Dunbar teachers' morale, commitment, and effectiveness have improved. They credit the reform interventions with "providing teachers with the theoretical and practical tools necessary to encourage student learning." In addition, they praise teachers for using "expanded instructional approaches."

Initially, teachers struggled with Dunbar's comprehensive reform models describing them as "a heavy burden." This perception soon changed. Over 95 percent of teachers who responded to a recent MCLC survey reported that they attended professional development in three areas: math, reading, and technology. They believe the professional development helped them to "make the school a better place," feel "empowered," and be "responsible and accountable for student learning." Teachers also believe that the school reform initiatives improved student-teacher relationships and decreased student absenteeism. Teachers now describe their students as "more likely to take learning risks" (MCLC, 2005).

Teachers no longer view Dunbar as being isolated from the neighborhood and abandoned by the school district. They reported significant changes in the school's culture and climate. They described Dunbar as a "caring school community" that is "full of energy" and "encourages parents to become involved." In less than



Table 4. Teachers’ Perceptions of School Improvement at Dunbar

Survey Items about the Quality of the Instructional Environment	Survey Items About School and Community Linkages
Teachers are provided the opportunity to develop new skills that will benefit children long term.	The Mechanicsville community invests in its children.
Teachers are changing their instructional behaviors.	Corporate partners work actively with the school.
Teachers and staff understand what is required to tear down the barriers that impede student achievement.	School personnel understand how to support families and provide the resources needed for this support.
Teachers and staff are provided the opportunity to visit urban schools where students achieve at high levels.	Teachers and staff have access to information and resources that enhance the school environment.
My colleagues are committed to doing quality work.	Advocacy for children can be observed in several school and community programs.
Teachers work collaboratively.	Stronger parent and community involvement are encouraged.
The curriculum is culturally sensitive to the needs of students.	Programs build leadership among parents to help them be active participants in their children’s education.
Every child has the right to an education that sustains him/her throughout life.	The achievements of Dunbar students and the contributions of Mechanicsville residents are acknowledged in community celebrations.
Arts and cultural programs exist for students at Dunbar.	Field trips to local and regional cultural and arts events are incorporated into the supplemental curriculum at Dunbar.

three years, Dunbar’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) grew from 5 to 300 members. Dunbar teachers believe that there are stronger and more productive connections between the school and the Mechanicsville community and that the school’s instructional environment has improved. When surveyed, nearly 70 percent of Dunbar teachers agreed with the statements in Table 4 regarding the quality of the instructional environment as well as school and community linkages.

Like the teachers, Dunbar parents believe that the school has improved. In in-



interviews, they praised the school's family atmosphere and acknowledged that MCLC's school reform interventions yielded productive programs for the community's children and families. One parent concluded, "As a result of MCLC's involvement with the school, the kids got everything they needed." Additionally, parents believe that there is "success at Dunbar and that the [Atlanta Public Schools] Board of Education is now sensitive to the needs here." A Dunbar parent exclaimed, "These kids are now getting an education like the children in Buckhead [an affluent Atlanta neighborhood]." Most importantly, students benefited from the improvements to their school and community. To help students understand community change, Dunbar teachers developed social studies lessons about neighborhood revitalization in Mechanicsville. Dunbar third graders investigated the community's response to the question, "What is most important in Mechanicsville?" According to the student study, Mechanicsville residents responded, "Dunbar!"

my **Community Is Me** **This Is What I See:**

Connecting Student Success and Community Vibrancy

School success results from a variety of factors. None of these solely rests in the classroom. Economic stability means stronger and more stable families. Stronger and more stable families have access to supportive networks (both familial and nonfamilial). In his analysis of neighborhoods and communities, Wilson (1987) indicates that social organization is the extent to which residents maintain social control of their neighborhood and realize common values. Wilson (1987) references two dimensions of neighborhood social organization: the prevalence, strength, and interdependence of social networks; and the extent to which residents are committed to the neighborhood and will work collectively to resolve neighborhood problems.



Social organization is reflected in a neighborhood's formal and informal institutions. It is defined as the extent of local friendship ties, the degree of social cohesion, the level of resident participation in volunteer associations, the density and stability of formal organizations, and the nature of informal social controls. Neighborhoods with positive social organization have enabling social networks. These networks communicate an extensive set of obligations and common expectations. Wilson (1987) asserts that adults who live in these neighborhoods are in a better position to control and supervise the activities and behavior of the children in the community.

High rates of joblessness trigger other problems in fragile neighborhoods. Joblessness adversely affects social organization and produces problems that range from increased school dropout rates and crime (particularly drug trafficking) to family disintegration (Wilson, 1987). In interviews with Mechanicsville residents, Davis (2006a) found acute concerns about joblessness, neighborhood safety, and community attractiveness. Residents saw these as interconnected problems. According to one neighborhood elder, "The community wants a clean, drug-free, safer environment. We want community development, public safety, green space, and parks with improvements that work." Unfortunately, Mechanicsville children know about neighborhood crime, particularly theft and prostitution. According to one teenaged boy, "The only thing the matter with Mechanicsville is that there is too much crime."

In its role as neighborhood ally and mentor, MCLC's neighborhood revitalization work focused on upgrading Mechanicsville's housing stock (particularly housing for low-income residents), beautifying streetscapes, encouraging local business and service industry growth, and reducing crime. MCLC worked with existing community partners to develop the individual capacity of residents by increasing the percentage of residents who earned a general education diploma (GED), participated in job training, and became employed. Davis (2006a) reported that some Mechanicsville



residents viewed the MCLC-supported workforce development programs as the “most important thing that came from community capacity building.”

In his analysis of neighborhood revitalization in Mechanicsville, Boston (2006) noted substantial outcomes from MCLC’s strategic partnerships. When MCLC began its work in 2001, the median household income in McDaniel Glenn (Mechanicsville’s public housing complex which housed more than 80 percent of the neighborhood’s residents) was \$5,847. By 2004, it increased by nearly 16 percent to \$6,768. During the same period, the number of employed household members increased by 20 percent, from 96 to 115.

Also, the larger Mechanicsville community benefited from MCLC-supported interventions and investment. Median family income increased nearly 16 percent from \$9,401 to \$10,903. Housing sales increased from 32 in the last quarter of 2000 to 157 in the last quarter of 2004. Additionally, there was a 17 percent increase in the number of commercial and business establishments in Mechanicsville and nearly a 17 percent increase in the number of employees hired by those businesses.

Notably, the criminal activity in McDaniel Glenn and the broader Mechanicsville community declined. The average crime rate for robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny declined in McDaniel Glenn by 44 percent. Similarly, criminal activity in Mechanicsville declined by 33 percent. These marked changes were accomplished due to the efforts of Operation Weed and Seed, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Justice. Operation Weed and Seed is designed “to weed out” criminals who participate in violent crime and drug abuse and “to seed” human services for prevention, intervention, treatment, and neighborhood revitalization in the target area. MCLC’s strategic partnership with Operation Weed and Seed resolved community concerns about crime and safety.

Residents also reported that neighborhood capacity building efforts were suc-



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cessful. Interviewees found job and leadership training opportunities more accessible. They believe these programs “produced people we should be proud of who will continue to help the community grow” (Davis, 2006). Table 5 provides a listing of MCLC’s strategic partners and community outcomes.

Perhaps the greatest testament to MCLC’s success is the commitment of residents to remain in Mechanicsville and send their children to Dunbar despite the demolition of the McDaniel Glenn housing complex. Seventy percent of Dunbar students lived in McDaniel Glenn. To stall outmigration of families and children from Dunbar during the implementation of the HOPE VI project, MCLC held Saturday seminars and conducted surveys of residents’ housing needs and transition concerns. Additionally, MCLC contracted with a consultant to locate temporary housing for families so that they could remain in Dunbar’s attendance zone. MCLC also enlisted the assistance of Atlanta Public Schools to provide bus transportation for students whose temporary housing was outside of the school’s attendance zone.

Residents voiced their appreciation for MCLC by indicating that they were “aware of the organization’s efforts and applaud them for jumping in the middle of a tough situation. The community needs folks who are concerned about people who don’t have a safety net.” Even though they had the resources and the option to move, over half of the original residents remained in the community (Boston, 2006). Enrollment did not decline at Dunbar during this neighborhood transition. In fact, one stakeholder commented, “Although some families moved two or three times because of revitalization, attendance at the school and participation of parents was exceptional.”

Boston (2006) conducted a comparative study of four Atlanta public schools and HOPE VI-impacted communities to determine the influence of revitalization on student performance. Three of the four schools studied experienced a precipitous



Table 5. Community Initiatives

Strategic Partners	Goals	Community Outcomes
<p>SUMMECH, Mechanicsville's CDC</p> <p>Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA)</p>	<p>To increase the availability of new affordable housing for low-income residents and to help residents gain more financial literacy and appropriate financing;</p> <p>To support AHA in writing a HOPE VI grant to secure funding for new housing</p> <p>To increase community safety by replacing vacant lots with green space in the community</p> <p>To retain families during rebuilding</p>	<p>MCLC awarded \$205, 267 in grants and \$2.1 million in pre-development loans to SUMMECH to acquire, build and renovate affordable units for rental and home ownership and to reduce the number of vacant lots by replacing them with housing. The HOPE VI investment of \$20 million and HUD EDI/108 investment of \$4.3 million to simulate affordable and mixed-income housing development; there were 247 children enrolled at Dunbar after relocation (260 children were enrolled before relocation; 295 families were moved from public housing)</p>
<p>Ropheka</p> <p>Atlanta Workforce Development Agency</p>	<p>To provide job-readiness training that will result in job placement of 300 Mechanicsville residents</p> <p>To equip residents with the skills necessary to lead neighborhood change</p>	<p>300 residents graduated from the Ropheka's job-readiness program. Subsequently, 215 were employed; 4 participants graduated from Atlanta Technical College, and 4 others are currently enrolled; 5 participants are completing an Atlanta Workforce Development program</p> <p>30 residents participated in Resident Leadership Facilitation Training (RLFT); several RLFT trainees now serve on various community organization boards</p>
<p>Innovative Learning Concepts (ILC)</p>	<p>To deliver quality afterschool and summer enrichment programs</p> <p>To improve student attendance, academic achievement, and performance on standardized tests.</p>	<p>290 Dunbar students participate in ILC's afterschool and summer enrichment programs</p> <p>Student attendance and academic achievement improved</p>



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decline in the enrollment of students who originally attended the school as well as a sharp decrease in student achievement as measured by standardized tests. When the affected public housing project was demolished, test scores improved after the community was reconstituted with students from higher income families. Boston (2006) found that this trend did not hold true for Dunbar, the fourth school studied. Rather, MCLC's mobilization of community partners facilitated interventions that quickly reversed the decline in student performance. Most notably, the academic gains reported by Dunbar were achieved with the existing students, not a new group of students.

the Moral Imperative to support **Deep** and **Lasting Change**

There is a disconcerting psychological relationship between one's residence and personal identity. In many ways, where we live shapes what we think about ourselves. So, what do children living in poverty and attending run-down schools come to think of themselves, their families, their neighbors, and the society that permits these atrocities?

It has taken decades for vibrant urban communities to know the depression and isolation that results from disinvestment. It will take time for these communities to heal and rejuvenate. As one Mechanicsville resident expressed, "We've had a crutch for so long; do we know how to walk on our own?" The truth is that healthy communities never walk on their own. Community is about relationships and support. The best relationships are enabling. The most advantageous support is financial. Both must be sustained in order to reverse protracted neglect and the harm done to generations.

Dunbar and Mechanicsville have made significant turnarounds. The maturation continuum which reflects this progress might be thought of as occurring in four stages.



Table 6. Stages of Community Evolution in Mechanicsville

Community Stages	Tactical Questions	Community Outcomes	Threats to Community Evolution
Community Identity	Who are we, and where are we going?	Residents determine their hopes for the community.	Lack of community appreciation Apathy Lethargy
Community Reflection	Who will determine the destiny of this community? What resources are required to actualize the community's vision?	Residents negotiate their hopes for the community with external stakeholders and form strategic partnerships.	Lack of interest from external stakeholders Resistance Inability to reach resolution and mediate differences
Community Transformation	How do we differentiate responsibilities and achieve a unity of ends?	Neighborhood organizations and external stakeholders solidify partnerships and rebuild infrastructure.	Lack of resources Misallocation of resources
Community Vibrancy	How will we continue to grow and be responsive to societal changes?	The community has a solid base of resources. There is evidence of stability. Internal and external members describe the community as flourishing.	Complacency

Over the five-year life of this project, Dunbar and the Mechanicsville community each matured through the stages of community identity, reflection, transformation, and vibrancy. Passage from one stage to another is cyclical and requires contemplating the answers to essential questions about the identity and destiny of the school and community (see Table 6).

Dunbar and Mechanicsville did not mature without help. MCLC prodded, listened,



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led, followed, and invited others to promote Dunbar and Mechanicsville along the journey. As many residents and stakeholders proclaimed, “MCLC made it happen!”

MCLC has changed and evolved over the life of the project as it fulfilled its roles as broker-informant, initiator, political strategist, community enabler, and neighborhood ally and mentor. Similarly, the MCLC model has undergone an evolutionary process. In the early years, MCLC’s leadership embraced the value of a holistic approach to school improvement, neighborhood revitalization, and community capacity building. However, implementation occurred in discrete silos as depicted in Figure 5. MCLC developed programs in each of the three areas, but the integration it sought was not

Figure 5. *Silo Approach*



easily accomplished. Integration requires sustained collaboration, yet all stakeholders did not fully accept this holistic approach. Stakeholders and community residents were comfortable seeking improvements in their areas of interest, but did not or could not envision the interconnectedness of the MCLC initiatives (Davis, 2006b).

As the project evolved, implementation continued to occur in silos; however, school reform became the predominant activity (see Figure 6). During this period, roughly three quarters of the funding and staff attention were devoted to school reform efforts (Davis, 2006b).



Figure 6. Silo Approach with School Reform Predominant

Near the beginning of its third year, MCLC shifted its emphasis toward more intentional integration of the three focus areas. The earlier work of building awareness and capacity made the various stakeholders more receptive to an integrative approach.

Figure 7 represents this integration, though a large portion of the effort still remained focused on improvements at Dunbar (Davis, 2006b).



Figure 7. Transition to Integration Approach



This third iteration of the MCLC model fails to capture the essential coordination role played by MCLC in harnessing assets inside and outside of the community and linking and leveraging resources to accomplish project goals. The consensus among stakeholders was that MCLC's coordinating efforts were largely responsible for the success of the project. Figure 8 reflects MCLC in its transactional role linking various constituents, leveraging resources, and ensuring collaboration between the actors and organizations that comprise the Mechanicsville community and its external stakeholders (Davis, 2006b).



Figure 8. MCLC as the Center of Transactions Approach

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MCLC continued to evolve and improve its approach toward community capacity building. Though its vision was slow to be implemented, MCLC recognized the interconnectedness of school reform, community capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization.

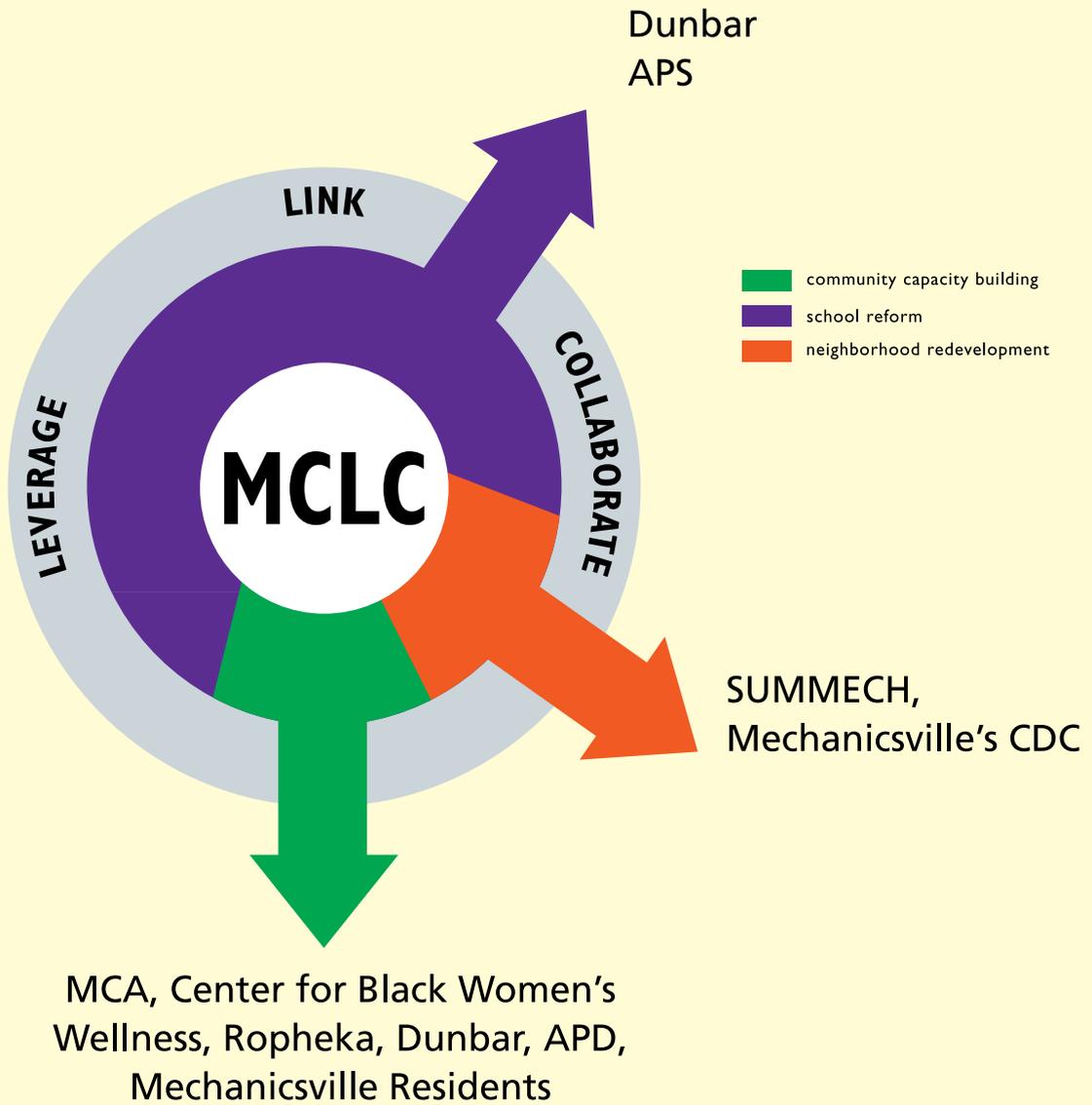
Figure 9 depicts MCLC as a catalyst for the integration of school reform, community capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization initiatives (Davis, 2006b).

Could MCLC have gotten to this model sooner? Perhaps, but as a learning organization, MCLC has developed at a pace that reflects sensitivity to community residents and other involved stakeholders. MCLC approached Mechanicsville as asset-based rather than deficit-based. MCLC grew and refined its roles. Its pace of growth and change was the community's pace.

The MCLC initiative was shaped around a driving question: Can school reform be the anchor for broader community investment and rebuilding? The answer is yes! In each of its component areas, MCLC has been successful in making vital connections. MCLC integrated the work of student achievement and community capacity building, community capacity building and neighborhood revitalization, and neighborhood revitalization and student achievement. By utilizing integration as a strategy, MCLC achieved its goal—to create a community vibrant with healthy, educated children where the residents proclaim, “We made it happen!”



Figure 9. Integration Approach



no Reform Heroes allowed:

Policy Recommendations for
crafting a New Urban Reality

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Five years ago, MCLC began as an unconventional three-pronged initiative to revitalize the Mechanicsville community by integrating the components of school reform, community capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization. Today, MCLC celebrates a neighborhood with growing opportunities for children and other residents to thrive. With student achievement as its major platform, MCLC has proven its value as a facilitator of partnerships and a provider of technical assistance to support school reform in one of Atlanta's lowest performing elementary schools and strengthen an urban community both physically and socially for long-term prosperity.

Early success indicators support the MCLC theory of change. Integration of school reform and community development represents an opportunity to holistically reverse pervasive disinvestment and neglect. To realize deep and lasting change, it is important to move beyond hero notions of school reform and community improvement. Sustainable urban revitalization demands that urban schools and communities be approached as more than just separate and discrete sites ripe for periodic intervention and cosmetic tinkering. The interdependence of school reform and neighborhood revitalization requires systems integration and sustained intervention to achieve meaningful and lasting community development. Too few community development initiatives have linked, as MCLC has done, community capacity building and neighborhood revitalization with school reform and student achievement.

Over the life of this project, MCLC learned several important lessons that can inform the policy and practice dialogue about connecting school reform, community capacity building, and neighborhood revitalization.

- ***Believe that the vision of a healthy school and community can be achieved for and with the existing community residents.*** Actively resist the notion that the school and community are beyond recovery. Resist replacement capacity notions of school re-



form and neighborhood revitalization that encourage exporting the original residents and building new neighborhood infrastructure for new residents. Embrace community redevelopment models that build the capacity of the current residents and indigenous neighborhood organizations.

- ***Engage an asset-based approach to mobilizing school personnel and community residents.*** Embrace community redevelopment models that build the capacity of the current residents and neighborhood organizations. Build indigenous ownership for the interventions that are implemented. Over time, it is this ownership that will sustain the systemic change required to transform the community.
- ***Understand that the intermediary organization must be an adaptive learning organization that will need to assume various structural roles and engagement strategies to accomplish its mission.*** These roles may include broker-informant, initiator, political strategist, community enabler, and neighborhood ally and mentor. Each of these roles is defined by the relationship being engaged. Identify and support project leadership that is credible to both community residents and external stakeholders. Relationship building within the community and between the community and external stakeholders who have resources—money, time, and power—to affect the proposed interventions is critical to success. There are multiple closed systems within a neighborhood that must be opened and then linked to achieve maximum leverage for systemic change. Once linked, there is the challenge of connecting the respective and collective systems to a larger community. The intermediary must know when to play what role to the benefit of the affected community.
- ***Appreciate the maturation stages of identity, reflection, transformation, and vibrancy through which the school and community must evolve.*** This maturation must take place in order for the school and community to sustain and take full advantage of the interventions that are implemented. Be prepared to facilitate community lead-



ership through these stages. Respecting this life cycle is at the heart of community capacity building. The school and community must mature to the point that each is prepared to take responsibility for sustaining the systemic change essential to school and neighborhood transformation.

- ***Invest in a sustained and visible signature initiative.*** Housing has been the more notable example of visible signature initiatives in community redevelopment projects. The MCLC experience proves that school reform can be used as the fulcrum for broader community engagement. There are benefits to using the school as a signature initiative. School reform is a motivating force for both initiating and sustaining community change. School reform is also critical to encouraging residents to assume responsibility and ownership for the health and welfare of their school and community.
- ***Focus initial school reform efforts on principal effectiveness and teacher quality.*** Explicitly link professional development of the principal and teachers to instructional priorities and desired student achievement outcomes. Resources should be used to implement interventions that will improve the school climate and support student achievement outcomes.
- ***Financially support and partner with the neighborhood's existing community development corporation (CDC) to improve housing, remove blight, and increase neighborhood green space.*** By doing so, the intermediary builds community capacity for managing the physical redevelopment of the neighborhood and supports real-time “sticks and bricks” improvements to the neighborhood.
- ***Be willing to share information, relinquish decision-making authority, and transition power to neighborhood residents and their organizations.*** Invest in community leadership training and mentoring that facilitates community residents’ ability to grow as effective decision makers and power brokers. Strategically link neighbor-



hood organizations to local government, philanthropic organizations, developers, and business leaders. Recognize that community leadership must be politically connected in order to induce changes in city policies, private sector investment behaviors, and funding policies. Facilitate access and involvement that will lead to building ongoing relationships.

MCLC began the journey with Dunbar Elementary School and Mechanicsville residents to comprehensively revitalize the Mechanicsville community in 2001. Together, they charted a course toward improved life chances for the community's children. Today, Block 85, a perpetual blight in the community and a stone's throw from the school's front door, is being replaced by green space and new modestly priced homes. Block 85 now serves as a catalyst for the redevelopment of surrounding parcels. The public housing project, where 70 percent of Dunbar students resided, is being transformed into a mixed-income community. Most importantly, durable relationships between people and institutions in Mechanicsville and the broader Atlanta community exist. This bodes well for sustained development that is in the continued best interest of Mechanicsville residents.

When the trek began, Dunbar and Mechanicsville were invisible to those outside of the neighborhood. Much like Ralph Ellison (1995) in *Invisible Man*, the school and community could lament:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

Dunbar and Mechanicsville are no longer invisible. They each have a place on the map—a hopeful place where the children are on the road to success and the community is on the road to recovery.



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