

Comments on Quality Schools, Healthy Neighborhoods and the future of DC.

By Mark Schneider

There is much to like about this report. What I find particularly important is the way in which the authors are doing two things:

- First they are trying to link together housing and school patterns and develop policies cognizant of the intimate links between these two sectors. Currently, far too often there are housing experts and there are education experts and never the twain shall meet. Bridging this gap is a fundamental contribution. I will return to the risk of this argument later, but the report outlines a bold challenge.
- Second, this report also treats charter schools as “facts on the ground” – recognizing that they are an integral part of the public school system of the District—note that I chose the term “public school system” carefully, because charter schools are public schools and have to be thought of that way. Moreover, charter schools are not going away. So future reports have to take the tone and the stance of this report—what ever is happening in the growing DC charter school sector will have effects on the traditional public schools and DC charter schools have to be thought of as an additional tool in any development strategies the city pursues. Making believe this is not so and treating charter schools as a temporary problem, like some kind of flu, simply doesn’t work. This report deserves considerable credit for treating charter schools as part of the system rather than a problem for the system.

But by training I am an academic. That means I don’t go to panels to heap praise on reports but to examine critically assumptions, arguments, data, conclusions and the like. Not surprisingly, I have comments about several assumptions of the study that I hope will spark discussion.

My comments fall into three broad categories:

1. What is the vision of the city that this report endorses and is it the only one, let alone the right one?
2. what can we reasonably expect from the policy recommendations that are laid out?

3. Can the emphasis on linking schools and communities actually distract us from improving the schools?

Point one: there is an implied assumption is that DC wants and needs more children and more students.

- On page 4, two reasons are given for this:
 - a .The District of Columbia cannot sustain continuing declines in school enrollment in conjunction with expanding school supply and rising public investment.
- But this is an adjustment problem: an adjustment in attitudes and an adjustment in capital stock. You may need to go through this adjustment to get to a smaller public school sector. So it's patently clear that expanding school supply in the face of declining enrollment is a sure loser, but why does supply need to continue to increase if demand continues to fall? We can rebalance the system by increasing the number of children **or** by continuing to reduce the supply in an orderly fashion. **Which is the right strategy is a serious question.**

b. The report argues that a community's ability to retain and attract families with children is an indicator of public confidence in the future.

- This is a questionable assumption. There are alternate visions of what a dynamic city in the 21st Century should look like and how central the role of children is.
 - First children are expensive. Alice Rivlin in 2002 produced some rough calculations that adding an average single, non-poor adult resident would increase the District's revenue, net of the cost of additional services for that added resident, by about \$4,300. An additional two-earner couple would bring in almost \$13,000 net of added costs. If the city's population of middle- and upper-income singles and childless couples increased by 50,000, the net annual increase in the District's revenues over operating expenditures would be in the neighborhood of \$300 million. **It would be possible both to improve public services and reduce tax rates.**
 - In contrast, a new family with two moderate-income earners and two children would have net cost to the city's budget of just over \$6,200, because the added expenditures (mostly for schools) would exceed

added revenues. This budgetary strain would require increased revenues from other sources.

- **Again: Children are expensive not only to parents but to the city as a whole.**

There is another vision of urban growth than the one presented in this report. I'll draw on Richard Florida's work regarding the "Creative Class".

Florida defines the creative class as "a fast-growing, highly educated, and well-paid segment of the workforce on whose efforts corporate profits and economic growth increasingly depend. Members of the creative class do a wide variety of work in a wide variety of industries---from technology to entertainment, journalism to finance, high-end manufacturing to the arts."

About 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce is in this creative class and their average salary was about twice that of a member of the working-class member or service-class.

Not surprisingly, cities that have large numbers of creative class members are also among the most affluent cities in the nation—and maybe not coincidentally they have low numbers of children.

On page 3 of the report, the authors note that the number of children in DC as a share of total population (20 percent) ranks among the lowest of the 50 largest cities nationwide. Only five other cities rank as low or lower (Boston, Honolulu, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Seattle).

If you go to the Brookings Report that is the source of this data, you will find among the cities with the highest percentage of children are Fresno, El Paso, Las Vegas, and Oklahoma City.

Richard Florida provides a different ranking—what he calls his creativity ranking: Among the cities with the highest rankings: San Francisco—number 1, Boston number 3, Seattle number 5, Washington DC number 8.

Among the cities with the lowest creativity rankings—you got it: Fresno, El Paso, Las Vegas, and Oklahoma City.

The point is **not** that we don't want good schools and vibrant neighborhoods—of course we do, and children have a human and civil right to a high quality education. It's a question of how many children we want in the city and it's that we need to think much more carefully about envisioning the future of a unique city such as DC and what kind of growth policy we want to pursue.

On page 43, the report takes what seems to me a moralizing tone in support of its vision of more children in the city:

“To some, it might seem acceptable (or even ideal) for DC to become a city largely composed of singles, couples without children, and empty nesters. However, many others believe that cities need families with children to thrive. Families with children tend to be highly motivated and economically successful. Families also bring diversity to cities, use and encourage expansion of public spaces, and help create strong communities.”

But there are lots of ways to encourage public spaces, diversity, economic growth, and strong communities—and many of them aren't built on expanding the number of children in the city.

Second related point: what should we expect of these policies?

while I believe that a lot the suggestions in the policy brief make sense and may indeed work, I come at this with a heavy dose of skepticism. My professional career pretty much is coterminous with the growth of today's profession of policy evaluation. Among the leading lights in establishing this field was the late Peter Rossi. His iron law of evaluation as he put it is “the expected value of any policy intervention is 0.” In simple English this means that most government policies we try don't work.

There are lots of reasons for this low expectation:

People never act the way we want them to. They constantly thwart all our best desires. And government policies are often designed to run counter to fundamental economic and demographic trends that are often so much stronger than any policy tools we have.

Linking this expectation with the demographic future of DC, let me turn to an article in the September 28th edition of the Charlotte Courier Journal. The reporter Warren Smithot wrote about: "The coming depopulation of America's schools"

His motivating question was whether or not the declining school age population found in cities such as Boston, DC, and San Francisco will hit Charlotte despite its location in the South and a whole raft of family friendly policies.

He writes:

Not only could this depopulation of schools happen, it probably will. Nationally, the birthrate has dropped to the point that our current birth rate is barely above what demographers call the "replacement rate." America's population has shown modest growth over the past few decades, but almost all of that growth has been because of longer life spans, not more children. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of school-aged children in America is expected to fall significantly over the next 10 years, and possibly precipitously over the next 30 years.

And here Smithot highlights the policy rub:

In Charlotte, city leaders are spending more than \$400 million on new schools. They received this money by claiming to voters two years ago during a bond campaign that Charlotte's school population will grow by 50,000 over the next decade. However, in three of the last four years, enrollment growth has been significantly less than projections. Now, Charlotte, a growing city in the "New South," has new and renovated schools that are barely half-full.

In short, Charlotte's policy to build new schools to attract and retain families is running up squarely against a fundamental demographic trend compounded by the growth of the creative class who are flocking to the queen city. **Would you bet on demography or government policy?**

My bet is that demography and economics will win over policy. Moving from Charlotte to DC, my bet is that we should continue to expect a shrinking population of children in DC and that we should plan for closing more schools in an orderly fashion, taking into account the reality of a vibrant charter school movement.

Third major point there is a fundamental vision in this report linking of schools and communities here that is both tantalizing and scary.

Tantalizing because the theory of action underlying this work is exciting and because to the extent it is correct, we can envision a synergy between schools, parent, children and the community writ large that can solve many problems at the same time. We can envision a situation where social capital is built in the schools and generalizes outward and we can envision the reverse situation where social capital and human capital in neighbors translate into better and more productive schools.

However, is this putting too much a burden on schools?

For example, in my work on charter schools in DC, I found that parents in charter schools were much more likely to talk to their child's teachers and principal and other parents than similar parents in traditional public schools, and charter school parents were more likely to trust school officials to do the right thing for their children, but none of this social capital translated into behavior or attitudes in the community at large. In short, building the bridge between school and community is a hard task.

There's also the question of how does this bridge work in a city where charter schools are becoming more and more the norm. Charter schools break the community/school link by destroying catchment zones. There is a cost here—in the suburban community where my kids went to school, talking to other parents while waiting for the school bus was an important part of life, but there was only one school in the district and it was a good one. Breaking up this linkage may be a sad thing to do but this is one of the costs of allowing parents to choose their children's schools from a larger set of schools beyond the neighborhood.

Also, how would stronger community/school linkages work in some of the most effective schools we know of, where schools create alternative communities. I'm thinking of David Whitmore's recent book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, which has the unfortunate subtitle *Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*. This book presents a profile of six schools that have beat the odds and there are some common characteristics. But one of the shared characteristics is the extent to which they have built strong communities within the school.

This leads to a fundamental question: What is the appropriate balance between focusing on building a strong within school community versus trying to build both a community in the school and an external community at the same time. If we can't do both, which one is more important?

Perhaps we should work as hard as we know how to identify what works **in** schools and rather than spreading our energies and efforts even further by looking at school community links where we probably have an even weaker knowledge base about what works and for whom.

I admit that I, like many others, am struggling with how this balance might work, but this report should get credit for raising the issue, but this is a question that will require lots of thought and work and, yes, experiments, to see how best to build the bridges between quality schools and healthy communities.

With that, I pass the baton to Chris or James.