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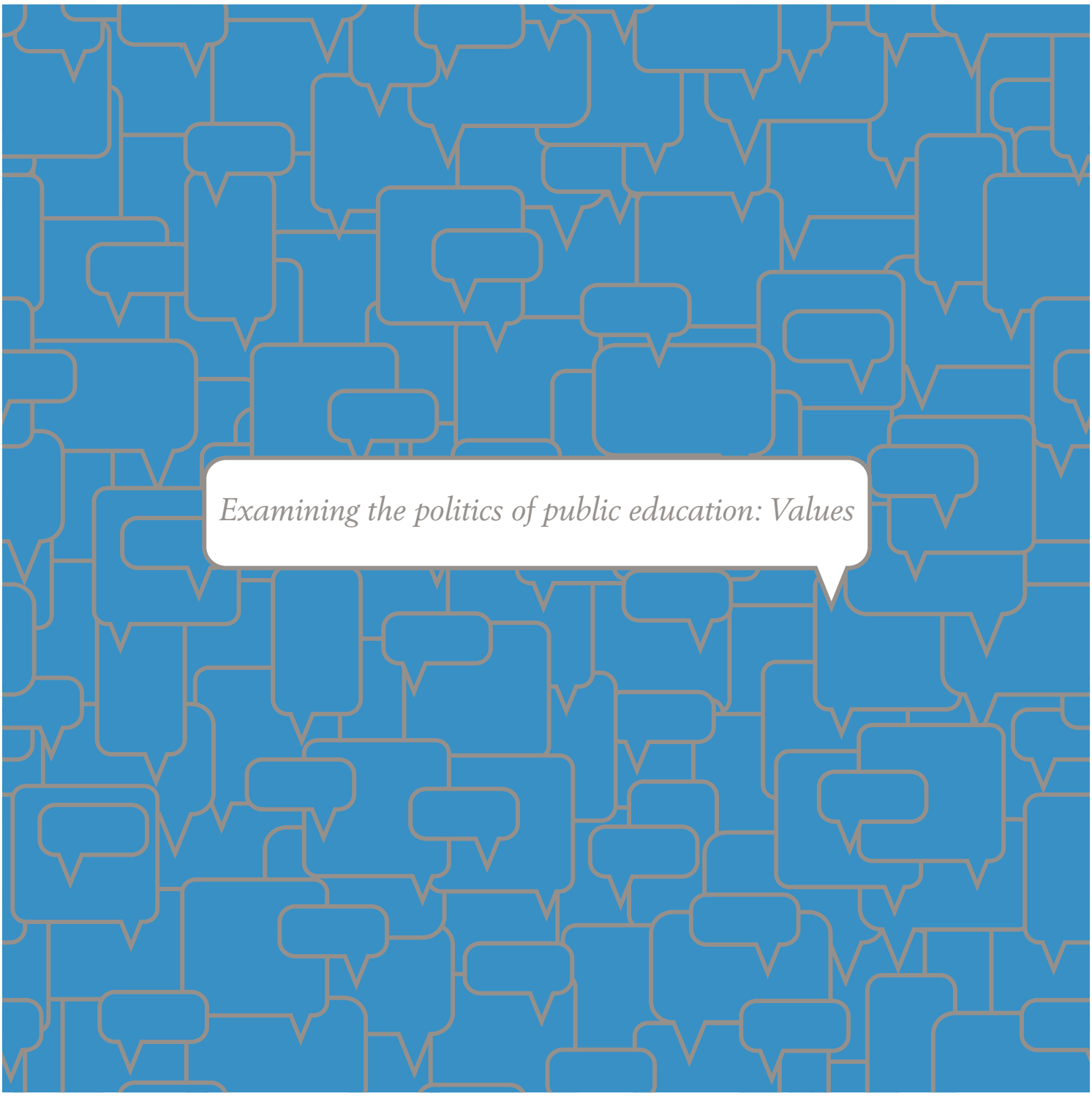

A PROJECT OF THE COLLECTIVE

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR | ANTWAN JEFFERSON, PH.D

One of the things that I've been particularly curious about since I've been involved with Denver education (circa 2002), is what people see when they look at the system of public education in this city. During my years on staff at a local church in Aurora (circa 2005), I also grew interested in this same topic, but in the neighboring city. What is it that people see when they see a public school system? How much of our thinking is about the physical nature of education (i.e., buildings and classrooms and teachers), and how much of it is nostalgic (i.e., our own education experiences, which are likely revised as our lives continue to unfold)? These still are important questions, and likely to be taken up by this Journal in its (hopefully long and successful) future.

For the current, second issue, of the Denver Journal of Education and Community, though, we focus upon a different question, one that is kin-like with other questions about what people see when they look at the system of public education in Denver and Aurora, a question of values and interests: what are the values (interests) you see represented in public education in the Denver metro area? Asking people throughout the metro area to think about values is certainly important in an era in which a small group of individuals may hope to have outsized influence on schools; one in which outside organizations may hope to influence schools to prepare their workforces. However, this question is important to DJEC for a slightly different reason: we continue to hold fast to the belief in the public aspect of public education, and we want to know if the general public's perception of values and influence is reflective of their own values.

So, as we will continue to do in creating content for this Journal, we invited a wide range of everyday people (the most important kind) to host conversations in their homes, and to sit together with friends, colleagues, family, and neighbors to share a meal and to share their views. The only qualifier for the discussion was the question.

What we learned was fascinating, and it reminds us of a few things about the current context of public education. We learned that while Denver and Aurora are distinct, but neighboring cities, they are perceived to differ in general educational climate and priorities. We learned that some in Denver perceive that their interests and values are subordinated to the interests and values that come with national attention. We learned that parents believe that schools prioritize academic outcomes over their children's overall well-being, and that they sometimes take away from children the opportunities to learn life lessons through making their own choices and mistakes.

What else did we learn? We hope that you'll read this issue to find out.

Each of the five articles in this issue serves a different purpose, and here's an overview that we hope will help you understand a publication of this type. The first article is the main story, and it represents the 6 different conversations, which included more than 50 people in Denver and Aurora. Thanks to the thoughtful writing of Allan Tellis, the main article captures the many twists and turns of these discussions, organized to show some topics discussed in nearly all of the conversations, and to also highlight some really fascinating outliers. Following this main article is a collection of four responses to it, each written by a different, first-time contributor to the journal.

From the perspective of a 25-year career teacher in Aurora, a former DPS student who is now homeschooled, a local non-profit executive director, and an education scholar who grew up in Five Points.

Together, these voices (both the collective and the individual contributors) give all of the content in this issue. We hope that you pick up what we put down, and that you'll join us on this journey.

Peace,
Antwan

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SURFACING VALUES

By | *Allan Tellis*, Chief Writer, Denver

"Kids will meet the expectations one year and they change it, and that's the most racist and biased system that you could ever expect for people to function under..."

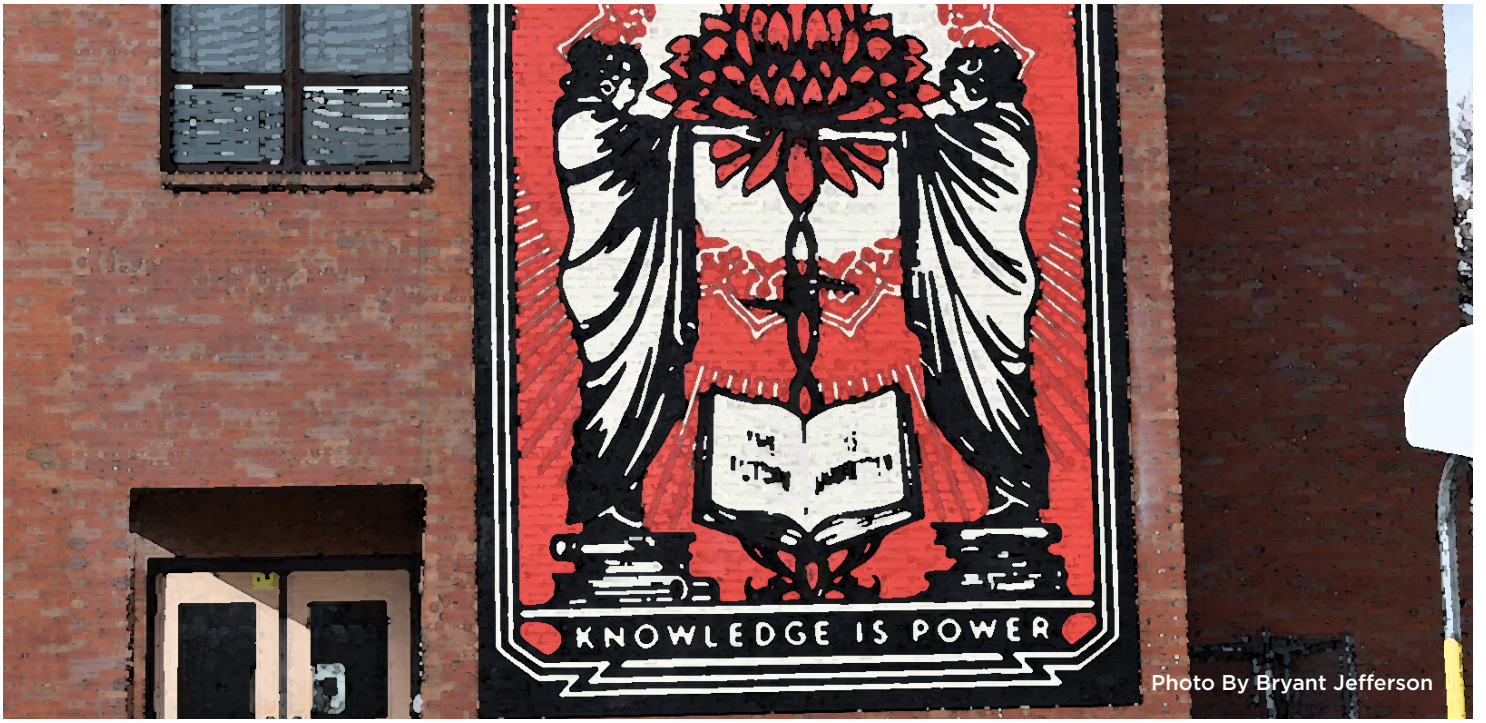

Photo By Bryant Jefferson

Getting to Values

Discussing what values are reflected in the educational system led community members into robust and intense conversations. Oftentimes, the values held by the community members that constitute an educational system do not align, and at times, those values conflict. The district strives for innovative solutions, the community calls for a return to tradition, some parents assert that choice is the only way for their children to receive the education they deserve, other community members say the lack of neighborhood schools is permanently fracturing their community.

Some community members suggested that the educational system should center the social and emotional needs of each child. Others emphasized the importance of creating schools that would allow children to produce strong outcomes in the familiar ways of test scores and other quantifiable metrics. Unsurprisingly, many community members wanted to have their local educational institutions to be deeply entrenched in the culture of their neighborhood. There was also much debate over the usefulness of the traditional hierarchies that exist within the metro area's districts. Some valued the stability provided by the districts' status quo, while others called for a fundamental overhaul over the current system.

While attempting to answer the question of what values they see reflected in their school system, and after reviewing several definitions Merriam-Webster provided, one group of discussion participants settled on the fourth definition listed, which defined a value as "something (such as a principle or quality) intrinsically valuable or desirable." After hearing that as a working definition, a recent graduate of Aurora Public Schools replied, "honestly, from like elementary to middle school, it was pretty ghetto, we had no values up in there… Honestly I don't think they teach you any values." As their conversation continued, however, they discovered what all the other groups eventually uncovered as well: the educational system does practice a sort of value system, although there are real variations between districts.

One common theme throughout the community discussions was that the rhetoric of each district rarely

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aligned with its actions. For instance, area districts claim to value community input and the implementation of equitable solutions, but according to community members, their behaviors show a different set of values. Despite the conflicting sets of values held by various community members, there was a shared longing for consistency in values throughout schools and districts. Many community members had grown tired of trying to decipher what is actually important to the leadership of their area's educational institutions, and desired leadership that matched words and actions.

Longtime residents have become exasperated with the process of negotiation between themselves and the educational system saying they have fought to give rise to the collective community voice only to be met with resistance and at times flat out lies. While throughout the conversations it remained unclear what values are displayed by the educational system currently, and what values should guide the educational system going forward, it is clear that community members have grown tired of inconsistency and unclear standards.

Should Values Align

Given the diversity of Aurora and Denver, differences in values are easy to spot, whether between individuals or between various communities and their respective school districts. As parents and community members discussed values reflected in their local school districts, their language represented views of school systems grounded in radically different sets of values. For some, student well-being and mental health are the priority. As one mother put it, "I measure success based on are the kids happy?... If you have kids walking down the hall silently then there's something wrong with that picture…that's prison culture to me." Others expressed frustration with less daily structure, noting that they send their children to school "not to play" but to learn.

Differences in life experiences also led some to see misalignment of values between school district leadership and many of the people they are hired or elected to serve. In Aurora, recent graduates held that the district should place a higher priority on preparing immigrant students for life after high school. Many of their families lacked the resources necessary to navigate the complications public schooling brings for undocumented people. One student stated that although she was made to feel valuable and was encouraged to explore her post high-school educational options, looking back on her experiences she felt "when you're a first-generation immigrant, you're just like fucking clueless."

As residents discussed the values they perceived in public schooling, a discussion about schoolyard conflict demonstrated disconnected views of child development. An Aurora conversation revealed deep concerns about how teachers, who are mostly white, strip children of opportunities to learn to establish boundaries with their peers, going so far as to eliminate all conflict between children. Many parents were critical of what they perceived to be unreasonable differences in how student behavior is evaluated, describing differences in behavior expectations for children based on where the student is enrolled, combined with their race. The behaviors of children of color were frequently thought to be policed in schools, as described by one father's surprise at how his nine-year-old understood the importance of his behavior in schools: "dad, like they care more about me behaving then they do about me learning."

Conflict avoidance occurs, it seems, at other levels of the public schooling system as well. Parents' decisions to no longer participate in school or district processes were discussed as a result of their experiences being harmed by their children's school or district. Though some residents suggested that education change would require families to more heavily invest in their child's education, it was clear from past experience that the burden to adjust most often fell to families, a burden that not all families are equipped to handle. Others noted that the system has been designed in a way that keeps parents on a treadmill which perpetually excludes them from being able to contribute in the ways that they would like to.

Some noted that area districts claim to value community input as a useful contribution to help them shape district direction and vision. However, one longtime Montbello resident says that this could not be true because district representatives always have an aggressive demeanor when it comes to community-district negotiations. As she put it "I really don't see any real values because first of all if there were any real values there, even from DPS, the board, the president or anyone else, they would not have come to meetings the way they have, gangster type."

A consistent question amongst those with experience in these urban school districts was how their experience compared to those from other communities throughout the metro area. One retired educator from Montbello noted that she has had the opportunity to visit schools in more affluent areas, saying, "I'm in these buildings, I'm looking at the differences, I'm looking at the way teacher student relationships are working out…our children are missing out, black children are missing out." Parents in Montbello noted that innovative school models often

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created different educational experiences within the same building. One parent emphatically questioned why certain schools were responsible for raising their own funds while other schools were not subject to bearing a similar burden for sustainability.

Discussions of school choice processes in Denver and Aurora also revealed misalignment of values. Many residents expressed concern that school choice allows for housing mobility without the responsibility of investing in the surrounding community. As one parent put it "white people move into the inner city because they know they don't have to send their kids to the school. They can choice their kids wherever they want to go." Another parent responded saying, "they can live in the cheap house and go to the great school and then rob the resources from the local school…I want parents to send their kids to Colfax. Like you might not think this is the right choice for my individual child but I promise that is the best choice for the community." If this sort of valuing of self-interest is so deeply held, how could there ever be consensus on an issue as contentious as enrollment through choice?

One father, from the Far Northeast part of the city, noted that despite repeated calls for a traditional high school in his neighborhood, innovative strategies like co-located schools have continued to dominate. Though he believes that supporting strong communities should be valued by the district, this support occurs only in some neighborhoods. As this father described it, "in the southeast area, at East High School, in those areas they have activities inside their school that bring people together…those things we don't have."

Interestingly, these inconsistencies were suggested to have not only shaped the educational experience of students, but also to have a hand in fundamentally altering the fabric of communities. For many, schools don't simply exist to help students meet educational standards; they also should serve to establish and maintain communal values. Parents believed this difference in experience is a display of their district's inability to promote a shared value system.

(in)Equities

In several discussions about fairness as a signal of values, residents across the metro area were concerned that a gap existed between the purported values of their respective school districts and the practices of these same districts. Whether in making financial decisions or in measuring student learning, this sort of misalignment of words and actions is not simply an innocuous display of pandering but a practice that actually triggers significant consequences for parents, students and educators. More than once parents leaned on the old adage that if you want to know what someone values, check their financial records. One young mother put it this way: "the way that they measure success flows from their values even if they don't realize it. When you look at an organization you can see their values in their budget."

The gap between what the district says and what their actions reveal has led some to believe the districts are purposefully deceptive. Residents shared that local districts manipulate language to establish enough credibility to implement their agenda without having to take the desires of its constituents seriously. One of the ways this shows up most clearly is in the way that caring for teachers is routinely cited as a top priority of the district, while most parents, community members and teachers themselves see something altogether different in the actual treatment of teachers. One teacher suggested that DPS cannot have much respect for teachers as they have recently battled against teachers looking to make at least $45,000 yearly. As this educator noted, "payment shows there isn't value for it as a profession." Not only do teachers struggle to make a livable salary, Colorado, according to at least one study, ranks 42nd in per pupil spending. As the same educator noted, to her, that indicates "there's not value towards our students' per pupil funding and the way that it's distributed."

Many found Denver's School Performance Framework (SPF) to be an inadequate way of facilitating the district's evaluation of schools. The SPF was described evidence of data-driven policy that forgoes conventional wisdom in favor of innovation. Quantifying school success has put the burden of producing results on the students and teachers in ways that typically don't improve the conditions of educational institutions but do provide ample anxiety for parents, teachers, students and community members. The SPF was often described as the district placating to community members' concerns about public schooling without taking the needed steps to improve schools. Residents expressed deep concern over the allegedly finicky nature of the assessment, which in the eyes of many, is subject to change on a whim. Some felt that this system of measurement was intentionally designed to be malleable so that it would consistently give the district statistical backing to treat marginalized communities differently. As one mother put it, "kids will meet the expectations one year and they change it, and that's the most racist and biased system that you could ever expect for people to function under."

Many of those involved with the district have become disillusioned with the local district rhetoric--progressive, uplifting language without any real intentions of change.

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One teacher claimed that a word like equity has, over the years, become a weapon, used to tantalize those who would like to see all students succeed. However, many felt that words like equity or justice are thrown around without a commitment to significant change, serving only to pacify community members, parents, and employees who take the district at their word. As the educator put it, "it's been politicized, it's been created as this weapon almost, as to where it's so watered down that like, that like y'all [the district] don't even have a working definition of what equity means." DPS has communicated that it values the benefits of a diverse teaching force, while it has been unable to hire and retain many non-white teachers, and has historically had a particularly difficult time sustaining ample percentages of black teachers. One parent from Montbello says he's attended job fairs where black teachers have purposefully avoided recruiters from DPS, opting to instead work in any other part of the metro area and oftentimes, even in other parts of Colorado. For him, this indicates that there is not simply a resistance of black teachers to work in the geographic area, but that there are systemic issues that go unaddressed inside of the district which repel this racial group from pursuing these positions. Based on his observations "if you look around we have other school districts that are hiring black teachers and Denver can't find black teachers, and if they do find them, they have to find them out of town or somewhere." One young mother suggested that the district seems to be thoroughly invested in protecting the politics of whiteness as opposed to implementing changes that would make the district more comfortable for people of color at all levels of public education.

Power

Many Denver residents shared concerns that the district prioritizes being considered a national, progressive leader in educational policy, evident in the influence of outside interests. Community members shared often feeling that they've been attempting to negotiate with a hostile administration. Many of them asserted that their desires have been flat out ignored in favor of policies that make the district appear to be on the cutting edge of educational policy. One educator claimed, "I think money is super important to them and they make a lot of decisions based on money and the power that comes along with that." Another agreed responding, "they really like being seen as leaders in the country and doing these things that look good on the outside." District aims to be a national leader has come with the insidious effect of making community members feel as though they are "lab rats" who are constantly being experimented on without their consent. They feel as though they are the subjects of unproven educational engineering which causes them to sacrifice their experience to see what tweaks improve educational outcomes. This was a point of tension amongst many community members because while there was consensus that there does need to substantial changes made to the city's educational institutions, they felt those fundamental shifts should be made with the guidance of community members. As opposed to community guided decision making, many felt that the districts decisions have been guided by the invisible hand of "liberal policy makers," who have little connection with the people most affected by their strategies.

It has not been lost amongst community members that the vast majority of charter schools and other innovative schooling solutions have been placed in low-income, minority communities. Many believe that they have been placed in these communities, not because they are an evolution in schooling that will improve the educational institutions in these communities, but because leaders are trying new models of schooling in communities perceived as not possessing enough power to push-back. One Far Northeast longtime educational advocate asked, "how many charter schools are in southeast Denver?" and answered "they're all in Northeast Denver." According to one mother, the proliferation of non-traditional schools "is one of the tenets of education reform." Some educators who work in charter schools expressed that they were taken aback after learning about the ways charter school systems operate, especially by focusing on employing white, middle class, young teachers. One teacher observed that this process has been designed to create a circular pathway for these teachers to work their way to the top of the system. He compared it to the way nonprofits have become a complete industry unto themselves, noting that oftentimes, what gets lost in the pursuit of funding is the upliftment of the people these organizations were created to serve.

Many longtime community members noted that this is not the first time they've seen the implementation of well-intended policies producing negative consequences. Many pointed to forced bussing as the first experience they had with a policy agenda that was meant to overhaul the school system and create equity but became unpopular with the community due to its latent effects. The disconnect between policy makers' ambitions and the lives of its constituents seems to have driven a wedge between the community and the administrative sides of these districts. One community member believes that "the district is making decisions, but they don't really know the community." Community members suggested that oftentimes there is an elitist bend to the decision-making group which DPS relies on. What this group often lacks is the representation of the experience of fledgling students or those who want

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to use the metro area's educational institutions in ways that propel students in a different direction than towards a college degree. A recent graduate of Aurora Public Schools noted that "they just want you to go to college and they make you believe that's what's gonna make you successful but there's so many other options." A fellow product of Aurora Public Schools agreed saying "I hate them for that. They don't give you the options. They make it seem like if you fail school you fail life."

For some, especially employees and longtime community members, the high value placed on appeasing think tanks and innovation centers begs the question of who really wields power in the district. One parent from West Colfax summed up several comments noting, "they're giving [the superintendent] the money to run this district but she's a puppet." Some suggest that in the metro area we often mistakenly look to local officials when trying to determine who has the biggest ability to influence change. One teacher suggested that community members begin to antagonize organizations like the Zuckerberg group and the Gates Foundation as they actually have the resources to manipulate school policy in a very forceful way. Another community member residing more than 15 miles away suggested that he noticed a similar trend, "DPS and Denver has gotten itself in a situation where because of its ties to education reform and because of the political scene... we have taken a very different path from the rest of the surrounding areas... most of the surrounding areas still have what you're talking about. They still have communities where the schools are the center of their communities."

Others spent time discussing the ways in which Denver's political structure is unique and makes it ripe for the divestment of school control away from community members. For those who had more intimate knowledge of school setups in other metropolitan areas, Denver stood out as uniquely disjointed and unusually pliable. The school board members in Denver are unpaid, putting the role out of reach for most people who do not have access to major funding from outside sources. There was also a suspicion of the way in which Denver's local government interacts with the school district, as the city has little formal power to influence the district. This unclear sense of where power is held in the district has led to competing views of the type of governance that would serve students and teachers best. Some called for a return to central authority which would help establish uniformity throughout the metro area. As one Far Northeast father suggested "when we had a central office that was a valuable resource." Others claim DPS's past use of centrality was at the heart of the problem and returning to that setup would reinforce colonial mentalities which perpetually lead to the exploitation of people of color. A Park Hill resident phrased it this way: "another value of DPS is centralization... part of that is also white saviorism- this idea that we know what the problem is, we're going to get our little best minds together in a central office, and we're gonna disseminate our little solutions and everybody is gonna be happy." She says that logic directly "goes against the value that they say they want in the classroom which is cultural responsiveness and adapting to student's needs."

One point of agreement among all was that including community voices in decision making conversations should be a value of both Denver's and Aurora's districts. One recent DPS graduate said that in order for them to perceive the district as committed to this value they must see more voices at the decision-making table. Community members do not want to be handed plans that are seemingly already well underway under the guise of the district reaching out for community input. A Far Northeast mother angrily rebuked the district's tactics exclaiming, "don't come out here and disrespect our community! Don't try to railroad people that have lived here for 35-40 years!"

Dreams

Many community members were adamant that the district would only reasonably incorporate community input if they were compelled by something stronger than moral conviction. In Montbello, parents felt particularly cast aside by the administration who had seemingly ignored their requests year after year. No issue made this clearer than the community's requests for a traditional neighborhood high school that have gone ignored since they lost their neighborhood's flagship school over a decade ago. Pushing against the imposition of district policies over many years has left many parents feeling tired and deeply frustrated about the intentions of the leadership within the school system. One longtime advocate for the Far Northeast Area has concluded that the only way to hold the administration accountable for meeting community demands is through entering a contractual agreement. After years of hearing empty promises, she's of the opinion that only a neighborhood agreement that clearly spells out the demands of community members in the metro area will allow the community to exercise power within the district. As she says "once you come up with the neighborhood plan and they sign off on it, if they don't follow through with what the community wants... then they're setting themselves up for a lawsuit."

One mother says she takes a much more micro approach to making sure parents are aware of the power they wield to influence the value system seen throughout the district. She says parents must interact with leadership

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in the schools and make sure it is clear that the school's function is to implement what parents want. "I say first and foremost, before you make any decisions, understand that I run this and if you understand that I run this, you understand that we make the final decisions, not y'all."

Scarcity

However, it is clear that simply voicing concerns is not enough to deeply influence what the district sees as critical. Oftentimes, racial politics deeply influence how community concerns are prioritized. One white parent was appalled at the level in which her privilege as a white person allowed her to be taken seriously in comparison to her non-white peers: "I've seen a pattern of listening to white people and their complaints and what they want to see happening in schools and ignoring the complaints and demands and calls to actions of communities of color…here I come with my whiteness and all my privilege and we say the same thing and people are like what was that? What do you need?… I studied that, but to experience that first hand was so astounding to me."

With disparities like this in interactions with the district between white parents and non-white parents it became clear to this young white mother that not all constituent groups were valued equally by the district. Parents in West Colfax and Park Hill noted similar trends, as they described how the racial shifts caused by gentrification have often led to significant changes in the material conditions in their neighborhood schools. Parents noted things like having been clamoring for air conditioning for many years, but seemingly seeing those conditions improve as soon as more white families began to appear in the neighborhood. One Montbello resident tried to describe "the ethnic breakdown of our community." "What was 99 percent black is almost 70 percent Hispanic. When you look at the teachers in our community they are majority Latinos, there are very few black teachers."

Some suggested that this disconnect between community values and the priorities of Denver and Aurora school districts have left other points of concern ignored which have served to diminish the quality of education within either district. For instance, there was an emphasis on building community as being one of the key principles of Denver Public Schools. However, there are underlying and untreated problems within the educational system which are splitting the communities, causing ruptures in neighborhoods. One parent noted that in the racially shifting Far Northeast community, racial tension is strong. Oftentimes, area districts are unable to see these growing tensions and lacks the nuance to see racial differences beyond the vague distinction between white people and people of color. According to parents, this unresolved tension has not only been a cause of concern for parents who feel like some group is being underserved, but also has led to acts of violence between students of different racial groups. Some parents have seen the shift towards supporting Hispanic students as a net benefit for the district, while others fear that the needs of black students have been neglected as there has been a decrease in their overall share of the student population. As one mother who has stewarded over ten children through DPS said "they're not even owning the fact that there is racial tension and the school is perpetuating it. When I, as a black parent, walk into the school and everybody is speaking Spanish in the main office and I'm standing there waiting there to be recognized…you can cut the tension with a knife.

Allan Tellis is a journalist who is dedicated to uplifting voices in underrepresented communities in ways that give these voices their full depth. Allan has written for a variety of publications over the last seven years but has most prolifically written about marginalized communities in the city of Denver.

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FROM AN EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE

By | *Nicci Guagliardo*

"If the schools are failing too many black and brown students, then the school should stop failing so many black and brown students..."

Photo By Bryant Jefferson

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Parents and community members feel justifiably frustrated with the gap in purported values and actionable practices in the public school system. One community member stated, "the district is making decisions, but they don't really know the community." I would argue stakeholders feel this way because districts and policy makers have quantified and standardized the most creative and human of systems, schools. Until major shifts in thinking occur, we will continue to feel a disconnect in what we want from our education system and what we get because it is impossible for a system which has reduced the importance of educators and students to scores on tests to reflect human values.

Kids have to be there, and teachers are paid horribly, so no one in the classroom is in it for the money; but because education is a bureaucracy, there are many other people benefitting off that classroom. There are principals, superintendents, test makers, textbook companies, and webinar coaches, all waiting for the test results so they can have jobs helping kids achieve conflated "standards." The lack of resources dedicated to the most important part of education – the student and teacher in the classroom – shows a clear lack of values within the system. A young mother in the article put it this way: "the way that they measure success flows from their values even if they don't realize it. When you look at an organization you can see their values in their budget."

In this system, the further one gets from the classroom, the more money they make, so why would a talented, motivated, person remain a classroom teacher? Well, many do not; in fact, according to NEA data, 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years for better-paying positions. Moreover, if a novice teacher stays in the classroom, they are evaluated on the same scale as master teachers, regardless of their level of expertise; and in many cases it falls on the novice teacher to find their own mentor. How is a person new to a profession supposed to feel successful if they are compared to experts and given little to no support to learn their craft? I call teaching a craft, but it has become apparent to me that most districts do not value their teachers enough to consider what they do a craft. The fact that over 75% of teachers are white females (NCES, 2017) proves that the people in charge feel classroom teachers matter little. If the system truly supports students, more money would be spent on the recruitment of black and brown educators. It does not take research to know that all people need to see people who look like themselves as role models. However, the system is not truly concerned about students growing or learning beyond what they are able to achieve on standardized testing.

Stakeholders are willing to question most practices, but there is little questioning of the validity of standardized testing as a measure of success. I do not know who decided that standardized tests should be the measure of a person's intelligence, when the only thing measured is how standardized a person is. We have years of research to show standardized tests are biased (Neill & Medina 1989; Kempf, 2016) yet we continually use them to prove the achievement gap and to determine most college admissions. If districts would agree to stop wasting time and effort on expensive, flawed, punitive, judgment systems, maybe classrooms could get back to teaching and learning; but this system is deeply rooted in punitive measures. Grading practices do not reflect a respect of learning. Especially at the secondary level, grades reflect what a student has not done (has not turned in an assignment, missed 5 out of 10 on the quiz) rather than what they have accomplished. If a teacher can give students extra credit at their discretion, then why are ANY students failing school at all? If the schools are failing too many black and brown students, then the school should stop failing so many black and brown students. Grades are subjective, and we need to stop treating them otherwise. It is difficult to explain the difference between a 59% and a 62% other than one of those grades means a kid passed and the other does not. What good does it do for a teacher, school, or parent to hold on to three percentage points as proof that a kid failed? How did numbers in grade books or bubbles on an answer sheet become more important than the human beings we serve as educators? There can be no values reflected in our education system if the system has none itself.

I have been a public school English teacher for 25 years, and I have been through every type of training possible to help me "fix" the problems in students who do not match the standards of proficiency. I am a mother of three daughters who graduated from the school where I teach. Every parent wants his or her child to be challenged and loved, supported and pushed. This happens in classrooms with talented teachers; there are spaces where vulnerable, authentic learning occurs, but it is not a system-wide practice. It is only happening in classrooms with teachers who are not afraid to teach beyond the standardized test scores, only in places where kids are engaged fully in the experiences of learning. There is no wonder that communities are feeling a disconnect in the way the school says it wants to inspire and challenge young people and the way it continually lets those same young people down. As long as we continue to value a number as a way to determine the worth of a person, the values of the school system will never match the values of someone who cares about people.

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Nicci Guagliardo, MBA, PhD is a 25 year public high school English teacher, Colorado native, and mother to three brilliant women. She is addicted to school which helps explain her PhD in philosophy.

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FROM A SCHOLAR PERSPECTIVE

By | *Manuel Espinoza, PhD*

"Dignity ought to be a guiding value in the design and organization of public schools."

Photo By Bryant Jefferson

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I have read closely the summary of community responses to the question: What values (interests) do you see reflected in public education in the area? I take no issue with the responses. I am content to let them stand as given. I do have a few things to say about dignity and our march towards to the prize.

Dignity ought to be a guiding value in the design and organization of public schools. In some classrooms, it is already a guiding light. In public schools, there are "elite" spaces—e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Gifted and Talented—that represent the best of what a school and district have to offer children and adolescents. (They also are indicative of the persistence of the problem of "caste" in our schools. It is one expression of the American way: live and let live, so long as me and mine have a bit more.) Classrooms that treat all children and adolescents as human beings of the highest rank, that understand all people are of noble birth, should also be thought of as "advanced" in a broad humanistic sense. In making claims regarding the presence or absence of the recognition of a person's inherent dignity, the first-person voice is alpha and omega. A person's claim that they are being treated as "less than" is inherently meaningful and merits consideration. That same person's appraisal of the affordances and consequences of a social remedy demands attention. The responses that have been reported carry weight and merit public debate. The issues must be reasoned through and addressed. To my mind, there are no shortcuts or ready-made remedies. Only creative labor, performed with patience and purpose, can resolve these issues.

I have a few thoughts regarding the matter of "pressing on" towards the social prize of integration. The term itself is contentious so I am compelled to do a bit of definitional work. Integration is social cohesion, a global, not just a national, problem. It does not mean the relinquishment of any portion of the human personality. It does imply a permanent willingness to live together peacefully. It almost goes without saying—almost—that peace is not simply the absence of conflict or the repression of opinion. It does mean that we the people are committed, joyfully and unwaveringly, to creating a society with room for all, one in which deference to the supreme value of all is normalized.

How might we get there? How many years might this pilgrimage last? How might we sustain ourselves during this protracted and arduous process? We should take care to bring enough love, we should take care to bring resources for the replenishment of the spirit. If you are a person of faith, bring your sacred texts. If you are of civic faith, purchase a volume containing the collected works of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His words, nurtured and watered in community, are of value to children of God and children of the Enlightenment. Bring poetry: Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others. Bring drama: Arthur Miller, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks and their friends. Bring music: Oscar Peterson, Lola Beltrán, Mozart. Anyone who can make grow in you wings, majestic and billowy, bring them along. Why? For celebration along the way, for nourishment as we travel and tire, to soothe our souls after defeat, to gird our backbone when the work at mid-day has begun. To critique values is our cultural right, to lament the absence of values is our choice, to cultivate a lasting remedy is both burden and freedom.

Manuel Espinoza (Ph.D., U.C.L.A.; Associate Professor, CU Denver) was born in Denver and raised in Five Points and Curtis Park. He is the Director of the Right to Learn Undergraduate Research Collective (R2L) and a Chicano ethnographer of education. Dr. Espinoza and R2L study dignity in education and are developing an argument for education as a fundamental right built on the principles of dignity.

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FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

By | *Jonathan Bateman*

"A Call for Districts to Relinquish Their Power."

Photo By Bryant Jefferson

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They Sin Against Us
A Call for Districts to Relinquish Their Power

When I reflect upon the current state of the district and my experience, I can't help but feel hopeless. I try not to though. All the sacrifices that have been made by my ancestors, their prayers and tears, amount to their descendants feeling just as stuck as they were. Sometimes I wonder why, as a community, we ever expected metro area districts to care or intentionally live by values that foster equity while there are still sins unatoned for that first manifested decades ago. A cleansing and repurposing of districts must take place, requiring them to make room for equity in education. But we must first collectively acknowledge and refute the white supremacy that formed the system of education, to begin with. Then, districts must relinquish their power and reorganize as an entity where decision-making comes from the community. Lastly, districts must commit to act on the values they say they possess.

Values. Who defines them? What are the consequences of not upholding them? As individuals, we all define values differently. But one thing we seem to agree on is that although metro area districts have clearly defined values, they don't guide their actions… and we don't understand why. We keep on throwing equitable solutions into a white supremacist system that disguises itself as fair but by nature can't be.

As a former student of Denver Public Schools, I have seen firsthand the outrage from teachers, parents, community members and students directed toward the district leadership for not upholding their core values: Integrity, Collaboration, Accountability, Equity, and Students First. These values would produce equitable results if it weren't for the skewed system they were manufactured into. Instead, appeasing public demands by making empty-handed promises seems to be sufficient for DPS. In order to maintain control, obstinance in the place of cooperation is standard when negotiating with parents and teachers, wearing them down. Creating malleable metrics for assessing schools allows for experimentation and placing the blame on vulnerable populations while dodging responsibility for failing schools. Systemic protection of whiteness denies marginalized communities the power to find solutions to educational inequities. Yet, DPS is hailed as a national frontrunner in innovative policy that claims to improve student success. If Integrity, Collaboration, Accountability, Equity, and Students First are truly the core values of DPS, the message is being lost in the lived experiences of Denver's children.

By centralizing decision-making power within the community, our lived experiences can change. I agree with the criticism that "the district is making decisions, but they don't really know the community." This is due to an abuse of power, which has also called into question the role of the district: "[f]or many, schools don't simply exist to help students meet educational standards; they also should serve to establish and maintain communal values." In order to accomplish this, the district must not simply ask for community input and consider it a mere suggestion, but it must implement it as a duty and obligation. How can the district maintain values while being praised for its innovation in the form of grants from high profile organizations like Oprah's Angel Network which gave 1 million dollars in 2010 to DSST, or the $55 million given to the Colorado Department of Education for charter school expansion in 2018?

"It has not been lost amongst community members that the vast majority of charter schools and other innovative schooling solutions have been placed in low-income, minority communities…" Do these communities want these charter schools? How can we know? Some voices claiming to represent communities of color, like African-American journalist Roland Martin, are often clandestinely backed by big charter school networks or other organizations that support innovation. One of the most influential charter school networks in DPS, DSST, co-sponsored Mr. Martin's town hall meeting, Is School Choice the Black Choice? on October 11th, 2019 in Denver. The supposed purpose was for the people to have a voice, but the entire conversation appeared to push for a specific charter school agenda, with some clear indicators of DPS' endorsement of this agenda, including through a DPS board member's participation on the panel.

Another way agendas are forced onto people is through policy. Historically, the public school system, which was once overtly built on white supremacy, is now covertly racist and oligarchical. Policies such as redlining, busing and segregation that disenfranchised the lower classes and people of color are still present in different forms. Metro area districts often lack follow-through on their values, appease, wear us down, experiment and blame. They sin against us. There isn't space for equity until districts renounce their source of power (a historically racist and inequitable system), abdicate jurisdiction, and submit as servants to the public.

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A community-centered school district would include parents and students in the yearly budget (both district and school budgets), allow for the public to elect the superintendent instead of the school board, reorganize the structure of how the board is voted in and how they are held accountable by the community, and the district must adopt community school models for all of its schools.

Jonathan Bateman *is a sophomore and former student of DPS who is now home-schooled. Education has always been his top priority and he sees it as his best way to make a positive impact on his community. He currently has aspirations of going to college and studying engineering and anthropology.*

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FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

By | *Art Williams*

"When we build relationships where we live, we discover the complexities of standing with those who are vulnerable and the commitment needed for long-term change."

Photo By Bryant Jefferson

As non-profit, faith based leader whose primary focus has been working closely with developing adolescents, largely in under-resourced communities for the past 20 years, I recognize the voices in this article. It raises many questions for me, as I think about my own work outside of public education. Do my own values matter? Are the values of my community, people and ancestors played out in my everyday life? These are often questions asked by many marginalized people groups who struggle to see their values lived out in our social institutions. Whether in education, politics, churches, corporations, or in my case the nonprofit world, our society's inability to build and sustain a healthy representation of indigenous and local leaders who possess like values continues to be a root issue of the concerns shared by several members of Denver's and Aurora's diverse communities, evident in the article. These are important concerns for nonprofit organizations, as well.

I have been a part of many prayer groups, strategy meetings and community gatherings where many parents, students and community members continue to feel unseen or underrepresented. "Do they even care about us?" is a consistent question that has echoed in my work for the past 20 years. They. Who the heck are they?

As I have come to understand it, they refers to "visitors" or "professionals" who commute in and out of the neighborhood everyday for work.

I have unfortunately experienced the disconnect with leaders who have the ability to punch in and out of the harsh realities that many of their students, clients and communities face. In the book, The Power of Proximity, author Michelle Warren states, "I find it extremely important to live in communities where you are "proximate to the pain of the poor." This makes all the difference in facing and overcoming injustice. When we build relationships where we live, we discover the complexities of standing with those who are vulnerable and the commitment needed for long-term change. Proximity changes our perspective, compels our response, and keeps us committed to the journey of pursuing justice for all." When we fail to produce a culture of indigenous leadership or working professionals who understand the power of proximity, we fail to break cycles of poverty, opportunity and belonging. It's my opinion that when leadership and strategy come solely from the outside and is led by the dominant US culture, it is nearly impossible to prioritize the values of those most marginalized.

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This has also been my personal experience working in a non-profit organization whose culture and strategies have been largely guided by middle to upper class communities.

After 78 years of operation, the global non-profit for which I work continues to struggle with its ability to sustain and develop local and indigenous leaders of color, and create effective strategies which produce healthy fundraising models and practical methodology that best serve low-income communities. Due to these realities, staff turnover is continuous and its effects on marginalized communities are noticeable. Similarly, many of our local and indigenous leaders have left teaching jobs, administrative roles and nonprofit organizations feeling exhausted and frustrated with their failed attempts to produce and sustain working models which place community values over organizational agendas. Our communities are left to deal with inconsistent leadership. This contributes to a lack of trust and hope in seeing community values implemented.

Where is the path to local ownership? And where are the pipelines that flood our school systems, nonprofits, etc. with local leaders and/or working professionals who understand the power of proximity and prioritization of community values? When identified, these leaders understand the urgency of placing community values over organizational opportunity. If left undetected, we risk repeating the same cycles of failed experiments. Round and round we go, Insanity!

So what are potential solutions?

- Equity: the leadership table gets larger creating space for diverse thought, experience, and opportunity.
- Ownership: Indigenous leaders with a clear path to ownership. Positions of real power with the ability to drive mission, vision and purpose.
- Resources: which reach far beyond the needs of the community. This eliminates the emotions of scarcity and provides the space to dream and experiment with the "what could be."
- Leadership Development: Indigenous leadership pipelines that address unique experiences, learning styles, trauma and values.

The four strategies above create the necessary movement towards understanding and thriving. This gives us the best chance to value these amazing communities filled with amazing people who possess unlimited and untapped potential.

Art Williams is an executive leader in the non-profit sector, and his work entails empowering under-served communities. He has a deep passion for the development, sustainability and holistic health of underrepresented kids, leaders, and communities. Art's newest endeavor takes his 20 years of youth development, leadership development, public speaking, and fundraising experience to launch a Leadership Foundation which serves the Denver metro area.

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OUR CHILDREN NEED CHAMPIONS.
WE NEED YOUR VOICE.
JOIN US FOR CHANGE.

BACKGROUND

The Denver Journal of Education and Community is a community education journal focused on topics of education in the greater Denver area. By engaging in community discourse, and connecting this content to scholarship and policy, DJEC hopes to contribute to local education thinking by offering a balanced and well-informed perspective.

THE CHALLENGE

- Important voices of students, family members, and community members are persistently absent or under-represented.
- Opportunities abound for high quality, community-based education thinking and leadership.
- There is high value in building and sustaining a model of community members creating content reflecting their perspectives and experiences.

THE PURPOSE

Content for DJEC is sourced from residents throughout the metro Denver area, including those who are directly and indirectly involved in the school-based education of children. By sharing their experiences, exploring solutions to persistent and emergent challenges, and thinking (dreaming) together about public education, our public sense of community grows while public education improves. To achieve this, residents are invited to host conversations with their neighbors, familiar and unfamiliar, and share these conversations to cultivate journal content.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN:

- To host a conversation, visit **EducationAndCommunity.com/host**
- To participate in a conversation in your community, visit **EducationAndCommunity.com/events**
- To support the journal, or to subscribe to its digital content, you can visit **EducationAndCommunity.com**

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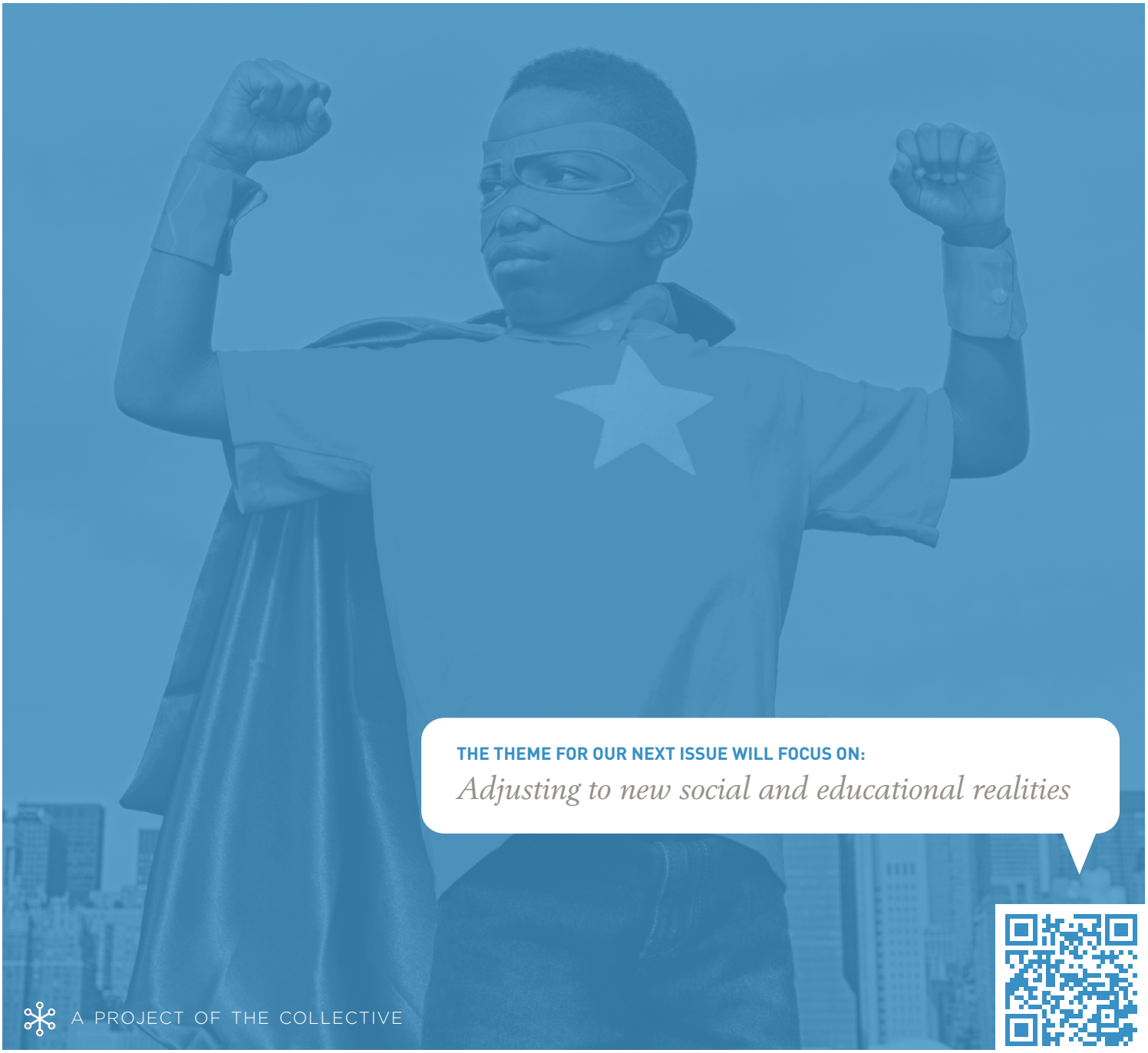

THE THEME FOR OUR NEXT ISSUE WILL FOCUS ON:

Adjusting to new social and educational realities

A PROJECT OF THE COLLECTIVE

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