

▶ METRO MATTERS: A Newsletter On Urban Issues

April-May, 2004

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▶ Director's Column: Ending Social Death in Our Schools by *Hakim Hasan*

The recent political fracas caused by Mayor Bloomberg's [imperial tactics](#) to end the social promotion of third graders in New York City public schools will, undoubtedly, be part of the larger national discussion when the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown decision is celebrated and analyzed in May. Many children of color in New York City public schools are not being adequately educated; or, more precisely, prepared to compete to apply to the best colleges or for jobs that will lift them far and beyond the working and middle-class. The gauntlet of standards and high academic achievement must be thrown down within communities of color in New York City.

According to published reports, Mayor Bloomberg's ideas about social promotion, as a matter of public policy, have been reinforced considerably by laborious reading on the subject. I find this interesting. As a teenager, I recall reading *Death At An Early Age* by Jonathan Kozol. It is a riveting account of his experience as a public school teacher in Roxbury, a poor black neighborhood in Boston. One wonders if Mayor Bloomberg is familiar with this book. Clearly, Mayor Bloomberg's determination to end the social promotion of third graders is not influenced by what Kozol wrote.

Kozol described the serious problems that poor children of color brought to school with them. Some of them were hungry; others

▶ Metropolitan Institute Update

**Tuesday April 16
6-8 PM**

The Silver Rights Movement: Building a New Generation of Stakeholders in America

John Bryant is the founder, chairman and chief executive officer of Operation HOPE, Inc., America's first non-profit social investment banking organization and a leading self-help provider of economic empowerment tools and services for the underserved communities.

Admission is free and open to the public. [Click here for further details.](#)

Urban Dialogues 2004
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were disengaged from the daily grind of poverty. Yet, they weren't lost causes. These children nevertheless demonstrated a zeal for learning when engaged.

Mayor Bloomberg needs to take the next rational step in his quest to be the education mayor. He needs to declare that the lives of children of color matter. They have to be educated and prepared to compete at the highest levels of American life as a matter of public policy-which, of course, at the municipal level would begin the war against "the bigotry of low expectations" often assigned to children of color.

Secondly, parents play a crucial and important role when education experts write and talk about quality education. High-quality education does not occur in a vacuum. It requires zealous parents, no different than those we read about in New York magazine who work overtime to provide toddlers with the cognitive skills they need in order to get into the best private schools and universities. These parents, as well as society, reinforce the value of the lives of those children.

I would strongly suggest to Mayor Bloomberg that he read Orlando Patterson's seminal study *Slavery and Social Death*. He should pay very close attention to Professor Patterson conception of "social death." It is impossible to frame public policy without a grasp of urban and national history. In a chapter entitled "Authority, Alienation, and Social Death," Patterson writes, "Institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power."

In New York City, substantial numbers of children of color are being failed by a public school system that has institutionalized their marginality in American life. As a whole, there is very little value placed on the lives of these children as a matter of public policy. Furthermore, far too many parents within these communities have either given up or succumbed to the erroneous idea that their children should not be prepared to attend the best colleges or compete for positions in American life far beyond the familiar realms of the civil service sector. Literacy and high academic achievement must be politicized and placed on the front cultural burner within communities of color. Otherwise, we will not be able to avert the social death or social irrelevance.

[Hakim Hasan](#) is the Director of the Metropolitan Institute.

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EDUCATION THAT WORKS.

Recent Notable Articles and Studies

Gentrification: Much Ado About Nothing?

The word "gentrification" has become laden with negative connotations: images of the poor and elderly driven from their homes by heartless landlords who want to jack up the rent and move in Muffy, Skip, and their Pomeranian. To this, Professor Lance Freeman (Columbia) and Frank Braconi (Citizens Housing and Planning Council) say: WRONG. Their research indicates that low-income persons in gentrifying neighborhoods are MORE likely to stay in their apartments. An article on Professor Freeman (Lisa Chamberlain, "Exploding the Gentrification Myth: Columbia Prof's Surprising Findings") can be found in [The New York Observer](#). The research article ("Gentrification and Displacement: New York City in the 1990s") appeared in the Winter 2004 issue of [The Journal of the American Planning Association](#) (available by subscription).

Exploiting the Desperate: Street People As Gladiators

Long-term street people live generally dreadful lives. Large percentages of them are mentally ill and addicted to alcohol or drugs. They are at the mercy of the elements (many die every year from cold), are shunned by the rest of society, and spend their lives scraping to survive. Perversely, some individuals have looked upon them and reasoned: Perfect, who better to exploit? The makers of the Bum Fights have taken to paying street people to beat each other up and to do self destructive things (like pull one's teeth out with pliers). A couple years have passed since the first of these videos was released; yet, these videos continue to be sold [online](#) unabashedly (caution: the website is very disturbing). For more information on this story, see the website of the [The National Coalition for the Homeless](#).

Black-Owned Small Businesses Face Discrimination

For a century or more, some advocates for Blacks in America have preached self-help (e.g., see writings by Booker T. Washington, or, more recently, [John Sibley Butler](#)). One thing this approach presupposes is the absence of external barriers to Black self-help. Unfortunately, a recent study shows at least one exists. Researchers found that "black-owned firms...are substantially more likely to be denied credit than other groups and are charged higher interest rates for those loans that are approved than other firms that are otherwise comparable." The ramifications of this are huge: black-owned businesses are going to have a harder time in the start-up years and during economic downturns because they won't be able to acquire credit or will have to pay significantly more interest. See David G. Blanchflower, Phillip B. Levine, and David J. Zimmerman, "Discrimination in the Small Business Credit Market," [The Review of Economics and Statistics](#), November 2003, pp. 930-943 (available by subscription).

New York City: Economically Divided

That there are the very rich and the very poor in New York City is nothing new. What may be new is the swelling percentage of the population that falls in one class or the other. Setting aside the number of individuals who have quit looking, the jobless rate in New York City crept up to 8.4%. Some 900,000 New Yorkers receive food stamps. Meanwhile, the lines for spaces in the City's elite elementary and high schools grow even though tuition has climbed to an average of \$26,000 per child per year. See Michael Powell, "In New York City, Fewer Find They Can Make It," [Washington Post](#), March 14, 2004, p. A1 (article available for purchase).

Parents' Worries About College Access Increase

Public Agenda analysis finds that "parents of high school students are increasingly worried about access to college. African Americans and Hispanics are especially concerned about access. Among African Americans, there is a substantial increase in the number who say college education is a necessity to get ahead in life." You can access the study, *Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003*, at the website of [Public Agenda](#).

HOPE IV Housing Program May Be Ended

The *Washington Post* reports that rather than reform the troubled public housing program, the Bush administration wants to end it. [HOPE IV](#), in short, provides grants for the rehabilitation or replacement of public housing projects. HUD now seems to think that a market approach to the problem is preferable. It holds that offering Section 8 vouchers is a more efficient way to stimulate the creation of low- or no-income housing. See Roger K. Lewis, "Differences Between Public Housing Policies as Wide as an Ocean," [Washington Post](#), February 21, 2004, p. F5 (article available for purchase).

Mass Transit and Smart Growth

[The Greater Washington Board of Trade](#) held a conference this past month on smart growth around Metro (AKA subway) hubs in Washington, DC and surrounding areas in Virginia and Maryland. The conundrum: how to create train stations that can handle a growing number of commuters AND be an attractive, vibrant urban space? All too often, Metro stations are cold, lifeless places, unpleasant at best and outright menacing at worst (thanks to large empty spaces with young men and street people hanging about them and no public authorities). So what's the solution?

Reconceptualizing hubs beyond functionality. Treat the station not merely as a means to an end (e.g., a place to catch a train) but as part of a community. That means building mixed income housing, space for retail and commercial development, and public space sculpted to attract people (instead of just getting them to the train platform).

All this sounds great; unfortunately, the political interests are aligned against this smart growth at Metro stops. Steven Pearlstein of the *Washington Post* writes, "place-making isn't really a top priority for anyone in the process- not the developer, who would rather use every square foot for rentable space; not the developer's leasing agent, who prefers to rent all the stores to national chains [who have deep pockets]; not Metro officials, who tend to be more worried about preserving parking spaces [which generate revenue]; and not local officials, whose primary aim is to maximize tax revenues and minimize political fallout from angry neighbors who want no development at all." See Steven Pearlstein, "Smart Growth is Great, When Done Smartly," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2004, p. E1 (article available for purchase).

"Are Shelters the Answer to Family Homelessness?"

Such is the title of a provocative op-ed in the January copy of *USA Today* magazine. Authors Ralph Da Costa Nunez and Laura M. Caruso despair over the decline in low-cost rental units over the past decade and concurrent rise in the number of homeless children. Yet, with hope they describe the change in the sort of accommodations to be found at shelters. "Fifteen years ago, shelters were stark, temporary, scary places, as families lived in congregate settings, on cots huddled together in an open space. They were gymnasiums [sic], armories, and church basements- none an appropriate place to call home. However, many of today's shelters are different. They have private rooms with cooking facilities; some are apartments with one or two bedrooms, which are safe, clean, and offer a multitude of services." For the rest of this article, see *USA Today* magazine, January 2004, pp. 46-48 (not available online).

Recent Books of Interest

*Joe W. Trotter, Earl Lewis, and Tera W. Hunter, [The African American Urban Experience: Perspectives from the Colonial Period to the Present \(Palgrave\)](#)

*Steven Hahn, [A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration \(Harvard University Press\)](#)

*Alexander Von Hoffman, [House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods \(Oxford University Press\)](#)

*Howard Husock, [America's Trillion Dollar Mistake: The Failure of American Housing Policy \(Ivan R. Dee, Inc.\)](#)

 **Metropolitan College of New York Publications**

Report: [People and Politics in America's Big Cities](#)

Report: [Bridging the Gap: Higher Education and Career-Centered Welfare Reform](#)