Urban Challenges for the Urban Educator Corps

Kenneth Howey

Abstract

The Urban Educator Corps, comprised of urban education school deans and faculty members from thirty-nine public urban research universities, is committed to advancing the quality of urban education, specifically addressing the key issues of teacher quality, student retention and success, and the creation of systemic partnerships. This article outlines the challenges that face our urban communities: the student dropout crisis; the teacher dropout crisis; preparing quality teachers; and the race, ethnicity, and generational gaps that undermine progress.

> *"The idea is simple: By harnessing the collective power of our urban, research universities, we will rebuild America's cities and once again make them places for opportunity, innovation, and vitality."*
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> — Nancy Zimpher, President, Urban Serving Universities

Today, 85 percent of all jobs in the United States are located in urban cores and metropolitan areas. By 2030, eight of every ten Americans will live in these cities (Coalition of Urban Serving Universities 2007). In light of these numbers, the vitality of our urban centers has never been more important to our future—and the opportunity for American urban research universities to shape that future has never been greater. Urban research universities provide the intellectual capital necessary for our nation to continue to be competitive in an innovation-driven global economy. Urban universities are more than education centers or major employers. They have become the economic engines for their regions.

Recognizing this important role, the presidents of thirty-nine public urban research universities from every region of the country united to better leverage the intellectual capital and economic power of urban universities. Called the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), the network is committed to:

- advance the quality of urban education at every level—preschool through postsecondary—in order to ensure academic success and access for *all* individuals;
- revitalize urban neighborhoods and fuel economic development; and
- reduce health disparities and improve community health.

USU member universities (listed in the introduction), address these three goals through research, strategic initiatives, and collaborative action. The USU coalition uses an evidence-based approach to gather and analyze data on issues that matter to cities, such as tracking the effectiveness of teachers in urban schools, interpreting economic data, or addressing problems of health indigenous to urban settings. By working

collectively, the USU Coalition is able to draw from best practices and innovative models for change across its membership and adapt and bring to scale local innovations and shared strategies to provide greater impact nationally.

The Urban Educator Corps

The Urban Educator Corps (UEC) is comprised of urban education school deans and faculty leaders who are committed to achieving the first of USU's three overarching goals, namely advancing the quality of urban education at every level, in order to ensure academic success and access for all individuals. Over the last decade the Corps has engaged in a variety of research and development endeavors to sustain progress toward this most ambitious goal. While the task is daunting, the need for success in this endeavor is imperative. It is the birthright of every child in America to have access to a high-quality education and to have support to succeed.

The UEC has identified three major purposes and an array of related strategies to guide its work. The first purpose is to enhance the quality of *urban* teachers and teaching as the key to advancing students' learning and achievement. The array of strategies that the UEC employs encompasses issues of urban teacher recruitment, preparation, induction and continuing professional development. Specifically, strategies include improving and extending:

- teacher recruitment endeavors, especially for individuals of color;
- programs of initial preparation, especially through programs designed specifically to prepare teachers for urban schools and particularly high-poverty schools;
- complementary programs of novice teacher induction and retention, often implemented in tandem; and
- continuing teacher education endeavors, particularly leadership preparation resulting in differentiated career roles for veteran, second-stage teachers.

The second purpose of the Corps is to improve the retention rates and measures of academic achievement and learning for *all* students in urban schools. Interventions occur at all stages of the preschool to postsecondary educational pipeline to:

- prepare children for school;
- ensure that there is extracurricular and family support to succeed in school;
- strengthen access from one level to the next in P-12 schools, including the transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school;
- improve graduation rates from high school;
- provide financial and counseling support in order to access postsecondary education; and
- improve retention in and graduation from postsecondary programs.

Each UEC member varies in terms of which of the above activities it chooses to pursue and where it can demonstrate exemplary practice. Regardless of the individual institutional focus, however, what distinguishes UEC member efforts are the *partnerships* the universities create with a variety of institutions, organizations, and agencies, and especially with urban P-12 school districts and teachers' unions.

Growing out of these collaborations, the third purpose of the UEC is to improve and extend partnerships that advance the aforementioned teacher education and access and success endeavors. These efforts involve:

- ***Partnerships with specific P-12 schools***, typically referred to as partner or professional development schools. Herein the emphasis might be on clinical preparation for pre-service teachers, school renewal, or a particular curriculum implementation such as a new approach to mathematics instruction;

- ***P-16 partnerships***, which call for strategic actions across multiple schools and even school districts. This might involve preparing school-based leadership teams to address the various types of achievement gaps reflected in different urban schools; and

- ***Community-wide partnerships*** which engage a variety of community organizations and leaders—such as the United Way or community nonprofit organizations—to advance learning for urban youth. An example would be instituting a common approach to preparing mentors for students at-risk academically.

Over time the Urban Educator Corps plans to identify at least one *evidence-based demonstration model* or outstanding example of educational innovation from each of its members. These will be initiatives that hold the potential to go to scale or be adapted in parallel efforts at other urban serving universities. This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* illustrates the wide variety of ways in which urban universities are creatively helping children and youth succeed academically. They are tackling head-on four significant educational challenges our nation faces: student dropouts, teacher dropouts, teacher quality, and the racial and generational gaps. Each of these endangers our nation's ability to provide access and successful learning for all our children.

Challenge 1: The Student Dropout Crisis

Every twenty-six seconds a student drops out of the educational system in the United States. Bob Herbert (2008), an editorial writer for *The New York Times*, lamented this inexcusable situation:

> That's more than a million [students] every year, a sign of big trouble for these largely clueless youngsters in an era in which a college education is crucial to maintaining a middle-class quality of life—and for the country as a whole in a world that is becoming more hotly competitive every day. Ignorance in the United States is not just bliss, it's widespread. A recent survey of teenagers by the education advocacy group Common Core found that a quarter could not identify Hitler, a third did not know that the Bill of Rights guaranteed freedom of speech and religion, and fewer than half knew that the Civil War took place between 1850 and 1900. "We have one of the highest dropout rates in the industrialized world," said Allan Golston, the president of U.S. programs for

the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In a discussion over lunch recently he described the situation as "actually pretty scary, alarming."

The June 5, 2008 edition of *Education Week* substantiated Herbert's portrayal of the alarming numbers of dropouts. A little more than 70% of all students graduate. For males the success rate is lower, closer to two-thirds (68%). The percentage of white students who graduate is somewhat higher (78%), but for students of color the statistics are alarming: only about half will receive a high-school diploma (Native Americans, 51%; Blacks 55%; and Hispanics 58.8%). Overall, of the 4.18 million ninth-graders in public school in the academic year 2004-2005, *1.23 million will not graduate* (and this does not factor in those who never even make it to the ninth grade).

This crisis is most visible in our nation's largest cities where the urban serving universities are located. A 2008 study of graduation rates in the fifty most heavily populated cities, undertaken by Swanson at the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, reported:

> Our analysis finds that graduating from high school in America's largest cities amounts, essentially, to a coin toss. *Only about one-half (52%), of students in the principal school systems of the fifty largest cities complete high school with a diploma.* That rate is well below the national graduation rate of 70%, and even falls short of the average for urban districts across the country (60%). Only six of these fifty principal districts reach or exceed the national average.
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> *In the most extreme cases (Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, and Indianapolis) fewer than 35% of students graduate with a diploma.* Further analysis demonstrates that the extremely low graduation rates for these large school systems contribute disproportionately to the nation's graduation crisis. The principal school districts of *America's 50 largest cities collectively educate 1.7 million public high school students*—one out of every eight in the country. However, these 50 education agencies *account for nearly one-quarter (23%) of the 1.2 million students nationwide who fail to graduate* with a diploma each year.

Challenge 2: The Teacher Dropout Crisis

There is a direct link to the student dropout epidemic in our urban schools with another pressing problem; it is the *teacher dropout* rate. Teachers are not only leaving the profession in increasing numbers, they are doing so earlier in their careers, particularly from those schools that need qualified teachers the most—high-need, highly diverse urban public schools.

This is not a new problem. In 1996, then U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, sounded the alarm, warning educators of the need to hire two million new teachers in the coming decade to offset the Baby Boomer retirees. While 2.25 million

new teachers were indeed prepared and hired between 1996 and 2006, during that decade 2.7 million teachers *left the profession*, and more than 2 million did this prior to their scheduled retirement (Carroll 2007). Thus, there was still a shortage of almost a half million teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) reports that the percentage of teachers leaving the profession increased from 15.7% (2000-2001) to 16.8% (2004-2005), and in urban schools it increased more significantly, from 15.9% to 20.2%, reaching one-fifth of the teacher population.

The turnover is occurring increasingly early in the teaching career and is highest in at-risk schools. Almost half of the teachers in urban schools have been in their school for three years or less and the principal for only four years. High-poverty schools experience considerably higher annual turnover rates (15.2%) than do low-poverty schools (10.5%) (Ingersoll 2001). Similarly, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) found that high-minority schools in Texas experienced higher rates of turnover than did low-minority schools.

The costs of such teacher turnover are substantial in terms of dollars, school efficacy and student learning. The *financial* costs to replace teachers include the recruitment, hiring, placement, orientation, induction, and professional development of the replacement teachers. There are various estimates of these costs, but a conservative figure derived from guidelines employed by the U.S. Department of Labor estimates turnover costs at 30 percent of the departing employee's salary. Recall that in the decade between 1996 and 2006 some 2.7 million teachers left the profession at various stages of their careers. Thus, if one used the fairly conservative estimate of 30 percent of a salary or $20,000, the total costs of replacing these teachers would be an astounding $54 billion. Whatever the rough dollar estimate, this is only part of the cost of teacher turnover.

Teachers who leave the profession impact school effectiveness, disrupting staff cohesion, institutional memory, curriculum continuity across grade levels, and collective accountability. The loss in regard to the operation of the school is largely incalculable, but has direct implications for the remaining teachers as well as students. Finally, there are instructional costs in this constant churn that is evident in urban schools. The continuing influx of new teachers unfamiliar with both the curriculum and the community contributes directly to persistently weak instruction and student learning.

Challenge 3: Quality Teachers

Not only are teachers at urban, high-need, highly diverse schools leaving in large numbers and at greater rates, those teachers who remain are often less qualified than their counterparts at suburban schools. Nationally, students in the schools with the highest minority enrollments have less than a 50 percent chance of getting a mathematics or science teacher with a license and a degree in the field that they teach (Edley 2002). Jepsen and Rivkin (2002), in their study of class-size reduction in California, reported that minority students in high-poverty schools were *six times* more likely not to have a fully qualified teacher than white students in low-poverty schools.

This huge disparity in teacher quality is of immense importance because we know that qualified teachers make a difference. Research during the past decade, involving more than half a million students and three thousand teachers (Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain 2000), has identified the single most important variable in improving student learning: the quality of the teacher in the classroom. Sanders and Rivers (1998), analyzed millions of standardized test scores in Tennessee compiled over a dozen years to examine the effects of teachers on their students. They discovered that children assigned for three years in a row to teachers in the top 20 percent (ranked in terms of their ability to achieve student gain scores in various content areas), placed, on average, in the eighty-third percentile, while those students assigned to teachers in the lowest 20 percent ranking, scored below the thirtieth percentile. There was an astonishing fifty-four point difference between the two groups of students, who three years before had scored alike.

It is clear then that preparing and retaining high-quality *teachers* is a critical aspect of preparing and retaining high-quality *students*. In terms of preparation, Levine's study of our nation's teacher education programs concluded that these programs "are inadequately preparing their graduates to meet the realities of today's standards-based, accountability-driven classrooms, in which the primary measure of success is student achievement" (2007, 11).

Levine offered a nine-point template for measuring teacher education programs. He recommended that "the program's *purpose* is explicit, focusing on the education of teachers; the goals reflect the needs of today's teachers, schools, and children; and the definition of success is tied to student learning in the classrooms of education school graduates" (2007, 11). He advocated that the faculty include both academics and practitioners—ideally combined in the same individuals—who are expert in teaching, up-to-date in their field, intellectually productive, and have their feet planted in both the academy and the schools. Further, he called for research carried out in these programs to be of high quality, driven by practice, and useful to practitioners and/or policymakers.

What Levine did not address is the additional distinctive understandings and abilities it takes for teachers to succeed in challenging *urban* schools. It is not enough for teachers to know the content they teach and to actively engage children in the subject through multiple pathways. Urban teachers also have to integrate particular urban contexts into their teaching and curricula. Prospective urban teachers must learn about the developmental attributes of the students they will instruct and understand the neighborhood and community in which they live.

A diverse urban classroom can and should be a rich environment for learning, especially in regard to how students can learn from each other as well as from the teacher. A deep understanding of the urban contexts enables the teacher to take advantage of this asset. If we are to develop lifelong learners, students need repeated, purposefully structured opportunities to learn how to study with and learn from one another. When the powerful social and cultural dimensions of school are not viewed as assets and leveraged for learning—and they are not in too many instances—students

often find that their race, culture, or social station work against them instead of validating them and their heritage. The extent to which teachers are able to take advantage of diversity and accommodate cultural differences in teaching is critical to their success as teachers. Thus, many UEC teacher education programs are designed to prepare highly qualified teachers to work in schools in urban/multicultural settings with children who come primarily from impoverished families.

Challenge 4: The Race, Ethnicity, and Generational Gaps

In addition to the challenges of retaining students and retaining and developing highly qualified teachers for urban schools, there are two significant disparities within today's urban schools. The first is the racial and ethnic demographic gap between today's teachers and the students in their classrooms. The present and projected teaching force is grossly underrepresented in terms of race and ethnicity relative to the population of students. A recent Education Commission of the States (ECS) review of studies of teacher recruitment and retention reported that "the nation's teacher workforce continues to be predominantly white (86%) and female (79%) in urban public schools" (2005). In contrast, in our nation's one hundred largest public school districts, which enroll almost one-fourth of all public school students, just under 70% are students of color (NCES 2003).

This disparity is long-standing and change, while coming, is occurring slowly. Based on 1999 data from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Zumwalt and Craig (2005, 115) report that between 1989 and 1999 the percentage of white students enrolled at schools and colleges of education declined by only 2 percent. While the numbers of prospective teachers of color is increasing, the overall percentage of the total number of these students in education programs remains low:

> African Americans increased their representation over the decade to 9%, a 40% increase, and Hispanics comprised 4.7% or 80% higher than before. Asian and Pacific Americans and Native Americans comprised 1.7% and 0.7% respectively....Prospective teachers are different from the K-12 student populations in another conspicuous way. Most are English-only speakers, whereas, in the last decade, the number of school children with limited English skills doubled to five million.

There are also differences, *generationally*, in teachers' approaches towards teaching and learning. In this regard, the schools in which newly graduated teachers work are not structured or equipped for teaching and learning in a digital age. The majority of urban schools were built before the advent of the Internet and computers and are ill-equipped to support multimedia learning technology. The influx of the Millennials—the generation born after 1976 and now entering the teaching workforce—are much more attuned to the digital world and its potential for new kinds of teaching and learning that encompass digital materials, global social networking, and interactive communication.

They have learned and continue to learn differently, and they will teach in new and evolving ways. These teachers will not easily accommodate to the "egg carton," self-contained organization found in so many existing K-12 schools, nor should they. Their preparation needs to address both the media-rich nature of their preferred learning style and, in turn, their teaching of equally media-savvy P-12 students.

The UEC Response

The Urban Educator Corps understands that developing and expanding teacher education programs designed specifically to prepare teachers for challenging urban schools is a priority of the first order. Part of this challenge is recruiting more teachers of color with these programs. Extending these preparation programs in a seamless fashion into the critical, formative first years of teaching in the form of complementary induction programs also has to be pursued.

Teacher education is an unfinished business, and stronger partnerships, often community-wide and P-16 in nature, are needed to address the four challenges facing our urban schools. As reflected in the triadic purposes of the Corps outlined earlier, strong, sustainable P-16 *partnerships* are needed, especially those involving urban universities, urban school districts, and teachers' unions.

For many urban youngsters to succeed academically and socially their progress in school must be buttressed in a variety of ways. This often means concerted attention to such factors as preschool interventions which prepare youngsters for entry to school. It encompasses preparing paraprofessionals and a host of teacher aides, tutors, and mentors who provide critical auxiliary assistance after school, on weekends, and during a variety of summer supplementary, remedial, and enrichment activities. It means working with families, caretakers, and family services. As reflected in the three major goals of the Urban Serving Universities it often means as well addressing community development challenges—housing, transportation and safety—as well as a host of healthcare issues.

Thus, in the brief descriptive summaries of access and success endeavors across eleven Urban Educator Corps sites that follow, a potpourri of these diverse and often interrelated interventions are presented. For example, at the University of Cincinnati and the University of Houston the evolution of P-16 urban partnerships involves a broad array of community partners to address access and success for urban youth. The University of Missouri-Kansas City supports innovative urban teacher recruitment and preparation efforts. The University of Alabama at Birmingham focuses on another critical form of preparation and retention central to student access and success: school counselors. The University of Memphis and Florida International University use curricula designed specifically to build on the cultural assets of urban youth. The University of Akron, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Georgia State University intervene at the elementary school level to ensure academic success. In the final section, North Carolina State's highly successful network for providing critical support to minority youth in grades 6-12 is profiled, along with the University of Minnesota's

unique early-college program designed specifically to assist three populations of immigrant students.

These accounts provide a compelling glimpse of the rich array of ways in which the USU and the UEC are assuming leadership in providing access and success for urban youth at all stages of the educational pipeline.

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Author Information

Dr. Howey is Research Professor in the College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services at University of Cincinnati. The author or editor of several books concerned with the education of teachers, he has presented papers in a wide variety of forums nationally and internationally. Professor Howey is currently working with presidents of urban universities to examine how resources within these universities might be better mobilized to assist with reforms in urban elementary and secondary schools.

Kenneth Howey, Ph.D.
College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services
University of Cincinnati
P.O. Box 210002
Cincinnati, Ohio 45221
E-mail: Kenneth.howey@uc.edu
Telephone: 513-556-3322