



## BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL: A COMMUNITY'S GREATEST RESOURCE

*In an attempt to understand and address the social factors that drive health inequities in Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute and the Office of the Provost sponsored the 2nd annual symposium on the Social Determinants of Health in April 2013, and invited local and national leaders to discuss how we can achieve health equity in Baltimore City. Among the many topics discussed was the importance of building human capital.*

Human capital is a community's greatest resource. Right now in Baltimore City, children in disadvantaged neighborhoods miss out on the opportunity to reach their full potential. There is a myth that all children have equal opportunity, but the reality is that some kids never get the opportunity to express their talents or even to find them. Out of 85,000 students in Baltimore City schools, only 6 percent are on the path to college.

Some children grow up in poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods, attend disadvantaged schools, and yet grow up to achieve great success. But these individuals are ones who have beaten the odds. We need to focus not on helping kids beat the odds, but on changing the odds. It is critical to make education an investment priority, so that we can give all children the opportunity to achieve their dreams. "Education is the pathway to equity and equality," explains Dr. Robert Blum, Director of the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute. "Education and health are intimately intertwined."

### **CHANGING THE ODDS: EARLY LEARNING IS KEY**

Every child deserves the best start in life. Evidence shows that attending preschool for more than one year results in a better educational performance at age 15-16. And educational performance at that age is a strong predictor of the type of job you will have, the income you will earn, the kind of neighborhood you will live in, and ultimately, your overall health.

Early, high-quality education helps children onto the path toward achieving their potential and having control over their own life. Children have no control over the conditions into which they were born, but we can give them the tools they need to control their future by advocating for early childhood education.

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*Dr. James Comer, Founder  
of the Comer School Development Program*



## BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL THROUGH EDUCATION

One initiative to help build human capital within Baltimore City Schools is Teach for America, which strives to develop character traits and mindsets in children that lead to success, such as hard work, curiosity, and self-advocacy. It does so by hiring teachers with certain characteristics, like zest, optimism, achievement, grit, social intelligence, critical thinking, and leadership to help children excel in education and in life. These are not teach-and-run educators; Teach for America alumni have gone on to become principals and leaders in education, non-profit, and city government in Baltimore.



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In order to successfully build human capital through education, leadership is needed at every level—teacher leadership, principals who create an environment where teachers can excel, and diverse leadership across the community to help every child realize his or her full potential.

## HAPPY, LOVING HOMES ENCOURAGE LEARNING – BUT WHAT IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE?

To help build human capital, every child needs at least one caring adult who sets high expectations for the child's future and provides the support to meet those expectations. Having a caring adult in a child's life and a supportive home facilitates healthy development, which fosters learning and the development of executive functions—the ability to plan, organize, manage, and focus—which are critical skills in helping children grow up well and succeed. Such environments help kids develop emotional, ethical, intellectual, and cognitive skills that provide a basis for a successful life.

### Schools Can Compensate

For children who lack a healthy home environment, schools can compensate by providing both support and expectations. Two schools in New Haven, Connecticut operate based on the theory that development and learning are inextricably linked, and that if you promote the development of children, learning will follow. These schools focus on promoting conditions that make development and learning possible, and their philosophy is based on understanding how children develop and learn. Students at these schools are exposed to stimulating activities, learning, social skills, creative activities, politics and government, health and nutrition, spiritual and leisure time activities, business and economics.

“We need to expose kids to possibilities beyond what they would see walking to school,” explains Dr. James Comer, founder of the Comer School Development Program. “And you have to create very early that understanding that there is another world, there is another way, and it doesn't become the choice of crack or going to school. You are having an exciting experience in and of itself.”

Because they created a framework that allowed a culture of learning, these two Comer schools tied for third and fourth highest levels of achievement in the city of New Haven. The schools also went from having the worst attendance in the city to having the best, and from having serious behavior problems all the time, to having none.

Dr. Comer notes that policy makers need to understand child development and how it relates to academic

learning and that school should be about preparation for life, not just about improving test scores. No Child Left Behind, Comer notes, is detrimental for children with its focus on test scores.

### **Expanding Students' Frame of Reference – Learning How to Dream**

In Baltimore, the Elijah Cummings Youth Program sends 14 high school students to Israel every year from the Jewish and African American communities in inner city Baltimore. Congressman Cummings explains that through the program, children get a chance to see beyond their neighborhood and learn to have high expectations so that they can know how to dream and imagine a better future. The program has led to a 99 percent college graduation rate for those who participate.

### **Access to Mental Healthcare in Schools**

Baltimore has received private funding to open up several mental health clinics in schools, which are an ideal place for young people to access mental health services because they don't require a parent to take them. Since depression is endemic in many low income communities, addressing mental health needs of young people has the added advantage of helping them focus and achieve better academically.

### **STRONG SCHOOLS AND STRONG COMMUNITIES GO HAND-IN-HAND**

We need to develop high-quality, high-performing schools within our city in order to build human capital. In order to build high quality schools, we need an effective, dedicated workforce. The poorest communities have a workforce unprepared to meet challenging needs. We need to find ways to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. We need to implement competitive salaries at lower performing schools. And we need to make sure our teachers feel supported and our best teachers are rewarded.

Not only are good schools critical for building human capital, they also attract and help develop a strong community of people who want to live there and be part of a vibrant community. A strong community can help create social networks, where neighbors can count on and look after each other.

The whole community must be involved to help create high quality schools. We should concentrate efforts as much on adult education and stabilizing the adult population within our communities as we do on schools. We need to focus on workforce development, adult education, and drug treatment programs in order to get the volume of adults necessary to provide guidance to the next generation. And we should focus on creating mentoring youth relationships to guide our children toward a better future.

We also need to figure out ways to get positive role models who come from the community to stay. If our most successful outcomes leave the city, there are no role models



*We need to change the odds, not beat the odds.*

*Dr. Tony Iton, Senior Vice President of Healthy Communities, The California Endowment*

for the next generation. To attract positive role models to the community and motivate them to stay, we need to create employment opportunities and good housing conditions.

Fundamentally, we build human capital through human connections. It can be done at home, through extended families, in the community and in school. The late developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner said it best when he said: "Every child needs at least one adult who is really crazy about him." Support and expectations go hand-in-hand. We know what children need to flourish. The mystery is why we do not make it available to all children.

*We will only be successful if we work together—if The Johns Hopkins University works together with city government, business and philanthropy, the community-based organizations and our neighbors—that is the only chance we will have of being successful.*

*Dr. Robert Blum*

