



Community Action for School Reform. Howell S. Baum. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. 298 pp. ISBN 0791457605

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Howell S. Baum's book, *Community Action for School Reform*, describes how the need for community involvement in southeast Baltimore's educational field led to the creation and implementation of the Southeast Education Task Force (SETF). Over the course of nine years, this task force "developed and [implemented] a community plan on education, helped an overcrowded school get an addition, influenced the Empowerment Zone's education initiative, aided an elementary school in becoming a full service community school, lobbied successfully for a new K-8 school, and much else" (p. ix). In this book, Baum recounts the process through which the SETF reached these goals as well as the lessons learned along the way.

Baum begins by defining three types of school reform. The first is the "Technical Approach" (p. 7), which is an attempt to reform curriculum and pedagogy by introducing new knowledge into schools. Typically, this type of reform occurs when schools implement new programs that have been developed elsewhere. It is believed that these programs can be replicated at any school. The second type of reform is "Institutional" (p. 8), which examines the structure of school systems. In this approach, reform is attempted from a "bureaucratic" viewpoint in which education is valued in regards to "specific 'production goals' " in the form of test scores. The third is the "Community Approach" (p. 9), wherein there is an emphasis on connecting schools and communities to tie families and schools together in the children's learning. This, clearly, is the approach Baum advocates, but sadly, does not follow in his own work with the SETF.

One of the book's most prominent strengths is the way in which it teaches other activists how to form their own community group. In fact, it provides step-by-step instructions into the process from beginning to end. First, it describes the specific objectives adopted by the SETF, which is to "help students directly, strengthen the families' capacity to raise children and prepare them for school, strengthen the communities capacity to act on education, and to develop the community as an asset"



(pp. 243–246). Second, it carefully illustrates how the SETF was able to achieve these goals. Baum believes these goals are easily attainable, provided that the group has a burning desire to participate, to take action, and to help form partnerships between schools, parents, community groups, and churches.

Another strength of the book is Baum’s narratives regarding the trials and tribulations faced by the SETF. He recounts how, in spite of an inordinate amount of effort on the part of its members, the SETF was unable to generate a great deal of excitement among the parents. The SETF also struggled against the natural limitations of time and energy, the lack of which became an obstacle to reaching their goals. In fact, many of the SETF members had committed to work on other projects and therefore found themselves spread far too thin to be effective. Other challenges included a tendency by members to move into action without fully developed and valid research and the development of various personal conflicts between school administrators, parents, and community activists. The lesson gleaned is that interpersonal relationships and politics go hand-in-hand with community action.

Unfortunately, there are three major failings in Baum’s study. First, in spite of the fact that Baum puts a great deal of analysis into his own perceptions of the group’s challenges, there are many more significant shortcomings that go unobserved and, therefore, undermine the overall conclusions reached in the book. For example, the SETF used quantitative research exclusively to determine a need for reform. Consequently, there was a complete absence of qualitative research or ethnographic data gathered from the southeast Baltimore community. This conspicuous absence shows a clear lack of regard and respect for the opinions and feelings of the very community the SETF was supposedly trying to help.

The second failing in this study concerns the ethnic makeup of the SETF. Specifically, Baum’s group consisted of mostly white, college-educated professionals with no representatives from the community that they were striving to reform. One of the unfortunate results of this is that the SETF adopted a deficit perspective of the southeast Baltimore students. This, in turn, led to the conclusion posited by Baum that “problems in children’s education were attributable not so much to shortcomings in curriculum or teaching as to great or special needs of children from low-income communities and troubled families” (p. 157).

The third, and most bothersome, deficiency of this book is its failure to look beyond test scores as a way of assessing “successful learning.” In all of the SETF’s goals and accomplishments, the emphasis was always on achievement over equity--product over process. Formalized testing was the *only* barometer used to show success in



educational reform. Thus, it is inconclusive as to whether the small improvements in formalized testing were directly related to the SETF's efforts and if the SETF created any real change for the community and schools.

What we are left with is a "how-to" book designed by and intended to assist middle-class white activists to initiate community action for a white ideal of school reform. The inherent flaw of the SETF blueprint is that it leads the wrong community members to reform the wrong problems. The SETF evolved to fix a community and its school-aged learners that were, in fact, not broken. And, in doing so, they ignored a system and structure of which they, themselves, were a part.

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