

# ***From Suspensions to Sing Sing***

*A Study of Discipline, Education and Criminalization in Buffalo, New York*

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## Executive Summary

Across the United States, urban education is in a state of crisis, and students are being funneled into the justice system whether they know it or not. Although this case study was conducted in Buffalo, New York, it sets out to determine how disciplinary policies affect high school graduation rates, which in turn, end up affecting community disenfranchisement and incarceration. Background research was conducted to provide a national context for the case study. Newspapers, scholarly journals, books and magazines contributed to the discourse. The primary research came from time spent in Buffalo, touring high schools and the Juvenile Detention Center. Teachers, counselors and community activists were interviewed, as well as experts in the field of educational policy.

In the past thirty years, America has seen a trend towards increased incarceration, and a broad disinvestment in public education. The prison population has grown exponentially and the graduation rates among high school students have declined considerably. Concurrently, America has developed a prison industrial complex, and fallen behind our peers abroad when it comes to educating our citizens. These issues intersect with the criminalization of students through disciplinary policies in schools. Schools have seen a significant rise in policing and an increasing reliance on suspension and expulsion as means to discipline students. As a result, many students are pushed out of schools, and often feel less safe despite the increased police presence.

There are alternatives to these detrimental disciplinary policies being carried out in cities across America. This study explores restorative justice in Denver and

Positive Behavioral Support in Los Angeles specifically. Each of these policies has been proven successful at resolving conflicts and mediating problems among students without removing them from the school community. In both cases, out of school suspensions were decreased substantially.

Buffalo, New York has undergone significant changes in the last thirty years. It has seen a large portion of its population flee to the suburbs or other parts of the country. Shifts in the economy and poor foresight by city officials have seen Buffalo become the third poorest city in the United States. The Buffalo Public School district, which serves a majority African American student population, is forced to confront the realities of educating adolescents in a city plagued by poverty. An overreliance on suspensions and mismanagement by district officials have contributed to average graduation rates in the city falling to 47 percent.

In order to reverse the damage done by outdated disciplinary policies and disinvestment in Buffalo Public Schools, several approaches must be taken. First, improvements to schools and community redevelopment must happen simultaneously. If communities are not strengthened schools cannot succeed, and vice versa. Second, school board officials and Buffalo Teacher Federation officials need to sit down at the negotiation table and hammer out a deal. Buffalo Public Schools cannot afford to lose out on any more funding due to infighting. Third, Buffalo needs to incorporate mental health counseling for its students, many of who struggle on a daily basis with the complications of extreme poverty. Finally, Buffalo schools need to find good educators and leaders from the community, and get

parents involved again in their children's educations. If Buffalo makes a concentrated effort to make these recommendations a reality, its schools and communities will begin to turn around.

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	2
<b>Introduction</b> .....	7
<b>Methods</b> .....	9
<b>The State of Public Education in America</b> .....	10
<i>Second-Rate Schools</i> .....	10
<i>America: Land of the Incarcerated</i> .....	12
<i>Progressive Policy in Action</i> .....	18
<b>Case Study: Buffalo, New York</b> .....	21
<i>A History</i> .....	21
<i>Buffalo Public Schools</i> .....	25
<i>Criminalizing Students through School Disciplinary Policies</i> .....	30
<i>Troubled Neighborhoods</i> .....	38
<b>Where do We Go from Here?</b> .....	42
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	48
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	49



## Introduction

There was a time when America was truly considered to be the land of opportunity. Before it became a tired cliché thrown around by politicians and pundits, this ideal drew pilgrims from around the world to the harbors of New York and San Francisco. America was given the world's poor huddled masses, and in turn, offered them the promise of a new life. Yet the opportunities that once abounded in this great nation are vanishing. The world-class public education system that fostered generations of innovators and leaders is no more. American public education is largely in a state of crisis. Nationally, graduation rates have fallen below 70 percent<sup>1</sup> (and significantly lower in many of America's largest cities).<sup>2</sup> Of those that graduate as many as 75 percent aren't prepared for college courses.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as a nation we have fallen behind our competitors abroad. In a recent study, American students ranked no higher than 15<sup>th</sup> worldwide in reading, math or science.<sup>4</sup>

This problem isn't as simple as having a stupid (or more accurately; uneducated) populace. Successful schools create engaged, productive citizens. Failing schools contribute to the devastation of our communities. Unfortunately, in the last forty years, public policy approaches meant to improve failing schools have instead destructively targeted students. The use of suspensions has increased significantly since the 1970s<sup>5</sup>, which represents a trend towards rigid punishments

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<sup>1</sup> "The Failure of American Schools - Magazine - The Atlantic."

<sup>2</sup> Dillon, "Large Urban-Suburban Gap Seen in Graduation Rates."

<sup>3</sup> "The Failure of American Schools - Magazine - The Atlantic."

<sup>4</sup> "Study Confirms U.S. Falling Behind In Education."

<sup>5</sup> "Suspended Education | Southern Poverty Law Center."

that don't always fit the crime. If our public schools continue to treat America's children like criminals, that is exactly what they will get. I am interested in studying how disciplinary policies criminalize students in the Buffalo Public School District and how these policies, which often push students out of an educational track and onto the streets (or into the criminal justice system), end up affecting communities.

This project initially came out of a discussion with a close family friend who is pursuing a candidacy for the mayor of Buffalo in 2013. When I asked him about the most pressing issue facing the city, he mentioned the dropout crisis among public high school students, which is especially pronounced among African Americans. I've spent a significant amount of time working with elementary and middle school students in the Buffalo Public Schools, so after a short period of contemplation, I decided to research what exactly was causing these falling graduation rates, and how the city's neighborhoods were affected by years of failing schools.

With my research, I hope to influence decision makers (specifically candidates in the 2013 Buffalo mayoral election) to consider not only modifying the policies that have served to alienate so many students that attend public schools but also to consider how our schools can help to create safe, enfranchised communities. Although I will contextualize my research in the broader frame of American education, I will be using a case study of my hometown, Buffalo, New York. Through my examination of the issue of criminalization, I hope to identify strategies that can curb this trend, specifically policy approaches addressing systematic change that can be implemented on a local, state and federal level.

## Methods

In order to provide context for my primary research, I spent a significant amount of time investigating the trends in public education and incarceration in America over the last forty years. Although I had studied both issues in some depth during the course of my Urban and Environmental Policy curriculum, I also consulted books, journals and reports published by non-profit organizations to fill in some gaps and provide statistical evidence. In order to answer some crucial policy questions I interviewed Steve Zimmer, who sits on the board of the Los Angeles Unified School Board and Nancy Franklin, the disciplinary policy czar for LAUSD. Thalia Gonzalez, a former attorney and current professor at Occidental College, was a valuable resource for me as well, due to her extensive knowledge of and experience with school disciplinary reform.

But in order to do a comprehensive study on Buffalo's public schools and communities it was necessary to spend time back in my hometown. First, I decided to interview faculty that are in Buffalo's schools interacting with students on a daily basis. I visited East High School, a persistently low achieving school in the Humbolt Park neighborhood of Buffalo's East Side, and interviewed guidance counselor Kelly Garvey. Later, I interviewed Jeff Walter, a longtime high school teacher at both Burgard Vocational and Bennet High School. While in Buffalo, I also visited the Erie County Juvenile Detention Center (which is coincidentally around the block from East High School) and interviewed David Rust, the Commissioner of Youth Services for Erie County. Finally, to get the perspective of a community member, I

interviewed Lenny Lane, activist and founder of Fathers Armed Together to Help, Educate, Restore and Save (or F.A.T.H.E.R.S).

## **The State of Public Education in America**

### *Second-Rate Schools*

The disinvestment in our public education system didn't happen all at once. It was set in motion years ago, and we are finally witnessing its effects. Disinvestment in public education has happened simultaneously with a disinvestment in America's cities on the whole. Although some consider Barack Obama to be the first urban oriented president in decades, reversing the effects of years of policies that have led to urban decay is a gargantuan task. Policies contributing to sprawl on every level have had a direct effect on urban education in America. The flight of affluent white residents from inner cities, combined with the federal government's subsidization of suburbanization decimated the tax base of school districts in cities across the country. In the past decade, a federal education policy that favored a free market approach with the expansion of charter schools and vouchers dealt another blow to public education.<sup>6</sup> Yet the disinvestment in America's public schools goes even further.

Across the country, the symptoms of disinvestment are acutely evident. Budgets for public education, especially in the wake of our debilitating recession, have taken a hit. In Wisconsin for instance, a four-year period in the 1990s saw a 35 percent increase in class sizes, a 42 percent reduction in textbook purchases and 54

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<sup>6</sup> Renzulli and Evans, "School Choice, Charter Schools, and White Flight."

percent of their programs for at risk and gifted students eliminated.<sup>7</sup> California, a state that once had some of the best public schools in America, has fallen to 46<sup>th</sup> in spending per pupil, with the largest average class size in the country.<sup>8</sup> Although these are just two examples, they reflect a trend of states tightening their budgets at the expense of public education. Many decry the practice of increasing funding to underperforming schools as “throwing money at the problem”. But while it may be true that money doesn’t always equate to success, a lack of money is definitely an impediment to successful education. Money cannot necessarily buy passionate teachers and creative lesson plans but smaller class sizes, better textbooks and special programs in schools are key to making sure that students are given opportunities to thrive.

Even though students in public schools around the country are seeing cutbacks, the problems of disinvestment are magnified in the largest school districts, most of which happen to be in urban areas. These school districts are increasingly serving people of color, many of who live at or below the poverty line. The landmark integration of America’s schools was meant to address this issue. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools integrated at a fairly steady rate, until the mid 1980s. But after 1986, school districts actually began to show trends towards *resegregation*.<sup>9</sup> Some of this is due to the aforementioned flight of white citizens from America’s cities. Even the white students that remain are

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<sup>7</sup> “A Disinvestment to Public Schools | 1997-1998 | At the Capitol News Archives | At the Capitol | News & Publications | Wisconsin Education Association Council.”

<sup>8</sup> California Budget Project, “A Decade of Disinvestment: California Education Spending Nears the Bottom.”

<sup>9</sup> Frankenberg and Lee, *Race in American Public Schools*.

becoming increasingly isolated and concentrated at fewer schools. In Cleveland for example, the exposure of white students to African American students declined by 29.2 percent from 1986-2000, despite a growing number of African American students in the district.<sup>10</sup>

Overwhelmingly, this trend is happening in inner city schools, where Latino and African American students make up a majority of the population. Resegregation, which is happening in large and small cities across the country, cannot be ignored as a contributing factor to the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Although some argue that integration alone does not lead to equity, data shows that central city school districts that serve students of color graduate students at a rate of 57.5 percent, while in their suburban counterparts, 72.7 percent of the students earn diplomas<sup>11</sup>. Money is also a major contributing factor, but it is clear from this data that students of color attending inner city schools are at a fundamental disadvantage to white students that attend suburban schools.

### *America: Land of the Incarcerated*

Since the Reagan Administration<sup>11</sup>, when America's war on crime was declared, our national priorities have changed significantly. In order to fight crime, it was decided that more Americans needed to be locked up. This strategy revolved around the central premise that if people are in jail they are not committing crimes. Between 1980 (the year Ronald Reagan took office) and today, the number of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Orfield, "Losing Our Future."

Americans behind bars rose from 300,000 to 2.3 million.<sup>12</sup> Often, this rise has not even been accompanied by an increase in crime. California is a perfect example. The prisoner population grew by 500 percent between 1982 and 2000 despite the fact that crime peaked in 1980 and has been declining (albeit unevenly) since.<sup>13</sup> The rise in incarcerations also has an incontrovertible racial component. Although only accounting for 30 percent of the population, people of color make up 60 percent of the prisoners in America.<sup>14</sup> While Hispanics are affected disproportionately as well, African Americans are locked up at the highest rates. To put it in alarming context, America incarcerates a higher percentage of its black population than South Africa during apartheid, and there are more African Americans in prison, on parole or on probation than were enslaved 1850.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the roughly \$35 billion spent on prisons each year by the government, incarceration has become an increasingly profitable proposition.<sup>16</sup> As more and more Americans are put behind bars, educating our citizens has taken a backseat to prosecuting them. Jonathan Kozol, educator and activist, writes of the Reagan years,

“Liberal critics of the Reagan era sometimes note that social policy in the United States, to the extent that it concerns black children and poor children, has been turned back several decades. But this assertion, which is accurate as a description of some setbacks in the areas of housing, health and welfare, is

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<sup>12</sup> Simmons, “Buying into Prisons, and Selling Kids Short,”

<sup>13</sup> Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. 7.

<sup>14</sup> “The Top 10 Most Startling Facts About People of Color and Criminal Justice in the United States.”

<sup>15</sup> Alexander and West, *The New Jim Crow*. 6,7.

<sup>16</sup> Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex.”

not adequate to speak about the present day reality in public education. In public schooling, social policy has been turned back almost one hundred.”<sup>17</sup>

While this contention might at first seem hyperbolic, upon an examination of the current stark realities of the public school system in America it seems that Kozol is not necessarily mistaken.

A telling statistic, which indicates that education policy has largely followed the broader trend in America towards criminalization, is as follows; in 2004 the federal government spent \$60 million on hiring school police forces and \$19.5 million on school safety equipment such as metal detectors.<sup>18</sup> Disturbingly, school policing has grown even more since 2004, and the industry continues to prosper. It is the fastest growing division of law enforcement and the school security market has prospered into a multi-billion dollar industry. Ironically, this is happening in the face of budget cuts and teacher layoffs, which begs the question: how many students look back when they are in college and think about a school police officer that inspired and encouraged them? Students now, especially those that attend inner city schools, face unprecedented levels of surveillance and are punished at rates far exceeding any time in recent history.

The compulsion towards school policing has not gone unnoticed by students. Psychologists have long studied expectations in adolescents and found that they have a significant effect on development. A student, in more instances than not, will live up to expectations, be they positive or negative. One such study (the results of

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<sup>17</sup> Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> “School to Prison Pipeline: Fact Sheet | New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) - American Civil Liberties Union of New York State.”

which were dubbed “the Pygmalion effect”) was conducted in 1968 by Robert Rosenthal. Rosenthal told elementary school teachers the names of twenty percent of their students that had been identified as showing “unusual potential for intellectual growth”. Although these students had actually been picked at random, at the end of the study they performed significantly higher than their classmates.<sup>19</sup> In this now famous case positive expectations created positive outcomes, but the inverse is true as well.

With this in mind, it is important to look at criminalization in public schools as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the state of Texas for example, reading scores on standardized tests for fourth graders are used to project how many prison beds will be needed ten years down the line.<sup>20</sup> If a student as young as nine is seen as a future prison statistic, how can Texas’ (and in a broader sense, America’s) public education system possibly expect them to end up becoming anything else? Although education costs in Texas are lower than in many other states, it is telling that they also have, at roughly 172,000, the most prisoners of any state in the union.<sup>21</sup> A recent study also showed that more than half of Texas students have been suspended or expelled between 7<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, if you treat your student population like criminals, they will internalize it.

Unfortunately, Texas’ algorithm for calculating future prisoners does not represent an isolated problem. In New Orleans, an alternative school for students

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<sup>19</sup> “The Pygmalion Effect.”

<sup>20</sup> “A \$5 Children’s Book Vs. a \$47,000 Jail Cell -- Choose One - Forbes.”

<sup>21</sup> “1 in 100 U.S. Adults Behind Bars, New Study Says - New York Times.”

<sup>22</sup> “High Discipline Rates Fail To Improve Student Performance, Report Questions School Policies.”

with offenses as inane as being late to homeroom or skipping class was located in the bottom floor of a prison. One student at the school explained that, “security arrangements at the school forced him to confront a negative image of himself, which he rejected, but most students responded to the aggressive treatment in kind and started acting more ‘crazy’”.<sup>23</sup> The worst part of the New Orleans example is that the students didn’t even need to be pulled out of school in the first place. Students were suspended and then sent to the prison school for skipping class or being late to homeroom.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most extensive problems that leads to the criminalization of students is the preference for administrators to dole out punishments that do not fit the crime, especially in schools with zero tolerance policies for certain offenses. Suspensions are given out much more than necessary and often end up setting students behind considerably with their schoolwork. Forcing a student to attend alternative schools for innocuous transgressions sets them back even more. Changing schools is extremely difficult on a young student, and when the new school is in a prison, they barely stand a chance.

School suspensions have the same racial implications as incarceration for adults. Criminalization in public schools happens disproportionately in inner city schools located in communities of color. In California, former Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction said of discriminatory policies in schools, “It’s amazing that we have had so little revolt among students of color. But in spite of all

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<sup>23</sup>Simmons, “Buying into Prisons, and Selling Kids Short.”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the inequality, the daily stresses of living with the racism of the schools, the young people still have this abiding hope that things will get better.”<sup>25</sup> In the face of statistical evidence, this hope is nothing short of miraculous. Although African American students represent only about 16 percent of the youth population of the United States, they account for 34 percent of suspensions and subsequently, 45 percent of juvenile arrests.<sup>26</sup> A student that is suspended in their academic career is twice as likely to end up incarcerated. Not only are African Americans unfairly targeted for punishment in school, but this punishment also marks them as potential inmates later in life. Taking into account that suspensions also make a student less likely to graduate from high school, and you have a disciplinary policy that serves to push students (primarily African Americans) out of schools, and into prisons.

On a federal level, the Obama administration is the first to recognize criminalization in public schools, and that the “school to prison pipeline” is a major issue. Although they haven’t really set forth a concrete plan for stopping the “pipeline” Arne Duncan and Eric Holder have at least developed the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, which pledges to work with non profit and philanthropic organizations to find solutions and promote those that already exist.<sup>27</sup> The initiative has four parts:

- building consensus for action among federal, state and local education and justice stakeholders;
- collaborating on research and data collection needed to shape policy, such as evaluations of alternative disciplinary policies and interventions;

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon, Piana, and Keleher, “Facing the Consequences.”

<sup>26</sup> NAACP Legal Defense Fund, “Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline.”

<sup>27</sup> “Duncan And Holder Announce Federal Initiative To Curb School-To-Prison Pipeline.”

- developing guidance to ensure school discipline policies and practices are in line with the federal civil rights laws;
- and promoting awareness and knowledge about evidence-based and promising policies and practices.<sup>28</sup>

Although the initiative doesn't include a concrete plan for stemming the tide of criminalization, having the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education recognize that it's an issue is certainly a step in the right direction. Twenty-two years after America embarked on its "war on crime", Obama's cognizance of the school to prison pipeline may finally bring it to a halt.

### *Progressive Policy in Action*

The use of suspensions and expulsions in America's schools to punish students has been shown to be both ineffective and racist. But students need boundaries, and teachers must have some means to enforce them. Fortunately, there are some progressive alternatives to traditional disciplinary tools that are having success, even in fairly large districts. One such alternative is restorative justice. Restorative justice is a philosophy first implemented in Australia. It intends to hold students responsible to fix the harm that they have inflicted on the school community with their actions. Rather than displacing them from their peers, it serves to reintegrate them into the student population. Not only are they still able to attend classes, but the school community is actually strengthened because situations end in resolution instead of escalation outside the walls of the school. In practice, restorative justice in schools incorporates a model in which a trained mediator facilitates a discussion between the victim and the offender. Other models include the student's families or

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<sup>28</sup> "New Initiative Targets 'School-to-Prison' Pipeline - Politics K-12 - Education Week."

even a panel of their peers. Thalia Gonzalez says that an effective model must focus on five key areas,

“First, gaining commitment from the school community. This process requires establishing the reasons for implementation, as well as buy-in from key members of the school community. Second, developing a clear institutional vision with short, medium and long-term goals. Third, establishing responsive and effective practice. Fourth, developing policies that align with restorative practice to transition into a whole school approach, rather than a program based model. Fifth, investing in an ongoing system of growth and development for all members of the school community.”<sup>29</sup>

Out of any school district in the country, Denver’s has had the most success with restorative justice. The most comprehensive program was put into place at North High School, which had some of the highest numbers of suspensions, tickets and arrests in the entire district (especially among Latino and African American students). During its pilot phase, the most at risk students were referred to the Restorative Justice Program rather than traditional suspension when they got into trouble. Soon a fulltime restorative coordinator was placed at North High School (along with the other pilot schools). The program at North High focused on establishing relationships between the affected parties (parents and students) and teachers, school administrators and restorative justice coordinators through dialogue, preventative classroom circles, conferences and mediations. In four years since the program was instated, suspensions were reduced by 34percent and

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<sup>29</sup>Gonzalez, “Keeping Kids in School: Restorative Justice, Punitive Discipline and the School to Prison Pipeline.”



with a new principal, and a new disciplinary policy structured around the district's new Positive Behavioral Support model, suspensions fell from 696 to one. During this time, the school also enlisted eighty parent volunteers to curb violence and absenteeism. Overall, the changes implemented at Garfield were enormously successful and the surrounding neighborhood became safer as a result. LAUSD policy expert Nancy Franklin describes the scale of improvement, "This is a school in which kids were being jumped into gangs in the bathrooms or at the school gate." But as a result of the new policies and the community taking ownership of the school, "That just doesn't happen anymore."

## **Case Study: Buffalo, New York**

### *A History*

In order to understand the current state of Buffalo, it is necessary to unravel its past. If a historian were looking for a city that epitomizes the plight of American cities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they would have to look no further than the city of Buffalo. Situated on Lake Erie, sharing a border with Canada, Buffalo is part of the famed Rust Belt. Along with cities like Cleveland, Youngstown, Allentown and Pittsburg, Buffalo was built on industry. Because of its location and its proximity to the eastern seaboard, Buffalo had one of the most bustling ports in the world during the early 1900s. Due to its state of the art grain elevators (which still stand today, watching over the lake like giant steel sentinels), Buffalo's port handled two

million bushels daily.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the city became a leading manufacturing center for cereal, flour and beer. Breweries and mills sprang up everywhere. Soon lumber and iron ore began to flow into Buffalo's port and gave rise to other prominent industries in the city. Steel would shortly become a major economic vehicle for the city. The behemoth Bethlehem steel mill that opened on the border of South Buffalo and Lackawanna employed thousands of workers. It also marked Buffalo as a major player in America's burgeoning auto (and subsequently airplane) industry. With industry came growth, and Buffalo flourished.

But as the 1960s and 1970s came about, and foreign industry began to undercut American businesses, Buffalo was hit hard. From 1970 to the end of the decade, Buffalo's population fell from 462,768 to 357,000.<sup>33</sup> Some moved to warmer climates, others fled to the rapidly expanding suburbs. But as the city crawled towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the loss of industry was only partially responsible for Buffalo's faults. Mismanagement by decision makers, corruption and a general lack of foresight by political leaders had disastrous consequences. Two of the most blatant examples were missed opportunities for urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s.

When the State University of New York at Buffalo was discussing plans of expansion in the late 1960s, most city residents thought it was only natural to build the new campus downtown on Buffalo's waterfront. UB's original campus was located in North Buffalo and many (including the Saul Alinsky organized civil rights

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<sup>32</sup> Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

group BUILD) hoped that another campus within the city limits could have major implications for urban renewal. Yet the new campus was built in suburban Amherst where land was cheap (and some university trustees owned property). Later, a similar decision was made when the Buffalo Bills decided to build a new stadium. In the early 1970s, tax incentives and cheap land enticed Bill's owner Ralph Wilson to replace War Memorial Stadium (or "The Rock Pile"), which was located on Buffalo's East Side with a brand new stadium in Orchard Park. While these decisions (among others) ended up costing the city millions of dollars in revenue, they represented a broader disinvestment in the city.

The story of Buffalo's rise and fall sets the scene for the city's current trials and tribulations. Now, Buffalo is a city of 261,310 people in an infrastructure built for half a million. Of these residents, 50.4 percent are white, 38.6 percent are African American and 10.5 percent are Latino.<sup>34</sup> Although Buffalo has lost so much of its industry, unemployment in the metropolitan area (which includes Niagara Falls and a few other small cities and towns) sits squarely below the national average, at 7.5 percent.<sup>35</sup> Yet still, 28.7 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, making Buffalo the third (behind Detroit and Cleveland) poorest large city in America.<sup>36</sup> When affluent whites fled the city and moved out to the suburbs, most of the residents that were left were those that did not have the means to flee. As a result, the city has largely been unable to support itself financially. Last year Buffalo

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<sup>34</sup> "Buffalo (city) QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau."

<sup>35</sup> New York Department of Labor, "Employed, Unemployed and Rate of Unemployment by Place of Residence for New York State and Major Labor Areas, May 2011."

<sup>36</sup> "Milwaukee Now Fourth Poorest City in Nation - JSOnline."

operated under a \$24 million budget gap<sup>37</sup> but in the past, projected deficits of \$110 million have even forced a state appointed control board to step in<sup>38</sup>.

The obsession with intra-urban highways (which coincided with massive highway building projects by HUD) also had a crippling effect on some of Buffalo's neighborhoods. Originally an Italian neighborhood that housed Buffalo's first city hall, the Lower West Side gradually became a primarily Latino community in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Attracted by cheap housing and a cultural void, a small but significant contingent of Puerto Ricans moved to the neighborhood from New York City. In the late 1960s, a plan to build a West Side Arterial to downtown was circulated, with support from the New York State Department of Transportation.<sup>39</sup> As often happens with these things, different proposals were kicked around for almost ten years before the state ultimately abandoned the project. Unfortunately, while the proposal was in discussion, thousands of panicked residents that didn't want a thruway running through their neighborhood fled. By the time the proposal was ultimately defeated, the neighborhood was left decayed and abandoned as its new Puerto Rican residents tried to pick up the pieces.

Buffalo's East Side fell victim to a similar fate. Once populated by a plethora of European immigrants, the East Side had become home to the majority of Buffalo's middle class black residents, who took great pride in their turn of the century homes and tree lined neighborhoods. In the late 1950s, it was decided that the Humbolt and Kensington Expressways would be built, and would run right through some of

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, "Fiscal Year 2010-2011 Budget Overview."

<sup>38</sup> "Buffalo Mayor Proposes Cuts In Police and Fire Dept. Jobs - New York Times."

<sup>39</sup> Goldman, *City on the Lake*.





number is even lower for African American students, who in New York state have the lowest graduation rate of anywhere in the country at 35.1 percent.<sup>43</sup>

While Buffalo public students can technically choose what school they would like to attend, they must take a test before entering elementary school, and then again before high school. There is a separate test for the most selective high schools: City Honors School, Hutchinson Central Technical High School and Leonardo Da Vinci High School. Similarly, at The Buffalo Academy of Visual and Performing Arts, students must prepare a portfolio or an audition. If students don't qualify for any of these schools they are either recommended for a vocational school, or sent to a neighborhood school. Although tests are open to all Buffalo Public School students, critics say that connections go a long way towards getting a student into a particular school. At City Honors, widely considered to be Buffalo's best public school (consistently ranking among the top fifty nationwide<sup>44</sup>) some claim that the district doesn't distribute testing information adequately so that entrance is skewed towards students whose parents are "in the know".<sup>45</sup> Whether this is true or not, it is somewhat telling that the student population at the most selective schools includes a significantly higher percentage of white students than the district average. At 67 percent, City Honors has the highest concentration of white students in the district (15 percent higher even than South Park High School, a neighborhood school that serves Buffalo's traditionally Irish South Buffalo community). While this

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<sup>43</sup> Orfield, "Losing Our Future."

<sup>44</sup> "America's Best High Schools: The List - The Daily Beast."

<sup>45</sup> "The Secret to Getting into City Honors - School Zone - The Buffalo News."

doesn't necessarily imply that the school is racist, it certainly doesn't represent the demographics of the district.

Some promising charter high schools have opened in the city, but seeing as they've only been around for a few years, it will be interesting to see if their success is sustained. Data is publicly available for three charter high schools: Tapestry Charter, Oracle Charter and Buffalo Academy of Science Charter. Tapestry is the most selective, but has shown the best results. With graduation rates at 96 percent, (the best in the city) the school's efforts have been lauded. However, Tapestry used to only include only K-8 students, so this graduating class is the first, and has been with the school since it opened. In the coming years, Tapestry looks to double its enrollment, and if its model stays successful other charters will surely look to replicate it.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond question, the challenges of educating an urban population in a shrinking city (much less the third poorest city in the country) are tenfold. But people that wield a considerable amount of power in the Buffalo Public School district have displayed a serious futility in fixing the problems with which they are confronted. Jeff Walter, who has taught in the district for thirteen years laments, "I have seen million dollar renovations done in two buildings that I have taught at and they were a waste of money. Teachers give feedback on what should be/have been done to improve their classrooms for the subject they teach to improve instruction and they have been for the most part ignored." General incompetence, coupled with a dispute between school board members and Buffalo Teacher Federation president

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<sup>46</sup> "History > About Tapestry > Tapestry Charter School."

Phil Rumore over turnaround plans that would move some teachers out of failing schools, cost the district \$14 million in federal aid last year.<sup>47</sup> Failing to submit turnaround plans to receive this money was a luxury that the school district, in which one in four schools have been deemed “persistently low achieving”, couldn’t afford.

Although in this case the concession over a clause that allowed the district to move teachers may have seemed small, Rumore’s adamancy could be construed as a power play. The teachers’ contract ran out eight years ago, but the union and the school board have yet to sit down for a renegotiation, which many see as an impediment to the quality of education in the city. Under a New York State law called the Triborough Amendment, public employees are allowed to work under the conditions of their old contract until the union reaches a new one. In the BTF’s case, this includes full benefits with a yearly 2.5 percent pay increase.<sup>48</sup> As such the union has little incentive to negotiate. In the meantime, Phil Rumore has become a powerful, but controversial figure. Most veteran teachers support him, but younger teachers think he is out of touch, and are still bothered by the decision he made to opt for layoffs rather than waiving a cosmetic surgery rider from the insurance plan. Sadly, the relationship between Rumore and the school board has only grown more tenuous, which certainly doesn’t bode well for future negotiations.

Another issue that is causing the district difficulty is the influx of English language learners into Buffalo Public Schools. Increasingly, refugees from war torn

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<sup>47</sup> “A Growing Divide - News - The Buffalo News.”

<sup>48</sup> “Why Does Buffalo Pay for Its Teachers to Have Plastic Surgery? - Jordan Weissmann - Business - The Atlantic.”

nations in Africa and Asia (such as Kenya, Chad, Tanzania, and Nepal) have begun to be resettled in Buffalo. This is in no small part due to Buffalo's proximity to Canada, which has made it a port of entry for many. During the past ten years, when overall enrollment in the district has declined by almost ten thousand students, the number of English Language Learners has increased almost 61 percent and they now make up 11 percent of the student population.<sup>49</sup> But the district's best efforts to deal with this change display a lack of vision and planning. Several years ago, the decision was made to move a large number of English Language Learners to Lafayette High School, where they now account for almost 60 percent of the school's population. Many parents assumed that this would become part of an international campus with International School #45 (which serves grades kindergarten through sixth). This did not happen though. Some of the students remain at Lafayette but others have been moved over to the newly opened International Preparatory School. This new school serves over 50 different language speakers, which will hopefully address the changing needs of the student population more effectively, may also signify the end of Lafayette. However, while the district decides whether or not to close Lafayette High School, many students (English speaking or not) wait in limbo.

### *Criminalizing Students through School Disciplinary Policies*

Many officials involved with the school district claim that student absenteeism is to blame for their shortcomings. The latest attendance study, showing that a third of Buffalo Public High School students missed seven or more

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<sup>49</sup> "The Future of Lafayette High School - Buffalo Rising."

weeks of school, does corroborate this assertion.<sup>50</sup> But while absenteeism is a major setback, there is no easy solution. Although some of my primary research suggested that the increase in school policing over the past several decades creates a school atmosphere that inhibits learning and may discourage students from daily attendance, David Rust, Commissioner of Juvenile Services for Erie County, believes that the opposite may be even worse. “If kids don’t feel safe in school they’re not going to go; the best indicator of high school graduation rates is third grade reading levels, and the second best is ninth grade attendance, which is where you start to see the school violence issues,” says Rust. He believes that officers in schools can be resources if they are treated as mentors rather than patrolmen. Garvey agreed that these officers didn’t necessarily hinder attendance, saying, “Most of my students don’t really fear the police.” However, she was quick to point out that the money could be better spent on other resources around the school, such as more counselors or psychologists for the students.

Garvey brought up another important point about the issue of attendance. When her students get into trouble with the law and are arraigned, the judge will often include school attendance in their punishment. Garvey believes that this, more than school policing per se, causes students to equate school with prison. It is clear that students cannot succeed if they don’t go to class but there are other important factors and outside influences contributing to this chronic absenteeism.

First and foremost, Buffalo Public Schools are plagued by outdated disciplinary policies, which have a huge impact on the trajectory of a student’s

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<sup>50</sup> “Contagion of Absence Infects System - Schools - The Buffalo News.”

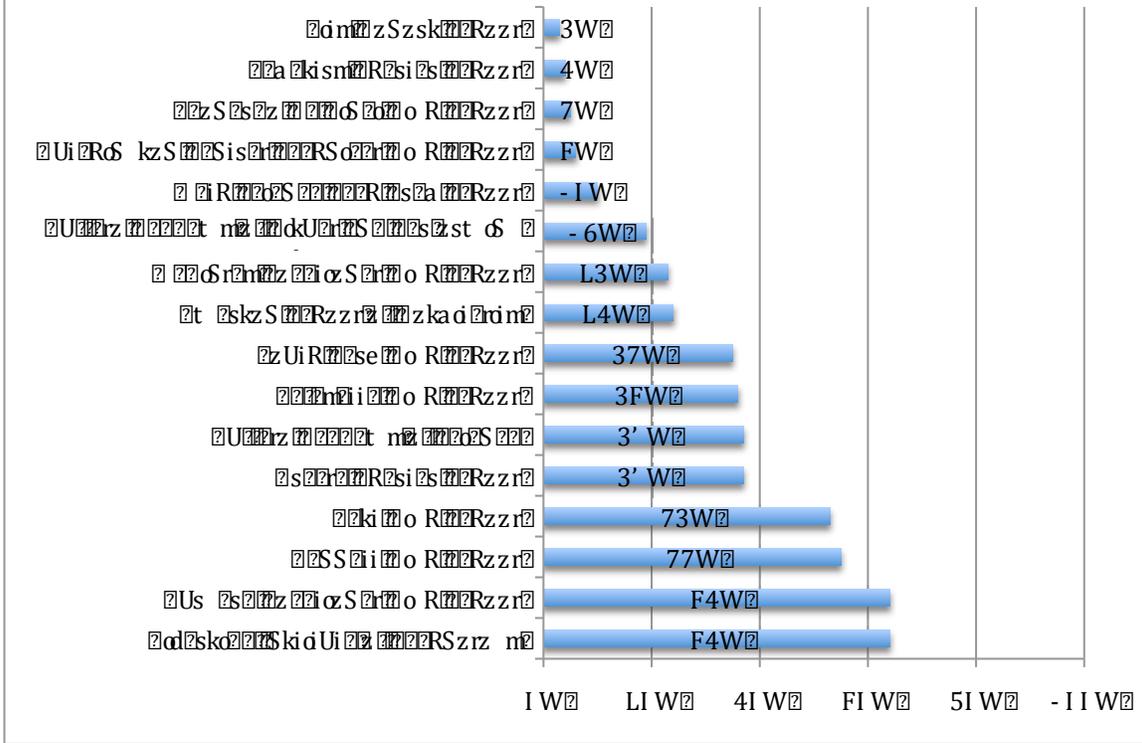
academic career. Los Angeles Unified School Superintendent John Deasy likes to talk about how there are no “dropouts” in Los Angeles schools; there are only “pushouts”. This principle comes to bear in Buffalo schools as well. Students don’t inherently want to stop coming to school, but in many cases, school policies (and the way they are administered) drive them out. For instance, one seventh grader from a Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority complex on the East Side of Buffalo who attends Lorraine Academy School 72 was suspended three times in three years.<sup>51</sup> This seventh grader, Davon, is a 180 pound twelve year old, and students’ incessant teasing sometimes leads to altercations. But even if a student’s offenses seem suspension worthy, after one or even two suspensions fail to change the student’s behavior it is difficult to understand why a school would continue to use it as a means of punishment. Not only is this seventh grader alienated from his peers, but he has also missed out on valuable class time. By the time he reaches high school the student is well on his way to being another statistic in the “pushout” rate.

By far, the biggest issue with discipline in Buffalo schools is their stubborn use of out of school suspension to deal with behavioral problems. Out of school suspensions shorter than a week (considered “informal suspensions”) can be used to punish many non-violent offenses if the students are repeat offenders. These punishments are largely at the discretion of administrators and, because students don’t have to be released to a parent, allow students to leave school and do as they please. The consequences of these policies range from detrimental to catastrophic.

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<sup>51</sup> “Looking for a Way Out: One Family’s Struggle on the East Side - Children of Poverty - The Buffalo News.”

**Wykaz zmian w strukturze organizacyjnej**  
**Wykaz zmian w strukturze organizacyjnej**



Wykaz zmian w strukturze organizacyjnej

highest in the city)<sup>53</sup>, graduated an abysmal 31 percent of its seniors (the lowest among general population high schools)<sup>54</sup>. Following the same pattern, all five of the high schools with the highest suspension rates fall into the bottom ten in attendance.<sup>55</sup> While other factors certainly come into play when analyzing low graduation rates and attendance rates for inner city high schools like these, these statistics are difficult to ignore.

Besides having a demoralizing effect on a student's education, suspensions can have disastrous effects on the community. Nothing good comes from putting more students on the streets during school hours. Last year, a student named Jawaan Daniels was suspended for walking the halls during class time at Lafayette High School. After a teacher stopped him, Jawaan was promptly suspended and sent home in the middle of the day. While waiting to catch the bus, Jawaan was gunned down and died a few minutes later at a bus stop near the school. He was 15 years old.<sup>56</sup> In a city like Buffalo, with 55 homicides in 2010 and a violent crime rate that ranks in the top ten nationwide<sup>57</sup>, giving students out of school suspensions is practically begging for trouble. One of my interview subjects, community activist and founder of F.A.T.H.E.R.S. Lenny Lane, believes that the use of "suspension is an excuse to keep kids in the criminal cycle". His group is dedicated to setting a positive example in the eastside of Buffalo and "changing the mindset of young men, who have seen generations before them fall prey to the same vices". Yet despite all of the

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<sup>53</sup> "What's Your School's Suspension Rate? - School Zone - The Buffalo News."

<sup>54</sup> "What's Your School's Graduation Rate? - School Zone - The Buffalo News."

<sup>55</sup> "What's Your School's Attendance Rate? - School Zone - The Buffalo News."

<sup>56</sup> "Student's Death Inflames Suspension Policy Debate - City & Region - The Buffalo News."

<sup>57</sup> FBI, "Crime in the United States by Metropolitan Area."

good work that they are doing, Lane's group continually bumps up against these policies. Often, suspensions are framed as the last line of defense for urban teachers against an increasingly unruly student population. But at what cost?

Some educational policy makers, including LAUSD school board member Steve Zimmer, believe that disciplinary policies are intentionally formulated to push out certain students, mainly students of color. Some of this is exacerbated by high stakes testing, which increased tremendously under the No Child Left Behind Act. Under No Child Left Behind, schools have a financial incentive to push out their lowest performing students. Yet Zimmer believes that has only amplified an existing problem and goes a step further than Lane. "I think it's much more purely racist than that," says Zimmer, "you have an astounding achievement gap, an astounding suspension gap, an astounding discipline gap way before No Child Left Behind came along." In terms of reversing this issue, Zimmer believes that very few school districts have gone far enough, stating, "When you have a system that is that intentional, that systemically racist and classist, you have to be just as intentional about dismantling it as you were about creating it." In order to make a lasting effect, Zimmer feels that a complete overhaul is needed. This entails a change in teachers, school leadership, curriculum and funding structures.

Whether or not administrators in Buffalo's public schools may agree with Lane or Zimmer's opinions, it is certainly true that disciplinary policies have remained static in a changing community and a changing school population. Many students are growing up in communities plagued by generational poverty. In many cases, parents have been victims of the same misfortune as their children and let the

cycle continue. There are two good indicators of this in Bailey-Kensington, one of Buffalo's most troubled neighborhoods. The first is that only 38 percent of students say that they have a caring adult at both at home and at school.<sup>58</sup> The second, being that girls that live in the neighborhood are also more than twice as likely to have a teenage pregnancy than girls their age around the country.<sup>59</sup> Not having a caring adult or a parent that can support them makes life considerably harder for an adolescent. Kelly Garvey, a guidance counselor at East High School (a persistently low achieving school with high suspension rates), described the grim realities of Buffalo's inner city that her students face. Says Garvey, "I think a lot of outside factors end up coming into schools: if something happens on the street and follows a kid into school, it takes over their whole day." Students are coming to school loaded with the baggage of drug addiction in their families and gangs nipping at their heels. Some, as young as middle school, are already tasked with the responsibility of helping to put food on the table. Many students are tardy on a daily basis because they are tasked with taking care of younger siblings in the morning. In light of this, it seems unreasonable to punish a kid as harshly for talking back to a teacher, being late to class or coming unprepared. Everybody knows what it's like to try to function productively on a bad day, and for many of these students, every day is a bad day.

Schools must recognize these circumstances, and adapt. In the face of public pressure, the Buffalo Public School administration has started taking measures to decrease out of school suspensions. So far, two new programs have been offered,

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<sup>58</sup> UB Regional Institute, "Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Needs Assessment."

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

and Garvey, a guidance counselor at East High says that she has seen an improvement since she started working at the school four years ago. The first program, called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, is geared around getting students that face “intense challenges” (above and beyond that of a normal student) to meet with a social worker. The second (which doesn’t have a name) allows students to avoid out of school suspensions by opting into a conference with their parents and the principal.

These programs each have facets of successful policies in place at other schools, and are fairly cheap because they utilize faculty already on staff. The district doesn’t seem to be willing to go all in though. Unfortunately the numbers don’t necessarily support the effectiveness of their new initiatives. 1 in 5 students in Buffalo receive an out of school suspension during the course of their education, compared with a 1 in 20 average in the rest of the state. Although conditions in the city have been generally consistent, out of school suspensions in Buffalo Public Schools as a whole have actually increased in the first couple months of the school year after these policies were enacted. There are some schools that have seen decreases but a few have seen sharp increases. Jeff Walter, now a teacher at Bennett High School, believes that part of the reason Burgard Vocational has seen increases in suspensions is inconsistency. Burgard Vocational has gone through two sets of administrators in the last few years, and without a strong, stable staff willing to put in place the new initiatives, the school will continue to flounder. While it is too early to tell if the new initiatives will be successful, they do need strong administrators to implement them.

### *Troubled Neighborhoods*

One of the most frustrating things that I came across in my research was a seemingly unavoidable catch-22. Schools are failing because kids are coming in with the baggage of growing up in a community dominated by the complications of poverty. To make matters worse, adequate resources aren't available because impoverished communities don't have the tax base to support their schools. But these communities are only impoverished and crime ridden because students are unable to get a quality education, and often turn to underground economies to support themselves. Most people with the ability to draw logical connections would agree that education has a direct effect on the quality of life in a community. Yet the correlations are so acutely obvious in some of Buffalo's neighborhoods that it is shocking how little progress has been made on either front. Recently, things have gotten so bad in Buffalo that newspaper headlines have begun to resemble plotlines from the HBO crime drama *The Wire*. Just a few days ago, homicide detectives were called after a dead body was found in a vacant house of East Lovejoy Street.<sup>60</sup> In the discussion of the effects that school policy has on the community though, it is necessary to take a look at two specific neighborhoods.

One such example is Buffalo's Lower West Side (LWS on the map). The neighborhood (which has never quite recovered from the Westside Arterial fiasco) is home to the majority of its Latino population, as well as a significant number of refugees. While 77 percent of the community qualifies as low to moderate income, the overall poverty rate is 44 percent (including a 60 percent among the

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<sup>60</sup> "Autopsy Done on Body Found in Vacant House."

neighborhood's youth).<sup>61</sup> Grover Cleveland High School, which served the majority of the of the area's teenagers, graduated 29 percent of its students in 2009-2010 and then closed down after the next school year, scattering its students across the district.<sup>62</sup> Not surprisingly, the neighborhood has ten times the national average of 18-24 year olds without high school diplomas.

The lack of access to quality education hasn't just been negligent, it has been downright deadly. Several years back, the city was up in arms because a war between two gangs on the lower West Side (with members as young as ten years old) was responsible for twelve shootings and three deaths within a six-month span. Despite outcry from the city, little investment was made into the schools or economic development in the neighborhood. A violent drug trade has continued to make this area one of Buffalo's most deadly up to this day.

The Bailey-Kensington (KE, KH and UD on the map) neighborhood on Buffalo's East Side (which is about a mile and a half from where I grew up) is another example. Historically, the area was one of Buffalo's most diverse but now it is about 72 percent African American. It is only a square mile, but according to Rust, twice as many juvenile offenders in the system come from Bailey-Kensington's 14215 zip code than any other in the county. This once thriving neighborhood is now home to over a hundred gangs and has the highest crime rate in Buffalo in every category. Violent crime rates in the neighborhood are three times the national average. Another telling statistic is the rate of unemployment for African American

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<sup>61</sup> Dankert, *Annual Plan, Supervision and Treatment Services for Juveniles Program*.

<sup>62</sup> "What's Your School's Graduation Rate? - School Zone - The Buffalo News."

males in Buffalo. At 51.4 percent, it's the highest in the country.<sup>63</sup> Considering this unemployment, and the fact that the percentage of children living in poverty in 14215 is twice the statewide rate, it is no surprise that five crimes a day are committed on average in this small area.<sup>64</sup>

It is hardly a coincidence that this is also where many of the students at Buffalo's persistently low achieving schools hail from. The only high school located right in the neighborhood is Bennett High School, which despite being considered a magnet school boasts a 46 percent graduation rate and a 55 percent suspension rate. Many of these students attend East High as well, which graduates students at a rate of 44 percent and suspends them at a rate of 53 percent. Although there are many factors contributing to the decay of this once great neighborhood, lack of quality schools is one of the most important.

An important issue that can't be ignored in these communities is the mental anguish that many kids go through growing up in Buffalo's roughest neighborhoods. The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs reports that 35percent of children exposed to a shooting, and 37percent of urban youth exposed to violence on a daily basis develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>65</sup> Because of the violence of the Bailey-Kensington neighborhood, many youth refer to 14215 as "Little Iraq", so it's not a shock that adolescents experience levels of PTSD similar to what might be seen in Baghdad. Other neighborhoods, in which children carry out violent gang acts when they're still in middle school (think "Little Uganda") aren't much better. Kelly Garvey

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<sup>63</sup> "PUSH - Plank 2 Green Jobs Buffalo."

<sup>64</sup> UB Regional Institute, "Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Needs Assessment."

<sup>65</sup> Morris, "Youth Violence: Implications for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Urban Youth."

believes that, “We need more mental health opportunities in schools, because otherwise, these students will never receive the help they need.” The evidence overwhelmingly supports Garvey. David Rust said that at least 80percent of juvenile inmates in Erie County are on high psychotropic drugs. While he has only been in his position for five years, he said these numbers have been fairly constant. Clearly, mental illness is an issue that our communities need to address, and schools may be the most apt to provide these services.

If our students are being pushed out on the streets, and the streets are filled with crime, one also must consider the role of the juvenile justice system in this cycle. In a city as poverty stricken as Buffalo, the handling of juvenile crimes has an immense influence on the future of many adolescents. In the last two decades, New York’s juvenile justice system has largely been failing its young people. At an average cost of \$210,000 annually per child, data from 1991 to 1995 illustrates that 75 percent of the juvenile offenders released from custody would be rearrested within three years.<sup>66</sup> David Rust describes a vastly different program in Buffalo. The facility, which is less than five years old, tries to get adolescents home with their families in less than a month, and has cut recidivism rates considerably. Still, it is imperative that Buffalo’s juvenile justice system work closely with schools to seamlessly reintegrate students, and continue to work towards implementing policies that serve to liberate youth from the cycle of imprisonment.

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<sup>66</sup> New York State Juvenile Justice Task Force, “Draft Report on New York State’s Juvenile Prisons.”

## Where do We Go from Here?

One proposed solution to the issues of criminalization and failure in Buffalo's schools is a transplantation of the Harlem Children's Zone model. It is the only plan that includes a wholesale approach to improve education and redevelop the community. The 14215 neighborhood has recently received a federal grant for a Promise Neighborhood from the United States Department of Education. This means \$1.5 million annually for four years in federal funds for a cradle to college support system modeled after Harlem's Children Zone. Not only will these funds support neighborhood schools (Westminster Community Charter, Highgate Heights Elementary School and Bennett High School), but also help to streamline family services, and enrichment for the broader community. The Buffalo Promise Neighborhood plans also include money for the Family Life Center (which provides adult education, and employment training), the Early Childhood Center, the Community Health Center of Buffalo, a park, a nature reserve and funding set aside to help residents fix up their homes.<sup>67</sup> When I asked Lenny Lane, who lives and organizes in the community, about whether or not he believes that the Promise Neighborhood model will be effective he replied, "Right now, it's all we got." He went on to compare the condition of many children born into the circumstances of poverty in this neighborhood to being born in a ditch. "The Promise Zone is not a handout, it's a hand. When you are born into a ditch, a handout won't help, but a hand will. The Promise Zone represents hope, hope that will change the mentality of kids growing up in this neighborhood."

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<sup>67</sup> Buffalo Promise Neighborhood, *Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Assets Plan*.

One of the keys to the Promise Zone model is getting to students at an early age. Both Steve Zimmer and Lane stressed the importance of early childhood education. According to Zimmer, early education or pre-school programs have shown to make a significant improvement in a student's performance when they enter elementary school, especially in skills like communication and word recognition. Lane on the other hand, believes that it is important to reach out to students while they are young because many are already headed down a dangerous path by the time they finish elementary school. Lane has even expanded his organization's gun buyback programs to kids, in which toy guns are traded in for basketballs and remote control cars. The prospect of a real, monetary investment in Buffalo's youth makes him visibly excited.

Many criticisms of the Harlem Children's Zone model are not necessarily applicable to Buffalo. Because of the abundance and affordability of housing in Buffalo, the city has largely been impervious to gentrification. While there are grandiose, expensive houses in certain areas of the city, they have been that way for a long time. The east side of Buffalo, which includes Bailey-Kensington used to be a thriving neighborhood with strong community ties. But for years, vacant houses have become abundant in the neighborhood. In 14215, one in every eight homes is vacant.<sup>68</sup> The issue isn't so much how the neighborhood will deal with gentrification, but rather how it will build on its investment to entice people to move back to its abandoned homes. On a citywide scale, Buffalo's problem neighborhoods extend far past the borders of 14215. If the city is to make lasting progress, it must find a way

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<sup>68</sup> UB Regional Institute, "Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Needs Assessment."

to leverage investment in the Promise Neighborhood into development in its other struggling neighborhoods.

Another solution to the problems facing Buffalo schools is organizing. Although Buffalo doesn't have an abundance of community-based organizations doing genuine grassroots organizing, there are two groups worth mentioning. Currently, there is a group pushing for a restorative justice based disciplinary code in Buffalo Public Schools. Founded in 2000, the Alliance for Quality Education is a non-profit organization headquartered out of Albany with an office in Buffalo that is working on organizing students, parents and community members dedicated to improving public education. AQE is building their campaign around establishing a restorative justice model in the Buffalo Public School district. The organization feels that the changes that the district has made to existing policies haven't gone nearly far enough to change this egregiously unfair system. The model that they are suggesting reserves out of school suspension for only violent offenses in which administrators have no other options. Other offenses will be handled with some type of in school suspension that incorporates students into the process. According to AQE, "Schools that have implemented practices within the restorative justice and discipline framework have seen disciplinary referrals drop, suspensions and expulsions dramatically decrease."<sup>69</sup>

The other organization doing exciting organizing work in Buffalo is PUSH (People United for Sustainable Housing). Founded by Buffalo native Aaron Bartley,

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<sup>69</sup> "Speak Out Against Out-of-school Suspensions for Non-violent Offenses - Alliance for Quality Education of New York."

(who got his start leading a successful living wage campaign for campus workers while studying at Harvard) the organization is dedicated to creating a successful model for grassroots neighborhood organizing and redevelopment in the city. Although their main focus is affordable housing, the group also runs direct action campaigns against corporations and organizations that contribute to poverty in the city, and wrest resources from the hands of community members. Their current campaigns involve trying to get the utility company National Fuel to help customers weatherize their houses, creating green jobs and securing city funding for pocket parks and gardens.<sup>70</sup> PUSH is one of the few organizations in the city doing bona fide grassroots organizing, which is necessary for community members to become engaged and take ownership of their neighborhoods.

Other recommendations include:

**Learn from other cities:** Across the country, major cities have successfully implemented progressive disciplinary policies in districts similar to Buffalo's. If Buffalo cannot develop creative solutions to their problems, they can learn from the successes and mistakes of other cities. Policies that work towards restorative justice and limiting suspensions are not necessarily one size fits all, but can be adapted to meet the needs of Buffalo's students.

**A new contract for Buffalo's teachers:** Improving the quality of education in the city of Buffalo needs to be the number one priority for the Buffalo Teacher Federation and the school board. Tension between the two groups has already

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<sup>70</sup> "PUSH - People United for Sustainable Housing."

caused the district to miss out on millions of dollars in funding. Steve Zimmer stressed the magnitude of changes necessary to reverse the trends in urban education. If teachers and school officials cannot even sit down at the bargaining table together, there is no hope for the city to overhaul its failing education system.

**Mental health Counseling for students:** Students growing up in the inner city face unique challenges. From drug addiction in their families, to witnessing violent confrontations on a daily to weekly basis, the mental health effects can be devastating. Untreated mental illness will only lead them to repeat the devastating cycle that they have grown up in. Because it is unlikely that these students will have access to mental health professionals on their own, schools must make it a priority to bring in effective psychiatrists and counselors.

**Make sure progressive disciplinary policies are actually enforced:** One of the largest challenges towards implementation of progressive disciplinary policies in schools is that they're largely carried out at the discretion of principals and school administrators, who bring biases into the picture. Zimmer said that while Los Angeles has one of the most progressive school disciplinary systems in the country, they are often mismanaged or even handled in a reactionary way. Zimmer even went on to say that in the face of years of racist disciplinary policies, a majority African American school, with a majority African American faculty could still be operated in a "white supremacist" fashion. Even if policy is changed, it doesn't necessarily change practice.

**Find a way to get parents involved in their children’s education/behavior:**

Although it is easier said than done, people at every turn emphasized the importance of integrating parents into their children’s education. Currently there is a significant contingent of Buffalo Public School parents that have formed the District Parent Coordinating Council of Buffalo in order to improve public education standards in the city. Led by parent Sam Radford, the group has gone as far as organizing a one-day district wide boycott of all Buffalo Public Schools. This momentum can be built on. Teachers and administrators need to seize on this and incorporate these parents into their schools. Nancy Franklin thinks that it is a teachers responsibility to try and make the parents feel as welcome as possible. Franklin emphasized that the reason Garfield High School was so successful recruiting parent volunteers was that they treated them so well. Parents were applauded, given shirts and made to feel that they were as much a part of the school as the students and the teachers.

**Inspire teachers and leaders from the community to stay in Buffalo:** Although the money may come from outside of Buffalo’s most vulnerable neighborhoods, change has to come from within. Hailing back to Saul Alinsky’s teachings about organizing, improvements have to be made from the bottom up. Almost everyone I interviewed agreed on this point. Zimmer stressed the importance of “growing teachers from the community”. Gonzalez blamed the lack of effectiveness of some restorative justice programs on outside and out of touch practitioners that were unable to connect with students. And Lane was extremely vocal on the need for community members to make sacrifices to help this lost generation of students that

have been devastated by years of inadequate education. Aside from teachers, Buffalo must entice its brightest policy minds to stay and try and fix the problems at hand. It is frustrating that the cities with the greatest need for creative solutions are several years behind the curve when it comes developing them.

## **Conclusion**

For years, cities in America's Rust Belt have been toiling in relative obscurity. The brunt of jokes and the object of ridicule, cities like Buffalo and Detroit, which are in dire need of progressive and innovative programs and policies, have for years seen neither. An obvious challenge to making improvements is money. But recently, the city has seen an influx of investment from the federal government (\$6 million for the Promise Zone) and the state government (\$1 billion pledged from Governor Cuomo towards urban redevelopment). In the past, the city has mismanaged and squandered funds like these, but they have been given another chance. The largest takeaway that I have from my research is that the rejuvenation of Buffalo's troubled neighborhoods, and the revival of its schools need to happen concurrently. It was not one simple decision that put Buffalo in the position that it is today. It was years of outside influences and shortsighted planning. In order to be relevant again on a national scale, Buffalo needs to boast safe neighborhoods and intelligent, innovative citizens that can attract businesses. If Buffalo is to have any kind of renaissance in the twenty first century, it will start with its schools.

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