



# CEURA REPORTER

Early Childhood Education at the YWCA of Minneapolis



### *Also Inside:*

- Waterpipe Smoking among Somali and Oromo Immigrants in the Twin Cities: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs
- Representing Poor Students' Interests: Insights and Lessons from the Fight to Save North High in Minneapolis

# CURA REPORTER

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**Photo on Cover:** *Children at a daycare center (photo illustration).*  
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## Letter from the CURA Director

The Twin Cities is one of a number of metropolitan areas across the country currently conducting an analysis of regional equity. Denver, Seattle, Portland, and others have previously examined equity in housing, education, transit accessibility, economic opportunity, and other areas. The quality and utility of a regional equity analysis mainly rests on two considerations: (1) how opportunity is conceived of and measured and (2) how segregation is analyzed.

Equity assessment can be a powerful tool for determining the uneven nature of opportunity within regions. To be most useful, however, equity analyses need to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of opportunity. It is a mistake to categorize communities along a single continuum of opportunity. Many types of opportunity exist, and they are distributed differentially across neighborhoods. We know, for example, that neighborhoods in the Twin Cities that score high for educational opportunity often score low for transit and employment access. In addition, neighborhoods that many regard as disadvantaged actually provide a number of opportunities for their residents, and conversely communities regarded as the most advantaged often lack certain opportunities. The best regional equity analyses therefore move away from simplistic and binary categories of “high/low” opportunity to characterize communities by the types of opportunities they do or do not offer. The approach taken in the Twin Cities equity analysis acknowledges the multiple dimensions of opportunity and allows for the examination of the strengths and weaknesses of all communities in the region.

In the typical equity analysis, the “geography of opportunity” described above is matched to the distribution of racial/ethnic groups and/or to the distribution of poor households to demonstrate how some populations have greater access to opportunity than others. In funding the current Twin Cities assessment, the federal government imposed a requirement to identify “racially concentrated areas of poverty” (RCAPs) for that purpose. However, a sole focus on RCAPs, would produce a myopic view of regional equity, and as some advocacy groups in this region rightly argue, forfeit an excellent opportunity to fully analyze segregation and opportunity in the region. A more robust analysis of segregation and opportunity in this (or any other) region would require examination not only of RCAPs, but also of an equally important form of residential segregation: “racially concentrated areas of wealth” (RCAW).

Although it is important to know where concentrations of people of color and of households in poverty live, it is equally important to know where they are absent. A sole focus on RCAPs stigmatizes minority communities, suggesting that such concentrations are unhealthy for the region and for the residents of those neighborhoods. The consequences of such a single-minded analysis are clear—the Metropolitan Council’s RCAP maps are already being used as a justification for opposing affordable-housing proposals in areas in or near RCAPs. Furthermore, a singular focus on RCAPs suggests that the distribution of the white population and the geography of affluence are not problematic and that they constitute a “natural” landscape against which the problems of nonwhite neighborhoods are set. Ignoring RCAWs also obscures the socio-political-economic forces that bring about segregation and will likely constrict the range of potential policy options for remediating regional inequities.

On this second critical element, those responsible for preparing the Twin Cities equity assessment should go beyond the federal requirement to analyze RCAPs and conduct a more complete analysis of the full range of race/poverty segregation in the region. Doing so would provide the federal government and other regions a powerful model for understanding regional equity.

Sincerely,  
Edward Goetz



Director, CURA

# Early Childhood Education at the YWCA of Minneapolis: Parent and Staff Perspectives on Quality, Access, and Policy

by Moin Syed, Anita Patel, and Lovey H.M. Walker

**Abstract:** Despite the well-documented benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs, we know little about the subjective experiences of those individuals who participate in them. In this study, we conducted focus groups with ECE staff and parents to ask fundamental questions for which few answers currently exist: What does quality ECE mean? What barriers to accessing high-quality ECE do families face? What are the policy implications that lie at the interface of quality and access? Our analysis led to multidimensional conceptualizations of both quality and access, which suggested targeted and feasible policy recommendations for improving the conditions for the children of Minnesota.

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs that serve children as young as infants and as old as elementary-school age have been shown to produce a number of positive outcomes. For example, a recent cost-benefit analysis of a sample of low-income, mostly African American, individuals who attended high-quality ECE programs demonstrated that each dollar invested in the program produced a \$10.83 total benefit to society.<sup>1</sup> Research has also documented long-term psychological benefits of high-quality ECE, most notably in terms of school achievement (e.g., standardized test scores, grade retention) and social adjustment (e.g., lower rates of delinquency, higher relational functioning).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the benefits of high-quality ECE are both robust and compelling.

The value of ECE is also beginning to be recognized by the federal and state

<sup>1</sup> A.J. Reynolds, J.A. Temple, B. White, S. Ou, and D.L. Robertson, "Age-26 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Child-Parent Center Early Education Program," *Child Development* 82 (2011): 379-404.

<sup>2</sup> W.S. Barnett, "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes," *The Future of Children* 5,3 (1995): 25-50.



Photo © Kendra Mack

**High-quality early childhood education programs have been shown to produce many positive outcomes, including higher school achievement and social adjustment.**

government. The Obama administration is considering investing in universal ECE for low-income and some middle-income families. Similar efforts are underway at the state level in Minnesota. Despite the well-documented benefits, ECE participation rates in Minnesota are low. Whereas 25% of 4-year-olds nationwide participate in state-funded programs, in Minnesota this figure is a paltry 2%, which is the lowest rate among the 38 states that offer programs.<sup>3</sup> The lack of available public programs paired with the prohibitive costs of private ones suggests that access to ECE programs is severely limited.

Our project was based on a collaboration between the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota and the YWCA of Minneapolis. The

<sup>3</sup> W.S. Barnett, D.J. Epstein, A.H. Friedman, R.A. Sansanelli, and J.T. Hustedt, *The State of Preschool 2009* (Rutgers, NJ: The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2009).

YWCA has offered a highly effective ECE program for more than 25 years (see sidebar 1). The YWCA has made ECE its top legislative priority, and thus is dedicated to lobbying and advocacy for funding for ECE programs that would serve communities of color. As research on the quality of and access to ECE is extremely limited, we developed an exploratory study to ask fundamental questions for which few answers currently exist: What does quality ECE mean? What barriers to accessing high-quality ECE do families face? What are the policy implications that lie at the interface of quality and access? It is critical to have a firm understanding of a phenomenon prior to making any statements about needed changes in policies. Importantly, we addressed these questions by talking with both staff members currently working in ECE centers and parents whose children attend those same centers. Staff and parents are likely to have similarities and differences in their perceptions of ECE, and points of

convergence between these two groups' perceptions could help identify the most salient issues of quality, access, and policy in the context of ECE.

### Methodology

We conducted a series of group interviews with ECE staff and parents at the YWCA of Minneapolis. We selected group interviews as our methodology to facilitate a conversation about the topics of focus and to reduce the pressures that respondents sometimes feel in individual interviews. We held the staff interviews during the lunch hour of a staff training day in the fall of 2011. Conducting the interviews at the training session allowed us to obtain the involvement of both a large number of staff members and a cross-section of staff positions (e.g., directors, teachers, aides). We conducted eight group staff interviews, ranging in size from 6 to 9 people each (60 total staff participants), at the downtown Minneapolis YWCA location, but included staff from the three ECE centers that were in operation at that time. To instill a sense of trust and confidentiality, we did not collect any specific demographic information about the participants. This was particularly important given that we were asking questions related to their place of employment, and wanted them to feel confident that their responses would not be later identified. We observed the staff to be predominantly women and racially/ethnically diverse, with the majority of the staff being women of color.

We recruited parents by posting flyers at the YWCA ECE centers and through personal invitations from ECE staff. We provided parents with childcare, dinner, and a \$10 Target gift card for participating in the group interview. We conducted two group parent interviews, one with 8 parents and another with 5 parents (13 total parent participants). Unlike the staff interviews, we did collect basic demographic information about the parents who participated, as it was important to understand whose views were being voiced in the interviews. All of the participants were women, ranging in age from 23 to 44, and came from self-identified African American, Somali, Latino, and White backgrounds. Schooling history ranged from elementary/middle school to graduate/professional school, with 9 of the 13 participants reporting high school or some college as their highest level of schooling. Eleven of the participants

## YWCA of Minneapolis Early Childhood Education Program

The YWCA of Minneapolis Early Childhood Education Program delivers a powerful blend of high-quality, full-time early childhood education (ECE), direct service, and advocacy for children (from infants through 10-year-olds) and families. Seven nationally accredited centers are located in Minnesota's Twin Cities metropolitan area. A culturally celebratory curriculum is a cornerstone of the program and is critical in preparing children for success in school, as well as providing support and guidance for families to nurture their children's development. ECE providers at the YWCA are diverse and highly qualified teachers and classroom aides who deliver top-notch care and education for children from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The YWCA of Minneapolis Early Childhood Education Program emphasizes serving children and families in need living in the urban core. All centers provide a high-quality interactive learning environment where children demonstrate age-appropriate development and test as ready to start kindergarten far above the achievement levels of their peers throughout Minnesota. The program equips children and families to thrive and succeed in life through access to high-quality early education and care, support, and services that stabilize families, as well as through empowerment of families to advocate for their needs.

For more information, visit [www.ywcamppls.org](http://www.ywcamppls.org).

were employed, one was a student, and one was not employed.

The interviewers were either trained graduate students or YWCA facilitators. The interviews were semistructured in that we developed an interview protocol beforehand, but encouraged the interviewers to allow the flow of the interview to dictate its course. The researchers from the Department of Psychology and the YWCA staff collaborated to develop the interview protocol. Initially, Moin Syed (Psychology) and Anita Patel (YWCA) independently drafted a set of questions based on the existing literature, project goals, and personal observations. We then integrated these into a single draft protocol, which we brought to a meeting of the YWCA ECE directors and head teachers. After describing the study goals, the attendees at the meeting broke into pairs to discuss the suitability of the existing questions and brainstorm about important omissions. We then engaged in a group discussion about how the questions should be modified. The research team then set the final protocol.<sup>4</sup> The questions covered a wide range of topics, but highlighted definitions of quality ECE, the meaning of access to ECE,

<sup>4</sup> The full interview protocols are available from the first author upon request.

perceptions of hardships and barriers experienced by families (including experiences of racism, language barriers, and treatment by government workers), and strengths and resources that families draw upon (see sidebar on page 8 for sample questions). The interview protocols for staff and parents were very similar to allow for comparisons across the groups. However, the parent interviews included additional questions about their feelings about the ECE center their children attend and how they feel their children are affected by the center, as well as the strengths and weakness of the center. We audio recorded the interviews and subsequently transcribed the tapes verbatim to facilitate analysis. All participants provided written consent to participate in the study and to have the interviews recorded.

We used thematic analysis to inductively generate themes present in the data through multiple readings of the transcripts. The team discussed potential themes over numerous meetings until consensus was reached on the number and nature of themes present (Table 1). After settling on the themes, we coded all of the transcripts using a two-step process. In the first step, we identified "speaker thought units," which were defined as a single speaker turn on the same topic. In the next



**Table 1. Description of Themes Identified for Thought Units Expressed by Parents and Staff**

Theme	Description
Cultural Aspects of Education	Experiences related to cultural values, practices, or beliefs related to the host country/region (e.g. America, Minnesota) or native country/region (e.g., Somalia).
Tangible Resources—Staff	Experiences related to the availability or restriction of tangible resources, such as education materials, monetary funds, and professional support from other staff members.
Tangible Resources—Families	Experiences related to the availability or restriction of tangible resources that come from families, including family income or transportation (location of center, car, bus pass), Internet at home, socioeconomic status, and education.
Family Characteristics	Features of family members that impact quality and access to education that are not “tangible” resources. These features may include their personality, parenting practices, communication with staff or the center, availability with time, awareness or knowledge and understanding, and family structure.
Holistic Approach to Child Education	Approaches to education that incorporate learning in different domains, including kindergarten preparation, life skills, or language.
Staff Characteristics	Features of educators and the center that are a part of quality or access to education services. These features can include intangible resources, such as personality or teaching style of staff, and their education or training.
“Middle-Class Paradox”	Financial difficulties people have concerning making money and not qualifying for services because of their income or job status. Excerpts may be characterized by being “stuck in the middle” (between wealthy and poor), or turning down resources to maintain a status that allows them to receive financial support.
Experiences of Racism/Discrimination	Prejudices, racism, and other acts of discrimination that may be based on ethnicity, race, social class, immigrant status, gender, etc. These experiences may or may not involve accounts involving the speaker, and could also involve people they know or experiences they have heard about.
Bureaucracy	Notions of quality or access (and barriers) for ECE that involve policies enforced by the government, case managers, the YWCA, and other structural powers.
Public Perceptions	References to how people outside of the ECE system (e.g., family, friends, policy makers, politicians) view ECE services. These references can involve negative and/or positive perceptions, attitudes, and understandings of the services.
Language Barriers	Specific stories of barriers to access or quality of care because of language differences. These stories can include situations involving translation, paperwork, or not understanding something because of a language difficulty.
Miscellaneous Quality Indicators	Quality and access issues/concerns that cannot be placed into at least one of the previous themes, including topics such as the food served at the center, the availability of parking, and parents knowing that their children are safe at the center.

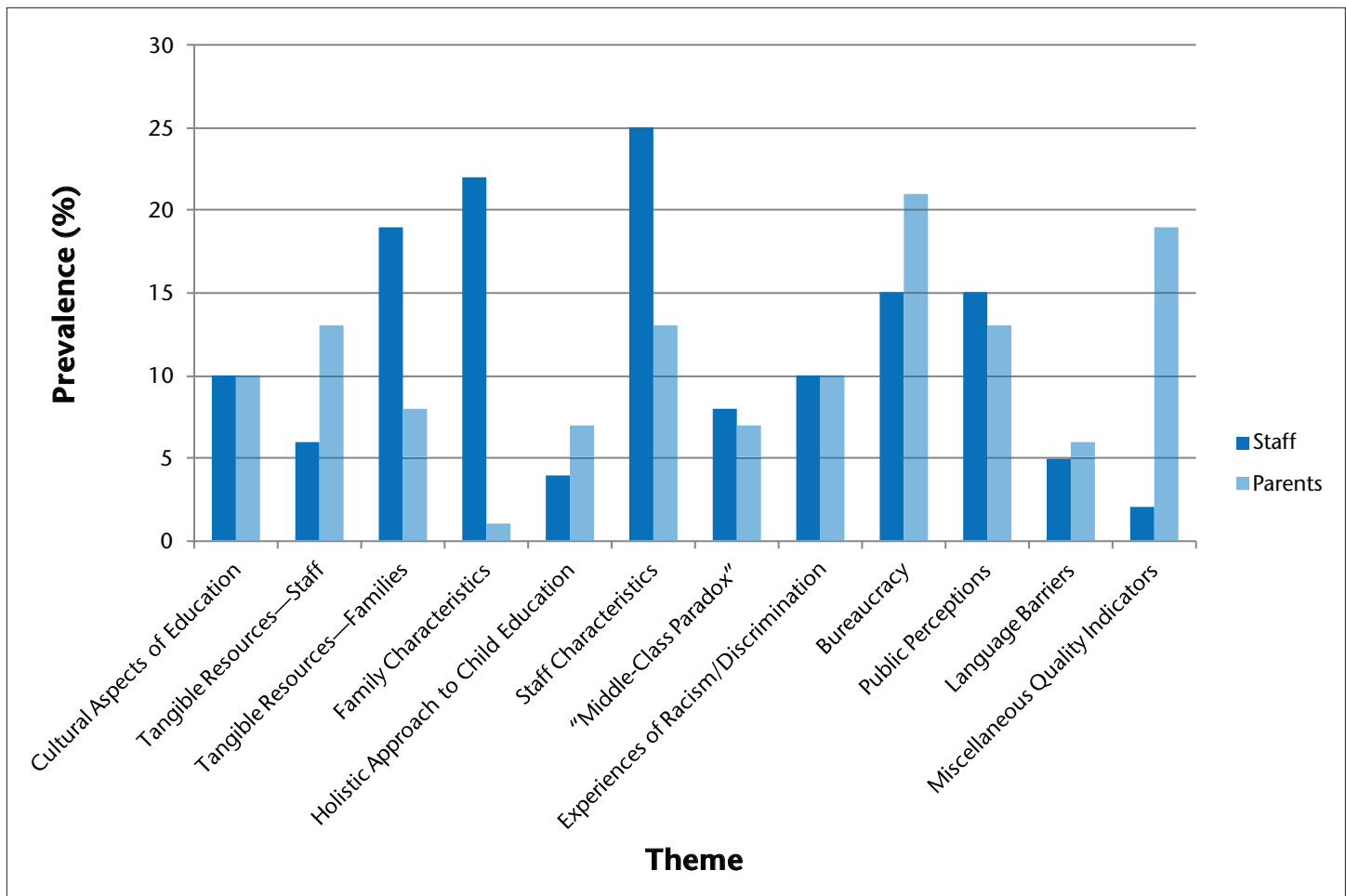
step, we coded these units for the presence of the 12 themes generated for the study. Units could be coded for as many of the 12 themes as were present. This analytic approach was consistent with our interest in what participants said and how often they said it, as a group, rather than linking individual responses. Two trained coders conducted the coding; the two coders achieved greater than 90% agreement for all categories.

### Findings

Our analysis resulted in 595 thought units (460 for staff and 135 for parents). Because each unit could be coded for more than one of the 12 themes, the total prevalence of themes was 646 for staff and 174 for families. Staff thought units represented the themes of *staff characteristics* (25%), *family characteristics* (22%), and *tangible family resources* (19%) most frequently. In contrast, the most frequent parent

thought units were *bureaucracy* (21%), *miscellaneous quality* (19%), and *public perceptions* (13%). Although the top three themes differed for staff and parents, the prevalence rates of the different themes were similar in several categories (Figure 1). The differing rates of co-occurrence of themes within a thought unit make it difficult to make direct comparisons. For example, although public perceptions was in the top three most frequent themes for the

Figure 1. Frequency of Themes Assigned to Thought Units Expressed by Parents and Staff



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because each thought unit could be coded for multiple themes.

thought units of parents but not staff, the prevalence was actually slightly higher for staff (15%) than for parents (13%).

Beyond simply identifying the different themes and their prevalence, our analysis led us to think about the responses in terms of three broad categories: definitions of *quality* ECE; perceptions of *access* to ECE; and implications for *policy* reform. Each of these categories is considered to be multidimensional, and all three are interrelated. We describe our findings for each category in more detail below.

**Quality.** Despite the frequent use of the term “quality” in the context of ECE, notions of quality ECE held by staff and parents are highly complex. Our analysis led to a multidimensional conceptualization of quality ECE that includes how staff members conceptualize the children and perceive their role in the child’s development, staff and parent resources, staff personality characteristics, and appreciation of the cultural context of staff, parents, and children.

There was broad consensus among parents and staff in terms of what constituted quality ECE. Staff consistently referred to a focus on the “whole child” as a guiding philosophy to their approach as educators. In addition to fostering literacy and numeracy, staff members viewed their role as serving a larger purpose in the children’s development, as described by one staff member:

I think it is programs that focus on the whole child, not just one specific domain or aspect of development. So everything from, you know, nutrition and well-being to family services, academics, you know, all those different learning areas.

Parents also recognized and valued this holistic approach. Although they did not name it “holistic” or oriented toward the “whole child,” the parents we spoke with clearly observed this principle in action. As stated by one parent:

One thing I noticed about this place is compared to [another center], is that

they had things going there, but this one being connected to the Y, they go swimming, and they have this person singing to the babies, you know, comes in with a guitar and sings to the babies, and my middle son, they had a person come in and work with his reading and, so he was really prepared going to kindergarten—there was a, you know curriculum there. It wasn’t just like sitting around and messing up in class, being bad because you’re in daycare. They really had structure, like really prepared them to going to kindergarten. And, so that to me is quality.

These statements suggest that both sides of the ECE relationship value a broader focus to education beyond academics.

Another point of clear convergence in definitions of quality was around staff training. Staff members themselves articulated the importance of their training in ECE; many of the head teachers hold master’s degrees and most have extensive experience working in educational settings. From their perspective, this

training leads to a more intentional learning environment, where they carefully structure the classroom and curriculum and actively engage with the children. This intentional approach was often contrasted with what teachers had heard about or observed in other centers in the Twin Cities area. They explained that many of these centers seemed motivated to simply pass the time as easily as possible rather than doing the hard work of engaging the children. To them, this is the difference between *daycare* and *preschool*, with the latter being more aligned with quality.

As with the holistic perspective of the children, parents clearly were aware of and valued the intentional educational approach of the YWCA teachers that reflected their training. Like the staff members, parents often used other centers as a point of comparison. In their view, the teachers at the YWCA had a process, a reason behind all of their actions. A story told by a parent illustrates the perception that the process of development consists of discrete steps:

One of the best things I like about this center is that his teachers are very understanding. They know exactly, like the steps, the phases that the kids need to go through or whatever—and they tell you, they talk to the parents. They're like “well this is what you need to do” or “try this and this and that.” I remember one time when he was having a problem; he wouldn't put his coat away. His teachers told him to be able to “take your gloves off first,” or “do you want to take your hat off first?” They'll try to do something in that same situation where, you know, it's helpful for him.

Less frequently discussed, but no less important, is the role of cultural awareness and sensitivity as an indicator of quality. Unlike the dimensions of holistic approach and staff educational training described above, both parents and staff discussed cultural understanding with a greater level of ambivalence. Many staff members felt a tension between respecting families' cultural values and practices and taking seriously their charge to prepare the children for future success in American culture, as illustrated by this staff response:

I have an Indian child, every time he drops a spoon he looks at me and

says “oh,” or in pushing in his chair and clearing his place, and helping himself stand up again, and picking up after himself and doing all these things. And while I was talking to [his parents], I realized that those were very American values, taking care of yourself, taking care of your own things, doing what you're supposed to do in your own time, and his parents even told me, “well that's not really how culturally we do it in India” and they were very, very sweet with me and we had a very nice conversation about it. But it was a big cultural difference and I didn't really quite understand it, I didn't really plan for. At the same time, like, you know, how can I meaningfully respect that, but then also still keep up with the expectations that I have for all the children, like that they clear their own place, take off their own bib, pick up their own things if they drop them and take care of themselves?

Finally, the parents discussed some additional aspects of quality that received little to no mention in the staff interviews. First, the parents discussed the high value they place on knowing that their children will be safe, comfortable, and happy while at the centers. This comfort assuaged the guilt and worry that parents sometimes feel when leaving their kids. Knowing that they did not have to worry about such things made their work life much more enjoyable. Second, the parents cited the need for more male teachers in the classrooms. One of the focus groups included a long discussion about a male teacher who was beloved by the children but ultimately left the center. Third, the parents talked about the importance of the food served at the centers. Many parents appreciated the center's attempts to incorporate healthier, organic, and nonprocessed foods into the meals they served. Others, however, viewed this as trying to serve kids “adult food” that resulted in their children not eating while there. Although the views on the food available at the centers were quite variable, it was clearly an important topic to the parents, yet not discussed at all by the staff.

**Access.** Access to quality ECE is also a multidimensional construct, including the availability of staff and parent resources, experiences of racism and discrimination, language barriers, the complexity of the ECE system, and

## Sample Interview Questions

- ▶ What do you think of when you hear the phrase “quality early childhood education”? What does “quality” mean to you?
- ▶ What does “access” to quality early childhood education mean to you?
- ▶ Do you believe all families are treated equally by government workers when trying to access services? In what ways are they treated differently?
- ▶ What barriers/hardships do you feel families face in trying to access early childhood education?
- ▶ Why do you believe early childhood funds are often targeted for cuts by the state?
- ▶ Do you believe all families in the community/families you know have equal access to quality early childhood education? Why/why not?

what we have termed the “middle-class paradox.” The middle-class paradox was repeatedly invoked by both parents and staff, although they did not use those precise words. It pertains to the fact that poor/low-income families tend to qualify for government aid to obtain childcare, and upper middle-class families tend to have the means to send their children to private centers, but lower middle-class families are left in the lurch. The paradox lies in the fact that many of these families do not qualify for aid based on their income, yet do not have sufficient resources to pay for care. Some who do receive aid were aware of this potential pitfall, and intentionally restricted their incomes to avoid becoming ineligible, which would lead to a net loss in their income. A staff member recounted:

I had a friend who called to get assistance and she was doing okay, she worked with me, and we all



made decent money as preschool teachers. But she had a child and she was trying to get some help paying for his childcare. They told her she made too much money. And she's like, well, okay, I make this much money but I still cannot afford childcare, so what am I supposed to do? And they said "well, you should probably ask your hours to be cut or quit that job and get a part-time job!" (background chuckles)

The middle-class paradox left both staff and parents frustrated and stupefied. To them, it embodied everything that is wrong with the approach to ECE in the United States. Many felt that the system encouraged people to not work and go on welfare, rather than rewarding them for maintaining steady employment. One staff member articulated this idea:

I think the system itself is just backwards. If you have a job, and you need daycare assistance, you get put on a waiting list and you have to wait up to two years before you can get that help. But if you don't have a job, and you're getting help from the county, you get daycare like that (snaps fingers). That's a barrier. It should be, in my opinion, the other way around. If you have a job you should be able to get daycare if you can prove that you are working. That's helping someone.

In many of the parent and staff interviews, discussion about eligibility for assistance closely aligned with respondents' perceptions of an overly complicated bureaucratic system. These discussions pertained to the system itself and how it is organized, as well as individual workers who embodied the negative spirit of the system. In terms of the system itself, staff found themselves drowning in paperwork that, to them, was not necessary. The difficulty with which individuals navigated the system was compounded by perceptions that many of the government workers were not as helpful as they should be, and often acted as "gatekeepers" to assistance in ways that seemed unreasonable to those seeking aid. As one parent stated:

[The worker] treats me like he owns the stuff I'm trying to get, the money or whatever.

Parents voiced general consensus that interactions with government workers were a "crap shoot," in that some are great and some are not, and you never know which kind of worker you might get. Although parents were vocal about the challenges they faced with government workers, they also spoke quite positively about advocates who worked on their behalf, particularly job counselors. The parents in our groups saw these workers as indispensable advocates who were truly motivated to work on behalf of the families, as demonstrated in this story told by a parent:

I've never had to use daycare before for my daughter, and my job counselor got it within two days my daughter was in here, with my job counselor. Any other time she said I'd have to wait like a month [on a] waiting list. She started it in two days so my daughter could go here so I could work. Two days. I was like, dang.

Two additional themes concerning barriers were closely intertwined with perceptions of the bureaucratic system: language barriers and experiences of racism and discrimination. Language barriers, in particular, were often discussed in terms of forms not being available in different languages, communication breakdowns between families and government workers, and the lack of available interpreters. Some comments highlighted how families are not always aware that interpreters are available upon request. Further, others raised the point that availability of forms in different languages is not helpful if the parent seeking the assistance is not literate in any language.

Finally, respondents frequently described their experiences of racism and discrimination. Oftentimes it was couched in content areas described above, such as the bureaucracy or language barriers. However, staff, in particular, recounted personal stories of racism in the course of the work in ECE. Many such stories came from staff of color who were treated skeptically by White families:

I've had kids come in and they see me and then they'd see the other [White] teachers and then they run straight to that teacher. In the beginning when they first start, even the parents would sometimes be iffy about me, but then after a month or

two their kids like playing with me and then, the parents come to me, like "she's really, she's really looking like mommy with you" and "I didn't really expect that," and I'm thinkin' you didn't seem like that, and I'm like what do you mean by, "expect that"?

In general, however, racism and discrimination were infrequently described in personal terms. This finding was especially true for the parents, many of whom directly denied they had any such experiences. Despite this, most respondents readily identified experiences and instances of institutional discrimination, the ways in which our social structures, bureaucracies, and policies differentially impact families of color compared with White families. This tendency to deny personal discrimination while acknowledging the existence of discrimination has long been described in the social-science research literature.<sup>5</sup> One staff member spoke in terms of curriculum:

I have worked at another childcare center in Minneapolis and they didn't have one piece at all in their curriculum about like diversity or inclusion or anything. That wasn't really a focus and there wasn't any training about it, so the example you mentioned where everybody was painted the same so, I can see where the teachers were never really brought aware of it, there's no training around it or how to include children of color.

**Policy.** A key policy-relevant theme pertains to public perceptions of ECE and ECE staff. Staff members perceive little respect for what they do among the public, which includes friends, family, and policy makers. For example, they reported that many seem to perceive their chosen career as temporary, a stepping stone to "something else," and do not properly acknowledge the training they have received or the importance of the work. A recurring theme throughout the interviews is that staff respondents believe the public views ECE as simply "baby-sitting" rather than skilled labor that requires training, hard work, dedication, and engagement with children.

<sup>5</sup> F. Crosby, "The Denial of Personal Discrimination," *American Behavioral Scientist* 27,3 (1984): 371-386.

These mistaken perceptions can be linked to legislative decisions that restrict funding and resources to ECE. A lack of understanding of what staff members actually do and what takes place at high-quality ECE centers inhibits an understanding of how funding is justified and necessary. Staff members at one center suggested that perhaps they should call for the governor to come spend a day at one of the centers:

I think if they can spend a little bit of time, even once a time in life, sit in the classroom for eight hours watching a teacher work, what we're doing. I think that'd really make so much difference. I can see every teacher, how much hard work, even for the infants, even for the little babies. How much heart. Hopefully this governor can come here, really see. "Yeah, I'll stand up, sure I'm supporting you, and oh yeah, oh yeah." No. No. No. No. Never works. They have to come here.

Yes, exactly. And then if, when in office, "Oh my god, this is tough, tough and different. I saw. All the difference I heard." Then change might be possible.

Indeed, another staff group reported attempting to engage former Governor Ventura in a similar discussion:

Governor Ventura said that he thought that children should be watched by a trusted neighbor or a grandmother (laughter). I was working at a preschool in Northeast Minneapolis, a very urban population, and we invited him to take a tour of our center, because we were like "you need to come and see what we do. I have a lesson plan. You know, this week we're studying giraffes. Is your neighbor going to do that? No. You know?" And, I'm sorry, your grandmother isn't good enough, if you want your kids to excel in school, they need to get an education and they need to get it early. We all wanted him to come to our center and tour it. He never did.

## Recommendations and Public Policy Implications

The findings about public perceptions of ECE suggest the need for greater



dissemination of information about what quality ECE is and why it is important. Two recommendations come to the fore:

- ▶ Implement a public-awareness campaign that highlights not only that ECE is important, *but what exactly quality ECE is.*
- ▶ Provide public officials the opportunity to learn about ECE and see quality ECE in action. Given that ECE has emerged as a priority legislative item, the governor and other state legislators should make meaningful visits to quality ECE centers around Minnesota to gain first-hand knowledge of the activities therein.

In addition to the public perceptions of ECE, our observation of the middle-class paradox is one of the key policy-related findings in our analysis. In contrast to the previous recommendations that target knowledge or awareness, the policy recommendations that follow from the middle-class paradox are financial, highlighting the need to support a greater proportion of the community:

- ▶ Increase access to quality programs for 3- to 4-year-old children living at or below 185% poverty through additional resources, and adopt a solution that will expand access to 0- to 5-year-olds by fiscal year 2017.
- ▶ Restore cuts to the childcare system, such as Child Care Assistance reimbursement rates and grants to the

infrastructure needed to train, build, and develop quality childcare.

- ▶ Fully fund the Child Care Assistance Program to eliminate the waiting list.
- ▶ Increase eligibility for Child Care Assistance to 75% of state median income.

Although these recommendations would by no means eliminate the middle-class paradox, they would go a long way toward supporting working parents, allowing them to both advance in their careers and receive high-quality education for their children.

## Concluding Thoughts

We view the current project as an initial exploratory inquiry into the relatively unexamined topic of quality of and access to ECE. Although a great deal of public discourse around the value and need for ECE currently exists, we feel stories such as the ones shared by parents and staff in our study are necessary to provide a human touch to the issue. Moreover, our interviews revealed aspects of the ECE experience from both parent and staff perspectives that are not part of the public conversation. Our goal is that our analysis can help move some of these issues into that public sphere.

It is important to note that the degree to which our findings can be generalized across the Twin Cities metropolitan area are not known. We only conducted our interviews within the context of the YWCA of Minneapolis' ECE Program locations, and thus we do not know how the attitudes

and experiences expressed are similar to or different from those of parents and staff from other ECE centers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area or centers in greater Minnesota. This issue is compounded by our inductive methodology. Although we view our approach as the most appropriate for the research question that we asked, the themes regarding barriers and challenges experienced by ECE staff and parents may be specific to those we interviewed. This situation may be especially true for the parents, as we spoke with relatively few of them.

It is interesting to note that, despite the mostly negative and unpleasant content discussed throughout the interviews, the majority of the interviews ended on a positive note. The respondents felt valued that we cared about their views, and seemed to feel a bit better after expressing them. However, we also received responses that issued a call to action, and see these testimonials as a first step toward change that will improve the lives of all of the children of Minnesota. This call to action emerged in both parent and staff

interviews, but this parent excerpt best captures the spirit expressed:

I think a better question would be, “why won’t they listen?” They obviously see the struggle and everything if we’re applying for like WIC or food stamps. They know that we are reaching out there trying to get help and then people are on it for years and years and years. We can say we need the help, but it’s just like they just won’t listen. So I think a better thing is—is why won’t you listen?

**Moin Syed** is assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on identity development among ethnically diverse youth and the implications of identity development for educational experiences. **Anita Patel** is vice president for racial justice and public policy at the YWCA of Minneapolis. The YWCA Racial Justice and Public Policy programs focus on living the YWCA mission of “eliminating racism and empowering women and girls” through individual and

systemic change. **Lovey H.M. Walker** is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Her current research involves qualitative and quantitative approaches to examining identity development, particularly how people integrate their cultural background into everyday life domains (e.g., academic or professional pursuits).

The authors express their gratitude to the YWCA staff for their assistance with all phases of the project, the graduate students and YWCA facilitators who served as interviewers, and most of all the YWCA staff and parents who took the time to share their experiences.

The research upon which this article is based was supported by a grant from CURA’s Faculty Interactive Research Program. The program was created to encourage University faculty to conduct research with community organizations and collaborators on issues of public policy importance for the state and community. These grants are available to regular faculty at the University of Minnesota and are awarded annually on a competitive basis.

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## 29th Annual Conference on Policy Analysis, Oct. 16

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The 29th Annual Conference on Policy Analysis will be held October 16, 2013, at the Continuing Education and Conference Center on the University of Minnesota’s St. Paul campus. The theme of this year’s conference is “Access and Opportunities: All Things *Not* Being Equal.”

The Founding Fathers of the United States declared that “all men are created equal” and that the government had a responsibility to ensure the unalienable rights tied to this equality. Despite the rhetoric often used about the American Dream and the United States as the Land of Opportunity, we cannot seem to eliminate disparities, and many inequalities continue to grow. What is the cost of these disparities to our society? Whose responsibility is it to reduce or eliminate them? Why does it matter? This year’s conference is designed to look at these questions and consider the policy, political, and implementation aspects of proposed solutions. The

keynote and concurrent sessions will consider these questions at both the macro- and microlevel. In addition, hands-on workshops will provide tools and data resources that might help in the development and analysis of policy related to inequalities and disparities.

The conference is organized with one plenary session and four concurrent sessions in the morning, followed by eight concurrent sessions in the afternoon that address current policy issues and processes. Immediately following the conference, attendees are invited to stay and attend a reception, which will provide further opportunity to network with peers, meet and converse with session presenters, and receive information from cosponsoring organizations, as well as enjoy complimentary hors d’oeuvres, wine, beer, and nonalcoholic beverages.

Founded by the Economic Resource Group, this year’s conference is sponsored by the College of Continuing

Education at the University of Minnesota. Cosponsors of the event include CURA, the Hamline University School of Business, the Center for Policy Studies, and the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

The registration fee for the conference is \$175 if postmarked by October 2 (\$75 for students), or \$200 if postmarked after October 2 (\$100 for students). Student registrations must include a current college or university fees statement to qualify for the student rate. Once again this year, CURA is supporting a limited number of partial scholarships for attendees from Minnesota nonprofit organizations. Applications for scholarships are due September 19. For more information about the conference or nonprofit organization scholarships, or to register for the event, visit [www.cce.umn.edu/policyanalysis](http://www.cce.umn.edu/policyanalysis) or contact Nick McArdle at [cceconf3@umn.edu](mailto:cceconf3@umn.edu) or 612-625-5969.



# Program and Staff Updates

**T**he Hennepin–University Partnership (HUP), in collaboration with Hennepin County Public Health Department and Hennepin County Library, hosted forums on May 10 and June 21 to connect front-line staff from Hennepin County with University of Minnesota faculty who have expertise on brain development that is relevant to the County’s work with children and families. The first forum, “Understanding Infant Brain Development,” featured Megan Gunnar, director of the University’s Institute of Child Development, and Ann Masten, Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Psychology, and drew 195 County staff. The second forum, “Maladaptation and Resilience in Maltreated Children,” featured Dante Cicchetti, William Harris Professor of Child Development and Psychiatry, and drew 90 attendees. HUP is working with County and University contacts to develop possible follow-ups, including providing more “research-to-practice” resources for County staff. For those interested in this or other topics related to Hennepin County, local government, and the University of Minnesota, visit the Hennepin–University Partnership Interactive Site at [hup.hoop.la](http://hup.hoop.la). This website is an online resource for Hennepin County and University of Minnesota faculty, staff, and students to converse about their interests, share resources, and exchange ideas.

The **Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO)** extends its thanks to Yia Yang for his five years of work at CURA. Yang recently began a new job as a coordinator at the University of Minnesota’s Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence, where he will be working with University students. MCNO wishes him all the best. He will be missed.

For the second consecutive year, Crow Wing County received a National Association of Counties (NACo) National Achievement Award for a project supported by CURA’s

**Community Assistantship Program (CAP).** Crow Wing County received the award for its Lakeshore Impervious Surface Coverage Research Study, conducted in 2012 with assistance from Robert Backes, a CAP research assistant from St. Cloud State University. The project calculated impervious-surface data for 32 lakes of more than 500 acres in size using high-resolution aerial photography and property sketches from the County’s Property Valuation and Classification Office. Studies have shown that water quality begins to decline when impervious-surface coverage reaches 12–15%. These local data will help guide land-use decisions to improve water quality in lakes and rivers within the county.

CURA was recently awarded a grant from the McKnight Foundation to support expansion of its already successful **Neighborhood Partnership Initiative**. This new pilot initiative is centered on the role of technology in strengthening low-income communities in the Twin Cities. The program will work with diverse communities in the Twin Cities to collaboratively create, design, and deploy community technology tools and practices.

The **Resilient Communities Project (RCP)** and its community partner for the 2013–2014 academic year, the City of North St. Paul, hosted a kick-off event for the partnership on September 6. More than 60 city staff, residents, business owners, and community partners joined University faculty, staff, and students to inaugurate the year-long partnership, which will match more than 20 city-identified projects with dozens of University of Minnesota courses and hundreds of students during the fall and spring semesters. RCP Program Manager **Mike Greco** will be sharing success stories from RCP’s first-year partnership with the City of Minnetonka at the Upper Midwest Planning Conference in Rochester, Minnesota in September, as well as the

Imagining America National Conference in Syracuse, New York and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education Conference in Nashville, Tennessee in October. RCP is pleased to welcome **Nancy Ferber**, a first-year graduate student in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning Program at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, who was recently hired as a program assistant.

**Will Craig** begins his 54th (and last) year at the University of Minnesota, where he entered as a freshman in 1960. He has been at CURA since 1970 and has served as associate director since 1999. This past summer, he organized sessions for the 24th Annual Conference of the National States Geographic Information Council. His focus is on helping states develop and support state-wide address systems, complete with geographic coordinates, that will help emergency responders, the U.S. Census Bureau, and others do their work more efficiently and effectively. Several states have such a system, but each has been created in a different way. The different approaches will be documented, accompanied by recommendations and best practices. In addition, Craig is serving on a study panel for the Transportation Research Board’s Airport Cooperative Research Program. The thrust of this study is integrating airport GIS data with public-agency GIS, focusing on barriers, opportunities, and successful examples. Craig was also recently reappointed to the Minnesota Statewide Geospatial Advisory Council.

In September, **Neeraj Mehta** traveled to Portland, Oregon, with 40 leaders from communities of color in the Twin Cities to participate in a learning exchange with the Coalition of Communities of Color, an organization focused on addressing the socioeconomic disparities, institutional racism, and inequity of services experienced by Portland families, children, and communities.

# Waterpipe Smoking among Somali and Oromo Immigrants in Twin Cities: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs

By Erick Marigi, Abdi Jibril, and Janet Thomas

**Abstract:** The Twin Cities are home to a large community of Somali and Oromo, most of whom are new immigrants from East Africa. Waterpipe smoking, also known as shisha or hookah smoking, is widespread among the adult East African population, but the practice is also gaining popularity among young people. This article describes research into the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about waterpipe usage among new Somali and Oromo immigrants through a series of “listening circles” (informal focus groups) composed of Somali and Oromo community members. The authors found that the use of waterpipe smoking among Somali and Oromo community members in Minnesota is socially accepted by both young adults and elders, in both public and private social settings. Study participants reported that they believed that waterpipe smoking is less harmful and therefore more acceptable than cigarette use. These results suggest that the Twin Cities have a great need to provide for culturally sensitive prevention and cessation efforts to address this emerging trend in tobacco use among the Somali/Oromo people. The research upon which this article is based received support from CURA as a New Initiative.

The Twin Cities are home to a large community of East African (Somali and Oromo) new immigrants, estimated to include approximately 30,000 Somalis and 12,000 Oromos. Somalis currently compose the largest African refugee group living in the United States, with more than 10,330 new arrivals in fiscal year 2006 alone.<sup>1</sup> Results of a 2005 study indicate that adult cigarette-smoking rates

<sup>1</sup> K.K. Giuliani, O. Mire, L.C. Ehrlich, M.H. Stigler, and D.K. Dubois, “Characteristics and Prevalence of Tobacco Use among Somali Youth in Minnesota,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 39,6 Suppl 1 (2010): S48–55; Minnesota Department of Health, The Minnesota Center for Health Statistics, “Teens and Tobacco in Minnesota, the View from 2008: Results from the Minnesota Youth Tobacco and Asthma Survey.” St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Health, 2008. Available at [www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/tobacco/teenstobacco08.pdf](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/tobacco/teenstobacco08.pdf).



**Waterpipe smoking, a centuries-old method of tobacco smoking with its origins in Persia and India, has gained popularity around the globe. In the Twin Cities, the practice is especially prevalent among the Somali and Oromo immigrant communities.**

among East Africans in Minnesota may be as high as 50%. In addition, the study documented widespread use of waterpipe smoking, also known as shisha or hookah smoking, in this new immigrant community.<sup>2</sup>

Waterpipe smoking, which originated in ancient Persia and India, is a centuries-old traditional method of tobacco use originally confined to older men. Today, smoking tobacco from a waterpipe has gained popularity around the globe, including the United States, predominantly among young people.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> K.K. Giuliani, O.A. Mire, S. Jama, D.K. Dubois, D. Pryce, S. Fahia, and L.C. Ehrlich, “Tobacco Use and Cessation among Somalis in Minnesota,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 35,6 Suppl 1 (2008): S457–462.

<sup>3</sup> W. Maziak, “Commentary: The Waterpipe—a Global Epidemic or a Passing Fad,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 39,3 (2010): 857–859.

It is estimated that 10–20% of U.S. college students smoke waterpipe, often smoking in hookah bars, lounges, and at home.<sup>4</sup> A typical session involves smoking for 45–60 minutes, and is typically a social event practiced in groups with the same mouthpiece passed from person to person.<sup>5</sup>

A limited number of studies have examined the composition of

<sup>4</sup> T. Eissenberg, K.D. Ward, S. Smith-Simone, and W. Maziak, “Waterpipe Tobacco Smoking on a U.S. College Campus: Prevalence and Correlates,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 42,5 (2008): 526–529; B.A. Primack, J. Sidani, A.A. Agarwal, W.G. Shadel, E.C. Donny, and T.E. Eissenberg, “Prevalence of and Associations with Waterpipe Tobacco Smoking Among U.S. University Students,” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 36,1 (2008): 81–86.

<sup>5</sup> K. Asotra, “Hooked on Hookah? What You Don’t Know Can Kill You,” *Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program Newsletter* 7,3 (2005): 1–10. Available at [www.trdrp.org/newsletter/2005/805nwsltrprt.pdf](http://www.trdrp.org/newsletter/2005/805nwsltrprt.pdf).



waterpipe smoke. Shihadeh and Saleh used a smoking simulation device to approximate the puffing profiles of waterpipe smokers in Lebanon to increase understanding of the tobacco toxins consumed during an average hookah smoking session. They found that waterpipe tobacco produced substantially more tar (100-fold), nicotine (4-fold), carbon monoxide (11-fold), and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (2–5-fold) than that produced from a single cigarette.<sup>6</sup> Generally, waterpipe smokers believe that the hose and water-bowl system serve as an effective filter of tobacco toxicants. Although it is true that the water filter system in the hookah pipe may filter out some tobacco-specific carcinogens (i.e., cancer-causing agents),<sup>7</sup> waterpipe smoke contains many of the same additional toxicants as cigarette smoke, including those that cause cardiovascular disease, lung disease, and cancer. Although it is tempting to compare the dangers of hookah smoking to that of cigarette smoking, the waterpipe delivery system, combustible materials, puff volume, and tobacco constituents are so different from cigarette smoking that data on smoke composition and toxicity cannot be extrapolated, one to the other.

Contrary to popular assumptions, waterpipe smoke can lead to nicotine dependence. Similar to the cravings for nicotine seen among cigarette smokers, frequent users of waterpipe may experience cravings, inability to quit despite repeated attempts, and abstinence-induced nicotine withdrawal symptoms that can be suppressed by subsequent waterpipe use.<sup>8</sup> In a 2005 study, 13% of current waterpipe users acknowledged that they are “hooked on waterpipe,” and 28% indicated an interest in quitting.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. Shihadeh and R. Saleh, “Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons, Carbon Monoxide, ‘Tar,’ and Nicotine in the Mainstream Smoke Aerosol of the Narghile Water Pipe,” *Food and Chemical Toxicology* 43,5 (2005): 655–661.

<sup>7</sup> K.M. Sajid, K. Chaouachi, and R. Mahmood, “Hookah Smoking and Cancer: Carcinoembryonic Antigen (CEA) Levels in Exclusive/Ever Hookah Smokers,” *Harm Reduction Journal* 5,19 (2008): 5–19.

<sup>8</sup> W. Maziak, S. Rastam, I. Ibrahim, K.D. Ward, A. Shihadeh, and T. Eissenberg, “CO Exposure, Puff Topography, and Subjective Effects in Waterpipe Tobacco Smokers,” *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* 11,7 (2009): 806–811.

<sup>9</sup> K.D. Ward, F. Hammal, M.W. VanderWeg, T. Eissenberg, T. Asfar, S. Rastam, and W. Maziak, “Are Waterpipe Users Interested in Quitting?,” *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* 7,1 (2005): 149–156.



**Waterpipe smoking has become a norm in Minnesota Somali and Oromo communities among both the young and old, and is commonly used at social gatherings in homes with both family and friends.**

**Figure 1. Results of Listening Circles among Somali and Oromo Elders: Major Themes**

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Waterpipe smoking (WPS) is very popular in both communities</li> <li>▶ It is bad for their community as a whole</li> <li>▶ There is a need for people to be informed and educated about the dangers of WPS</li> <li>▶ WPS is very popular among the youth in their community</li> <li>▶ Concern exists about WPS being a gateway drug to other drugs</li> <li>▶ There is awareness that WPS is addictive and dangerous to one’s health</li> <li>▶ Gratitude was expressed for the attention being brought to the issue of WPS</li> <li>▶ WPS is against Islamic beliefs</li> <li>▶ When smoked in homes, nonsmokers, even children, are exposed to the second-hand smoke</li> <li>▶ WPS is more popular among women than men</li> <li>▶ Concern that tobacco may be mixed with other substances, like khat</li> </ul>	<p><b>Somali</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Cultural issues such as language barriers between youth and elders make it very challenging to monitor youth behavior</li> <li>▶ WPS is not a traditional part of Somali culture, it is new</li> </ul> <p><b>Oromo</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ WPS is ubiquitous, occurring at most social gatherings</li> <li>▶ Shisha is smoked during ceremonies</li> <li>▶ WPS is a part of the Oromo culture, even back home in Africa</li> </ul>

In the Twin Cities, waterpipe smoking is especially prevalent among the Somali and Oromo immigrant communities. Acculturation and unique cultural barriers may impact waterpipe smoking prevalence among these new East African immigrant communities.

This article describes our research group’s investigation into the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about waterpipe use among this community through a series of “listening circles” (informal focus groups) composed of Somali and Oromo young adults and elders.



## Research Methodology

We developed our study methods and procedures through a partnership with Professor Sirad Osman, Ph.D., of St. Paul New Americans Community Services, a community health center and social service agency that provides affordable, culturally appropriate, and supportive resettlement services necessary for community self-sufficiency. We also collaborated with the Brian Coyle Center and the Somali and Oromo student organizations at both the University of Minnesota and Normandale Community College in our recruitment efforts.

We used several different recruiting methods to invite community members to participate in our study, including an e-mail sent to the list-serv hosted by the participating Somali and Oromo student organizations; flyers posted in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis; and word of mouth. Eligible participants were from the Somali or Oromo communities and were at least 18 years of age. We provided those who chose to attend these open discussions with a light meal from a local restaurant specializing in East African cuisine.

Given the possibility that the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about waterpipe smoking may differ when the opinions of young adults are compared with community elders, we offered separate listening circles for these two groups. The young adults were invited to two co-ed group sessions, one held at the University of Minnesota and another at Normandale Community College in Bloomington. We enrolled a total of 48 participants (20 female and 28 male). Given the possibility of gender-specific beliefs about hookah smoking among older East African members, we elected to offer gender-specific elder listening circles. We conducted one male and one female listening circle among Somali elders at the Cedar Riverside Pentagon apartments and one male and one female listening circle among Oromo elders at the Brian Coyle Center. We enrolled a total of 86 participants (41 female and 45 male). These groups were facilitated by a young adult Somali male trained in moderating group discussions, Dr. Osman, and several culturally matched members of our research team. Each discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes and was launched with the simple statement, "We are interested in understanding your thoughts and

opinions about hookah smoking in your community. Please share your knowledge and beliefs with us." Given the informal nature of our listening circles, we did not record the content of the sessions but a research assistant took notes.

## Findings

Figures 1 and 2 summarize findings from the listening circles. Overall results indicated that waterpipe smoking has become a norm in Minnesota Somali and Oromo communities among both the young and old, and is commonly used at many social gatherings in homes with both family (including community elders) and friends. Study participants had limited knowledge about the health

effects of waterpipe smoking, had mixed perceptions about the addictive nature of waterpipe smoking, and lacked awareness about risks to nonsmokers (e.g., children) from exposure to waterpipe smoke. Somali and Oromo young adults reported that waterpipe smoking in hookah bars is "the latest fad," and is associated with social popularity ("being cool"). They considered waterpipe smoking to be more socially acceptable and safer than cigarette smoking. Young men reported that they were more likely to smoke at lounges, whereas both elder men and women usually smoked at home. Community elders in the study expressed concern that waterpipe tobacco may be a "gateway drug" to other recreational drugs of abuse.

## Figure 2. Results of Listening Circles among Somali and Oromo Youth: Major Themes

### Waterpipe smoking (WPS) is a social norm among East African immigrants:

- ▶ WPS has become a norm in most social gatherings.
- ▶ Use is prevalent with both family (including community elders) and friends.
- ▶ WPS in hookah bars is "the latest fad," associated with social popularity ("cool")

### WPS is subject to peer pressure:

- ▶ Friends pressure each other to smoke waterpipe
- ▶ The ubiquitous use of WPS in social settings contributes to nonsmokers feeling "left out"

### Lack of information/education on WPS:

- ▶ Smokers' source of knowledge is from friends/family or own experiences with WPS vs. credible sources of health information.
- ▶ Culturally, second-hand smoke associated with WPS, is not considered dangerous
- ▶ Precautions are not taken when smoking around children

### Cultural perspectives on WPS:

- ▶ Culturally, WPS is considered more permissible than cigarettes
- ▶ Parents are generally less concerned about their children's use of WPS but are concerned about cigarette use.

### Islamic perspective on WPS:

- ▶ Islamic/Muslim traditional beliefs state that any substance that may alter an individual's state of mind should be avoided

### Gender differences in WPS:

- ▶ It is more socially acceptable for men to engage in WPS
- ▶ Women are less likely to engage in WPS in public settings

### No age differences in the prevalence of WPS:

- ▶ WPS use exists among teenagers through elders
- ▶ Younger men are more likely to smoke at hookah lounges (ads on Facebook) while elders and women usually smoke at home

### Political perspectives on WPS

- ▶ Nonsmokers suggest that WPS should be regulated like other forms of tobacco to inform perspective users of its dangers (health effects) and to curb spread among teens/young adults

## Summary

Results from our listening circles indicate that the use of waterpipe smoking among Somali and Oromo community members in Minnesota is socially accepted by both young adults and elders, in both public and private social settings and is very common. Study participants reported that they believed that waterpipe smoking is less harmful than cigarettes and more culturally acceptable. These results suggest that the provision of culturally sensitive prevention and cessation efforts are needed to address this emerging trend in tobacco use among the Somali and Oromo new immigrant communities.

The information gleaned from these listening circles led to the development of a detailed quantitative survey. Our research group in the Department of Medicine at the University of Minnesota, in collaboration with CURA, is currently recruiting young adult college students to complete this survey to

further enhance our understanding of hookah use and nicotine dependence among Somali and Oromo young-adult college students in the Twin Cities area. The overall aim of this program of research is to inform the development of a culturally appropriate intervention to increase awareness about the health impacts of waterpipe smoking in these underrepresented communities.

**Erick Marigi is an undergraduate senior student at St. Olaf College, where he is pursuing a double major in biology and math. He worked on this report under the mentorship of Janet Thomas while an intern in the Program in Health Disparities Research in Summer 2012. He is a member of the Minnesota Future Doctors organization and is applying to medical school. Abdi Jibril graduated from the University of Minnesota in May 2012 with a degree in physiology. He began work in the area of hookah smoking among the Oromo and Somali communities while a**

**summer research student in the Program in Health Disparities Research in 2011. He is a member of the Minnesota Future Doctors organization and is currently applying to medical school. Janet Thomas, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Minnesota. She is a behavioral scientist targeting tobacco control and a licensed psychologist specializing in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Her primary research interest is tobacco control efforts among underserved populations including African American, Native American and East African communities.**

The research upon which this article is based received support from CURA as a New Initiative. Such grants provide support for projects that are initiated by faculty, community organizations, government agencies, or students and that fall outside CURA's existing program areas. Additional funding was provided by a grant from the Department of Medicine at the University of Minnesota.

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## Project Assistance Available from CURA

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**T**he Center for Urban and Regional Affairs supports research and technical assistance through a number of individual programs, each with their own deadlines and application procedures.

■ **The Community Assistantship Program (CAP)** matches community-based nonprofit organizations, citizen groups, and government agencies in Greater Minnesota with students who can provide research assistance. Eligible organizations define a research project, submit an application, and, if accepted, are matched with a qualified student to carry out the research. The application deadline for spring semester 2014 assistantships (January through May 2014) is October 30, 2013. For more information, to discuss potential projects, or for assistance with applications, contact CAP coordinator Will Craig at 612-625-3321 or [wrcraig@umn.edu](mailto:wrcraig@umn.edu), or visit [www.cura.umn.edu/cap](http://www.cura.umn.edu/cap).

■ **The Community Geographic Information Systems (CGIS)** program provides technical assistance in mapping, data analysis, and GIS to

community-based organizations and nonprofits in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Staff at the CGIS program specialize in parcel-level mapping, demographic analysis, and Internet-based GIS technologies. The CGIS program has no formal application process or deadline to apply. Project requests can be made by phone, e-mail, or online at [z.umn.edu/cgishelp](http://z.umn.edu/cgishelp), and generally can be turned around within two weeks. For more information, to discuss potential projects, or for assistance with data needs, contact CGIS program coordinator Jeff Matson at 612-625-0081 or [jmatson@umn.edu](mailto:jmatson@umn.edu), or visit [www.cura.umn.edu/cgis](http://www.cura.umn.edu/cgis).

■ **The Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program** (the Nelson Program) provides student research assistance to community and neighborhood-based organizations and suburban government agencies in the Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area. Priority is given to groups serving diverse communities. Projects may include any issue relevant to a neighborhood or community's needs and interests, including planning,

program development, or program evaluation. Applications from organizations collaborating on a project are encouraged. The application deadline for spring semester 2014 assistantships (January through May 2014) is October 30, 2013. For more information, contact CURA community programs assistant Jeff Corn at 612-625-0744 or [curacbr@umn.edu](mailto:curacbr@umn.edu), or visit [www.cura.umn.edu/nelson-program](http://www.cura.umn.edu/nelson-program).

■ **The Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO)** trains people to work effectively in organizing and staffing neighborhood organizations. It trains new organizers and increases the skills of existing neighborhood staff, leaders, and volunteers through internships, workshops, and other programs. For more information about MCNO and the training opportunities available, contact Jay Clark at 612-625-2513 or [clark037@umn.edu](mailto:clark037@umn.edu), or Ned Moore at 612-625-5805 or [nedmoore@umn.edu](mailto:nedmoore@umn.edu), or visit [www.cura.umn.edu/mcno](http://www.cura.umn.edu/mcno).

# Representing Poor Students' Interests: Insights and Lessons from the Fight to Save North High in Minneapolis

by M. David Forrest

**Abstract:** By many accounts, public officials have inadequately represented today's poor students, especially those of color. At the center of this inadequacy is their tendency to equate poor students' interests with efforts to close so-called "failing" schools. This article examines how and with what consequences urban social-justice advocates have contested these efforts. To do so, it draws on evidence from a case study of advocacy efforts surrounding North Community High School, a predominantly poor and black public school in Minneapolis. The article describes how advocates in the North High Community Coalition successfully resisted attempts to close the school under the pretense of its apparent failure, examines how these advocates alternatively constructed and represented poor students' interests and attached them to the redesign of North High, and concludes by articulating three general lessons about the political representation of poor students and identifying possibilities for future research regarding these groups' efforts. This project was supported by a CURA Dissertation Research Grant.

By many scholarly and journalistic accounts, public officials have inadequately represented today's poor students, especially those of color. At the center of this inadequacy is their tendency to equate poor students' interests with efforts to close "failing" schools,<sup>1</sup> a tendency encouraged by the edicts of the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). These schools—often characterized by high proportions of poor students of color and identified by their dwindling enrollment and low standardized-test scores—are accused of wasting resources, educating ineffectively, and, ultimately, lowering student achievement. Many officials argue school districts can best serve poor

<sup>1</sup> For stylistic reasons, I will not continue to place quotes around the failing label. The reader should, however, continue to read this label as constructed and contestable rather than self-evident.



**North High supporters at an MPS community meeting, protesting the proposal to close the school. The message on their signs—"Stop the Privatization of Public Education!"—conveys one of the multiple constructions used by members of the North High Community Coalition.**

students by closing failing schools and expanding school choice, most often in the form of open enrollment or charter schools. However, by stressing school performance per se as the primary influence on poor students' educational outcomes, these efforts have obfuscated the manifold challenges that surround them.

As much if not more than anyone else, urban social-justice advocates have contested this *failing-school* construction of poor students' interests. Working with activist coalitions, community organizations, and teachers' unions, these advocates have mobilized against mass school closures in poor and racially segregated neighborhoods. In doing so, they have also positioned themselves as alternative representatives of poor students—those who attach these students' interests to the redesign, versus the closing, of failing public schools.

Many commentators have highlighted these advocates' efforts and their potential significance for reforming public education. However, important questions about these efforts remain underexplored: What alternative (that is, *non-failing-school*) constructions of poor students' interests do they actually offer? What are their advantages and disadvantages for the redesign of public schools? What lessons do they hold for future efforts on behalf of poor students? In this article, I address these questions by drawing on evidence from a case study of advocacy efforts surrounding North Community High School, a failing public school in Minneapolis.

## Background

**Fighting to Save North High.** On October 12, 2010, the superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) issued a proposal to "phase out," or



close, North Community High School—perhaps the most publicly maligned failing school in the city (“[B]urn North High School down!,” City Councilman Don Samuels once exclaimed<sup>2</sup>). North High, as it is more commonly called, was and is one of the poorest and most disproportionately Black schools in Minneapolis. It is located, not coincidentally, in Near North, a segregated north Minneapolis neighborhood with the same income and racial demographics.

The superintendent, in explaining her proposal, underlined the low scholastic achievement of North High students and framed the school itself as a primary cause. Citing below average standardized-test scores and dwindling enrollment, she claimed that it was incorrigibly challenged and in decline.<sup>3</sup> Her understood intention was to fix its apparent failure by opening a new (and already authorized) charter school, Minneapolis College Prep. This intention comported with both NCLB recommendations and established trends in MPS, a district that had already closed several public schools and, following its strategic plan, authorized an increasing number of charter schools.

An African American-led advocacy organization calling itself the Save North High Coalition (hereafter, the Coalition) immediately mobilized against the superintendent’s proposal. The Coalition’s members at the time included North High’s Alumni Association, the Friends of North Foundation (a nonprofit foundation that provides fundraising and volunteer support for the school), the Public Education Justice Alliance of Minnesota (a citywide group of socialist and student activists, current and former teachers, parents, and interested city residents), Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (a nonprofit community organization focused on issues of racial and economic justice), a few parents and students, several community members, and various citywide supporters, such as me.

I began working with the Coalition in October 2010, less than two weeks

after the superintendent issued her proposal. From then until the spring of 2012—by which point, the Coalition had stopped meeting—I accompanied its members and supporters to more than 40 meetings and public events. I used my participation in these meetings and events as an opportunity to explore how the organization constructed and represented the interests of North High students. To enrich and corroborate my analyses, I also gathered documentary evidence surrounding the organization’s efforts, such as news articles, flyers, and online video footage.

**School Failure or District Abandonment?** According to the Coalition, the superintendent’s proposal confused more than clarified the challenges facing North High students. These students, they argued, suffered not from a failing school but a district that had abandoned them, a trend perpetuated by her proposal. As one collective statement contended, “The district would rather throw out its most valuable assets than do the hard lifting to improve educational outcomes for North’s current students and students living on the north side.”<sup>4</sup>

Coalition members reframed low test scores and declining enrollment as proof of MPS’s abandonment. Low test scores, they argued, said more about the presence of unaddressed challenges facing North High students than school performance per se.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, they claimed that the school’s declining enrollment did not stem from its apparent failure but several MPS policy decisions. These decisions included, for example, the closing of North High’s feeder schools, the elimination of its guaranteed-attendance zone, and the implementation of various open-enrollment programs. Some members also suggested that individual district employees had actively discouraged enrollment at and support for North High.

After extensive lobbying and demonstrating by the Coalition, less than a month after issuing her initial proposal, the superintendent withdrew it and introduced a new one. This new proposal requested permission to hire

a consultant who would lead district officials and school and community stakeholders in designing a “new” North High that would drive academic achievement for students.<sup>6</sup> At a meeting attended by more than 200 school supporters, the school board granted her request.

### Constructing Poor Students’ Interests

Though it was a clear victory for the Coalition, the board’s decision did not so much resolve their concerns as force them to shift focus. To save the school, they would now have to shape its redesign as a community stakeholder and/or agitator—a shift acknowledged in their choice to rechristen themselves the North High *Community* Coalition. This new focus raised several important and already looming questions. If the recommendation to close North High rested on an inadequate *failing-school* construction of poor students’ interests, what alternative construction should they, as student and community representatives, bring to the redesign process? What educational challenges facing poor students did the *failing-school* construction obfuscate? What should redesign efforts do to address these challenges?

Coalition members primarily explored four alternative constructions, each of which is described below. The descriptions specify where each construction locates the interest of poor students, how each characterizes the educational challenges facing these students, and the practical implications of each for the redesign of North High and similar public schools (Table 1). These constructions, although theoretically distinct, were not always mutually exclusive in practice. For example, proponents of all four supported providing more adult mentorship to North High students. However, as I make clear, they did so for different reasons and, on the whole, fostered different visions of the school’s potential relationship to students.

The first two constructions centered on the goal—enforced by NCLB and emphasized in the district’s strategic plan—of making North High a high-performing (on standardized tests) *choice* for students.

<sup>2</sup> T. Collins, “Samuels Steps into North High School Lion’s Den,” *Star Tribune*, 15 February 2007, [www.startribune.com/local/11556081.html](http://www.startribune.com/local/11556081.html).

<sup>3</sup> B.H. Johnson, Letter to Families of North Community High School, 8 October 2010, [minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2010/10/documents/Minneapolis-North-Closing.pdf](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2010/10/documents/Minneapolis-North-Closing.pdf); B.H. Johnson, Recommendation Regarding Phasing Out North Community High School, 12 October 2010, [v3.boardbook.org/Public/PublicItemDownload.aspx?ik=30670503](http://v3.boardbook.org/Public/PublicItemDownload.aspx?ik=30670503).

<sup>4</sup> Friends of North Foundation and North High Alumni Association, Frequently Asked Questions—North High School, 14 October 2010, author’s personal files.

<sup>5</sup> Teasing out the effect of school performance on student achievement is notoriously difficult. Even assuming the adequacy of standardized tests as measures of achievement and educational success, most analyses pay insufficient attention to context.

<sup>6</sup> The proposal also sought to deny North High a freshman class for one year, fostering a clean break and transition to the “new” school. The Coalition opposed this provision and, after several months, the district eventually abandoned it.

**Table 1. Constructions of Poor Students' Interests**

Construction	Failing School	Good School	Supportive School	Public School	Community School
<b>Specification</b> <i>Poor students' interests lie in efforts to...</i>	...sanction and close failing schools and expand school choice.	...rebrand failing schools as "good" and marketable schools.	...reconstitute failing schools as supportive schools for underserved communities.	...restore and protect failing schools as well-funded public schools.	...reorganize failing schools as community-controlled schools.
<b>Challenges</b> <i>The main educational challenge facing poor students is...</i>	...low school performance, caused by ineffective and inefficient educators.	...a failing-school stigma that discourages them and drives away supporters.	...an intersecting and community-specific set of unaddressed needs.	...the unequal distribution of educational resources, made worse by NCLB.	...top-down district management and disempowered poor communities.
<b>Redesign</b> <i>The redesign of failing schools should...</i>	N/A	...advertise them in ways that excite current students and attract supporters.	...engage poor communities, identify their students' needs, and implement a suitable program.	...expand their budget and educational resources for students.	...cede more resources and decision-making authority to poor students' communities.

► **Good School.** The first construction located poor students' interests in efforts to rebrand North High as a *good school*. As one Coalition member said, "We need to package the positive things [happening in the school] right now." Doing so, others suggested, would get current students excited about their education, raise performance, and create incentives for potential students, talented staff, and community members to join and support them. This *good-school* construction implied that the primary challenge facing North High students was the failing-school label itself. The label, many Coalition members argued, constituted a class- and race-coded stigma that discouraged poor students and drove away potential support. Consequently, redesign efforts should implement a targeted and positive marketing strategy around the school. The redesign, one member asserted, must "figure out who our customers are and advertise to them, saying 'North [High] is exactly what you need.'"

► **Supportive School.** The second construction located poor students' interests in efforts to *support* them as members of underserved communities. As one community member said, the district must "define ... programs that are uniquely matched to the community [and ...] attract students ... who would benefit from those programs." This *supportive-school* construction intimated that

North High students were primarily challenged by an intersecting and community-specific set of unmet needs—such as needs for greater mentorship, parental involvement, housing stability, and a healthy learning environment. Proponents of this construction argued that redesign efforts should respond accordingly, engaging students' communities, identifying their needs through this engagement, and implementing a suitable program to raise their performance. Early program suggestions from Coalition members included, for example, offering more mentorship opportunities, providing on-site housing services, and greening the classroom and curriculum.

The other two constructions emphasized the goal of making North High a stable *public resource* for students, the existence of which does not rest on test scores or choice mechanisms:

► **Public School.** The third construction located poor students' interests in efforts to restore and protect North High as a well-funded *public school*. One of the Coalition's socialist members put the point succinctly: "We have to make the district publicly commit to reinvesting in the school." This *public-school* construction implied that the main challenge facing North High students was an overall decline and unequal distribution of educational resources.

As things stood, several Coalition members argued, federal and district policies had exacerbated this challenge. School choice and high-stakes testing had stimulated the flow of students and resources away from public schools attended by poor students and toward testing companies, wealthier public schools, and an unreliable patchwork of charter schools. These policies, one member summarized, "are designed to make [public] schools [like North High] fail [and . . .] aid privatization." Redesign efforts should, thus, focus on expanding North High's educational resources—such as a full liberal-arts curriculum, school supplies, a well-rounded and well-paid faculty, reduced class sizes,<sup>7</sup> and extensive socioeconomic supports for students' families.

► **Community School.** The fourth construction located poor students' interests in efforts to reorganize North High as a *community-controlled school*. In other words, one Coalition member stated, "the community [must] claim the school" as its own resource. According to this *community-school* construction, the

<sup>7</sup> At the time, North High already had small class sizes, due to its reduced enrollment. District officials, to some extent, saw this as an inefficient use of resources rather than a potential asset to the school and its students. See T. Post, "At North High, Freshmen Mark a New Beginning," *MPR News*, 19 September 2012, [minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/09/19/education/north-high-freshman-class-turnaround](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/09/19/education/north-high-freshman-class-turnaround).

challenge facing North High students was not just distributive inequality but community disempowerment. Without community power, some members argued, district officials would (continue to) use school resources to address their own needs before the specific needs of North High students and families. Officials had consistently emphasized, for example, standardized-test preparation (a district need) over providing wrap-around socioeconomic support for students' families (a community need). This construction suggested that, to expand community power, the North High redesign should cede more resources and decision-making (not just advisory) authority to students' families and other community members. Moreover, one Coalition member argued, community members ought to solicit more support from "community partners [such as] the Urban League, churches, and businesses with an interest in training students to fill [living-wage] jobs."

### Advantages and Disadvantages of the Supportive-School Construction

As the redesign process moved forward, the Coalition gravitated most pointedly toward a *supportive-school* construction (although debates within the organization continued throughout its existence). That is to say, they espoused a redesign process aimed at raising North High students' performance by supporting them as members of underserved communities.

Coalition members gained district backing for and promoted this construction in several key ways. First, they added MPS as a member of the Coalition. This addition symbolized and formalized a growing engagement between themselves as community and student representatives and the district as the manager of the school. Second, on January 29, 2011, they hosted a community potluck at North High. At this potluck, community members were invited to "re-vision" the school, identifying the types of school culture, curriculum, community support, leadership, and faculty and staff that they thought would support student excellence. The superintendent and multiple school board members also accepted invitations to attend. Third, the Coalition helped several community members—including many from its own ranks—secure

spots on district-controlled redesign advisory committees. One was a hiring committee formed to advise the interview and selection process for the consultant who would lead North High's redesign. Another was a community advisory board formed to advise the redesign process itself. In cooperation with the Coalition, the district assembled both committees as a way to identify and incorporate students' community-specific needs into the redesign.

Through these and other measures, the Coalition successfully deployed the *supportive-school* construction. However, the question remains, how did this construction actually advantage and/or disadvantage North High redesign efforts? Because these efforts are still under way, and because my exposure to them was mostly in their formative rather than implementation stages, any answers I give are necessarily provisional.

That said, in my observations, I encountered two main advantages and two main disadvantages. To be clear, the *supportive-school* construction did not in itself determine their occurrence. Advocates can, in practice, bundle advantages as well as mitigate disadvantages. This construction did, however, make each more likely to emerge.

**Advantage 1: Community Participation.** The *supportive-school* construction's primary advantage was its ability to foster greater community participation and recognition, an advantage shared with the *community-school* construction. District officials actually invited participation from the North High community to better identify students' needs, something they had failed to do in the recent past. As I summarized above, community members participated in events cosponsored by the Coalition and MPS and received significant representation on multiple advisory committees. Redesign efforts also included a community survey and multiple focus groups, both of which aimed to uncover community members' understandings of North High and its students' needs. Perhaps most importantly, the final design draft for the new North High called and planned for increased, more personal, and more efficacious interactions between parents and teachers.

**Disadvantage 1: Community Stigmatization.** By underlining community-specific needs of North High students, the *supportive-school* construction also raised the risk of community

stigmatization. This risk stemmed from a dominant discourse that, despite advocates' best efforts, attributes these needs to family and neighborhood dysfunction. Some participants in North High's redesign inadvertently fed, or at least failed to curb, this discourse. Most important among them was the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), the consulting firm hired to lead the redesign. In its public presentations and promotional materials, ISA championed the idea of addressing students' needs by building more strong and deep relationships—between students, teachers, advisors, parents, etc. Building strong relationships is, of course, an idea so ill-defined and well-intentioned that it cannot be criticized per se. However, when articulated in relation to a school like North High, it affirms an enduring yet oft-refuted, race-coded, and stigmatizing thesis that says poor people's problems—including low student achievement—stem from the lack of functioning social ties in their neighborhoods. Fortunately, the new North High's final design document shifted away from this idea somewhat, placing more emphasis on well-documented institutionalized barriers.

**Advantage 2: District Support.** The second advantage of the *supportive-school* construction was its ability to secure district support, an advantage shared with the *good-school* construction. Because it comported with MPS's strategic plan and mission—that is, raising student performance on tests—the superintendent could more easily direct district resources, information, and personnel toward implementing its proponents' suggestions. For example, early in the redesign process, district officials used student contact lists, personnel, and office supplies to advertise and support the Coalition's community events. Later on, despite a diminishing and tight budget—the result of the recent recession, a district-wide decline in enrollment, and state legislative decisions—the district was able to set aside more than \$150,000 to hire ISA, a strong proponent of the *supportive-school* construction. Throughout the redesign process, district personnel have, on the whole, remained committed to what the Coalition started.

**Disadvantage 2: District Co-optation.** By affirming the district's mission of raising student performance, however, the *supportive-school* construction also opened up opportunities for



co-optation. It allowed district officials to claim broad support for North High students while, in practice, only emphasizing issues already deemed central to their mission and to raising test scores. As one might expect, these issues were, most often, those *not* requiring a substantial redistribution of resources. For example, at one community advisory board meeting, a district official circulated a “vision template” for the design that failed to consider housing instability, environmental racism, health disparities, or *any* distributional issues shown to affect student needs and success. Similar issues went unaddressed in ISA’s model for school reform and, with the exception of student health care, the final design draft for the new North High. Higher on the docket were nondistributional issues such as social-emotional supports, safety, and skill development. To be sure, these issues are significant, but they are not the whole picture.

### Lessons Learned

In the fall of 2012, the new North High—officially, the North Community High School Academy of Arts and Communications—accepted its first freshman class. Although the Coalition had stopped meeting more than a year before then, the school and its ongoing development is a testament to their important efforts. Reflecting on these efforts, three general lessons about representing poor students’ interests stand out.

**Lesson 1: Poor Students’ Interests Are Not Self-Evident.** They are, in fact, contestable political constructions. That is to say, political actors shape their appearance by illuminating certain aspects of poor students’ educational experiences and obscuring others. Thus, even advocates with similar grievances (for example, district abandonment) cannot and should not assume prior agreement with one another about what poor students’ interests are. At its best, the Coalition enabled its members to articulate and defend different constructions, fostering productive debates about the direction of the organization, North High, and public education as a whole. At its worst, its most influential members acted on a presumed agreement with the *supportive-school* construction, marginalizing opportunities for productive disagreement.

**Lesson 2: Not All Constructions of Poor Students’ Interests Are Equally Compelling.** Some are downright bad,



**North High Community Coalition members meet at a local church in December 2010 to discuss and organize their ongoing efforts.**

lending support to policy efforts that obscure and/or exacerbate educational challenges and barriers to upward mobility. As I have already suggested, the paradigmatic example of a bad construction in the NCLB era is the *failing-school* construction. A key task for advocates, then, is to avoid alternatives that reproduce the consequences of this construction. The most problematic alternative explored by the Coalition was the *good-school* construction. Unlike the other alternatives, this one obscured unaddressed material challenges facing North High students, calling for a redesign effort centered primarily on image. To be sure, in the short-term, this effort may have diminished the stigmatization of North High and its students as failing and dysfunctional. However, by ignoring the material challenges surrounding these stigmas, it would have reaped few if any substantive benefits in the long-term.

**Lesson 3: No Perfect Construction of Poor Students’ Interests Exists.** Rather, multiple workable alternatives, each featuring its own advantages and disadvantages, exist. For advocates, the key in any given political context is to recognize these advantages and disadvantages and ask which are preferable. The Coalition entered a political context where district officials showed willingness to redesign the school, students and others in their constituent base lacked resources and opportunities

for sustained contention, and appeals to community already permeated the rhetoric surrounding the school and the superintendent’s redesign proposal. Given this context, their move toward a *supportive-school* construction was, despite its potential disadvantages, most prudent. Because of the district’s flexibility and the low likelihood of sustained mobilization, a more adversarial effort rooted in *public-* or *community-school* constructions likely would have fizzled out. In addition, given the prominence of community rhetoric, an effort rooted in *good-* or *public-school* constructions probably would not have resonated as well with officials and supporters.

### Concluding Thoughts

The relevance of advocacy groups like the North High Community Coalition will, in all likelihood, persist and increase during the coming years. On May 22, 2013, the Chicago Board of Education voted almost unanimously to close 50 failing public schools, an unprecedented number. School districts in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. recently moved to close 23 and 15 schools, respectively. In all cases, an overwhelming number of the affected students are poor, Black, and/or Latino. Public officials argue that proposed closings will benefit these students by granting them the choice to attend more efficient and effective schools.

Social-justice advocates in each city disagree and accuse officials of abandoning poor students.

Against this backdrop, it is ever more important to ask how and with what consequences advocates might replace the *failing-school* construction of poor students' interests. The preceding sections specified four alternative constructions and assessed the advantages and disadvantages of one in particular. This analysis obviously leaves much room for further investigation. For example, what happens when advocates gravitate toward the other constructions considered within the Coalition? What alternatives did members of the Coalition not consider?

Beyond these questions, at least two related questions warrant further investigation. The first is about success. To successfully link redesign efforts to alternative constructions of poor students' interests, advocates require the cooperation of several policy actors. Even the most conformist construction I encountered—the *good-school* construction—called for marketing efforts that would be hard to implement without district cooperation. The most adversarial constructions—the *public-school* and *community-school* constructions—called

for public officials to substantially shift their focus from test performance and school choice to resources and power. Under what conditions are advocates most likely to achieve the cooperation needed to succeed?

The second question is about expectations. Both public officials and advocates place high expectations on public-education reform, whether they prefer the redesign or closing of failing schools. Not only are reforms expected to raise poor students' achievement, they are also expected to deliver some measure of upward mobility in an increasingly unequal society. It is reasonable, I think, to expect that widespread redesign efforts informed by alternative and *compelling* constructions of poor students' interests would have some noticeable benefits. Many of the reforms these efforts demand—better support services, more community involvement, increased funding, and so on—directly expand poor students' educational opportunities. However, without simultaneous efforts to address related societal problems—the foreclosure crisis, the disappearance of living-wage work, high rates of incarceration, and so on—how much can we really expect them to aid long-term achievement and upward mobility?

Whatever the answer, advocates' efforts on behalf of poor students will, I hope, continue to be a significant part of the urban political landscape.

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# Recent Project Awards

Each issue of the *CURA Reporter* features a few capsule descriptions of new projects under way at CURA. These projects represent only a portion of those that will receive support from CURA and its partners during the coming year.

■ **Ain Dah Yung Center's Cultural Evaluation Project.** The Ain Dah Yung Center hosts the first culturally relevant emergency shelter for American Indian youth, as well as allowing American Indian youth and families to understand and uphold their indigenous rights. This project was needed to develop a more efficient evaluation model for gathering data from community members and to help Ain Dah Yung Center address the immediate needs of youth in crisis, as well as impact issues at the root of homelessness. The model is culturally relevant, acknowledging the social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding today's social conditions. Scott DeMuth, a sociology Ph.D. student in the College of Liberal Arts, analyzed the current evaluation system, conducted a literature review of indigenous measures, and developed the evaluation tool based on the medicine wheel, interviewed organization staff, then compiled the results into a final report. His work is being used to evaluate multiple aspects of Ain Dah Yung Center's activities and will allow the center to create better programs and help at-risk youth.

**Program:** Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program

■ **District Council Community Planning Engagement.** The Macalester-Groveland Community Council is the official citizen-participation organization for residents, businesses, and institutions in the Macalester-Groveland area. This project kick-started a two-year community planning process intended to engage residents and stakeholders through extensive community outreach. The research informed the council with a better sense of what processes and strategies have worked for other communities and how best to implement them. Andrew Tran, a Master of Urban and Regional Planning student at the Hubert H. Humphrey

School of Public Affairs, discovered, categorized, and summarized neighborhood-planning processes and community-engagement activities, as well as literature reviews of case studies and interviews with residents and neighborhood groups. The final results are being used to develop the neighborhood's engagement strategy for their district plan and will serve as a resource for other district councils.

**Program:** Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program

■ **Minnesota South Asian Health Study.** Sewa-Asian Indian Family Wellness is an organization committed to bringing total family wellness to the South Asian community through promoting research, community, advocacy, and direct services to improve the quality of life of its clients. This project conducted a baseline Minnesota South Asian Health Study to gain a better understanding of health disparities and needs in this community, as well as to identify health problems unique to this community and to improve the amount and quality of health data for South Asians in Minnesota. Melissa Kwon, Ph.D., a Research Associate in the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, served as a faculty mentor for the project. Julie Lee, an undergraduate student in the College of Liberal Arts, and Phyo Ma, an undergraduate student in the College of Biological Sciences, informed the community about the survey, assisted in collecting data using surveys and interviews of community members, entered the data into a program for data analysis, and presented the project results to stakeholders. These results are being used to increase access to needed health care for the South Asian population and to help address issues that community members face that impact their quality of life.

**Program:** Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program

■ **Welcome Back to the River Winona, Working Together to Transform Levee Park.** The city of Winona is a strong community with important connections to its water resources, which contain many scenic, ecological, and cultural

characteristics. However, some of these connections need refurbishing. This project sought to understand how to utilize the public space of Levee Park, which ranges from traditional park spaces to wetlands and forest islands. Improvements were considered for public access, recreation, and other programming that celebrate connection to the river, strengthen economic vitality, support tourism, and enhance the community as a whole. Erin Garnass-Holmes, a dual-degree Master of Landscape Architecture and Urban and Regional Planning student, documented historical and existing conditions on the river site and identified redevelopment case studies. The final project report is serving as a roadmap for implementation of the physical and programmatic improvements necessary to stimulate a renewed public interest in the riverfront.

**Program:** Community Assistantship Program (CAP)

■ **Melrose Lake Targeted Resource Protection and Improvements.** Melrose Lake Improvement Association is an organization created to proactively preserve and protect the general welfare of the lake and its environment. This project consolidated data, obtained updated mapping, and identified historic baseline data to determine if the current decreases in water quality, fish count, and water depth are anecdotal or a part of a pattern. This work was the initial step in the restoration of the lake, and was aimed at packaging data and maps into a report while at the same time determining the scope of lake deficiencies and how to resolve them. Ruby Irving-Hewey, a graduate student in Biological Sciences at St. Cloud State University, performed a literature review, determined baseline lake characteristics, implemented water-quality tests, executed GIS mapping of nearby watersheds, and summarized best practices to mitigate the lake's deficiencies. The project materials are being used to begin a scientifically efficient restoration of Melrose Lake through historic understanding of the lake, as well as current mapping and treatments to keep the lake and its wildlife healthy.

**Program:** Community Assistantship Program (CAP)





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