

**Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds:
Creating a Culture of Educational Achievement in
East Baltimore's Urban Food Desert**

"These children, like children everywhere, have facile minds. You can hear it in their ease of language, in their rapid-fire mimicry of adult convention. You can see the innate intelligence on those rare occasions when a bit of information touches a nerve, provoking them with a challenge that they can understand and accept as relevant to their world" (Simon & Burnes 284).

I imagine very few of my neighbors ever see it. Not really. Not up close. If you've got enough elevation you can look in that direction. I can. I look out the window from my desk towards East Baltimore, but even then, I can't really see it. Not up close. I see the shiny new construction at Johns Hopkins Medical Institute, the Baltimore Sun, church steeples, and a seemingly omnipresent police helicopter, flying low, circling menacingly, in search of someone or something.

There's really no reason to travel that way – it leads to nowhere, to nothing. They say it is dangerous. If you want to get to Hopkins, there are better, safer, more well-traveled roads to lead you there. Even when I was new in town I knew better than to drive those streets. I had heard the stories. I had watched *The Wire*. I knew that nothing good happened in East Baltimore.

I suppose it was curiosity or an unwillingness to believe that there are bad places. How can a place be bad? Bad things might happen in a place. People might act badly in a place. But a place is just place; it is neither good nor bad. It is geography. So one bright, shiny, nothing bad can happen day I veered off my usual path, traveled a few blocks further north, a few blocks further east, and saw for myself the abandoned row houses, the crumbling storefronts, the burned out churches, the "corner boys, touts, drug slingers, petty criminals" (Simon). I saw for myself what decades of poverty and drugs and violence and neglect can do to a place and wondered, "What would it feel like if this was your neighborhood, your home? Who would you be if this was your world? Would you know, would you truly comprehend, that just another block or two this way or that, the world was new and shiny and prosperous and healthy? Would you want to be a part of that other world, or would you want to make your world better? Either way, would you know how to start?"



East Baltimore

As an advocate for access and affordability in postsecondary education, I have dedicated my career to supporting and creating ways to assure equity for students across all socioeconomic strata. I believe that higher education is the single most transformative experience in which a person can engage and that, whatever the outcome or level of achievement, people's lives are enriched by participating. The fact some ethnic groups are underrepresented in higher education has been shown to be more significantly linked to economic factors than to aspects of culture or race. However, the range of economic factors that influence academic success and degree attainment are increasingly complex and diverse, including the growing problem of 'food deserts' in urban and rural neighborhoods that inhibit learning potential and exacerbate health issues resulting from hunger, nutritional deficits, and obesity. This paper draws upon research in the fields of education, public health, economics, and organizational behavior to examine how life in an urban food desert impacts children's educational attainment and success and, more importantly, the interventions that can be applied to ensure every child has the opportunity to pursue an educational path that will advance the trajectory of his or her life. A review of the literature and primary research considers which interventions are most promising to mitigate the impacts of life in an urban food desert by responding to the following questions:

1. What is a food desert?
2. How do childhood experience, culture preference and economics influence food choices?
3. What are the larger, more systemic, issues associated with poverty?
4. How is the Baltimore City Public School system addressing the needs of students?
5. How are governmental and non-governmental agencies working to make postsecondary education achievable for all?
6. What are the cross-cultural implications for education?
7. Can emotional intelligence supplant the community norms that impede academic and social success?
8. Can the revitalization of East Baltimore serve as a laboratory to test new approaches to overcoming the impacts of life in an urban food desert?

What is a food desert?

The 110th United States Congress' 2008 Farm Bill included funding to conduct a study of food deserts and in doing so asserted that "the term 'food desert' means an area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities" (Sec. 7527).

Several years ago, I moved into a converted cotton mill in the Jingtowntown neighborhood of Oakland, CA. (Fans of Green Day will recognize Jingtowntown from *American Idiot*.) The area was predominately industrial, with two or three blocks of older single-family homes inhabited by recent immigrants and lower-socioeconomic status (SES) residents, and an emerging enclave of artists' lofts in converted warehouses. It was here that I first experienced a food desert. I was surprised to find that the corner



market that was frequented by many in the neighborhood offered no fresh fruits or vegetables, but was stocked plentifully with highly processed packaged foods that were high in fat and sodium and devoid of any real nutritional value. The only supermarket within walking distance offered some more healthy options, but the prices were two to three times higher than the next closest supermarket, which

required a car to access, and most of the families living in these homes relied on public transportation or walking to get around. In fact, many of the fruits and vegetables were less expensive at Whole Foods than in the neighborhood's supermarket.

I began to wonder how this limited access to healthy food not only influenced children's developing palates and dietary choices (which, in turn, will impact their long-term health), but how a diet with limited nutritional value might impact a student's academic achievement. I am now living in Baltimore and have seen several neighborhoods that are highly residential food deserts. Baltimore's public education system has myriad challenges, including very low test scores and low graduation rates which stem from a wide array of contributory factors. However, there is little doubt that living in a food desert is one of those factors. A study of Baltimore neighborhoods found that nearly a fifth of its 630,000 residents live in food deserts (Farrow).



Grocery Stores in East Baltimore

In *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Jonah Lehrer writes that that “a single day, rendered intensely, can become a vivid window into our psychology” (Lehrer 712). A child who lives in food desert is more likely to be eligible for free or reduced price school breakfasts and lunches. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) asserts that this program “provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day,” a graduate-level nursing student at Johns Hopkins University reports that one school in Baltimore, MD provides primary school children who participate in this USDA program the choice of a muffin or pop-tart and juice for breakfast each day, which seems both far from nutritionally balanced and unlikely to either establish good eating habits or sustain energy and cognition levels required for effective learning (A. Richert, personal communication, January 27, 2011). The subconscious and overt messages these programs provide to children should serve to elevate rather than underscore the messages they receive daily about the value of food and nutrition to the quality of their lives.

In a recent posting on National Public Radio's website, contributor John McWhorter argues that food deserts are a myth because obesity is rampant in spite of the availability of healthier food options and that other factors, including “childhood experience, cultural preferences and economics... [create] a palate” that prefers foods that are higher in fat, sugar and sodium and more likely to result in less healthy citizens (NPR). To discount the existence of food deserts because people who have access to healthier food options make bad choices suggests that there is no benefit in attempting to solve this problem. I agree with Mr. McWhorter's suggestion that “We should focus more attention on getting the word out in struggling communities about ways to make tasty food that doesn't kill you.” However, I also know that food deserts are a reality, and that ‘getting the word out’ effectively will also require easy and affordable access to healthy ingredients.

How do childhood experience, culture preference and economics influence food choices?

*To teach his British guests how to eat a meal properly, Escoffier decided that any party larger than four people dining in his London restaurant could only have whatever dishes he put in front of them. He invented the chef's tasting menu as an educational tool, for he was confident that people could **learn** how to eat. Over time, the English could become more French. He was right: because the sense of taste is extremely plastic, it can be remodeled by new experiences. It's never too late to become a gourmet (Lehrer 73).*

Escoffier's experience underscores the potential to retrain the palates of children who have been raised on the high fat, high sugar, high sodium diet that is most readily available in neighborhoods designated as food deserts; to enable them to improve their health status; and, through improved nutrition, improve their cognitive abilities and educational achievement. Contrary to John McWhorter's argument that "childhood experience, cultural preferences and economics... [create] a palate" (NPR) that prefers foods that are higher in fat, sugar and sodium and more likely to result in less healthy citizens, the palate is a sensory device that can be developed and expanded to enjoy new flavors and textures.

Having lived in and around Berkeley, CA for many years, I watched with interest as Alice Waters worked with urban elementary and middle schools to introduce children to healthy foods by teaching them to grow fruits and vegetables in their own schoolyards. Just as Escoffier used his tasting menu as an educational tool, Waters used her Edible Schoolyard initiative to educate both children and their teachers and families about "culture, history, language, ecology, and mathematics through the preparation of food" (The Edible Schoolyard (ESY)). Waters and her partners have set out to change the way children understand and experience food by establishing ESY's mission "to create and sustain an organic garden and landscape that is wholly integrated into the school's curriculum, culture, and food program" (EYS).



Alice Waters and The Edible Schoolyard

An offshoot of the ESY effort is the School Lunch Initiative (SLI) which is intended to “connect formal academic subjects with experiential learning in instructional gardens, kitchen classrooms, and school classrooms” (School Lunch Initiative). SLI was formed in 2004 as a public-private partnership between the Berkeley Unified School District, The Center for Ecoliteracy, and the Chez Panisse Foundation (founded by Waters) and “was based on the hypothesis that if young people are involved in growing, cooking, and sharing fresh, healthy food while learning about it in the curriculum, they will be more likely to develop lifelong healthy eating habits and values consistent with sustainable living” (Rauzon, S., Wang, M., Studer, N., & Crawford, P.). SLI has integrated improvements to the District’s school lunch program and campus food and dining services with curricula that include nutrition, cooking, and gardening classes. A study commissioned by the Chez Panisse Foundation and conducted by the University of California, Berkeley’s Atkins Center for Weight and Health examined the impacts of the SLI and found that there were several positive outcomes as a result of ensuring school breakfast and lunch programs provide students with healthy options. These included a positive correlation between a school’s participation in the SLI and the frequency with which families’ dined together and consumed fresh produce, the value families placed on including whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables in their children’s diets, and reported improvements in children’s eating habits.

However, Waters’ efforts are not without critics. Caitlin Flanagan wrote in *The Atlantic* that The Edible Schoolyard movement was a “...cruel trick ... by an agglomeration of foodies and educational reformers who are propelled by a vacuous if well-meaning ideology that is responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise have spent reading important books or learning higher math (attaining the cultural achievements, in other words, that have lifted uncouneted generations of human beings out of the desperate daily scrabble to wrest sustenance from dirt).” And to Flanagan’s point, the Atkins report noted that academic performance scores in English Language Arts and Mathematics were higher at schools with lesser-developed SLI programs, but cautioned that these schools also had lower proportions of low-income students (Rauzon, Wang, Studer, & Crawford). It is also important to note that, among the lengthy list of Objectives and Student Outcomes, the ESY does not include a goal to improve standardized test scores or other objective measures of student achievement (EYS).

Flanagan argues that the “solution lies in an education that will propel students into a higher economic class, where they will live better and therefore eat better.” While it is certainly true that increased wealth may make healthier food more accessible and affordable, I would argue that it also provides increased choice and, absent an appropriate nutritional foundation and well-trained palate, the newly affluent may opt for more familiar, albeit less healthy, food choices. In 2008, Golan, Stewart, Kuchler and Dong concluded that “Taste and convenience may lead consumers to prefer less nutritious foods and value them more highly than foods with better nutritional profiles. For some, 75 cents is too much to pay for an apple but not for a soda.”

The Economic Research Service of the USDA compounds that argument, reporting that “Policies to encourage the supply of affordable and nutritious food in underserved areas, such as zoning modifications and grants or loans for new store development, will not affect residents’ health if they do not change their food-purchasing behavior or do not have the time or knowledge to prepare healthier foods. At the same time, efforts to provide nutritional guidance or to change dietary habits will be ineffective if it is too difficult or expensive for people to get to stores that carry healthier foods” (Ver Ploeg).

How do you change the food choices of consumers who have developed poor nutritional habits due to access, affordability or preferences developed over time? One effort that provides some insight into this challenge was undertaken by the Food and Consumer Service (FCS), the agency responsible for administering the United State’s food stamp program. Their mission is “to ensure access to nutritious, healthy diets for all Americans. [FCS’s] food assistance and nutrition education programs provide a

healthful diet for needy Americans. Assistance and education efforts encourage consumers to make healthful food choices” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell). In constructing their study, the researchers attempted to examine two key aspects of food choice: first, which groups of families were more likely to select nutritious foods and second, what were the “attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about food choices and healthy eating from a group of low-income families” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell). The authors observed that when discussing food choices with their focus group participants “a tension was apparent between what they believe they “should” do--as revealed in their expressed intention to purchase more nutritious foods--and their food preferences and actual food choices. This tension was most obvious in their choice of snack foods for their children, which they described as “junk foods” that the children want. This tension was also apparent when discussions about the importance of preparing healthier meals turned into discussions of favorite foods consisting of high-fat, high-salt meat items” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell). The researchers found that a significant percentage of low-income households understand which foods comprise a healthy diet, but that they are resistant to adopt any changes necessary to comport with these dietary guidelines because of “ethnic traditions, preferences of family members, and lack of time” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell). Others indicated that they weren’t confident that they could adapt their food choice and preparation to provide meals that would be both healthy and appealing to their families. The verbatim comments from focus group participants help to further illustrate their point of view:

“You cater to your kid. If it’s something they don’t care for, it will just sit.”

“Kids are the biggest influence on what is bought and cooked.”

“It’s hard to look at your kids and not buy what they want.”

“I was raised here eating red meat. It’s gone on for generations. If you’re sitting down for a meal, red meat is it.”

“When you plan a meal you start with the meat. I never had a meal without meat while I was growing up.”

“60-75% of my food budget goes for meat” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell).

These researchers concluded that “initiatives aimed at assisting low-income meal preparers to adapt culturally familiar foods and initiatives aimed at educating children may be especially fruitful avenues for providing nutritional guidance to low-income families” (Bradbard, Michaels, Fleming & Campbell). From my perspective, I would underscore their endorsement regarding educating children, since it appears from their data that children significantly influence the purchasing practices of their parents and that eating habits established during childhood often persist into adulthood.

A group of European researchers determined that the factors influencing food choice can be classified into one or more of six categories, including “biological determinants such as hunger, appetite, and taste; economic determinants such as cost, income, availability; physical determinants such as access, education, skills (e.g. cooking) and time; social determinants such as culture, family, peers and meal patterns; psychological determinants such as mood, stress and guilt; [and] attitudes, beliefs and knowledge about food” (European Food Information Council). They concede that theirs is not an exhaustive list, and that interventions cannot be easily generalized, as there are differences that stem from life stage and other factors independent of these other determinants. They conclude by suggesting success is likely to stem from tailored interventions that incorporate “practical solutions as well as environmental change,” while acknowledging that there are also a “number of barriers to dietary and lifestyle change, which vary depending on life stages and the individual or group of people in question” (European Food Information Council).

As I have approached this research I have done so with the hypothesis that purports that children who live in food deserts are less likely to eat nutritionally balanced diets, more likely to be obese or

malnourished and, as a result, less likely to perform well academically. Therefore I was surprised to find a study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research that found that “in general, children who are overweight or obese have achievement test scores that are about the same as children with average weight” (Kaestner & Grossman).



East Baltimore

What are the larger, more systemic, issues associated with poverty?

Children of poverty face multiple, often insurmountable, challenges that not only limit the direction of their future, but also impede their development in ways that make it difficult for them to attain the tools for success, namely education or training, in order to break the cycle and assure their economic future. In neighborhoods like East Baltimore, children struggle against violence, food insecurity, family upheaval, lead poisoning, substance abuse, and “public schools marred by high absenteeism and poor academic achievement” (Annie E. Casey Foundation 10). According to the 2000 Census, the median income for this community was \$14,900, making it the second poorest neighborhood in Baltimore City. “The rates for crime and for domestic violence ... were nearly double those for the city as a whole, and the incidence of child abuse and lead poisoning were among the highest in Baltimore” (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2).

David Simon -- journalist, author, teacher, screenwriter, and dystopian depicter of Baltimore’s truest self -- perhaps said it best: “There are two Americas - separate, unequal, and no longer even acknowledging each other except on the barest cultural terms. In the one nation, new millionaires are minted every day. In the other, human beings no longer necessary to our economy, to our society, are being devalued and destroyed.” What happens to a child who is born into a community that bears the scars of that devaluation and destruction? How will she or he learn to navigate the world? They are part of the other America. The one where police don’t protect you, they suspect you. The one where you are more likely to end up dead or in jail, than to find yourself on a college campus. The prism through which they viewed the world was filled with the abandoned row houses, the crumbling storefronts, the burned out churches, the “corner boys, touts, drug slingers, petty criminals” (Simon).

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies underscored Simon’s observations, asserting what is seemingly obvious: “It must be recognized that there is an inextricable link between poverty and education. Poor children are often undernourished, before and after birth, with the result that brain development can be stunted. Poor children also often suffer from various forms of cultural and intellectual deprivation which limits their horizons. Every effort must be made to overcome these impediments to success during the early years, when they can be handled best.”



East Baltimore

Can emotional intelligence supplant the community norms that impede academic and social success?

Researchers at Yale University have begun to construct interventions to alter the outcome of a life viewed through the lens of poverty. Through programs intended to develop “social and emotional learning (SEL)” and emotional intelligence, they have achieved significant improvements in academic achievement when compared with non-participating students (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes & Salovey). They have utilized “a skill-based approach to foster social, emotional, and academic competence. The program teaches children how to *recognize* emotions in oneself and in other people, *understand* the causes and consequences of a wide range of emotions, *label* emotions using a sophisticated vocabulary, *express* emotions in socially appropriate ways, and *regulate* emotions effectively (the “RULER” skills)(Brackett, Rivers, Reyes & Salovey). Persons with highly developed emotional intelligence are more likely to be successful academically, professionally, and interpersonally. Some have argued that, absent emotional intelligence, “a person can have outstanding training, a highly analytical mind, a compelling vision, and an endless supply of terrific ideas but still not make a great leader” (Robbins & Judge 412).

Emotional Intelligence arms people with the ability to persist in the face of difficulty, to monitor their feelings, to read other people’s feelings, to get along with others, to resist temptation in the service of a higher goal, and to take action that considers the needs of self and others. Moreover, studies have shown that Emotional Intelligence is positively linked to self-efficacy which, in turn, is correlated with academic success. While curricula have been developed to assist teachers and administrators in incorporating Emotional Intelligence education into the classroom and after school setting, I believe that it is equally important to extend that teaching to parents or other primary care givers in order to ensure continuity between what the child is learning both inside and outside of the home. In doing so, I assert that it is imperative that program participants understand and accept the premise that the development and improvement of these skills will yield benefits across a spectrum of personally held values, including economic security, reduced violence, and self determination.

Emotional intelligence enables a person to exhibit empathy. But what does empathy look and feel like when you’ve spent your whole life in East Baltimore? “Poverty itself delivers emotional blows to children: poorer children at age five are already more fearful, anxious, and sad than their better-off peers, and have more behavior problems such as frequent tantrums and destroying things, a trend that continues through the teen years” (Goleman, 256). In his book, *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*, Daniel Goleman opines “that there is a role that emotional competence plays over

and above family or economic forces – it may be decisive in determining the extent to which any give child or teenager is undone by these hardships or finds a core of resilience to survive them” (256). Goleman suggests that some of these children possess innate emotional intelligence that enables them to exhibit a “winning sociability that draws people to them, self-confidence, an optimistic persistence in the face of failure and frustration, the ability to recover quickly from upsets, and an easygoing nature” (112).

While I suspect this is true, I wonder if those skills are transferable outside of this young person’s familiar culture. In David Simon and Edward Burns treatise, *The corner: A year in the life of an inner-city neighborhood*, they describe children and adults who possess these traits and employ them effectively in the drug-slitting streets of Baltimore. But those same children and adults struggle to interact outside of their comfort zone, because the context in which they have developed these skills is limited. I would assert that the same would be true for children and adults who have spent their life in Roland Park or Guilford¹. They may be perfectly able to ace a college interview or dine comfortably at an upscale restaurant, but I expect they would be hard-pressed to navigate relationships successfully in East Baltimore.



Johns Hopkins School of Medicine – East Baltimore

We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters’ characteristics, which were, of course, the worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic by class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, insolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom (Morrison, 177).

It is hard to argue against preparing a young person to be successful in a world that is more likely to judge them against a set of commonly held values, beliefs and behavioral norms most typically found in the educational institutions that will prepare them for the future and the businesses that will employ

¹ *Affluent neighborhoods of Baltimore City.*

them. But will these skills translate in a way that enables them to also survive and succeed in their own hardscrabble neighborhood? Will they allow the child to maintain his or her own voice, personality and perspectives, or will these children feel that they must adopt something akin to “white masters’ characteristics” in order to be successful?

I believe that the most effective way to sustain, develop or create emotional intelligence in children who have grown up in neighborhoods blighted by abject poverty is to create programs that engage the child’s family and wider circle of friends and acquaintances. By addressing the challenge intergenerationally, you not only form an extended network of support, you allow for the inculcation of culture, history, and identity that might otherwise be lost in spite of the best intentions of educators. Moreover, this approach allows for dialogue around ‘real life’ examples of interactions that have failed or been more contentious than required because of an inability to recognize and adapt to emotional cues. Allowing parental figures and community leaders to emphasize and demonstrate the need for and benefit of this kind of education might help to assure the students’ success, even in the face of a neighborhood that has developed its own rules for behavior. However, Simon and Burnes argue, “Job interview techniques, cooperative learning, managing emotions, interpersonal discipline – stuff like that will get you hurt at Fayette and Monroe, where the rules of the corner demand not social skills, but unhesitating ruthlessness.” To accept their premise is to give in to a Hobson’s choice: developing these skills will prepare the children for life beyond the neighborhood, but possessing these skills will make life in the neighborhood dangerous.

These children are not yet aware that they are horribly alone, that the rest of America – its dreams, myths, standards – has walked away from [East] Baltimore. They don’t fully sense that this country has reshaped itself as distinct and apart from the core of its cities, that it no longer pretends to have a use for an underclass that once might have served it with raw labor, filling its rural spaces or crowding its sweatshops. These children don’t know the whole truth, and yet by middle school, the compartmentalization that has allowed them to straddle both worlds is beginning to crumble. By middle school, the more savvy are already asking themselves and each other whether knowing the names of four African rivers will help them spot a drug corner stickup a minute before happens. Or whether awareness of the Pythagorean Theorem will allow them to squeeze ten more vials from an eight ball. Everything taught in the classroom becomes strangely dissonant; the contradictions between general knowledge and the rules of the corner are there and inexplicable. (Simon & Burnes 278-279)

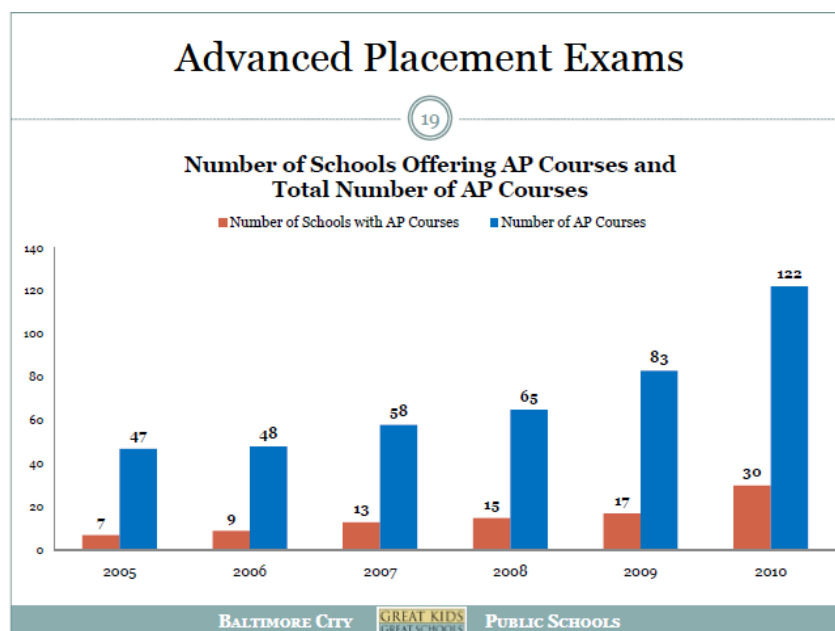
I can accept, unwillingly, that the challenge is tremendous and the rewards might be few. However, I am more optimistic – perhaps more naïve – and believe that we must try to change the trajectory of the lives of as many of these children as we can. We must insist that they have access to clean air and water, shelter that provides warmth in the winter and protection from the oppressive heat of summer, healthy and affordable foods, safe places to play and exercise, and an education that truly prepares them for a life beyond drug-slinging or jail. We can’t be content to say that their life might be better if we turn away, leave them alone, and let them live according to a code that has evolved from decades of addiction, poverty, and neglect. But we must also remain grounded in the truth of this challenge. Like David Simon, I know that “there are places in Baltimore where ... all of the depicted tragedy and waste and dysfunction are fixed, certain and constant. And that place is, I might add, about 20 blocks from where I live” (Simon).

How is the Baltimore City Public School system addressing the needs of students?

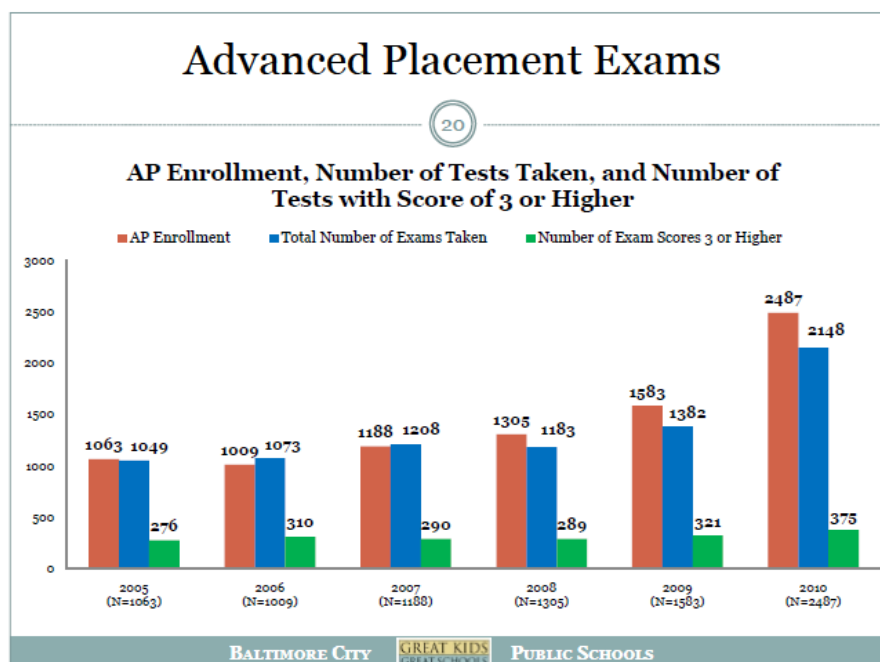
Our schools cannot be improved if we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children's ability to learn. Children who have grown up in poverty need extra resources, including preschool and medical care. They need small classes, where they will get extra teacher time, and they need extra learning time. Their families need additional supports, such as coordinated social services that help them to improve their education, to acquire necessary social skills and job skills, and to obtain jobs and housing. While the school itself cannot do these things, it should be part of a web of public and private agencies that buttress families (Ravitch, 229).

It is not surprising to read in the Baltimore City Public School's *State of Our High Schools* report that the high school graduation rate was 66%, or that the dropout rate was 4.1%, or even that these bleak numbers were marked improvements over prior performance within the city (graduation rates are up 10% over three years and the dropout rate is down 56% over three years). However, as one reads through page after page of dismal results, the statistics that are perhaps most disheartening are those reflecting the city school's achievements with regard to Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

In what is surely one of the more ironic developments in the arena of college preparation, these courses which were once made available to a small number of high performing students in order to give them an opportunity to accelerate their education during the senior year of high school, are now both *de rigueur* for every student who hopes to demonstrate exemplary academic achievement to college admission officers (as grade inflation and test preparation programs have rendered GPAs and SAT scores highly suspect) and for every school that seeks to demonstrate rigor in their curriculum. The Baltimore City Public Schools have been making a concerted effort to increase both the number of high schools offering these courses and the number of AP courses being offered at each school. As illustrated in the chart below, significant gains have been achieved in both instances:



Unfortunately, as this next chart illustrates, simply making the courses available and allowing students to enroll is not enough to achieve the benefit that these courses are purported to provide. While enrollment in AP courses more than doubled in a two-year period, and the number of students opting to take the AP exam has nearly doubled during the same timeframe, the number of students scoring a “3” or better – with 3 being the minimum score an AP test taker can earn to demonstrate s/he is ‘qualified’ for advanced placement in the subject matter – remains effectively flat for the past 10 years. This is particularly discouraging as scoring a “3” is generally not sufficient to fulfill a course requirement at most colleges and universities. The majority of postsecondary institutions require a score of “5” while some will accept a score of “4” in elective or general education courses. New York University’s AP policy, for example, indicates that “students may receive college credit toward their degree for AP Exams taken prior to the completion of high school and with results of 5 or 4” (College Board, 2011).



The result of this is that nearly 2,000 students enrolled in a course that was either too advanced for their ability or were ill-prepared for an exam. What remains unknown is how that failure to meet the AP standard impacted those students’ views about their own academic ability, college admission applications, or future endeavors to attempt or complete college level work. What is evident is that the Baltimore City Public Schools’ approach to AP courses and exams is broken.

But ramping up the high school curriculum is not the only place where the Baltimore City Public Schools continue to miss the mark. In his 2011 *State of the Schools* report, CEO Andres Alonso takes the reader through page after page of discouraging results: a habitual truancy² rate of 7.75%; 14 city schools that have been classified as “Persistently Dangerous”; Maryland School Assessment eighth grade reading score of 61.6% and math score of 39.2%; and more than half of Baltimore’s public high schools failed to meet the ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’ standard, yet only three of those 20 were closed as a result. While Alonso’s report touts that “the percentage of high school students taking the SAT is higher in City Schools (79%) than in Maryland (69%) and the nation (46%)” (Alonso, 2010), their average scores

² Habitually truant students are students enrolled in a school for at least 91 days in a school year and who are unlawfully absent for 20% or more days of school in any marking period, semester, or school year.

are in the 14th percentile for Writing, 13th percentile for Critical Reading, and 9th percentile for Mathematics (Alonso, 2011), meaning that 86%, 87% and 91% (respectively) of students across the country are scoring higher than Baltimore City school students on these tests (College Board, 2011).

As Diane Ravitch asserted, we cannot improve schools and the educational outcomes for children if we ignore the impacts poverty has had and continues to have on their ability to be successful academically. While CEO Alonso has developed an ambitious plan to transform Baltimore City schools, the fact is that children continue to fail in part because of their circumstances of their home life, including poverty and inadequate nutrition.

In his 2010 essay, *Healthier students are better learners: A missing link in school reforms to close the achievement gap*, Dr. Charles Basch explores “seven educationally relevant health disparities” that he cites as strategic priorities to direct limited resources toward areas of greatest potential impact. These include “1) vision, 2) asthma, 3) teen pregnancy, 4) aggression and violence, 5) physical activity, 6) breakfast, and 7) inattention and hyperactivity” (Basch, 4). Basch asserts that, “health-related problems play a major role in limiting the motivation and ability to learn of urban minority youth” and that “recent research in fields ranging from neurosciences and child development to epidemiology and public health provide compelling evidence for the causal role that *educationally relevant health disparities* play in the educational achievement gap that plagues urban minority youth” (Basch, 4). Basch believes that these “health disparities impede motivation and ability to learn through at least five causal pathways: *sensory perceptions; cognition; connectedness and engagement with school; absenteeism; and dropping out*” (Basch, 4). Moreover, Basch believes these pathways are interrelated, and that the net effect is additive.

Basch is not alone in his identification of physical and mental health as a key component in academic achievement. However, even those who share his view seem less focused on solving that particular problem. For example, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) developed a policy paper in 2003, *Improving academic achievement in urban districts: What state policymakers can do*, aimed at directing scarce state resources to efforts that would prove most beneficial. Their report identified eight areas that school superintendents determined would be most important for policymakers to focus, including 1) School governance, 2) School finance, 3) Teaching quality, 4) English language learners, 5) Early childhood learning, 6) Data management, 7) Integrated social, medical and mental health services for students, and 8) Finances related to special education (ECS, 2003). Notwithstanding their identification of the importance of student health, when developing their detailed recommendations, they decided to only address the first four components, leaving the issues relating to the integration of social, medical and mental health services for students out of their discussion. Nonetheless, when superintendents detailed their priorities within the categories of school governance, school finance, teaching quality and English language learners, they found ways to continue to draw attention to the growing problem of health disparity in urban public schools. Included in their recommendations to state legislators, the superintendents requested that lawmakers “encourage partnerships among districts and social, medical and mental health services to provide assistance for students and their families in overcoming barriers to learning” (ECS, 2003). However, when delineating their policy recommendations, they once again fell short of addressing the full extent of the need, instead focusing their request on mental health:

Policy Recommendation. With the documented importance of addressing mental health and behavioral problems early in life before they escalate into serious problems, it is imperative that schools provide mental health screening and services in elementary school. State policymakers can assist by creating grants that encourage partnerships between districts and local mental health providers to provide intensive assistance for elementary students and their families and additional services for older students (ECS, 2003).

While mental health issues merit attention, they are not the sole source of health-related academic barriers in urban schools. Overlooking the more pervasive issues of poor nutrition, inadequate physical activity, and comorbidities stemming from obesity and poor general health is to overlook the opportunity to effect a positive substantive change in the lives of these children.

How are governmental and non-governmental agencies working to make postsecondary education achievable for all?

One evening I told him [Moishe the Beadel] how unhappy I was not to be able to find in Sighet a master to teach me the Zohar, the Kabbalistic works, the secrets of Jewish mysticism. He smiled indulgently. After a long silence, he said, "There are a thousand and one gates allowing entry into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his own gate. He must not err and wish to enter the orchard through a gate other than his own. That would present danger not only for the one entering but also for those who are already inside. (Wiesel, 5)

While Moishe the Beadel would likely argue that college is not the path for everyone, last month in Washington D.C. at the 'Building a Grad Nation Summit,' the White House's Director of the Domestic Policy Council, Melody Barnes, opined that, "Education is no longer a pathway to opportunity. It's a prerequisite. We need to make the hard choices and investments to make sure all children are prepared to succeed" (Adams, 2011). She went on to say that "when people say there are factors or reasons that prevent students from going to college, they are merely making excuses and something needs to be done. 'We need not only to hold failing schools accountable, we need to help turn those schools around...Building a grad nation requires all of us getting to work and fast'" (Adams, 2011).

Barnes is taking her cues from her boss. Upon taking office in 2008, President Obama outlined an education agenda that includes plans to improve higher education and academic success by expanding financial aid, simplifying federal programs, improving retention and graduation rates, and ensuring more Americans acquire the skills and education to meet the demand for emerging industries, thereby providing the framework to achieve by 2020 the highest proportion in the world of students graduating from college. To achieve that 2020 goal would require that 90% of U.S. high school students graduate from high school and enroll at a postsecondary institution, thus improving on current graduation achievement at a rate of increase of 1.5% per year. (America's Promise Alliance, 2009)

While this lofty and ambitious goal is fraught with hurdles, challenges and very real problems that have been, heretofore, insurmountable, there is renewed vigor and commitment to making an effort to improve the quality of public education for all citizens.

One such effort is modeled after the post-World War II Marshall Plan, wherein then Secretary of State George C. Marshall committed substantial resources to rebuild Europe with an intention of securing its economic future. The America's Promise Alliance was founded in 1997 with General Colin Powell as Chairman. It has recently launched what it calls the *Civic Marshall Plan*, which brings together "policymakers, educators, business leaders, community allies, parents and students to address the dropout epidemic by focusing on the dropout factory high schools and their feeder elementary and middle schools" (America's Promise Alliance, 2009). They have structured a network of resources that are "community-based and locally organized, but also have support at the state and national levels – with guiding research, evidence-based strategies, annual benchmarks to measure success and above all, accountability" (America's Promise Alliance, 2009). Moreover, they cite Baltimore, MD as a 'case study' and identify five 'lessons learned' that they have identified as critical to success, underscoring the

enormity of both the challenge and the investment of human and financial resources required to make notable improvements. The lessons learned include:

1. “Districts can’t do it alone” or, in other words, districts are going to need some wealthy benefactors and robust state and federal program dollars to invest in the effort. In the case of Baltimore, contributors included the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, nine local foundations, and federal grants from three separate Department of Education programs. (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009)
2. “School can’t do it alone” or, said differently, schools will require external resources, expertise and investors to inform and guide the transition, as well as to create capacity for innovation and experimentation. Baltimore’s partners included Johns Hopkins University, Coppin State University, the University Of Maryland School Of Law, the National Academy of Finance, political groups and national non-profits. (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009)
3. “Wise partners can influence policies” or, in the case of Baltimore, investors and partners required more evidenced-based planning and decision making, which in turn required outside experts to examine, assess and re-engineer the school district’s programs for “discipline and suspension policies” and attendance issues. (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009)
4. “Partners can assist with understanding data” or, in what is perhaps the most telling (and diplomatic) ‘lesson’, the realization that district personal lacked the ability to determine which data to gather or acumen to review the data they were gathering and draw informed conclusions. As the case study describes it, “the Baltimore Education Research Collaborative, composed of representatives from Morgan State University, Johns Hopkins University, and Baltimore City Public Schools and supported by local and national foundations, conducts strategic data analysis and rapid response studies to inform decision-making” (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009).
5. “Partners can assist in driving continuous improvement.” This is perhaps the most perplexing of the lessons. Given the dire state of public education in Baltimore, it would seem that those responsible would be strongly motivated to continue to drive improvements, not only to close the chasm in performance that had become Baltimore’s legacy, but to assure the children of the city are provided with every opportunity to succeed and excel. Instead, the report notes the commitment of the new mayor and “a landmark teachers’ contract approved by the union membership ...[that] positions Baltimore as one of the country’s leading districts in acknowledging and rewarding teacher achievement” (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). What is not clear from the report is how ‘teacher achievement’ correlates with student success.

Another effort is underway at the Johns Hopkins University ‘Everyone Graduates Center’ or EGC. Located within the Center for Social Organization of Schools, the EGC “seeks to identify the barriers that stand in the way of all students graduating from high school prepared for adult success, to develop strategic solutions to overcome the barriers, and to build local capacity to implement and sustain them.” By using a “systematic and comprehensive approach, EGC combines analysis of the causes, location, and consequences of the nation’s dropout crisis with the development of tools and models designed to keep all students on the path to high school graduation, and capacity building efforts to enable states, communities, school districts, and schools to provide all their students with the supports they need to succeed” (EGC, 2010).

A significant amount of the ECG's research has been focused on the predictive factors and drivers that result in students dropping out of high school. They have identified a "process of disengagement" that typically begins in middle school or earlier, wherein the student is chronically absent, receives repeated disciplinary suspensions, has high levels of course failure, and/or is "overage" upon entering the 9th grade (indeed, their data depict some 4% of high school students who dropout are 20 years of age or older at the time they leave high school). In addition they have created a cataloging system that enables schools and researchers to make and classify specific determinations of the factors that lead to each student's decision to leave high school. These include:

Life Events: These are students who leave school because they "need to work, get married, become incarcerated, have a child, need to take care of an ill family member, etc."

Fade Outs: These are students who have performed acceptably in school and who have not had disciplinary issues, "but at some point stop seeing the point of staying in school, believ[ing] they can succeed better without it."

Push Outs: These students are "seen as detrimental to success of school or other students. Administrative rules [are] used to remove [them] from school or send [them] to [an] alternative school."

Fail to Succeed: These students "do not pass courses and earn enough credits to be promoted to next grade or graduate" (ECG).

While several of these conditions suggest an element of 'self-determination,' the fact remains that "approximately 50 percent of the dropouts in the United States are produced by 15 percent of the high schools, all of which serve populations with high poverty rates" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Clearly, it is not enough to know what the final determining factor was that leads a student to dropout. Any successful plan for data gathering, analysis, intervention and improvement must also consider all of the factors associated with poverty that contribute to one or more of the behaviors that result in students leaving school before high school graduation.

For those students who do graduate, especially those who have persevered in high schools serving students with lower socioeconomic status, state and federal student aid programs have been designed to assure access to and affordability of postsecondary education. However, in spite of these efforts, "low-income students make up just 15 percent of students at elite private colleges and flagship public universities—a number that has remained flat in recent years, despite efforts to boost the socioeconomic diversity of students" (Adams, 2011). Perhaps even more surprising is that "on the whole, Americans see minority students as having much greater advantages in seeking access to college than is actually the case, although white people are much more likely than black and Hispanic segments of the population to hold such a view" (Schmidt, 2011). This kind of thinking could lead Congress to act in ways that diminish the financial resources available to needy students. Although 43% of the study's respondents perceived that "students from low-income families have less opportunity than others to attend college," their perception of the opportunity for minority and middle-class students was identical. Nearly 25% of the respondents actually believe that "qualified students who are racial and ethnic minorities have more opportunity than others to attend college;" 20% believe that students from low-income families have more opportunity to attend college than others, while 10% felt the same way about middle-class students. (Schmidt, 2011).

As Moishe the Beadel taught Eliezer, there are many ways to enter a place where knowledge can be achieved. And while it is true that each person must find his or her own path, it is also incumbent upon

us as a society to ensure that path is not littered with potholes or landmines that delay or prevent progress.

I looked at the Mao portrait on the wall. The Chairman had kind-looking features. Smiling eyes, glowing cheeks, a round nose, and a gentle mouth. It was a peaceful face. Hot Pepper once said that if you stared at Mao's portrait long enough, the Chairman would come alive. His eyes would blink and his lips would open. I experimented with staring but the man never came alive. I was getting bored looking at him. But there was nothing else besides the portrait on the wall in the classroom. A couple of months ago I scribbled in my notebook during the reciting. Mrs. Cheng stopped me. She later explained that she was trying to protect me. Although she didn't spell the words out, I understood the message. She was right. If Hot Pepper had caught me, I would have been expelled from school as a reactionary. (Min, 11)

Anchee Min's narrator in *Wild Ginger* describes a typical moment in a classroom: a student who is not engaged in learning (although it is debatable just how much 'learning' was really occurring during the Cultural Revolution in China) and a teacher who has good intentions, but who is unable to change either the curriculum, the environment, or the larger circumstances of the child's life in order to bring the educational experience alive. This same scenario plays out in different ways in different classrooms across the country and, I would venture to say, throughout the world. Talented teachers find ways to increase stimulation and make the educational process challenging for their students, but even the best teachers are constrained by the requirements of school boards, the realities of testing, the dearth of resources, the time to prepare and present information and, in the case of children who are growing up in an urban food desert, the internal physical, psychological, and social barriers that impede the child's ability to fully participate in the pedagogical process.

To craft a solution that addresses each aspect of this problem requires a breadth of understanding and commitment to change that likely far surpasses not only the ability, but perhaps also the will, of those who are best positioned to make a positive impact. But before there can be answers, it is important to know the questions:

- How do food deserts emerge in urban neighborhoods? Throughout history, people have lived in high density housing in large cities. They have not grown their own food and relied on conveniently located purveyors of fruits, vegetables, meats, baked goods, etc. that were available from the local green grocer, butcher or baker. Was there a time when these resources were available in neighborhoods like East Baltimore? If so, why could they not be sustained? It is easy to imagine that during the violent and turbulent decades of 1960s, 70s, and 80s that these kinds of businesses may have moved out the neighborhood, and that the economic blight that followed kept others from trying to establish new businesses. However, now that the circumstances are improving, would the neighborhood be receptive to a resurgence of healthy food purveyors, or have the nutritional habits that have formed during decades of binging on junk foods changed the purchasing habits as well? Could a healthy grocer be successful and profitable in a former food desert?
- What is required to transform the eating habits of the children and families who are living in urban food deserts? How do you change the food choices of consumers who have developed poor nutritional habits due to access, affordability or preferences developed over time? Once

healthier food options are available, the challenge becomes much more akin to the challenge facing so many Americans today – how do you combat the mega-marketing of foods that are void of any nutritional value, high in salt and fat, and exceedingly detrimental to health and succeed in developing the same kinds of cravings and eating habits for fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats and fish? How do you honor and respect the cultural roots of food consumption and food choice, while updating those recipes to maintain flavor and improve nutrition? How do you instill a commitment to moderate consumption of those things that cannot be converted to more nutritionally sound versions, but that remain important components of the cultural experience with food?

- How are those efforts to instill healthy eating habits undermined by the USDA’s school breakfast and lunch programs? What is required to get schools to provide only healthy food options to students?
- What is required to increase physical activity among a population that has lacked the nutritional basis to expend energy through sports, exercise or other active pursuits? Once people are making better food choices, it is important to balance their caloric intake with caloric expenditures. Teaching children and the adults who raise them the importance of sound nutrition and physical strength, flexibility and endurance is a start, but incorporating that knowledge into sustained lifestyle changes will require an investment of time, resources, and programming that goes beyond the classroom and into the construct of the daily lives of everyone in the community.
- How do you address and overcome the effects of the chronic health problems, including diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, anemia, or high cholesterol, that are present in communities living in food deserts?
- How does a child interpret his or her place in the world when the basic elements of daily living are not accessible in a more organic fashion? What is the subtext of these social programs and elaborate scaffolding to engender some semblance of the kind of life his or her peers might be experiencing in a more affluent neighborhood? How does a child experience these interventions and determine his or her own role in the world?
- What is required to overcome the psychological damage that develops in a child who is raised in an environment where good health is not readily attainable? What are the deeply ingrained messages that child has absorbed that inform his or her sense of self worth? Is the act of investing in the child’s nutritional and physical health enough of a signal to transform and improve self-esteem, or are other interventions required?
- What are the neurological impacts of protracted nutritional deficit on a child’s cognitive ability? What are the remedies and prognosis for improvement? Are there lasting effects that cannot be overcome? If so, what are the mitigating factors that can be brought to bear to give the child the best opportunity to succeed academically and prepare for a productive adult life?
- In neighborhoods like East Baltimore, children struggle against violence, food insecurity, family upheaval, lead poisoning, substance abuse, and “public schools marred by high absenteeism and poor academic achievement” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 10). How do you address the issues food presents to children in this environment? If food has become a source of comfort, what do

you do to replace it? If food has been scarce, how do you assure children that they can trust food will be available in the future?

- How is the value of education perceived in a poor neighborhood? Is there common agreement that preparing a young person to be successful in a world that is more likely to judge them against a set of commonly held values, beliefs and behavioral norms most typically found in the educational institutions will prepare them for the future and the businesses that will employ them? If so, will these skills translate in a way that enables them to also survive and succeed in their own hardscrabble neighborhood? If not, what is the hope for that child's future?
- How does the education system adapt to meet the special needs of children living in food deserts?

What are the cross-cultural implications for education?

In his 1917 essay *A Study of Physical Education*, Mao Tse-tung wrote, "Physical education not only strengthens the body but also enhances our knowledge. There is a saying: Civilize the mind and make savage the body. This is an apt saying. In order to civilize the mind one must first make savage the body. If the body is made savage, then the civilized mind will follow. Knowledge consists in knowing the things in the world, and in discerning their laws. In this matter we must rely on our body, because direct observation depends on the ears and eyes, and reflection depends on the brain. The ears and eyes, as well as the brain, may be considered parts of the body. When the body is perfect, then knowledge is also perfect. Hence one can say that knowledge is acquired indirectly through physical education. Physical strength is required to undertake the study of the numerous modern sciences, whether in school or through independent study. He who is equal to this is the man with a strong body; he who is not equal to it is the man with a weak body. The division between the strong and the weak determines the area of responsibilities each can assume" (Maoist Documentation Project, 2004).

At the crux of the food desert problem is the impact an unhealthy diet has on a person's ability to learn. There is truth in Mao's assertion that "physical strength is required to undertake the study of the numerous modern sciences, whether in school or through independent study" and that physical strength is derived from a nutritious diet coupled with a regimen of vigorous exercise.

I lay down on my back. The night was broad and wide. I began to think about my father. I missed him terribly. As my mind wandered the sweetness of the air disappeared. I became uncomfortable. I felt the sky turn into a broad palm and press itself upon my face. A nameless anxiety crept up on me. I worried about my future. I thought about the word "escape." I wanted to escape school and become a Maoist. I understood that it was the only path to a good future. One had to be a Maoist to get a good job. But on the other hand, I was confused. I was not sure whether being a Maoist would make me happy. I was not looking forward to graduation. I didn't see a future as bright as the one Chairman Mao promised. Maybe it was the daily hunger, the hardship, that stressed me. And my father. The way he was treated. My family was never enthusiastic about participating in the Cultural Revolution. All my siblings were considered politically nearsighted. I didn't see where it was all leading (Min, 50-51).

While Mao advocated a healthy mind and body, many of his people suffered from a dearth of food during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, a sense of wanting and needing that which was forbidden or could not be obtained seemed to permeate Chinese society. These passages from Anchee Min's *Wild Ginger* poignantly illustrate the pervasive undercurrent of need that framed daily life.

I remembered a story from One-Eye Grandpa. He said he'd once had a hard time explaining to a group of village children what a book was. They had never seen one. He was a veteran at that time and was passing through town. I was sure Evergreen and I would have made a difference. What a pity. (Min, 2004)

Mao denounced intellectualism and hijacked the educational system in China for his own political aims thus, it is doubtful that the education of the village children had been curtailed, as they likely had never had access to books, classrooms, or teachers. In my forum, *The Power of Knowledge* (Hoblitzell, 2011), I have asserted that knowledge and power are derived from a multitude of sources and are used for as many purposes. As other forums have explored, the experience of human life in harsh circumstances is the catalyst for many defining actions, decisions, philosophical and political leanings, as well as the ultimate formation of one's truest self. For many, life in harsh circumstances gives birth to an intractable sense of dignity and/or spirituality that also serves to enable one to endure and persevere. Under those conditions, the knowledge gained is not gleaned from didactic sources, great works of literature, or another's expertise. It flows from within, from each person's experience of the world and the moment they are living. As we examined the sources of knowledge and power, and more importantly, how it was wielded, there emerged a vast array of examples from literature.

Danielle Chauncey observed that "In *Ulysses*, James Joyce confronts religion head on and early through a conversation between Haines and Stephen: 'Either you believe or you don't, isn't it? Personally I couldn't stomach that idea of a personal God. You don't stand for that, I suppose?' To which Stephen responds: 'You behold in me a horrible example of free thought.' Considering the book itself is a reflection on Odysseus in the *Odyssey* who encountered immortal God after immortal God, Stephen seems to believe in the authority of God, whereas Haines is self-reliant. Haines is what many people are today, not atheist or a pagan, but floating between two movements. One that wants to leave the church behind, and one that can't" (Chauncey).

Eric Ayers shared his impression of "...The Bluest Eye, [wherein] the narrator's big sister was the source of her knowledge. The source of our knowledge must be chosen carefully. One has to have a variety of sources to get the best perspective on any given idea. America is the greatest country in the world. I say that because this is all I know, but I've never lived in Denmark or Singapore. My source of knowledge is the small part of the world that I've seen so far. This is not a very educated perspective" (Ayers).

Ryan Hinricher noted that "In Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, we see the character Equality 7-2521 discover electricity. His attempt to deliver this to the Council of Scholars is struck down as evil. 'And if this great thing shall lighten the toil of men,' said Similarity 5-0306, 'then it is a great evil, for men have no cause to exist save in toiling for other men.' Then collective 0-0009 rose and pointed at our box. 'This thing,' they said, 'must be destroyed.' ... later in the text, after changing his name from Equality 7-2521 to Prometheus, he declares, 'I have learned the power of the sky was known to men long ago; they called it Electricity. It was the power that moved their greatest inventions. It lit this house with light that came from those globes of glass on the walls. I have found the engine which produced this light. I shall learn how to repair it and how to make it work again. I shall learn how to use the wires which carry this power. Then I shall build a barrier of wires around my home, and across the paths which lead to my home; a barrier light as a cobweb, more impassable than a wall of granite...' (Loc 849).' His attempt to

deliver the invention as a gift was only seen as a threat by the oppressive Council. He felt it worthy to retreat with it to the forest and make his own way. Still his plan was to use it for defensive means only” (Hinricher).

Julia Keefer opined “Ironically, the most powerful character in *God Dies by the Nile* is Zakeya, an illiterate peasant with no formal knowledge, who ends up having the power and the hoe to kill the Mayor. In *Ulysses*, all Stephen's bookish knowledge seems to get him tangled up in all kinds of internal conflicts and dilemmas, almost like Othello, another character of extreme knowledge and intelligence. In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and *Red Azalea*, knowledge is forbidden. To survive you must hide or burn it. This is the case in *One Man's Bible* where Gao Xi Jiang burned all his books before the Red Guard entered his house. In *Soul Mountain* the protagonist finds knowledge buried in the earth, deep inside the mountains of China, deep inside the many pronouns that make up himself. In *Night and One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, characters survive by concentrating on the details of the present moment. Too much knowledge of their fate might render them impotent, and dead. But this doesn't mean knowledge isn't good. The AUTHORS of these books had extreme knowledge but maybe it was so painful to them that they empowered characters who lacked some of their intelligence. Saadawi does that all the time.” Keefer followed up with a challenge: “What is your definition of knowledge? Does it include all cognitive domains and sensory experience? Then Zakeya has more knowledge than previously thought” (Keefer).

Indeed, I have always applied the broadest definition to the concept of knowledge, recognizing that people both possess innate understanding of certain things (e.g., intuition, emotional intelligence, etc.) and acquire new knowledge through every experience. How individuals incorporate and apply that knowledge over the course of their lives varies greatly, as does the power each person derives from what they know. Such is the case for Maple, the protagonist in *Wild Ginger*, as her education has been limited by the precepts of Mao and her knowledge is continually challenged and censored until she is nearly unable to discern her own experience. In the end, she is able to reflect on all that she has seen, heard and felt throughout her tumultuous teenage years and decide for herself her truth. I expect the same is true for the children of East Baltimore. Their education has been limited by the circumstances of their lives – poverty, crime, poor health, substandard living conditions, and violence – and their world view colors every new experience and piece of information. The lens through which they view the world, the power they acquire and wield, are greatly informed by their circumstances.

As Simon describes in *The corner*, children from East Baltimore learn that there are more immediate and significant rewards derived from ‘street smarts’ than from anything they might be learning in a classroom. As Dai Sijie described in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, intellectualism was scorned and the educational system hijacked for the furtherance of Mao's political aims. In my forum, *The Power of Knowledge*, I have endeavored to explore how the acquisition and leverage of knowledge is portrayed in literature.

One particular claim that I have been considering since its posting is that “knowledge can only be acquired through experience. Sensory experience is a requirement because true knowledge is a feeling” (Hinricher in Hoblitzell, 2011). While I believe that there is merit to the assertion that “sensory experience is a requirement,” I don't believe it is an absolute, that experience is the only means by which to acquire knowledge, or that knowledge is a feeling.

If we consider the senses --- sight, sound, smell, taste and touch -- it is easy to imagine that one or more of these would be engaged in the acquisition of new information or knowledge. Every experience we have serves to inform and expand our understanding of the world around us and, perhaps most importantly, our place in that world. However, I also believe that we are born with innate knowledge that is present without experiencing any of these sensory interfaces.

I would also assert that it is possible to acquire knowledge through empirical means that do not employ experience or, for that matter, feelings. While empirical knowledge absent context may result in

greater misunderstanding than clarity, context can also be understood from an amalgamation of empirical data and, through that process, result in a deep understanding of a person, place, thing, concept or time, while only engaging your sense of sight to read.

Nonetheless, experiential knowledge is a powerful thing. Just as there are benefits realized from exercise, exposing intellectuals to the effort, skill and knowledge required to successfully cultivate crops also has its merits. My father was a physicist and spent most of his professional life engaged in the exploration of science. However, he balanced his academic and research pursuits with manual labor, choosing to make our home and raise his family on a working ranch where each of us learned to raise livestock, plant and nurture large and small crops, repair fences, bail hay and any number of intensely manual labors. This lifestyle not only assured we developed and maintained physical vigor, but also a full appreciation of what was required to maintain the nation's food supply. We understood what was required to keep our animals healthy and what was required to ensure our own health. For my brothers, sisters and me, our experiences on the ranch gave context to our lessons in the classroom, and expanded the breadth of options we could consider for our futures.

While the experience of my childhood provided me with an expansive view of the world, the view of the world from East Baltimore is narrow, limited and, in many ways, finite. During Barak Obama's campaign for the Presidency he remarked to an NAACP Forum that "We have more work to do when more young black men languish in prison than attend colleges and universities across America" (Kessler, 2007). While the science behind this assertion has been hotly debated, the fact remains that for too many poor young people of color, prison is a part of their future. Today, "an estimated 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United State" – the highest prison population rate in the world, with nearly "one out of every 31 U.S. adults under some form of correctional control" (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011).

In prison, I experienced the height of grief and joy, the peaks of pain and pleasure, the greatest beauty and the most intense ugliness. At certain moments I imagined that I was living a new love story. In prison I found my heart opened to love--how I don't know--as if I were back in early adolescence. In prison, I remembered the way I had burst out laughing when a child, while the taste of tears from the harshest and hardest days of my life returned to my mouth. In prison I relived my entire childhood" (Saadawi, Memoirs from the Women's Prison - 39)

In their 2006 report on the state of prison education in the United States, Richard Coley and Paul Barton write, "The 'chain gang' was tough physically; the 'learning gang' requires hard mental effort and discipline." The prison population is composed largely of those with the lowest levels of educational attainment. For young black males aged 20-39 who have dropped out of school, the rate of incarceration is equal to the rate of employment (Coley & Barton, 2006).

Educating prisoners is by no means a new phenomenon. In fact, education became a function of American prison in 1798, "just seven years after the first American prison opened its doors" (US Department of Education, 2011). In 2006, more than 90% of federal and state prisons provided education to their inmates. Education is viewed as an important component in rehabilitation, due in large part to the imperative for literacy and job skills to reduce recidivism (Coley & Barton, 2006). Today, researchers report that 35-42% of correctional facilities offer some form of postsecondary education (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). While public funding for prison education was severely curtailed and, in many cases, eliminated during the 1990s, it is seeing resurgence as data demonstrate the impact education has not only on reduced recidivism but improved inmate behavior during incarceration.

At a time when many state's prison budget exceeds their funding allocations for higher education, it is interesting to look at one particularly successful (and privately funded!) model for prisoner education -- Bard College's Bard Prison Initiative (BPI). BPI provides "a rigorous and diverse liberal arts curriculum, [culminating in] both associate and bachelor degrees" at three long-term maximum-security and two transitional medium-security prisons. While the enrollment of nearly 200 men and women is a minute percentage of the total prisoner population, the "college-in-prison programs [has] slashed rates of reincarceration from 60% to less than 15%" (BPI). This speaks to the transformative power of education. As the President of Bard College, Leon Botstein, stated, "It takes radical incarceration – the loss of all hope – to engender a love of learning" (Olian, 2007); from my vantage point, this must be especially true for those whom education clearly failed in the past.

Radical incarceration is certainly an apt term for the circumstances of millions of Jews and others targeted by the Nazi's racial hygiene or eugenics programs. While Hitler and his troops created one more horrific program after another aimed at eliminating an entire race of people, his targets persevered through countless horrors and have gone on to educate the world about the full measure of atrocities and the circumstances that permitted them to occur.

*Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned
my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.
Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw
turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all
eternity, of the desire to live.
Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul
and turned my dreams to dust.
Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long
as God Himself.
Never. (Weisel, 34)*

For centuries, education has been a vitally important component of Jewish culture. However, when Germany took control of Europe in the early 20th century, the "opportunities for Jews to attend schools and universities were initially limited severely and eventually eliminated entirely" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). Educational options continued for some school-aged children who were being hidden and protected from being taken to the camps. A child with an 'Aryan' appearance could continue to attend school, albeit while risking being discovered. Those who were being physically concealed "tried to educate themselves through reading and writing" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011).

For non-Jewish citizens of Germany, education took an equally dark turn. Beginning in the 1920, German children were targeted by the Nazi party for their messages of propaganda. They defined the party in terms that were appealing to young people: "dynamic, resilient, forward-looking, and hopeful" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). "Millions of German young people were won over to Nazism in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Education in the Third Reich served to indoctrinate students with the National Socialist world view" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). Children were taught to discriminate and hate, learning that "Nordic and other 'Aryan' races" were superior and that Jews and others deemed as inferior were "parasitic 'bastard races' incapable of creating culture or civilization," in spite of all real evidence to the contrary (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). It is interesting to note that in Nazi Germany, "97% of all public

school teachers...joined the National Socialist Teachers League....In fact, teachers joined the Nazi Party in greater numbers than any other profession” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). German educators introduced new textbooks that taught students love for Hitler, obedience to state authority, militarism, racism, and anti-Semitism.

As if creating the playbook that would later be used by Chairman Mao, children in Germany were taught in the classroom and through the Hitler Youth movement to be “race-conscious, obedient, self-sacrificing Germans who would be willing to die for Führer and Fatherland” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011). These children swore allegiance to Hitler and pledged to serve him and their homeland as future soldiers. “From their first days in school, German children were imbued with the cult of Adolf Hitler. His portrait was a standard fixture in classrooms. Textbooks frequently described the thrill of a child seeing the German leader for the first time” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011).

In his novel, *Night*, Elie Wiesel teaches us that there is no greater sin than that of silence and indifference. Many argue that fascism in the early 20th century was fueled by that silence and indifference, as those with the knowledge to foresee the devastating trajectory and the power to change the course of history stood idly by for far too long. While there is truth in these statements, fascism was also fueled by an overt act to ‘educate’ a population in adherence to a narrow and misguided belief system.

“Ironically, many Americans don't like to combine education and literature. As a screenwriter and screenwriting consultant, I have been told many times that Hollywood didn't want movies with a message. Many of the modernists favored aesthetics over didacticism, but most of the Nobel Prize winners have a didactic as well as an aesthetic approach to their writing. In my spare time, I never read novels that don't teach me something, even if it is about language. I never read for pure entertainment. Maybe that is why I got rid of my TV. Even though Americans value education, why is the content of popular media, including popular novels, focused on "amusing ourselves to death," the title of one of Neil Postman's books?” (Keefer in Hoblitzell, 2011)

Education in America today struggles against an emerging culture that places greater value on entertainment, celebrity (or, in this age of reality television and tabloid journalism, faux-lebrity!), and false indicators of achievement (e.g., money, status, fame), than it places on the truest indicator of educational attainment – an expanded mind. Liberal arts are denounced by some as impractical and disconnected from the economic engine of workforce development. Dominique G. Homberger, a biology professor at Louisiana State University, was removed from her teaching post and her students given higher grades when they complained that her course was too hard and too many students were failing (Jaschik, 2010). “Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks present evidence in Working Paper 15954 that in 1961, the average student spent 40 hours a week engaged in their studies—attending class and studying. By 2003, this had declined by nearly one-third to 27 hours weekly” (Vedder, 2010). Faculty senates at schools like Princeton University, Dartmouth and Cornell Colleges, and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill are adopting policies to curb grade inflation, while students protest vehemently that such action “could potentially undermine ... students’ achievements compared to other schools” (Lederman, 2011).

While children and adults around the world and throughout history have held the opportunity for education to be a most prized gift, many Americans today are willing to squander that benefit or trade the opportunity to truly learn for an easily obtained symbol of learning such as a grade or degree. Diploma mills and for-profit colleges and universities have thrived in this environment in part because they provide easy access to the ‘fruits’ without requiring the ‘labor’. A veritable junkyard of educational options has emerged, filled with antiquated and discarded notions of what constitutes learning and what will suffice as a reliable credential. Students with degrees and diplomas from for-profit institutions are struggling to garner employment, discovering only after they have invested thousands of dollars

(and presumably some lesser quantity of time and effort) that the education they have received has not prepared them adequately for the job marketplace. A recent PBS expose of for-profit colleges included interviews with a group of 'nursing school' graduates who could not find jobs because they "never set foot in a hospital" (Durrance, C., Maggio, J. & Smith, M., 2010). They told the interviewer that the clinical rotation for psychiatry comprised a one-hour visit to the Church of Scientology; for "pediatrics [they] went to a day care" (Durrance, C., Maggio, J. & Smith, M., 2010). These women paid \$30,000 for a 12-month program that is, quite frankly, junk. The cruel irony of this is that these programs tend to prey upon those who have the greatest need for and least experience with postsecondary education. Most of these students borrow the money to attend these programs, racking up substantial debt and compounding interest in the process. They are frequently the first in their family to attend college, and many lack the requisite analytical skills (or skepticism of hucksters!) to critically examine the veracity of the schools that are courting to them (often through aggressive recruiters or advertising on daytime television).

Nawal El Saadawi writes that "What we need is an educational system that is not only adapted to solving the specific problems of our societies but is also built on developing the capacity for *critical appraisal* and free examination of options. Taboos on thought still hold sway, especially in the three areas of politics (class and national struggle), religion and sex. (The Nawal El Saadawi Reader, 192-193). Education should challenge students. It should be confounding, difficult, and at times, incomprehensible. Saadawi asserts that creativity is borne from dissidence. Creative chaos becomes the impetus for new knowledge, introspection, discovery, and deep thought. It is imperative that all people have the capacity – including the physical health that is derived from healthy eating and exercise – to participate fully and contentiously in their education.

For many students who find their way to quality institutions of higher learning, this creative chaos emerges in the exploration of new thoughts and ideas, challenging literature, or the opportunity to explore a new culture during a study abroad experience. Others find stimulation in their encounters with learned faculty, a diverse student body, or the immersion into unfamiliar – and often intimidating and uncomfortable – subject matter. Still others find their niche – the place where their own curiosity meets with the drive to create new information, new perspectives, new discoveries and add to the growing body of knowledge that is the academy.

However, these transformative experiences depend upon a foundation of education that inculcates a student with basic skills in reading, writing and analytical thought. Moreover, students must have the confidence and commitment to take risks, push beyond their comfort level, and assert themselves in ways that challenge them to think in new ways, as well as to consider the thoughts and ideas of others. While these attributes can be developed over time, a successful preparatory education also depends upon a foundation of good health that is achieved through healthy eating, regular and sustained activity, and mental well-being.

Can the revitalization of East Baltimore serve as a laboratory to test new approaches to overcoming the impacts of life in an urban food desert?

*But how does the self arise? How do we continually emerge from our sensations, from the "scraps, orts and fragments" of which the mind is made? Woolf realized that the self emerges via the **act of attention**. We bind together our sensory parts by experiencing them from a particular point of view. During this process, some sensations are ignored, while others are highlighted. The outside world gets thoroughly interpreted. "With what magnificent vitality the atoms of my attention disperse,"*

Woolf observed, “and create a richer, a stronger, a more complicated world in which I am called upon to act my part” (Lehrer, 181).

As Virginia Woolf asserts, who we are, how we evolve, what we become is not predestined, but rather, develops over the course of our lives as we experience the world and our place in it. For children of poverty, living in urban food deserts, their sensory experience may be limited in ways that not only color their interpretation of the outside world, but stifle their own ability to develop their most complete self and determine the ways in which they can disperse their own attention.

I had the opportunity to meet with Dennis Miller, Vice President of East Baltimore Development. Miller and his colleagues, in partnership with the “U.S. Government, the State of Maryland, the City of Baltimore, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Johns Hopkins Institutions, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies and many others” (Miller) are engaged in the East Baltimore Development Initiative (EBDI), a subset of the East Baltimore Revitalization Initiatives, which is touted as “the largest redevelopment project ever undertaken in Baltimore,” (Miller) in an effort to transform 88 acres of vacant and decaying row houses and empty lots into a “thriving mixed-income community for families, businesses and public institutions” (Miller). The neighborhood has been designated as food desert by the Baltimore City Health Department and its mortality burden is ranked 6th out of 55 city communities for diet-related causes of death, including diabetes, stroke and heart disease. Given the composition of the EBDI partners and the project’s stated objectives, I was curious to learn more and to determine if, without prompting, EBDI’s plans for transformation included addressing the need for better access to affordable healthy foods.

The East Baltimore Revitalization Initiative has begun the process of recasting multiple aspects of daily living in this low income neighborhood that has been ravaged by “sequential epidemics of heroin, crack cocaine, and HIV; the intensified crime and gang activity that fed and feasted off the drug trade; and the activities of slumlord, property flippers, and predatory lenders. The end result has been an ever-deepening cycle of disinvestment and decline” (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2) While largely focused on real estate development, the East Baltimore Revitalization Initiative incorporates elements of education, workforce development, public health and community programming in an effort to “arrest and reverse the downward trajectory” of life in East Baltimore (Annie E. Casey Foundation 3).

As Mr. Miller described the EBDI, he placed significant emphasis on those areas where the EBDI was different from other gentrification blueprints. Unlike many ‘urban renewal’ projects, the EBDI is attempting to take a holistic approach to revitalizing this neighborhood, including the active involvement of and support for the current residents. While 584 families have been relocated to “healthier neighborhoods,” all of the current residents were offered options: they could receive financial assistance to enable them to move elsewhere; they could receive financial assistance and



architectural and contracting support to remain in their current home while they bring it up to code; or, they could trade their current home for one of the newly refurbished ‘green’ homes in the neighborhood.

All of the neighborhood’s residents have been assigned a family advocate who is responsible for assisting them to relocate or remain in the area. These family advocates, who are described by Miller as “a trusted point of contact between the community and EBDI,” also assist the residents with a broad spectrum of issues and concerns. As Miller outlined their role, it became clear that EBDI was working to transform more than just the physical construct of this East Baltimore neighborhood. Family advocates are working with the residents to help them to enroll in workforce development projects and obtain their GEDs; obtain assistance in paying utility bills; gain access to health care, including treatment for mental health and substance abuse issues; avoid foreclosure or eviction; obtain homeowner and other tax credits; and to ensure they receive financial, budgeting and credit counseling. Family advocates have even provided each of the households who continue to reside in the neighborhood throughout its transformation with HEPA vacuums and special doormats to help them to cope with construction dust (Miller). However, Mr. Miller made no mention of any effort on the part of these family advocates to make certain that these families had access to affordable healthy foods.

In addition to the efforts of the Family Advocates, EBDI is promoting the involvement of Minority-Owned Business Enterprises (MBE), Women-Owned Business Enterprises (WBE), and Locally-Owned Business Enterprises (LBE) to ensure the economic transformation of the neighborhood by bringing in new retail establishments and small restaurants, thereby creating employment opportunities for the local residents. Rather than simply providing space or tax incentives, EBDI has adopted a longer-term view and is “seeking to provide professional development opportunities and business incubation services to start-up businesses,” and “seeks to assist the residents living in the project area in both connecting with new employment opportunities and connecting with meaningful, life-long careers” (Miller).

According to Mr. Miller, EBDI is particularly proud of their Elev8 initiative. “Elev8 Baltimore partners with schools and the community to make sure that every student is ready to succeed in high school” (Miller). The program includes co-curricular activities to complement students’ academic curriculum, incorporating into school activities high-quality health education and services for students and parents, linking students and families to community resources, and “engaging students and families so that they can be effective advocates for themselves and their communities” (Miller).



Elev8 Baltimore

East Baltimore Community School

Mr. Miller indicated that EBDI believes that a world-class school is a key element in creating a revitalized neighborhood. Therefore, they have established a K-8 public contract school that operates like a charter school, but gives enrollment priority to neighborhood children, including the children of former residents who have opted to relocate. EBDI has also renovated a former Catholic school which will now serve as home to 24 or more graduate-level art students from the Maryland Institute College of

the Arts (MICA). These students will collaborate with area residents “in what educators see as pioneering effort to address urban problems with ‘art-based’ solutions” (Miller).

Mr. Miller went on to describe, with great enthusiasm, every detailed element that comprised the East Baltimore Development Initiative. Within these 88 acres adjacent to the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, EBDI is creating 2,200 units of mixed-income housing, including several ‘preservation blocks’ that will restore and renew historic row homes; new ‘green’ construction of townhomes with rear-load garages and two-tier balconies, bathrooms on every floor, and soaking tubs; two-million square feet of commercial development; new offices for the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Berman Institute of Bioethics; a 21-story 359-suite graduate student housing complex; a MARC (Maryland Area Regional Commuter) Train station; MICA-sponsored public art and art events; public greenspace for outdoor activities, including free Wi-Fi; greenspace programming including a speakers’ series and community events; pedestrian-friendly lighting; and community policing through a public-private security effort. Mr. Miller described a future state for the neighborhood of new and refurbished homes, clustered around a kind of ‘central park’ that would serve as a ‘gateway’ linking the community to retail and commercial amenities (Miller).

As our time was drawing to an end and, other than several references to new restaurants and cafes that the EBDI hoped to bring to the neighborhood, there had been no mention of where or how the residents would obtain food, I had to ask. Mr. Miller acknowledged that this was a known problem. He described EBDI’s vision to bring an urban grocery store to the area, ideally situated along the park. Miller stated that the ideal solution would comprise “about 20,000 square feet – about the size of a Trader Joe’s – with an emphasis on fresh foods” (Miller). He acknowledged that, with the intended economic diversity of the neighborhood, it will be important to cater to myriad needs. While he believes that the model of “multi-door market” similar to other historic Public Markets around Baltimore (e.g., Lexington Market, Cross Street Market, Broadway Market, etc.) that bring together specialty purveyors (butcher, baker, green grocer, etc.) in a single space is appealing, they may opt for a more traditional grocery store. What he does not want to include is a “suburban-style supermarket surrounded by a large parking lot” (Miller). Miller sees that model as inconsistent with the neighborhood plan. Nor is Miller interested in bringing another Whole Foods outlet to the area. “While we want to cater to a broader economic base, the Charm City Circulator (*a fleet of 21 free shuttles that travel three routes in Baltimore City*) provides access to Whole Foods at Harbor East, so there is no need to replicate that here” (Miller).

I probed further to determine what, if any, steps were being taken now to address the needs of current residents. It is unlikely that, given the economic composition of the existing community, residents are shopping at Whole Foods and, other than a few very small and poorly stocked corner markets and fast food establishments, the East Baltimore neighborhood has a dearth of food outlets. Miller told me about a new program, initiated by the Baltimore City Health Department in March of 2010 that enables residents to order groceries online at their local libraries and pick them up at the same locations the next day.

While Baltimore City has too many neighborhoods that could be designated as food deserts, it has an extensive and well-managed network of public libraries. With 24 branch locations throughout the city, all Baltimore residents have easy access to the programs and services provided by the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

In their launch of the program, the Baltimore City Health Department noted that, “a neighborhood designated as a food desert has no supermarkets within walking distance and lacks other resources that would provide healthy, inexpensive food. Corner stores and fast food or take-out restaurants are common in these areas, but they generally only offer unhealthy options. Healthy staples at corner stores, if they are available, can cost as much as 20% more than they would cost in supermarkets. Few residents of the neighborhoods targeted by the program own their own vehicles ... making travel to a

distant supermarket an obstacle” (Farrow). Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake underscored the issue, stating that “this program will make these neighborhoods stronger and healthier, allowing residents the same access to full-service, competitively priced grocery stores that much of the rest of the city enjoys” (Farrow).

This Virtual Supermarket Project (VSP) began as a pilot in 2009 and was conceived as an innovative way to address food access problems in Baltimore City. “In many densely populated cities, including Baltimore, residents of some communities must choose between shopping at small corner stores that lack fresh produce or paying a premium for a ride far outside their area. This is not a fair choice,” said Interim Commissioner Farrow. “We are hoping that if this program is successful, we can partner with more grocery stores and expand the program to other areas of Baltimore where there is need” (Farrow). While certainly laudable, the Virtual Supermarket Project is only available to users once per week and on a very limited basis. Participants in East Baltimore must place their orders between 2:00 pm and 4:00 pm on Tuesdays and then pick up their groceries between 4:30 pm and 5:30 pm on Thursdays. Nonetheless, the VSP “has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from its participants. 91% of participants indicated that this program ‘has improved their access to fresh and affordable groceries.’ 73% of people indicated that it has enabled them to make healthier purchases” (Baltimore City Health Department). This is likely due in part to the many incentives the Health Department has embedded in the program. For example, “to encourage healthy eating, the program provides healthy eating recipe books, healthy cooking demonstrations, and a \$10 incentive for healthy food purchases. The health food incentives are issued on a customer’s first order and then every fourth order. If a customer orders from the VSP each month, they have the opportunity to obtain \$120.00 worth of healthy foods free of cost” (Baltimore City Health Department).

While the efforts of Mr. Miller and his colleagues at the EBDI and the Virtual Supermarket Program are welcome improvements, they currently fall far short of creating the kind of environment in which a child might thrive. How does a child interpret his or her place in the world when the basic elements of daily living are not accessible in a more organic fashion? What is the subtext of these social programs and elaborate scaffolding to engender some semblance of the kind of life his or her peers might be experiencing in a more affluent neighborhood? How does a child experience these interventions and determine his or her own role in the world?

*Dignity stems from the ability to feed oneself. This applies to the state
as much as it does to the individual, man or woman. (Saadawi, The
Nawal El Saadawi Reader - 48)*

The profundity of Nawal El Saadawi’s assertion regarding the dignity that is secured from being able to feed oneself underscores my own thesis, namely, that a child who is denied access to healthy food options because he or she lives in an urban food desert will not only suffer a nutritional deficit, but may also struggle to succeed academically due to the myriad implications derived from his or her limited diet. Just as a child who attends a school with outdated or an insufficient number of textbooks infers that the community is not invested in his or her education, a child who has limited access to affordable fruits and vegetables may deduce that his or her health and well-being are not valued. Frequently, this problem is compounded by “lack of access to a sufficient amount of food because of limited resources” (Kalb). A recent *Newsweek* article referred to this phenomenon as ‘food insecurity’, asserting that the increase in food insecurity has resulted in “many families feel[ing] isolated and ashamed...In 2008, 14.6 percent of U.S. households fell into the category at some time during the year—the highest rate since the Department of Agriculture began recording stats in 1995” (Kalb). In a city where “nearly 60-percent of all African-American men between the ages of 18 and 35 are estimated to be in the criminal justice system,” one out of every ten residents is addicted to heroin, and children as young as 10 are working as

lookouts or drug dealers (Khalid), every interaction with a child in East Baltimore needs to reinforce that child's perceived security and emphasize her value, potential and dignity.

Pedro Noguero, New York University professor of sociology and author of *City Schools and the American Dream* and co-editor of *Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools*, wrote recently that "if we want to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn, we must ensure that their basic needs are met. Students who are hungry should be fed, children who need coats in the winter should receive them and those who have been abused or neglected should have counseling and care. Expanding access to healthcare, preschool and affordable housing, and providing more generous parental leave policies should be included on the education reform agenda."

However, we cannot wait until a child is attending school to begin. "By the time a child is between two and four years old, her eating habits are largely shaped. If she reaches the age of five without learning about healthy eating, the chances of her developing poor nutritional habits and attitudes are significantly increased" (Betancourt). By capitalizing on the momentum established through the East Baltimore Revitalizations Initiative, I propose that East Baltimore's food desert can be transformed to a kind of healthy oasis through a multi-faceted approach comprising the following six elements:

1. Developing and equipping grocery stores and other small retailers to sell healthy food options with funding from the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, including increased support for Arabbers, farmers' markets and community supported agriculture;
2. Incorporating the Edible Schoolyard and School Lunch Initiatives into the curriculum at the East Baltimore Community School;
3. Incorporating a family fitness and recreation program into the curriculum at the East Baltimore Community School;
4. Creating and sustaining a Community Kitchen and Nutritional Education Program in conjunction with the East Baltimore Community School and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health;
5. Establishing and sustaining a network of community gardens/greenhouses, coupled with educational programs for home/rooftop gardening; and
6. Incorporating emotional intelligence training and coaching into the academic curriculum and community outreach efforts.

What follows is a high-level overview of each of these proposed elements:

Developing and equipping grocery stores and other small retailers to sell healthy food options with funding from the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, including increased support for arabbers, farmers' markets and community supported agriculture

On February 19, 2010, the Obama administration introduced the Healthy Food Financing Initiative which will invest \$400 million dollars into programs aimed at bringing groceries to the underserved (Winter). While implementation is dependent upon an appropriation in the 2011 budget in order to create a collaborative program within the U.S. Treasury, Department of Agriculture and Department of Health and Human Services, in the event that is not forthcoming, the needs of the East Baltimore neighborhood could also be met with privately-funded /government –sponsored initiatives aimed at achieving these same goals.

Baltimore City is one of the only remaining urban communities with an active network of arabbers. Arabbers are small scale entrepreneurs -- mostly Black and male -- who hire horses and carts to carry fresh fruits and vegetables to the neighborhoods of Baltimore (Hansen). While there has been significant controversy surrounding some of their practices, “for most residents this is a blessing, as there are few supermarkets located in the city. As long as there is a demand for the product, the arabbers have business” (Hansen). Continuing this long-standing African-American tradition underscores the history of the neighborhood, while providing convenient access to healthy foods to its residents.



Araber

The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions host a weekly farmers’ market on the East Baltimore campus every Thursday from May through October. According to Davis Bookhart, manager of Energy Management and Environmental Stewardship and chair of the Johns Hopkins Sustainability Committee, “[the market] helps advance one of our sustainability goals of promoting local, seasonal and, where possible, organic produce” (JHU Gazette). Efforts to increase the community’s engagement in this program could include walking tours of the market led by ‘experts’ who can assist participants in identifying healthy options, tips for preparation, and experimentation with new foods. In addition, eligible families can receive financial support from the Women, Infants and Children Program, most commonly referred to as WIC, a federally-funded health and nutrition program that helps families by providing checks for buying healthy supplemental foods from WIC-authorized vendors, including certified farmers’ markets.

Incorporating the Edible Schoolyard and School Lunch Initiatives into the curriculum at the East Baltimore Community School

The Edible Schoolyard initiative educates both children and their teachers and families about “culture, history, language, ecology, and mathematics through the preparation of food” (ESY). The School Lunch Initiative (SLI) expands that premise by “connect[ing] formal academic subjects with experiential learning in instructional gardens, kitchen classrooms, and school classrooms” (School Lunch Initiative). SLI is “based on the hypothesis that if young people are involved in growing, cooking, and sharing fresh, healthy food while learning about it in the curriculum, they will be more likely to develop lifelong healthy eating habits and values consistent with sustainable living” (Rauzon, Wang, Studer & Crawford).

Each of these programs provide significant opportunities for parents and other family members to participate, thereby extending the benefits derived from the experience to more people and connecting the community to one another in new ways. Imagine how these programs might be enhanced by creating a role for senior citizens to share stories of their own experiences with gardening, canning or

favorite family recipes handed down through generations? The challenge of developing a child's palate can be addressed by creating programs for expectant mothers that not only provide options for meeting their own nutritional needs during pregnancy, but provide them with a primer for selecting and preparing fresh and healthy foods for their newborn and toddler.

Incorporating a family fitness and recreation program into the curriculum at the East Baltimore Community School

School-based physical fitness programs have suffered greatly in recent years from budget cuts and increased emphasis on standardized testing. However, reinvesting in the physical fitness of East Baltimore community will not only serve to improve the health, well-being and academic readiness of the children, but can also be extended to improve the health of the entire community. While the East Baltimore Development Initiative's plans did not include fitness or recreation facilities, I believe that oversight can and should be remedied.

Just as parents are required to assist with and review their children's academic homework, parents can and should play an active role in their children's fitness and recreation. I envision a program that would require parents to participate weekly in one or more fitness and/or recreational programs during the school day or in an after-school/weekend activity. In addition, the fitness and recreation facilities that are developed in conjunction with the school should be made available to the entire community in the evenings, early mornings, and on weekends. Programs should be extensive and tailored to varying levels of fitness, skill, abilities and ages so that every East Baltimore resident can participate.

In addition, the 'central park' should be utilized as a gathering place for daytime, evening and weekend events focused on increased fitness. Whether it is a 5K walk/run, cycling and skating paths, tai chi and yoga, or volleyball and basketball, there are an endless number of fun and healthy activities that can and should be part of the lively fabric of a revitalized community, and the new park is a perfect setting in which to introduce and engage the residents in these activities.

Creating and sustaining a Community Kitchen and Nutritional Education Program in conjunction with the East Baltimore Community School and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

For some residents of this neighborhood, reliance on convenience foods has limited their ability to prepare satisfying and healthy meals. With the school serving as a kind of de facto community center and the Edible Schoolyard necessitating the construction of an industrial kitchen, the natural extension is to open the kitchen in the evenings and on weekends to provide cooking instruction and nutritional education. Programs can focus on the needs of small and large families, working parents, and special dietary needs. Communal cooking sessions might even support preparing food for neighborhood shut-ins.

Establishing and sustaining a network of community gardens/greenhouses, coupled with educational programs for home/rooftop gardening

While the Edible Schoolyard will introduce gardening to many families in the community, there is an opportunity to widen that reach by creating community gardens and greenhouses as part of the community's greening efforts. In addition, educational programs can be made available to assist home gardeners who want to pursue container or rooftop plantings.

Incorporating emotional intelligence training and coaching into the academic curriculum and community outreach efforts

The investment of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Johns Hopkins Institutions, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies and others in the East Baltimore Revitalization Initiative provides the scaffolding to enable a more expansive enterprise that leverages the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; the work of Dr. Marc Brackett, Head of the Emotional Intelligence Unit in the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University; and The Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson & Thompson) that describes elements of the family process of coming to terms with stressful or threatening life events through evaluation and assessment of the stressor, family vulnerabilities, established patterns of family functioning, family capabilities and strengths, family appraisal of the stressor, and problem solving and coping skills; to create a replicable model to introduce Emotional Intelligence educational programming aimed at school-aged children and the adults involved in their education. In addition, this effort could explore the use of volunteer mentors to coach and guide students and parents in preparing for critical interpersonal interactions including interviews for college or jobs, conflict negotiation, complaint resolution and other situations that are prone to limited success as a result of low Emotional Intelligence.

An individual's dignity is derived from every aspect of one's life that informs her feeling of worth. It is an essential component of educational success, as a child must believe he or her she is deserving of increased knowledge, skill and capacity to develop new concepts and ideas in order to fully engage in the educational process. As Saadawi asserts, we must provide communities and individuals with the ability to feed themselves, and that includes not only feeding their stomachs, but also their hearts, minds and souls.

We are living in a time of famine and drought, not only in the urban food desert of East Baltimore, but throughout so many aspects of our culture. While many of us hunger for art, literature, rational discourse and civility, too many others are satiated with the drivel of reality television; the mind-numbing schlock of 'McBooks'; and the propaganda, dogma and incessant shouting of talk radio and so-called news programs. There are those who thirst for the opportunity to dive deeply into an exploration and understanding of myriad cultures and approaches to life on our shared planet, while others cling to antiquated notions of nationalism, xenophobia and sovereignty.

Education is a moral imperative. We cannot abdicate our responsibility to educate children because it is difficult or expensive or thwarted by other social constructs and societal ills that fall outside of the scope of responsibility for schools. We should commit the required resources to assure that the children of East Baltimore are well nourished, physically and mentally fit, and living in an environment that promotes and sustains the kind of healthy lifestyle that engenders academic success. We must also consider the best approaches, using evidence-based analysis and reasonable and reliable measures of progress and success to determine our path. In his 2005 essay, *Are "best practices" good enough?*, Dr. Edward G. Rozycki wrote, "American education is a vast junkyard of mostly abandoned, usually expensive, curricular innovations that in their own heyday were promoted as panaceas for much that ails school and society." Rozycki acknowledges that the problem isn't necessarily an abundance of bad ideas, but a tendency to adopt a purported panacea without a process for systematically evaluating its efficacy.

We must be brave and steadfast in our resolve to ensure the true health and well-being of children. We cannot turn away from the urban food desert and act as if it exists because it is the way people choose to live. We cannot accept that poor eating habits are cultural, that palates and food preferences are formed early in life and cannot be changed. Most importantly, we cannot shirk our responsibility to provide ubiquitous access to a quality education. The future of our global society depends upon an educated citizenry.

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