



**UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE**  
*A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

# The Struggle to Achieve Authentic School Choice for Poor Families

*An Interview with Howard Fuller*



[www.annenberginstitute.org/equity](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/equity)

## ***About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale***

This interview was produced for the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for *all* students.

Please visit [www.annenberginstitute.org/equity](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/equity) for more essays, multimedia materials, and interviews containing definitions of *equity* and *excellence* and descriptions of strategies educators today are employing. We invite you to participate in the dialogue by using the site's interactive features.

*Interview conducted by Heather Harding, principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*

## ***About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University***

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.


January 2007

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University  
Box 1985  
Providence, RI 02912  
[www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)

# The Struggle to Achieve Authentic School Choice for Poor Families

*An Interview with Howard Fuller*

## An Abundance of High-Quality Educational Options – Unless You're Poor

 **HEATHER HARDING:** *I'd like to talk about your work with schools. Let's start with the difficult questions. The discussion at the February 2006 Understanding Equity and Excellence at Scale forum kind of got stuck from my perspective – we never got to the definitions of excellence and equity or where we disagree. Let's start there before we go to the schools. In your opinion, thinking about the strategy of choice, what issue or issues does choice address in terms of equity and excellence?*

**HOWARD FULLER:** At BAEO [The Black Alliance for Educational Options], we say that choice is widespread unless you're poor. In our way of looking at the world, we see choice as one of the elements that ought to be a part of the strategy to make sure our children get access to and actually achieve a high-quality education. When we look out at the world, we see that people with money are able to make choices for their children because if you have money and schools don't work for your kids, you're either going to put them in a private school or you're going to move to communities where the schools do work, or you're going to be able to make sure they have access to Sylvan, or whatever. If you're a poor working-class person, particularly living in urban areas that we focus on – and our focus is on black parents, but it's probably true for brown parents as well, the – you're limited to the school that they put you in. And if that school is not a good school for your child, what are your options?

We're simply saying that every child ought to have an opportunity to have access to excellence and all families ought to have the opportunity to be able to take advantage of the possibility of change for their children. So freedom is very interesting – Imhotep said that freedom is really not free. And freedom really is a license – it's not an end. What freedom really is, is a launching pad. So you've got to be in constant pursuit. From our standpoint, education is one of those key ingredients to achieving freedom. And you've got to be in constant pursuit of the best possible education that you can get. We see choice as one of those instruments or elements that ought to be there for parents and kids as they try to pursue the best education possible.

---

---

Howard Fuller is a Distinguished Professor of Education and founder and director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University.

---

---


---

---

**I N T E R V I E W E R**  
Heather Harding is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

---

---


 *The access focus sounds to me like an equity issue. How do you think choice leverages excellence?*

Well, first of all, I'm not so sure that in and of itself it does, because there is the argument that if you have competition, it will mean that everyone has to get better. And I do think that there's an element of truth to that, but I don't think it's automatic. I don't think, I mean, that education will – simply because you have competition everybody will get better. But it does – I do think it creates the potential for that to occur. Because if you're concerned about losing students and if there is a policy where doubt has followed students, you're more likely to be more concerned about what it takes to keep those students.

The problem, of course, is that in education many parents choose schools not because of academic excellence – there may be a whole variety of reasons why you choose a particular school. So it's almost as if you have to deal with these issues of excellence as a moral responsibility irrespective of whether or not there is competition or no competition or whatever: that we have a moral responsibility to provide the best possible education for all of our children. And on that issue of freedom, it – freedom – is illusionary. If you have freedom to choose from amongst mediocrity – so that in the final analysis what really makes this work, you not only have to have the option, you have to have those things that you need to make sure that the options are quality or else it's a false sense of freedom.


## The Challenges of Providing Genuine Choice to Poor Students

### Defining Excellence

 *Just a quick reflection. At the forum, where do you think we got in terms of discussing equity and excellence at scale?*

I'm not sure we got very far. In part, I think it's the way we structure these meetings – where we had the panels and all of that. I had actually hoped that we would have had more of just the open kind of discussion. And I think some of the way that Linda and the other facilitator ran it – the process, I thought, was a little difficult to really get deep into stuff and stay with it and go all the way. I thought there was some tension in the room that never really got fully addressed.


Maybe the way it was structured was the only way to do it, but I left there really not being clear as to what we were supposed to get out of it. Honestly, I was in a room where I felt like some of the views that I hold are very different, which is OK, as long as you really get an opportunity to air them out, because I like to focus in and figure out where we are on these issues. Or what it is that we agree on and what it is that we disagree on and why do we agree and why do we disagree. I don't think we had that type of discussion.

 *Even in a lot of the writings in the briefing book for the forum, there's some agreement about equity. Everybody should have access to quality, everybody should be supported in their home cultures, everybody should have the skill set that makes them viable in the economy, in the global economy, whatever. But I don't feel like there was a lot of agreement around excellence; what does that mean, particularly at scale? Are we going to follow the rhetoric of the standards movement? Is that what education means? Does it mean something entirely different? Do we need to bring in language about adequate education? What is your sense of that in your world of educational work?*

I'll probably babble like the rest of us when it comes to this, because I think you're right – there are all these terms that are out there but there is a lack of clarity as to what they really mean. Maybe another way of putting it is that we have so many different definitions of what excellence is. For some of us, for example, the argument is that you can't have an excellent education unless it is culturally specific – where people find out who they are and where they fit into the world, which I do think is important. But what I'm sitting here saying is, after you find out where you fit in the world, do you have the math skills, the reading skills, the language skills, the technology skills that you will need to be economically proficient in this world? Because I do agree with Paolo Freire's theory that education is really about preparing people to engage in the practice of freedom.

But to be able to engage in the practice of freedom, I think you have to have some level of economic independence, and the issue is, how do you get that in the world in which our young people will have to live and compete? And, we can like and dislike all the discussion about globalization, but if Thomas Friedman is right and this is a flat world – the one part of his book that was really interesting is when he got into who is not going to participate in this flat world. And you know you talk about people who are sick and all of that, but it's also people who don't have the skills that are needed. So, when we start talking about excellence, it seems to me we have to talk about those skills that our young people will need to be able to function in this global economy.

The dispute gets down to: what are those skills, and what level of skills are enough? I don't think we got to that kind of discussion, therefore, we left not having defined excellence. And since you haven't defined it, that makes it very hard to figure out how to get there. To get somewhere, you've got to at least say where you are trying to go. And, of course, one of the issues with a person like me is, I'm involved in discussing one of the elements to get “there,” and the elements to get where. I'm just trying to say, here's a method that needs to be in place for people to get “there.” On a day-to-day basis, when I'm working as the chair of the board of this small Christian high school, the struggle is, what is the “there” that we want for our graduates?

 ***How is that playing out in this work for the school?***

It's playing out in a lot of different ways. We've looked at various, what we think are rigorous curriculum designs, designs that are aimed at getting students to college. And we've decided to have what we would characterize as a college-bound curriculum. Our issue, of course, is that we have ninth-graders coming in reading at a fifth- and sixth-grade level, doing math at less than that, and no real exposure to science. Their writing skills are very low. So we're talking about trying to take ninth-graders with those skills to a point where they will be able to go to some postsecondary experience.

So the problem is, you can say anything – “We have a college-bound curriculum” – but do you have kids that have the skill level to do that? Do you have faculty that have the ability to get the kids that are at relatively low levels to this high point? And that's the real struggle in our schools, and it is going to take a real level of commitment on the part of everybody, including the parents who've got to be willing to have their kids at a school that is going to require them to come after school, to come to school on Saturday, to go to school during the summer. Because unless we can do that, we don't see how we can move these young people from the point where they are to the point that we want them to be.

So that's where this whole issue really takes route because, at least for me, you're now in an actual school with 163 kids and you've got to figure out how to make this work. We're doing it in two ways. We're trying to define excellence. We're trying to say, What does it look like? And then I guess there's a third way, because we are trying to figure out how we're going to get to this – and it's hard, it's very hard.

### **Mobilizing Resources and Using Them Well**

***So in this school that you're working with, is it extended day, is it Saturday school and summer school like you described?***


Yes, because we had summer, because we are going into our third year and I was able to raise a little money so that our seniors could participate in a summer program. And they actually did it online – it was a British authors course. Because one of the things that I'm arguing at our school is, given the size of our school, we will never have all the resources we need in the building, so what we've got to do is use contracted employees, we have to use online. Because we've got a wide range of skill levels, so in order to make sure that kids who are at higher levels – we've got to have something that continues to advance them.

What I'm trying to get all of us, and the principal, to agree on is that we have to look at our kids and then we have to figure out how to bring resources in from wherever it takes to make sure that we get our students to where we want them to be. And so it has to be a different sort of mindset, but then you have to raise the money to be able to do this, because if you're going to have after-school and Saturdays and Sundays, it takes more money.

 *Or a partnership of some sort.*

Right – people who will bring resources to the table. Say, if you’ve got a corporation that’s willing to lend its expertise in the form of people who can help our kids in certain areas where we need help, or they’re able to provide some of the technology that we need, or whatever it is. But it’s all about – you’re right – getting resources into the school and using them effectively.

### **Scaling Up Successful Models**

 *What about questions at scale? We know the way you define choice is that it’s a way to get “there.” It’s creating more access and more equity to the options that are out there and perhaps creating more options. How are you currently thinking about taking that to scale?*


You know what? I’m currently not. Well, I shouldn’t say that. I think you would have to approach the scale issue from a couple of different levels, and this is what I mean by that: in a place like Milwaukee where you have a low-income voucher program, we’re limited in terms of the number of students we could serve by law. We just went through a huge battle with the governor to get the cap lifted, because one of the ways that people restrict choice is things like caps. They restrict the amount of money; they restrict ways that people can access the various choices. All of those are strategies to say if you have to have it, than let’s at least restrict it. For the people who oppose it, their first goal is never to have it, but if you have to have it they try to weaken it, they try to limit it and so forth. That’s one way that’s done.

So when you talk about scale, do you mean to have unlimited choice so that the scale of people that can get it is increased? But most of the time when we’re talking about scale, we’re talking about, how do you replicate excellence? How do you take really great schools – if you’ve got a KIPP school or the Aspire school or whatever it is, or if the Noble charter school is doing well – how do we create five of them or ten of them, or twenty of them? And, of course, there are some foundations, like Broad, that have taken a position that the point of change or the – I forget what terminology used – is the district, that’s the unit of change. So unless you can really work with existing public school districts and get them to change radically, you’ll never go to scale, because they’re looking at 100,000 kids, versus a charter element in a community that might be serving 2000 kids.

I don’t know what the answer to that is because obviously you want to serve as many kids as you can. But one thing I’ve learned is that it’s not that simple to replicate excellence. And I think some of the networks are struggling with this question of how to maintain quality as they, quote, “want to get larger” and try to serve more and more kids. I think you also run into an issue – take our school – we do not want to get larger than 160 kids or so, because going from 160 to 200 would change our school drastically and I don’t know that we could do the stuff the way that we want to do it by going to 200.

Other people argue, you'll never get the resources you need with 160 kids. But I would argue that it depends upon how you use those resources and how you think about it. I once heard a person say that a small school is not a large school in drag. It actually has to be different. The financial model has to be different. Your thinking about how you approach things has to be different.


So, I don't know. I'm sort of rambling because I really don't know how to tackle this problem. And I understand that unless you go to scale you just will be viewed as some kind of boutique thing. But as you go to scale, the question is, How do you maintain the quality that defines what you are at the finer point? And do you create real excellence without bringing in a whole new bureaucratic structure that in ten to twelve years will simply be the same thing that you say we're trying to get away from? I don't know that we have the answers to those questions. I think people are learning – I think the KIPPs of the world and some of the other networks are learning, but I think that some of these learnings are just pointing out how difficult this is going to be.

 ***Go back to the other scale question: If there weren't caps and legislators, if school district central office people weren't trying to limit or restrict choice – whether it be vouchers or charter schools – if that were allowed to flourish, would you be concerned about equity? It strikes me that if it were a free, a total and free-flowing choice system, would we still face the same equity concerns?***

The direct answer to that is yes. I've been criticized by some people because I don't support universal vouchers. I got in this to fight for poor people and I have a concern that if we were to go to a universal voucher, I don't know why we would give money to people who've already got money. It's been my experience that when the focus becomes everybody, poor people suffer.

Now there are people who would argue, yeah, but politically, programs that are only for poor people don't survive. So you're struggling with this political dynamic and then I end up saying, Well, what about a sliding scale that would bring in more poor and working-class people? But you'd get to a certain point where you'd say, if you are above this income level, you get nothing. Then the poor people who are at the bottom would get 100 percent of whatever it is and someone else would only get 60 percent. See, that, to me, is much more of a political discussion because the argument that's thrown to my face is unless you move to something like that, this program that's trying to help the poorest people is going to get abolished, so I struggle with that.


But then you struggle with: What are the limits so that you do maintain some type of focus on equity as it relates to the poorest parents? I don't have an answer to that. Some people, of course, argue that if you simply have unlimited choice – and it depends on what you mean, whether you're talking about vouchers or charters or what you are talking about – by definition you're going to bring more investment, more people into the fray and you're going to have a greater level of resources to help the kids you're really trying to help. I don't know about that.

 ***Going back to your school, what's the difference between going from 165 to 200 versus starting another school, or fanning out over a network?***

Schools are so much about relationships – there comes a number when the relationships become different. We've got so many kids now who were with us when we first started – we only had thirty-three kids. We had a meeting with them, the seniors and juniors, and they were mad that the school's getting too big, because they were used to very small classes. So there comes a point where I think those relationships that are so critical, you can no longer have, because you have just too many people.

If I were to do it, rather than have our schools grow, I would have us create two or three more smaller schools. The problem is, I don't feel like we're ready because we don't have it down yet and I wouldn't want to try to expand until we really had it down and until we also had trained through our teachers who could be our next school leader, who would understand the culture and all of that. I could envision us expanding but I think it's going to take a few years.


### **Diversity in Leadership**

 ***We talked earlier about who gets to expand, what the resources are to bear. Do you have any thoughts about how to make these networks more racially, culturally diverse?***

I think we're just going to have to decide that we're going to have to do that. I'm concerned that as we move toward quality, as we move toward networks and scale and all of this, that we're going to end up with a movement that is going to be almost totally White-led. I think that we can't have that and we've got to figure out a way to have more people of color in the leadership of some of these networks, more people of color operating and owning schools that are also excellent schools.


So I think investors and foundations are going to have to have a very serious discussion about what are we going to do to make that happen. That discussion, right now, isn't taking place at the kind of deep level that I think it needs. So I think those of us who believe that this is important have got to continue to insist that that occurs. And I think a number of the White people who are benefiting by all of this also have to force that discussion.

### **The Need for Dialogue among People of Good Will**

 ***Do you want to comment on the experiment of New Orleans and the emerging charter district?***

Unfortunately, I haven't been keeping up with it in the way that I should. I worry that we're going to re-create what was with a new label over it. So I hope that as we talk about this emerging charter district, it will be something that is really very different than what existed previously in New Orleans. Because I always worry about using the charter label but creating something that really isn't a charter.

But I know that there are some very good people involved in trying to do this in New Orleans. I'm really anxious to see what's going to happen. I know there were concerns about the charter sector and the for-profit sector and all that. So I don't know to what extent that's still a major concern or whether or not that's debated, because I really have not been keeping up with it. And it's something I really need to learn more about but I haven't been paying that much attention toward.

 *Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you want to comment on?*

The one comment I would make after fifteen years of being engaged in this debate and having lost people who I thought were my friends on this issue: I really hope we can get to the point where people like myself who care deeply about kids can sit down with people who also care deeply, but don't consider choice as the right mechanism – that we could have a discussion void of demagoguery and really talk about kids and talk about, if not choice, then what? Because we have 163 kids who, if our school were not there, would be in a radically different place. And I think that there's real value to what we bring to the table. We couldn't bring that to the table if we didn't have the voucher program. If you talk to the kids themselves and ask them what it was like in their other school and what it is like in our school and you hear their stories, you see that.

That's not saying that it couldn't happen or it shouldn't happen – the reality is that it wasn't happening. And the fact that we exist means that 163 kids are going to have a chance in life that they would not otherwise have had. I would bet that with people at the KIPP schools and all of the other schools, you see the same thing. So to me it doesn't make sense for people of good will who care about kids to be separated over what to me is not an ideological discussion – it's a tactical discussion. But some people have made it into an ideological discussion. So if you support choice, then, what – you're not for social justice? I hope we can get to the point where those of us who ought to be on the same side of the barricade – that we could get there, but right now we're not. Of all the stuff that has happened, that's the stuff that pains me the most.