Critical Incident Reflection #2

School Pride = Community Pride = National Pride??

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Recently, NBC aired its newest edition to reality makeover television programs, *School Pride*. Reminiscent of the *Extreme Home Makeover* series in which family members and friends write producers and request assistance with rebuilding their homes, *School Pride* producers field requests from students and faculty of dilapidated school buildings. When a school has been chosen, a team pulls up in trucks, rallies the school community and volunteers, and everyone joins in to make the school a nicer place for learning. The producers of the show claim that their intent is to use the makeover shows to draw attention to the state of education in the country (Stetler, 2010).

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Given that this is considered a show designed to entertain the masses, a few questions come to mind: How have schools in disrepair previously been addressed by the government? What are the historical patterns of this concern? Is there a connection between student demographics and school disrepair? And finally, is this venue, entertainment of the masses via a reality television show, what it will take to get society moving in a direction that will save our schools, one brick at a time?

The medium of television is definitely not the first to look at the state of school disrepair in our nation in recent history. Although a report of its kind had not been conducted since 1965, in February 1995 United States General Accounting Office Congressional Report entitled School *Facilities: Conditions of America’s Schools* was compiled relaying information collected during a comprehensive study of the state of school infrastructure in America (United States, 1995). The report stated that while school facilities and maintenance are almost exclusively the responsibility of the state and local governments, the infrastructure as it stands is in need of maintenance and capital investment and that, “ public concern is growing over laws that require students to attend schools that are unsafe” (1995, p. 3). Furthermore, the report went on to note that over 30 percent of America’s schools were not classified as adequate or in need of only preventative care, schools that served nearly 14 million students, and the committee recommended a total budget of $112 billion dollars to support infrastructure in education (1995, p. 4-5).

Five years later, in 2000, the concern about disrepair in America’s schools continued at the national level as President Clinton proposed a bill calling for the modernization of America’s schools requesting $1.2 billion dollars targeted for repair (White House Report, 2000). The bill passed in December, 2000 supplying some of the needed funds for repair of school infrastructure (2000). And yet, nearly a decade later, in 2009, the concern about dilapidated schools persists. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the state of infrastructure in America’s schools a grade of “D” noting that although there has been some support for the state of school infrastructure in a graphic depicting school construction spending that reached an all-time high in 2004 with nearly $30 billion dollars in spending earmarked, to just under $20 billion in spending in 2007. However, even with this estimate, there are still gaps and shortfalls to be noted including a concern about a projected $35 billion dollar shortfall in projected needs. (American Society of Civil Engineers, n.d.)

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Further noted in the ASCE’s report card is that “another major concern is that despite increases in spending for school facilities earlier in this decade, the money has disproportionately gone to the nation’s wealthiest school districts while the neediest students continue to endure the most decrepit facilities” (American Society of Civil Engineers, n.d.). Echoing this concern are several of schools targeted by the *School Pride* team including Enterprise Middle School in Compton, Lanier Elementary School in Baton Rouge, and Communication Media and Arts High School in Detroit (2010). These schools historically serve high populations of minority students (100%) and students with low socio-economic status (58 to 96% receiving free/reduced lunch) (Communication Media and Arts High School, 2010; Enterprise Middle School, 2010; & Lanier Elementary School, 2010). Were some of the schools now being highlighted by the *School Pride* television show part of the schools that were disproportionately funded in the past? Did the funding for these schools to have updated repair and proper facilities go to newly built subdivisions in wealthier parts of the district?

Additionally, it is well documented that environment impacts student achievement and learning. Psychologist Abraham Maslow documented in 1943 in his now famous “hierarchy of needs” pyramid that the foundation for self-actualization comes from support for basic physiological and safety needs (Simons, Irwin, & Drinnien, 1987). In Linda Frazier’s report, *Deteriorating School Facilities and Student Learning,* the author notes,

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“It has been firmly established that people are influenced and effected by their

environment. Children exposed to environmental in school facilities are no exception.

Deferred maintenance can create an environment of peeling paint, nonfunctioning toilets, poor lighting, and inoperative heating and cooling systems. This, of course, affects both the health and morale of staff and students” (Frazier, 1993, p. 3).

It is the expectation of our nation and our society that all students be given access to an equal and equitable education. The state of disrepair in the schools in our nation indicates that we are falling short of this expectation, and more importantly, students are losing opportunities that they will never be able to recover.

With twenty-plus years of well documented history of concern about the state of our schools, including government reports and calls from the professional organizations like the ASCE, why are we no further along? What has been the missing component to moving this problem toward a solution? Will it take the rallying cry behind a reality television show to move us forward? Certainly, this cry garnered the attention of 4500 volunteers and multiple donations from major corporations including Wal-mart, Microsoft, General Motors, and Home Depot at just one of the schools (2010). And certainly, because it is on every Friday night in people’s homes and living rooms, things will change.

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The impact of *School Pride* on the nation’s community remains to be seen. The history of the inequity has been well documented, but with slow or little progress toward a real solution. Will *School Pride* be a clarion call for focus on the inequity and disrepair of school systems across the nation? Will communities band together to repair broken playgrounds and holes in classrooms? Or will it fade into the obscurity of entertainment, with low ratings and lower impact? Stay tuned.

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