

FOREWORD

I have spent my entire life working with low-income youth, and I have never wavered in my belief that anything is possible when time, opportunity, and love come together. I grew up in an afterschool program, run by my mother, serving poor African American children on Chicago's South Side. Some of the kids in the program defied the odds and went on to great careers in fields like engineering, education, and entertainment.

My mother offered them nothing more than a place to gather, read, do homework, play, sing, and feel safe and secure. There was nothing mysterious about it. But for many of these kids, my mother was an adult they could talk to and trust. For some of them, she was a surrogate parent. I have often wondered what it would take to go to scale and give every young person more opportunities outside of school to learn, play, and work together.

The answer is right here in Milbrey McLaughlin's book about CYCLE, a remarkable program founded by Greg Darnieder that worked with hundreds of young people in one of America's most challenging communities, Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing complex. The book begins with these young people as adolescents in the 1980s. Now in their forties and fifties, most of the CYCLE graduates have achieved middle-class success, built careers, and raised families, while so many of their counterparts outside the program fell through the cracks.

CYCLE's approach was straightforward: give young people positive, structured opportunities with clear, unambiguous expectations,

and they will rise to meet them. One of the program's graduates now works with me to help young people avoid gangs, drugs, and street life and find work in the legal economy—paying forward his debt to the next generation.

As the book's title suggests, the essential problem for low-income urban youth is that they can't imagine a world they can't see. The only life they see is the one in front of them—single-parent families, drug dealing, street gangs, few if any men going to work each morning and coming home each night, police patrols, and violence. Asking them what they want to do with their lives and how they might fit in the larger world is like asking a fish to imagine what it's like to fly. If you've never worked in an office building and don't know anyone who does, you can't imagine doing it yourself.

Programs like CYCLE understand that poverty is not the defining obstacle to success. The real barrier is the lack of opportunity to see and experience the larger world. Children from families with means already have life-enriching opportunities in the nonschool hours: music lessons, summer camp, family travel, relationships with adults from a variety of fields. If we are to build a more equitable and just society, we need to make better use of that out-of-school time for low-income children. They need mentors, relationships, internships, work and play opportunities, and sometimes just friends from outside their immediate environment.

At a time when more than half of Chicago Public School students failed to complete high school, CYCLE participants had graduation rates in the range of 90 percent, which is higher than the national average *today* and well above Chicago's current record-setting rate. They didn't all go to college, but many of their children have, suggesting the enduring intergenerational impact of the program.

The best part of the book are the stories of the people and their lives told in their words and through their experiences. Also valuable are the thoughtful insights from McLaughlin and, in the afterword, Greg Darnieder, who was a mentor to me when I first got involved in public education.

Having worked in public education at the local and the national levels, I can tell you that the system we have created today does not systematically provide these kinds of opportunities to the children who need them the most. Whether it's lack of resources, bureaucratic inertia, or simply a failure of imagination, none of us has made the commitment at scale to provide the kinds of support that CYCLE pioneered in Chicago. And as with so many other challenges in public education, we lack the political will to find the resources.

I continue to believe that public education is the best antipoverty program in our country. But schools can't do it on their own. There are too many nonschool hours in the life of a child and too many burdens facing our teachers and parents. Guiding children to a successful adulthood is a shared responsibility for our entire society. As many others have said, "It takes a village," and in these polarizing times, the village needs to come together for our most vulnerable kids. My deepest hope is that policy makers everywhere take time to read this book and find the will to bring programs like this to low-income communities all across America. It's the smart thing to do. It's the right thing to do. And we know that it works.

Arne Duncan
US Secretary of Education, 2009–16