

A Common Agenda

How Three Communities Overcame Societal Tumult
to Create Educational Equity Agendas

By Richard C. Harwood

With an foreword from **Nicole Rodriguez Leach**,
Executive Director of **Grantmakers for Education**





The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, tackle shared challenges, create a culture of shared responsibility, and build local capacities. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute's approach has spread to all 50 states across the US and 40 countries around the world.

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Foreword

What is the public promise of education in a vibrant and inclusive multi-racial democracy? A worthwhile question over the decades, it carries particular importance today when democratic processes are routinely tested, defended, and changed in the US and around the world. This question prompts more than an intellectual exercise. Arguably, it is a question whose answer is a set of ideals, conditions, and lived experiences that can only be achieved through a public commitment to equity and justice. It is a question that we are all poised to engage with in this critical moment.

At Grantmakers for Education, we stand in this commitment. We have a vision of all learners thriving in education systems that are equitable and just, supported by funders who are equipped with the knowledge and connections to advance transformation. As the largest forum in education philanthropy, we support philanthropic organizations and grantmakers to collectively promote effective, strategic, and equity-centered philanthropy. In this effort, Grantmakers for Education unites our members for equity and justice, offering perspectives that enable them to situate their work, navigate their world, and enhance their impact. The perspectives and experiences shared in this report from The Harwood Institute are especially poignant for all who are steadfast in this commitment – and those we call in to join us.

This report shares the stories of three communities – uniquely different, but each committed to education equity and the change needed to attain it, led and driven by community members. These stories demonstrate how pursuing a shared purpose around education equity is both possible and necessary in creating thriving communities. Within these stories are people and organizations across sectors, all doubling down on their commitments to pluralism and deliberation in a time when polarization threatens the vitality of public will and action. These stories present the powerful lesson that to care about education equity is to care about the civic fabric and health of communities.

Grantmakers for Education is pleased to uplift these stories at a time when we are endeavoring to explore the philanthropic will and shared agenda for education equity across the diverse and wide body of philanthropic organizations and education grantmakers we serve. We are grateful to The Harwood Institute for their work to help our country more effectively move forward.

The communities featured in this report found new ways to work together toward their shared purpose – authentically engaging one another, embracing an array of leaders, taking on the tough conversations, establishing norms that align with ways of being in community with one another – and in them, there are lessons for us all in the way forward.

Nicole Rodriguez Leach
Executive Director, Grantmakers for Education

Introduction

In March 2021, Georgia’s Cherokee County School District announced the appointment of Cecelia Lewis as its diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) administrator. According to school superintendent Brian Hightower, the newly-created position “stems from input from parents, employees, and students of color.” The celebration of this new role was short-lived.

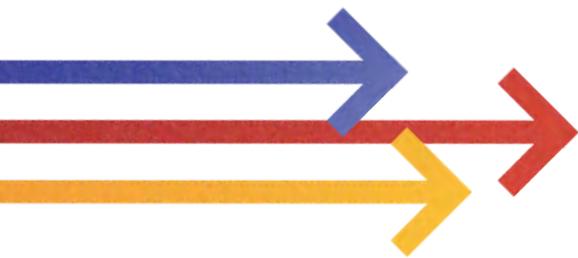
A local uprising of residents quickly coalesced and argued vehemently that the DEI plans were part of a larger nationwide push for communities to adopt critical race theory (CRT). Actively stoked by outside national groups, like Moms for Liberty, the district school board soon passed an anti-CRT resolution. The opposition to Lewis became so inflamed that some school board members feared for their own safety. Lewis quit before ever starting her new position.

In just the past couple of years, nearly one thousand school districts and over 40 state legislatures have proposed or passed resolutions and laws against CRT, DEI, how American history is taught, and related educational policies. Schools and school boards have banned books that teach students about issues like racial inequality and LGBTQ rights; the American Library Association reported that in 2022 alone, 2,571 books were challenged, the highest number since the organization began tracking bans 20 years ago. Widely popular books like *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* are commonly among ALA’s top 10 most-challenged books.

Parental ire over how schools deal with race, equity, school mask policies, and other issues have led to scores of school board member recalls and prompted hotly contested school board meetings across the country. Things got so acrimonious in normally sleepy local school board meetings, that the National School Boards Association sent President Biden a letter expressing concern that aggressive actions against school board members could be a form of “domestic terrorism” and asked for federal law enforcement assistance. The result of NSBA’s action: 19 states have withdrawn or plan to withdraw from the national association in protest of the letter, placing the national group in dire financial straits.

Third Way, the centrist national Democratic organization, held a June 2022 virtual discussion focused on education, stating in their announcement: “While characteristics like race, class, and geography have often correlated most closely with differences in voting behavior, education may be overtaking these other categories as a defining divide.” Divisions on education are playing out across the country.

In the wake of George Floyd’s killing on May 25, 2020, the nation was confronted by a reckoning with social injustice and systemic racism. These are not new issues; they are persistent and have haunted us since before the nation’s founding. Concerns about equity and disparities, more specifically, have been on the educational agenda for decades. Yet for all the attention these issues have received, inequities and disparities in education keep growing; they have not diminished.



Just three years after George Floyd’s death, there seems to be a rapid retreat from educational equity. Perhaps better put there’s been a head spinning backlash. Douglas County, CO, is just another example. The school board there reversed an equity policy adopted just the previous year which committed the district to hire a more diverse workforce and evaluate the curriculum; this came after sacking the school superintendent, Cory Wise, who had actively advocated for the new equity policy, and had two years remaining on his contract.

My chief concern here is whether widespread support for educational equity is even possible today. More broadly speaking, can any kind of public will and real action on education be generated in American communities, and in our nation, especially in this current environment?

It is often said that the measure of a society is the compassion and commitment it demonstrates to its children. My own experience is that education is one of the best indicators for how people think about community and their connection to it.

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So much of the conventional wisdom is that the nation – and thus communities themselves – are too polarized to come together. There is good reason to believe that education may be one of the least likely places where such agreement can be reached and effective action can be taken. But is that actually the case? Is there an alternate path forward, one that is still rooted in being more equitable, fair, inclusive, and hopeful?

My short answer is a clear, even defiant yes. My response is not based on belief, wishful thinking, or turning a blind eye to political realities. Rather, at the very time the nation finds itself in the grips of nasty and divisive debates over CRT, race and equity, school mask mandates, and school board upheavals, three very different communities, with different challenges and different demographics, each developed shared agendas on educational equity.

This is the story of these communities – Reading, PA; Lexington, KY; and Clarksville, TN. It is about the distinct paths they forged, the telling commonalities of their agendas, and the underlying conditions required for action. It is about the power of community-led, community-driven change to ward off and overcome the fractured, divisive, narrow politics of our time. This is the story of the larger lessons we can learn from these communities.

Three Different Communities

In 2011, *The New York Times* wrote that Reading, PA, was the poorest community in the US. To me, this was especially significant and eye-opening as I have worked in some of the hardest-hit places in America over the past 35 years, including Flint, MI, Youngstown, OH, Detroit, MI, the Mississippi Delta, and some of the poorest areas of West Virginia and Kentucky. I had no idea about Reading's plight.

No longer an industrial town with a predominantly White population, Reading is now over 60 percent Latino. Lest anyone think the community is homogeneous, it is more diverse than at any time in its history; people come from more than five Latin nations, many with their own dialect, history, heritage, customs, and culture. Today, Reading neighborhoods are multilingual, the population is more transient, and the city is growing and revitalizing in all sorts of ways. New investment is happening downtown; new programs are launching to support young people and families; and new and younger leaders are emerging.

Still, many people in Reading feel they don't have a voice. Deep divides exist based on neighborhoods, economics, and siloed efforts. Poverty is still a huge issue as are newer language barriers. Bias and racial inequities persist, with some White people suggesting that Latino families value education less than other groups, while many professing to help those in need fail to understand the realities of what people actually need. There is a pervasive ingrained negativity that holds Reading back – from once being named the poorest community in the nation, to the community being labeled violent based on the actions of a relatively few, to residents sensing that the surrounding Berks County doesn't believe it shares any of Reading's challenges while looking down on the community.

Reading residents take great pride in their city. They point to its strong industrial past, spirit of mutual support, and resilience in the face of enormous changes and recent crises such as the pandemic. As one community leader said, "Even those who are struggling, they'll be the first to help their neighbor out with food or a ride." Reading is part of the demographically changing New America. The question regarding education equity is: How does this community – beset by poverty, fragmentation, and negativity – create a can-do, shared purpose for moving forward?

Significantly different from Reading is Lexington and Fayette County, KY, a bustling community bursting at the seams, with its growth coming fast and bringing with it many benefits. New energy abounds, job opportunities have expanded, and the community has become a hub for arts and culture, all while maintaining a small-town, neighborly feel. There is an abundance of programs, organizations, and leaders working to strengthen the community. Compared to most places in the US, Lexington is blessed with financial resources. Civic pride is strong.

However, not all is as it seems. In Lexington, many people feel left out or left behind. Racism and income divides the community; zip codes determine opportunity. A professional instinct to

coordinate efforts often masks the need to engage in harder conversations about purpose, relationships, and impact. Asking hard questions – especially by those who are perceived as being outside the traditional power structures – is seen as making waves and is frowned upon.

Lexington was recently named by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the best 50 places to live in the United States. Even so, Lexington is at a critical juncture. It has experienced significant growth; at the same time, it faces real challenges. In some respects, the community is on the move while often feeling stuck. Despite its impressive growth, it's in a kind of "waiting place," where progress stalls even though there may be lots of activity, programs, and initiatives. The response is often to push even harder, do more projects, raise more funds, and announce new efforts. Yet Lexington needs to find new ways to work together. As one community leader said, "I don't feel like we have internalized a pursuit of the common good into our bones." Moving forward, how Lexington does the work will be just as important as what Lexington does.

Different from both Lexington and Reading is Clarksville and Montgomery County, TN. The people who make this area their home love their community; their affection for their hometown is one of the strongest I have ever experienced in my time doing this work. Fort Campbell is a key part of the area's growth and pride. At the same time, newcomers are now streaming in from Nashville and elsewhere. New housing and new schools and new roads are being built. Think of it as boomtown, USA. In 2019, *Money* magazine named Clarksville the best place to live in the US.

But parents there told us they are struggling to be the best supporters of their children's education. Many are juggling multiple jobs, taking care of several kids, and making ends meet. Some challenges at home – such as having a parent deployed overseas, or returning to civilian life – are increasingly spilling over into challenges at school. In Clarksville-MoCo, people speak about pressing disparities between neighborhoods, school resources, overcrowded schools, and educational opportunities. In the meantime, the local public schools are some of the most innovative in the nation.

Clarksville-MoCo is at a point that many communities can only hope to reach. They are experiencing continual growth built on a strong foundation of rich traditions, new people, an expanding economy, and an abundance of natural beauty. But it is like a teenager in a growth spurt – clothes too tight, bed too short, and sore from growing pains.

For Clarksville-MoCo there is no single program, no individual, and no one organization that can do the necessary work to move forward effectively. As a community leader asked, in a "growing, changing city, do we bring all our talents and energies and cultures and personalities and diversity? How do we bring it all together? How do we aim that energy and make it work?" The task is discovering how to marshal the community's collective spirit and resources to make community a shared responsibility – a common enterprise – to enable the community to proactively shape its future rather than fall victim to unmanaged growth. It's that, or more and more people get left behind and left out as inequities and disparities grow.

Three different communities, each at different points in their own evolution, facing their own set of challenges and opportunities. In our current turbulent political, social, racial, and economic environment, one might think the chances for generating any kind of shared agenda for educational equity would be minimal to non-existent. Conventional wisdom tells us so. But against all odds, these communities did create such agendas. Not only that, their agendas are strikingly similar, alerting us to what truly matters to people when it comes to education and equity in America.

A Counter to Ugly Politics

In Reading, The Harwood Institute partnered with Centro Hispano, a deeply-rooted local organization, to engage 36 leaders in in-depth interviews and hold 16 community discussions with residents (five in Reading were in Spanish). We also spoke with students and educators, among others. The same approach was used in Lexington, where our partner was the United Way of the Bluegrass, and in Clarksville, where we partnered with an ad hoc coalition made up of Women Veterans of America, Leadership Clarksville, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Clarksville in Clarksville-MoCo.

A basic idea animated these efforts: community-led, community-driven change can break the gridlock on education and help to create the public will and common ground necessary for making progress on educational equity. Thus the change in these three communities was not led or defined by experts, educators, school boards, or political groups. There were no cookie-cutter agendas imposed on these communities from some distant national organization seeking to mobilize their base of supporters and ram their pre-set agendas down the throats of a community, as so many national groups are doing today.

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Something entirely different happened. These agendas emerged from the community. They are based on a broad engagement of diverse people and perspectives and inclusive of people from all political persuasions. They serve as a potent counterforce to the current politics of division, acrimony, fear, even hate. The process by which they emerged is a corrective antidote to a corrosive politics that is ripping apart the civic fabric of our society. Sadly, the prevailing politics in America is focused on education but not about education. In the name of the well-being of children it makes pawns of children. There is nothing positive or hopeful that comes from this ugly politics.

These three communities teach us there is an alternate path forward.

A Common Agenda

In each community, there were agenda items that were particular to that community. But beyond these particular agenda items, seven common areas of focus were held by at least two, and usually all three, of the communities. One way to think about these seven areas is as independent areas for action; certainly action can and often will be taken on each of them separately. But in listening closely to people talk about education and equity in these three communities, a fuller picture emerges. Think of these seven areas as a web of mutually reinforcing actions that tell a story of both the challenges people see in supporting young people today and the aspirations they hold for young people.

Also consider the radical nature of these agenda items. I use this word intentionally. I go back to the very definition of the word radical: relating to the fundamental nature of something – it's very root. In the seven agenda items, people are telling us that they want to get to the basics, to the root of the matter. But the basics here are not merely the traditional 3R's of education: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Instead, these basics deal with the whole child, or young person; they strike at the core of their very well-being. Here, then, are the seven common agenda items from across the three communities.

1. Mental Health and Mentoring

Time and again, people said that young people are increasingly facing difficult mental health challenges, including depression, loneliness, and trauma from poverty, domestic violence, and family-related drug addictions, among other sources. One Clarksville resident told us, "Many students, especially those with a lot going on at home, won't be able to succeed in school until they deal with trauma or social-emotional issues."

Some schools have the good fortune of having a single counselor for an entire school population, others have none. Neither situation is adequate to meet the current challenges. More mental health support is needed for more young people and such

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support will need to come from the larger community. Schools alone cannot do this. Connected to mental health is the need for more young people to have a mentor – a loving, attentive adult in their lives.

2. After- and Out-of-School Activities

Too many young people have no place to go when they are not in school. Many people talked about the boredom, isolation, and mental health challenges besetting young people. Violence, gangs, and drugs are becoming more prevalent. There can be a lack of supervision. One Lexington resident said, “There’s not enough programs and activities for the youth to help them be productive, build self-confidence, see how they fit into society and how they can be positive contributing members of society.” Well-run after- and out-of-school programs are proven to develop the social and emotional health of young people, reduce school absenteeism and discipline problems, and even improve academic performance. At the most basic level, they provide young people with a safe, caring place to go. While many good opportunities already exist in communities, there are far too few of them to meet the need. Young people need more.

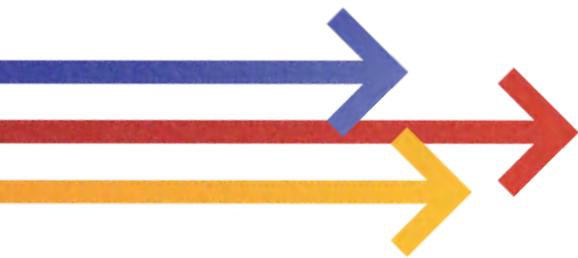
3. Pathways for Success

“If we don’t have the resources to help students develop, how are they going to do it?” asked one Reading parent. More young people and their families need more diverse opportunities to find success as they make their way through and beyond school. For some, more tools and support are required to plan for post-secondary education, including a four-year college, community college, or a technical school. Others want vocational options. Importantly, all options must be valued, and their value must be clearly communicated. This often is not the case today. More internships need to be created to expose more students to potential opportunities and to help ignite their imaginations about their future and develop needed skills and confidence. Families must be actively engaged as full partners in this process.

4. Pre-K and Early Education

To set children up for success, educators and communities must invest in pre-kindergarten programs that focus on school readiness and that are accessible to all families. In a community like Reading, as in many communities today, a key component of school readiness is building up English language literacy for young children and their families. But demand for pre-K far exceeds supply in communities. The quality of the existing supply is both uneven and it lacks educational or social development benefits. High-quality, available, and accessible pre-K is a fundamental equity issue to ensure that all young people can get off to a good start in life and find success.

“High-quality, available, and accessible pre-K is a fundamental equity issue.”



5. Teachers Who Look Like the Community

People want school systems to hire and retain teachers and educators who look more like their communities. There is an enormous power in a student seeing an adult in their school who looks like them; and a greater diversity in teachers would enable a deeper understanding of what diverse populations of children are experiencing. As one Reading high school student said, “If I had a teacher that did math or science or English that looked like me, they would understand me more. They would understand me as a person.” Schools also need more bilingual staff and leaders, as well as more training for all teachers regarding the experiences of Black, Latino, immigrant, and other families. The nation is facing a major teacher shortage, which only underscores the importance of developing new and innovative approaches to creating stronger pipelines of diverse teachers and better methods for retaining them.

6. Equitable Allocation of Resources

Disparate levels of funding and programmatic support for students exist in communities and across individual schools and neighborhoods. “You get a varied educational experience based on where you live,” a Lexington teacher told us. Sometimes these differences involve academic programs, tutoring, books, and other educational materials; vast differences can also exist in athletic facilities and clubs. People express deep concerns about a lack of transportation in some schools and neighborhoods to various programs and opportunities, as well as the lack of accessible and timely information. These disparities are critical equity concerns for people.

7. Community and Student Voice

Parents, families, and students seek a stronger voice in education. Currently, some feel they have no voice at all, others say that poorer communities and communities of color are “invited, but not welcome,” and those who raise difficult issues or questions often feel shut out, or even fear repercussions. As one Clarksville resident said, “People should be able to share ideas, express concerns, and have outlets to work together to create solutions.” A new effort to discover and lift up the community’s voice in education would refocus public discussion and subsequent actions on what matters to people and provide a greater impetus for actions that truly address people’s shared aspirations and needs. Without this voice, people fear business as usual will continue unimpeded.



Parents, families, and students seek a stronger voice in education.



A New Politics of Community

It doesn't take much analysis to see that this collection of education agenda items is profoundly different from the current education debate. These agenda items are not driven by organized political factions fanning the flames of concern over CRT, DEI, equity audits, and related issues. They are not rooted in the heated rhetoric and retaliatory efforts to win debates at any cost. The process by which these agenda items evolved wholly rejects the vilifying of opponents and driving them into submission, out of a job, or out of town. The reality about today's ugly politics of education is that it is more about fanatical adults tearing others down than about building up young people. There is little concern about what is happening to the very civic health of communities. The community-driven agendas created by the three communities serve to bring communities together, not divide and destroy them.

To move forward together, we must create opportunities for people to counter the ugly politics of our time and to forge practical paths forward. Full stop.

These agendas are essential to forging a more equitable, hopeful path forward. They are a downpayment on a new politics of community. But make no mistake: they alone are not enough to bring about the progress we need. The communities we worked with told us as much. Alongside the specific agenda items, leaders and residents alike raised up the urgent need for their communities to develop a very different civic culture that strengthens and invigorates community. Only then can sustained action occur.

Please, take a moment to look at the agenda items again. When this work was taking place, I often said that these agendas were not a report card on the local public schools; instead, they were a call to communities to take shared responsibility for all young people working in partnership with the public schools. As one Reading resident remarked, "All the answers can't come from the school district. It has to be something that's collaborative." Indeed, so many of the agenda items require shared action by the community. No one leader, organization, or group can bring about the progress necessary. In other words, how we do the work is as important as what we do.

Nearly 25 years ago, The Harwood Institute undertook a study in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation in two Mississippi communities. Both were seeking to bring about progress on education. One was succeeding by many measures; the other could not get going and things just kept getting worse. The foundation had asked me to examine the differences in their educational policies as a way to explain the widely divergent outcomes. But once we started to engage local leaders and residents in each community, we discovered that while their education policies did differ, what seemed to matter even more fundamentally were the different underlying community conditions.

Through innovative research, we discovered that there were nine factors that contributed to either the progress or stuckness of these communities. These factors operate much like an ecosystem, providing a rich and robust enabling environment for efforts to take root, grow, and spread. They are instrumental – meaning, a community can proactively create them. We have since refined this framework through additional research, on-the-ground initiatives, and substantial financial investments. We used the framework in each of the three communities.

Rather than review the framework here, I want to tell you about the underlying conditions that these communities said were critical to their own forward movement. These echo the Institute’s framework, but are more contextualized given what people in these three communities said. Here are some of the underlying conditions that cut across all three communities.

→ Embrace *authentic* engagement.

In each community, so many people spoke about how they did not feel that their voice mattered. Despite many civic engagement activities, too many people still feel they lack real opportunities for

“Too many people still feel they lack real opportunities for their voices to be heard.”

their voices to be heard; they feel shut out from opportunities that do exist; too often engagement yields little or no action. There can be no true equity if people do not feel their voice matters.

→ Raise hard issues and make waves.

More courageous conversations about really tough issues must occur. In each community, people said that it was frowned upon to raise hard issues and make waves, whether in public forums or in leadership meetings. The issues involved in educational equity require digging deep to understand people’s lived experiences, the challenges they face, the aspirations they hold, the institutional and cultural roadblocks, and possible solutions. None of this is easy. Being uncomfortable is part of finding an equitable way forward.

→ Develop more connected, trusted leaders.

Today, a small number of leaders hold too much power, and too many leaders are viewed as lacking in a deep understanding of communities. Moving forward, communities must broaden and deepen their leadership. Leaders must find more ways to work together and share power. They must have their communities always in their line of sight. Without changes in leadership, equity is not possible.

→ Make room for new and emerging leaders.

Let's be clear: making room for new and emerging leaders is not simply about adding a chair at the table. Rather, it is about making room for people's voices and perspectives – however different they may sound, and no matter how difficult the issues are that they raise. Making room is about a willingness to consider—and move in—new directions. It is understanding that frustrations with the past can be sources of energy for a more productive future.

→ Build catalytic, boundary spanning entities.

Most communities have an array of organizations and groups that provide programs and services—an asset to be celebrated. But many communities—most of the ones the Institute has worked with—lacked a large enough collection of organizations or groups that are catalytic and span boundaries. Communities must work to build entities that bring people and institutions together in order to spur public discussion, spark action, and marshal community resources.

→ Forge new norms and a sense of shared purpose.

At the heart of meeting community challenges is an urgent need for a greater sense of shared purpose. This shift to shared purpose occurs when people discover the aspirations they have in common, work through their challenges, and are clear on their

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purpose in action—together. Shared purpose is built upon productive norms for interaction: making room for everyone to engage, listening deeply, being willing to hear different perspectives, making commitments to one another and following through, and working for the common good.

→ Generate a can-do community narrative.

A negative narrative hangs over many communities and shapes people's mindsets, actions, behaviors, and spirits. Such negative narratives hold communities back and can be the greatest hidden factor to whether communities move forward. But beware: narratives do not change because someone hires a public relations firm to “convince” people of some new reality about themselves. New can-do narratives only take hold through concrete actions that demonstrate the possibilities of a new path. Such actions must be real. They must be believable. As communities take more and clearer positive steps, they need to actively tell these new stories, without hype, and without overinflating their significance. These emerging stories must be told consistently and over time.

A Way Forward

In each of the three communities, organizations, groups, leaders, and everyday people are stepping forward to turn their equity agendas into concrete action. In Reading, for example, the initial work on their agenda was so powerful that three local funders stepped forward to underwrite the follow-up action phase in lieu of support from our national funder. The work in Reading is off to a fast and successful start, where three cross-sector teams have formed to address critical priorities: English as a second language, early childhood education, and after- and out-of-school activities. All of these efforts are geared to build bridges, shift norms within the community, and foster a new shared sense of common purpose. This is just the beginning of the work in Reading; other new relationships, partnerships, and actions are already underway.

In Clarksville, there is an initial focus on mentoring and supporting young people. Good work is already happening in the community in this area, but much more is required to ensure that every young person has the support they need. A group of 25 organizations and community leaders, among others, are joining forces to take collective action to meet this need. Central to their effort is changing how they work together and thus strengthening the civic culture of the community. As with Reading, in Clarksville mentorship is just the beginning of what will emerge.

“In each of the three communities, organizations, groups, leaders, and everyday people are stepping forward to turn their equity agendas into concrete action.”

And in Lexington, as I write this article, the work is just getting started. Possibilities include creating new and stronger pathways for success to provide workforce development opportunities for young people. This is essential in all communities as young people need viable options beyond four-year college, which most do not attend. Another possibility is to strengthen family and student voices in education, and to make sure they are informing and influencing educational decisions. One can imagine these two possibilities being combined!

In my latest book, *Unleashed: A Proven Way Communities Can Spread Change and Make Hope Real for All*, I documented the stories of nine very different communities and how they generated change over time and strengthened their civic culture. In each case, they unleashed a chain reaction of actions and ripple effects that spread like a positive contagion in their communities. They never started with big, comprehensive, and complex plans; instead, they typically found small steps they could take, which then catalyzed much larger changes. The keys were to turn outward to the community, get in motion, start small to go big, and focus on creating a new trajectory for hope. These communities, and many others I've worked with, did that. Reading, Lexington, and Clarksville are now on that path forward.

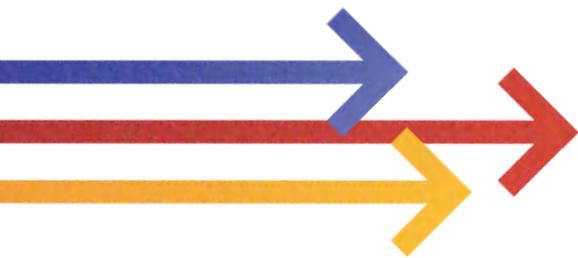
No Need to Surrender

The idea of polarization is a powerful one. The accepted narrative in our nation is that we are too polarized to make progress on tough issues, especially on education. Each day the education debate is taken over by groups that inflame and polarize debates. Progress is elusive; it can seem out of reach. But let's be clear: such a notion of polarization can serve as both an explanation and an excuse for inaction on concerns like education. We can easily ascribe our current maladies to it, throw up our arms in frustration, and walk away. That would be a terrible mistake. It would also be a bad miscalculation.

In March 2022, The Harwood Institute, again in partnership with the Kettering Foundation, released a new national study on people's views on the state of the country and their lives. We spent a year talking in-depth to a cross-section of Americans in sixteen communities, based on a typology created by the American Communities Project. We went from rural western Kansas to New Orleans, LA; Houston, TX to Fresno, CA; Stamford, CT to Spartanburg, SC; and beyond. What we learned debunked the notion that the American people are hopelessly and helplessly polarized. The report offers a more nuanced understanding about what's actually happening with our current education debate, and thus helps us to find a way forward. *Civic Virus: Why Polarization Is a Misdiagnosis*, revealed three key messages:

- People are separating and segregating themselves from one another due to unrelenting fear and anxiety about what's happening around them and to them.
- Many leaders, news media, and social media are intentionally stoking polarization for their own self-interest—producing a ceaseless noise that is engulfing people and subjecting them to an alternate reality that confuses, disorients, and destabilizes them.
- Seeing no way out, people have an instinctive fight-or-flight response with many breaking up into smaller “tribes” and camps to protect themselves and gain validation, while others retreat from engaging at all.

The leaders and residents in Reading, Lexington, and Clarksville found a way to get beyond fight or flight to create a new agenda for education and their community. They did this by focusing on what matters to them, rather than succumbing to manufactured political divisions and fear. They entered into safe spaces to have real conversations rather than seeking to vilify, even destroy, the other. They pieced together what they believed could make a difference in the lives of young people, rather than using young people as political pawns. They valued community because they believed that the only way forward was to work together, rather than to go it alone. Now, each of them has already moved into turning their equity agendas into concrete action. Education needn't be one of the defining fault lines in society; instead, under the right conditions, it can be a unifier.



One might ask if the three communities were somehow immune from the larger trends and forces that are playing out nationally and, increasingly, in local communities. Of course not; no place is. The difference was that they engaged in community-led and community-driven work. They generated public will and a shared understanding of what matters to people. They put a stake in the ground for a new politics of community as a counterforce to the ugly politics of today.

At the heart of the story of these three communities is the lesson that we need not surrender to the narrative of polarization sweeping across the nation. There is a more equitable, fair, just, inclusive, and hopeful path forward.



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Postscript

Since this report's initial drafting, each community has made strides in advancing their community-led, community-driven education agenda. Below is a snapshot of how each community is taking action based on what matters to people.

In Reading, after four community partners stepped forward to steward the local action phase, a Public Innovators Lab trained scores of community leaders and residents in Reading in the Harwood approach of Turning Outward. The action teams mentioned near the end of this report formed following the lab: English as a Second Language, After- and Out-of-School Activities, and Early Childhood Education. Since their formation, each team has worked to form partnerships between organizations that historically have not worked together or that needed to find fundamentally new ways to work together. Each team is producing concrete actions in their respective areas. Collectively, these teams are shifting the civic culture of the community.

A little over a year into their efforts, our partners in Reading tell us fragmentation is waning, the community is engaging in hard conversations it previously would have avoided, and a greater sense of shared purpose is emerging. So many people are stepping forward to join this initiative that the action teams are experiencing challenges incorporating people quickly enough. In addition, the Harwood approach has already jumped to new organizations and networks throughout the community, including youth violence, family language services, and neighborhood economic development, among many others.

The work in Reading is proving that it is possible to shift an entire community's civic culture when enough people step forward, Turn Outward, and take action on what matters to people. In short, they are creating a new trajectory of hope.

Lexington is providing an example of an alternate approach for community-led, community-driven change. One of the critical education agenda areas that our work in partnership with United Way of the Bluegrass uncovered there was a desire among residents and leaders for the community to focus on workforce development and access to opportunities for students in middle and high school. In response, in fall 2023, the Blue Grass Community Foundation launched a new grant initiative called "Accelerating Innovative + Equitable Workforce Pathways." This initiative seeks to tackle persistent issues around youth career readiness in new ways by implementing solutions that come from within the community.

The Blue Grass Community Foundation structured the grant initiative to shift key elements of the community's civic culture. First, the grant funds will target support to grassroots, collaborative efforts that break down existing siloes and help organizations and groups work together in new ways. This is critical as our report identified the tendency to coordinate but not collaborate—

meaning groups in the community tended to partner without actually having to work through tough issues together. Second, the applications will be reviewed by an independent, intergenerational, and community-based team. And third, grant recipients will receive ongoing support from Catalyst:Ed, a national nonprofit focused on unlocking organizations' capacities to catalyze education change. The Blue Grass Community Foundation plans to distribute its first round of awards through this grant in early 2024.

Clarksville offers yet another picture of what it looks like to move forward. There, an ad hoc group made up of different organizations and community members continues to lead work around youth mentorship. In response to youth concerns unearthed through The Harwood Institute initiative and ongoing community conversations, a number of different actions have emerged. To start, the local public library revitalized their youth and family programming to be more in tune with youth needs, with one event in summer 2023 drawing over 4,000 people. New youth outreach programs are popping up in previously-ignored neighborhoods and through local churches. And plans are in place to use a decommissioned school bus for a book mobile.

Meanwhile, including youth voices in monthly Rotary Club meetings led to the library partnering with Project F.U.E.L., an initiative to address food insecurity among Clarksville's school-aged population. The Bags to Mats program is another new collaborative effort that brings youth and adults together for cross-generational volunteer service to address the practical needs of Clarksville's homeless population. In Clarksville, small steps are being taken by different groups, all working with a shared purpose.



Appendix A: Methodology

The Harwood Institute’s work with communities is one part of our strategy to demonstrate that Americans have the public will and ability to address society’s fault lines. In each community discussed in this paper—Reading, PA; Lexington, KY; and Clarksville-Montgomery County, TN—the Harwood Institute partnered with one or more local organizations to conduct research with the community to identify key strengths, challenges, and areas to build on. This report brings together findings from these three communities, which collectively illuminate the potential for communities nationwide to find common ground on education.

The resident conversations and leader interviews conducted through these conversations took place with a representative cross-section of each community’s population. A brief description of how the research occurred in each community appears below.

Reading, PA

In 2021, Centro Hispano partnered with The Harwood Institute with support from Walton Family Foundation to develop a community-led, community-driven education agenda.

Over a five-month period, The Harwood Institute, with the support of Centro Hispano, undertook a series of conversations with community residents from 12 different neighborhoods across Reading. Each conversation was held with approximately 12 people; five of these were held in Spanish. There were four additional conversations to delve deeper into issues that were surfacing from initial conversations; one was conducted with high school students, another with teachers, and two with participants from earlier conversations (one of which was in Spanish).

In addition, The Harwood Institute conducted 36 in-depth interviews with community leaders, which included elected officials and leaders from Reading Public Schools, nonprofits, religious institutions, businesses, and other areas.

Lexington, KY

In early 2021, United Way of the Bluegrass partnered with The Harwood Institute with support from Walton Family Foundation to develop a community-led, community-driven education agenda.

Over nine months, The Harwood Institute, with support from United Way of the Bluegrass, undertook a series of conversations with community residents from 12 different neighborhoods across Fayette County. Each conversation was held with cross-sections of approximately 10 people. There were four additional conversations to delve deeper into issues that were surfacing from initial conversations; one each with students, teachers, grassroots leaders, and participants from the earlier conversations.

In addition, The Harwood Institute conducted 36 in-depth interviews with community leaders, which included elected officials and leaders from Fayette County Public Schools, nonprofits, religious institutions, businesses, and other areas.

Clarksville-Montgomery County, TN

In early 2021, Women Veterans of America (WVA), Leadership Clarksville (LC), and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Clarksville (BBBS) partnered with The Harwood Institute with support from Walton Family Foundation to develop a community-driven education agenda.

Over nine months, The Harwood Institute, with support from WVA, LC, and BBBS, undertook a series of conversations with community residents from 12 different neighborhoods across Montgomery County. Each conversation was held with cross-sections of approximately 10 people. There were four additional conversations to delve deeper into issues that were surfacing from initial conversations; one each with students, teachers, youth mentors, and individuals from across the county who could attend a previous conversation.

In addition, The Harwood Institute conducted 36 in-depth interviews with community leaders, which included elected officials and leaders from Clarksville-Montgomery County Public Schools, nonprofits, religious institutions, businesses, and other areas.

Appendix B: Suggestions for Further Reading

The following reports are recommended as further reading.

- [Reading Thriving, Together: A New Agenda for Education and the Community](#) (2021), by Richard C. Harwood, Andrew Taylor, and Jed Miller
- [Lexington's Path to Shared Purpose: A New Agenda for Education and the Community](#) (2022), by Richard C. Harwood
- [Clarksville Mo-Co Stepping Into the Future: A New Agenda for Education and the Community](#) (2022), by Richard C. Harwood and John P. Conroy
- [Civic Virus: Why Polarization Is a Misdiagnosis](#) (2022), by Richard C. Harwood

About the Author



RICHARD C. HARWOOD is an innovator, writer, and speaker. For over three decades, he has devoted his career to revitalizing the nation’s hardest hit communities, transforming the world’s largest organizations, and reconnecting institutions to society.

He has developed a philosophy by which people can learn to solve common problems, create a culture of shared responsibility, and deepen Civic Faith—and has put it into practice in communities around the globe. The Harwood practice of Turning Outward has spread to all 50 US states and is being used in 40 countries. His experience working on the ground to build capacity and coalitions for change gives him a unique and powerful insight on bridging divides and creating resilient communities.

Dedicated to providing a trusted civic voice, Rich’s leadership has helped people in communities see and hear one another, afford dignity to every individual, and find ways to do common work. In Newtown, Connecticut, after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Rich led the process for the community to collectively decide the fate of the school building.

An inspiring and sought-after speaker, Rich regularly keynotes major conferences and events. He has written six books, scores of articles, and groundbreaking reports, and frequently appears in national media. He is the founder and president of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, located in Bethesda, Maryland.

More information about Rich Harwood can be found at www.theharwoodinstitute.org. You can connect with Rich Harwood on LinkedIn and Facebook.

