

A high-school course is planned for later this year.

And even Meta has a team dedicated to developing education applications in the metaverse.

## Looking Ahead

As metaverse mania continues, three things appear true.

First, innovation theory suggests that the early successful instances that apply elements of the metaverse will be proprietary in nature. They will be optimized initially to maximize the performance and reliability of an immature technology at the expense of scale and interoperability. That immediately suggests a problem. Many of the instances that are called a metaverse won't meet a key criterion of Ball's definition: interoperability. Indeed, much of what passes for metaverse hype right now is still virtual reality clothed in new marketing language.

This may not be a bad thing, however, given concerns about whether the metaverse will be a safe and healthy place for children. Experiences in walled-off gardens—think Prodigy and America Online, not the whole of the World Wide Web—could be safer, at least initially, even though that might temporarily undermine the vision of innovating instruction or skill development through the blockchain or decentralized autonomous organizations.

Second, the metaverse seems more of a sustaining than a disruptive innovation for full-time virtual schools. Unlike disruptions, sustaining innovations improve the performance of

an existing product or service to better serve users who already exist. Full-time virtual schools that have sometimes struggled to engage students would likely benefit from a more immersive, social experience. Combining their programs with the metaverse, as well as with in-person learning pods, could create a more robust and accessible schooling experience. Alongside the flexible models of learning that took root during the pandemic, such as pods and hybrid online and in-person programs, a socially rich, immersive metaverse could, eventually, disrupt traditional, brick-and-mortar schools.

Finally, metaverse applications can create educational experiences that are otherwise impossible in a traditional environment. Virtual reality can bring content alive with dynamic images and hands-on digital exploration. It can bring real people and knowledge from other parts of the world into classrooms everywhere. Consider the potential for science labs, language learning, internships, cultural exchanges, and field trips (see “The Educational Value of Field Trips,” *research*, Winter 2014).

When the metaverse comes to class, these are the areas where you'll want to point your virtual-reality goggles.

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## SCHOOL LIFE

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but its school board and its political establishment did not. By the late '60s, there was an increasing level of frustration over the exclusion of African Americans, especially from decision-making power. Their kids were making up a larger and larger percentage of the student body in the schools, yet they had very little representation on the school board. There was a lot of activism to change that. I think that eventually the white leaders of the city and the school board realized that the time had come. The system was in crisis, and they realized they needed to hire somebody who could bridge that divide and who had some credibility, that it was time to hire an African American leader.

**Do you think that big-city school systems can ever become effective, or do we need to move to a different model? Today, I see charter schools, decentralization, and giving parents choice as a new form of citizen participation. Isn't that the message your book leads to, that big-city systems can't move forward?**

I didn't intend that. I would say that a big theme is the tension between what schools and school systems can and can't accomplish. One of the big patterns in the history of education is America's tendency to put everything on the schools, to

expect schools to solve all our problems. It goes back to the 19th century, with Horace Mann calling schools the great equalizer. There's a narrative about public education being the ticket to people's success and the engine of social mobility. And Foster, as I said before, worked hard to raise expectations and bring that narrative closer to reality for all students.

But another lesson in my book, and in much scholarship in the history of education, is that we expect too much of schools, because they're embedded in the larger society. If urban school systems are having problems, it's partly because cities have problems, and schools aren't separate from that. People have economic problems, and that leads to educational disadvantages, and the schools can't just level the playing field by waving a wand, whether it's a particular school and principal or a system and a superintendent. They're operating within constraints on what they can achieve. In that sense, I think the problem's even deeper than people realize, but I would agree that at their best, charter schools and other kinds of innovations can empower leadership like Foster's.

*This is an edited excerpt of an Education Exchange podcast, available at [educationnext.org](http://educationnext.org).*

# Marcus Foster Raised Expectations for All Students

*Historian John P. Spencer on one of the first Black superintendents of a large urban district*

**E** *EDUCATION NEXT* senior editor Paul E. Peterson recently spoke with John P. Spencer, associate professor of education at Ursinus College and author of *In the Crossfire: Marcus Foster and the Troubled History of American School Reform*.

**Paul Peterson: Black Power has moved to the center of American education's political agenda in a way not seen since the 1970s. The critical race theory debate is raging, the Supreme Court will soon decide whether universities can use racial criteria in admissions, and the New York Times' 1619 Project dates America's founding moment not to 1776 but to the first arrival of slaves in Virginia. In 1970, Marcus Foster was appointed as the one of the first Black superintendents of a major American city. His story could hardly be more relevant to American education today.**

**Professor Spencer, do you see a connection between the events and debates of 50 years ago and the disputes over American history and Black Power that are occurring today?**

**John Spencer:** Absolutely. These are longstanding struggles in America over race and our history of slavery and racism and inequality. In the 1960s those issues came to the fore through the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement. Foster became an educator in the 1950s and a celebrated school principal in Philadelphia in the late '60s, and then superintendent in Oakland in the early '70s. My book's title, *In the Crossfire*, is partly literal, because Foster was tragically assassinated in a crossfire of bullets, but it also conveys a metaphorical notion about the ideological crossfire of that era. The school reform debate had become incredibly polarized. One side was blaming students and families for the unequal outcomes in urban schools, and the other was blaming the schools themselves for being racist institutions. Foster was difficult to pigeonhole. He managed to communicate with different sides and to do constructive things. All of that is echoed in the polarization we have today and in the challenges of operating constructively within it.

## What were Marcus Foster's origins?

Foster's family migrated from Georgia to Philadelphia when he was three years old. Foster was raised by his mother, who had five kids, of whom Marcus was the youngest. And think about his middle name: Aurelius. This shows you something about his mother, the kind of standards she had, and the kind of determination she had to raise kids who were going to be successful, work hard, and thrive in the system. Foster's brother told me that their mother used to emphasize that they had to be twice as good as everyone else. He also had a grandfather who was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, so there definitely was a family legacy in education.

**Arguably, Foster had his greatest accomplishments at Gratz High School in Philadelphia, where he became the first Black principal. At Gratz, he really had an impact.**

Foster was most well-known as the superintendent in Oakland, and that was certainly the peak of his achievement in the field. But he was principal of Gratz in the late '60s, and this was the pivotal moment in his career, because he was the leader of a school that had a lot of difficulties. Before his arrival, Gratz had a white principal who was emblematic of a style of leadership in that era, of shrugging your shoulders and saying, "Well, what can you expect of these kids? Look at where they come from, look at their neighborhoods, look at all the things that make it impossible for us to succeed with them." Foster exemplifies a pivotal shift toward a kind of leadership that has been echoed in more recent years,

which is about raising expectations for all students. Foster did raise the expectations of the school and suggest that the kids here can learn, that we need to work hard, serve them, and use all the resources at our disposal to change the whole ethos of the school.

**Then in 1970 he became superintendent in Oakland. How did the leadership group that had dominated that city decide to hire a Black superintendent?**

One simple answer is: pressure. Oakland's population had been almost entirely white as recently as about 1940. That changed after World War II, largely because of the African American migration out of the South. Oakland became diverse,

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Marcus Foster

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