

# *Sustaining Reform*

**The School District That Did  
the Right Things Right**

*Lyn Sharatt and Michael Fullan*

**Developing a Civic Infrastructure**

*Carolyn Akers*

**Making a Reform the Work of the District:  
Lessons from Kansas City, Kansas**

*Steve Gering*

**Communities and School Boards:  
The Keys to Sustaining Reform**

*David Wynde*

**Continuous Improvement:  
Sustaining Education Reform  
Long Enough to Make a Difference**

*Thomas W. Payzant*

*Voices in Urban Education*  
Number 9, Fall 2005

*Publisher*  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
at Brown University  
Warren Simmons, Executive Director

*Editor*  
Robert Rothman

*Managing Editor*  
Susan Fisher

*Copy Editor*  
Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

*Production & Distribution*  
Mary Arkins

*Design*  
Gilbert Design Associates, Inc.

*Illustration*  
Carolina Arentsen

*Voices in Urban Education* (ISSN 1553-54X) is published quarterly at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Articles may be reproduced with appropriate credit to the Annenberg Institute. Single copies are \$10 each, including postage and handling. A discount is available on bulk orders. Call 401 863-2018 for further information.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children. For program information, contact:

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Brown University, Box 1985  
Providence, Rhode Island 02912  
Tel: 401 863-7990  
Fax: 401 863-1290  
Web: [www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)

©2005 Annenberg Institute for School Reform

## *Sustaining Reform*



- 2 **How Can Reforms Last?**  
*Robert Rothman*
- 5 **The School District That Did the Right Things Right**  
*Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan*  
On the surface, the York Region District School Board's reforms did not achieve their desired results. But a closer look reveals what the district did right and offers clues to how districts can attain sustained improvement.
- 14 **Developing a Civic Infrastructure**  
*Carolyn Akers*  
In 2001, Mobile County, Alabama, raised taxes for the first time in forty years in support of education reform. A local education fund played a key role in mobilizing the community and continues to do so in supporting the school district.
- 22 **Making a Reform the Work of the District: Lessons from Kansas City, Kansas**  
*Steve Gering*  
A decade-long partnership involving a school district, a foundation, and a national reform support organization offers lessons in sustaining a reform over time despite changes in district leadership.
- 29 **Communities and School Boards: The Keys to Sustaining Reform**  
*David Wynde*  
A reinvigorated school board and community partners have set the Portland, Oregon, school district on a reform course.
- 36 **Continuous Improvement: Sustaining Education Reform Long Enough to Make a Difference**  
*Thomas W. Payzant*  
Thanks to political stability and a design for continuous engagement and improvement for teachers and school leaders, Boston Public Schools has sustained a reform effort for ten years.

# How Can Reforms Last?

Robert Rothman

---

**A**lthough educators and policy-makers continue to urge major reforms in education, a glance at the record of the last twenty years shows that reform has been taking place nearly everywhere and nearly all the time. Unfortunately, many of these efforts failed to take hold in schools or school systems. They sank without a trace, only to be replaced by the next new idea.

One reason reform has been so evanescent is that many of the initiatives were the products of dynamic leaders who were able to implement sweeping changes, often in the face of determined opposition or skepticism, but when the leader moved on, the opponents were able to kill the reforms. The leaders were seldom able to turn the reforms into “the way the system does business.”

How can reformers avoid this fate and ensure that reform lasts? One way is to build an infrastructure that helps turn the *reform* into *normal operations*. Another way is to build a constituency that will advocate for the reform even after the initiator leaves.

In either case, reform support organizations play critical roles in these efforts. While district leaders and their staffs – and also school staffs – must ultimately own the reforms in order for them to succeed, reform support organizations provide essential capacity and engage the community.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* looks at five distinct reform efforts to show what it takes for reforms to gain traction and staying power.

Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan examine the case of a school district that, on the surface, did not achieve results from its reforms. A deeper look, though,

*Robert Rothman is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and editor of Voices in Urban Education.*

showed that the reforms *did* produce improvements where they were implemented faithfully, suggesting ways that reforms can take hold.

Carolyn Akers describes the successful effort in Mobile County, Alabama, to raise taxes for the first time in forty years in support of education reform and the role of the local education fund in mobilizing the community and supporting the school district.

Steve Gering shares lessons that the Kansas City, Kansas school district has learned from its decade-long reform partnership involving the district, a foundation, and a national reform support organization.

David Wynde tells how a reinvigorated school board and community partners have set the Portland, Oregon, school district on a reform course.

Thomas W. Payzant describes how political stability and a design for teacher and school-leader engagement have enabled Boston Public Schools to sustain a reform effort for ten years.

Although these articles address some common themes, they all represent very different approaches to sustaining reform. In some cases, district leaders led the reforms; in others, the community did so and



the district implemented their vision. In some places, district leaders sought the support from the community and schools from the outset. In others, the district implemented the plan and then worked to gain buy-in. In large part, the ways the reforms were implemented reflected local circumstances.

At the same time, each of these stories suggests that reform is never “done.” While all of the authors can cite some success, they all recognize that their districts still face challenges they need to address. Districts and their community partners all have important roles to play to ensure that the *next* phase of reform lasts as well.

# The School District That Did the Right Things Right

Lyn Sharratt  
and Michael Fullan

---

*On the surface, the York Region District School Board's reforms did not achieve their desired results. But a closer look reveals what the district did right and offers clues to how districts can attain sustained improvement.*

This is a mystery story. It is about a district that apparently did the right things but seemed not to get commensurate results across all classrooms and schools. In this paper, we look closely at the details and discover a very important lesson about districtwide reform.

The district is York Region District School Board (YRDSB), which is a large multicultural district just north of Toronto, Ontario. YRDSB is a rapidly growing district with a diverse socio-cultural and linguistic population; over a hundred different languages are spoken in York's schools. The school board has been opening, on average, at least five elementary schools a year for the last five years. There are 140 elementary schools and 27 secondary schools with over 108,000 students and 8,000 teachers in total.

Districtwide reform has become increasingly important over the past decade, as educational leaders have sought to achieve larger-scale, sustainable school improvement across the system. Our paper delves deeper into what such reform looks like and what we must do to obtain substantial success in student learning.

We don't provide here a review of the research on school district reform (for lessons learned from several cases, see Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn 2004). One recent major study, however, puts our paper in perspective. The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005) contains case studies of reform in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. All three systems had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system; all focused on many of the "right things" like literacy and math, used obvious-choice strategies such as concentration on "assessment for learning" data, invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on systemwide change.

And they had money – Seattle, with \$35 million in external funds; Milwaukee, with extra resources and flexibility; and Chicago, with huge amounts of additional funds. There was great pressure, but success was not expected overnight. Decision-makers and the public would have been content to see growing success over a five- or even ten-year period. It would seem that the conditions were ideal to accomplish significant reform.

*Lyn Sharratt is a superintendent (Curriculum and Instructional Services) in the York Region District School Board, north of Toronto, Canada, and an associate with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.*

*Michael Fullan is former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and is a noted author, consultant, and international authority on education reform.*



Yet there was not corresponding success. The upfront conclusion of the case-study evaluators was:

The three districts we studied had decentralized resources and authority to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed is that the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale. (Cross City Campaign 2005, p. 4)

Pursuing these curious findings – seemingly doing the right things and not getting results – our paper gets inside district reform in a way that explains why doing the *apparent* right things is not sufficient.

### ***The Right Model***

In 1999, when YRDSB began its improvement strategy in earnest, the director of education, Bill Hogarth, set out to develop the best possible model for reform, drawing heavily on external ideas but developing a capacity from within the district to lead the reform with a critical mass of leaders at all levels of the district. Hogarth focused the

system by stating that all students would read by the end of grade one.

At this point, the district, with support from School Plans for Continuous Improvement, decided to focus on improving literacy through a model that came to be known as the Literacy Collaborative (LC). Key features of the approach (Sharratt 2001) included:

- a clearly articulated vision and commitment to a system literacy priority for all students, which is continually communicated to everyone in the system;
- a systemwide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement;
- the use of data to drive instruction and determine resources;
- a commitment to building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students; and
- the establishment of professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

The model may appear overwhelming; we do not intend to explain it in detail here. In fact, it developed over time and is presented and discussed on an ongoing basis within the system to clarify the overall vision and approach. Our point here is that the model is explicit and comprehensive. It reflects and guides the work of the district and is used by instructional leaders at all levels of the system.

More specifically, the strategy involved developing and supporting school literacy teams, starting with an initial cohort in 2001–2002 and adding schools over a four-year period until all schools in the district – elementary and secondary – were involved. Each school team consisted of three people: the principal, the literacy teacher (typically released for half to full time to work alongside the principal and teachers



during the school day) and the Special Education Resource Teacher. The teams committed to participating in regional literacy professional development once a month and in change-knowledge sessions, led by Carol Rolheiser and Michael Fullan, about six times a year.

There is a longstanding saying in the change literature that “change is a process, not an event.” This saying proved to be accurate in YRDSB, not just because the sessions were continuous over multiple years, but also because the strategy required teams and schools to apply ideas between sessions and to continually build them into everyday practice. It was what happened *between* sessions that counted. Ideas were constantly applied and discussed as the district emphasized “learning in context” – that is, learning by applying new ideas and building on them.

In short, the model was based on best knowledge. It was comprehensive in coverage and was constantly communicated, shared, and refined with all stakeholders – the school teams, the curriculum consultant/coordinator staff, the community, school board trustees, and the system as a whole. Moreover, there was a multiyear commitment funded at the board table and outlined in the comprehensive System Plan for Continuous Improvement, so that the district stayed on course with the strategy. There was no mistaking that LC was the system priority.

Each June, the district organizes a Literacy Learning Fair in which leadership teams of three from all schools present what they have accomplished and learned. Schools must report on the three goals of LC – increasing students’ achievement by:

- using data to drive instruction and the selection of resources;

- building administrators’ and teachers’ capacity for successful classroom instruction; and
- establishing professional learning communities across the district.

The Literacy Learning Fair is part celebration and part pressure and support to keep reaching new levels of achievement. If there was ever a district that got it right and was engaged in continuous reflection and development, York Region was it. So, what results are they getting?

### ***The Wrong Results (or Were They?)***

York Region, as we have said, is strongly committed to the moral purpose of raising the bar and closing the gap in student achievement, so it is a major interest to find out how YRDSB is doing with respect to the literacy achievement of its students. The Education Quality

---

**If there was ever a district  
that got it right and was engaged  
in continuous reflection and  
development, York Region was it.**

---

and Accountability Office (EQAO) is an arms-length government agency charged with assessing and communicating on the achievement of all students in Ontario including, for example, the literacy performance of grade 3 and grade 6 students. We do not hold EQAO results as the only measure of achievement – in fact, our assessment for learning strategy relies heavily on daily diagnostic and formative assessment, students’ self-assessment, and the corresponding actions.

---

Perhaps there is more than meets the eye. We decided to examine more closely these seemingly rather average results, given the effort. And this is where we found “God in the details.”

---

Nonetheless, EQAO scores are a significant barometer of progress over time. It can be seen from these results that cohorts one (seventeen schools) and two (twenty-one schools) did only moderately better than the third and fourth cohorts. In Grade 3 Reading, for example, the proportion of students attaining the provincial standard in the first two LC cohorts moved from 57 and 52 percent to 61 and 64 percent, compared to the second two cohorts, which advanced from 55 and 61 percent to 58 and 61 percent – very modest gains. Compared to the provincial average, YRDSB students who met standards as a whole moved from 59 percent to 61 percent, compared to the provincial averages of 48 percent to 54 percent – not very impressive.

So what was happening, and what are some of the possible explanations? Four possible explanations occurred to us.

First, perhaps the model was not the right one or the most powerful. We leave open this debate.

Second, it might be that the model has not yet had enough time to take

effect. Cohorts one and two have been engaged only three years, and the largest cohorts have had little time; the 2003–2004 cohort of forty-five schools has been involved for only one year, and for the largest group, fifty-seven schools, there has not yet been a chance to see first-year results, as they began only in 2004–2005. Thus, 102 of the 140 elementary schools have been involved for a very short time.

Third, the results may indeed be impressive, given that the district is supporting an increasing number of students who are learning English as an additional language. The percentage of ESL/ELD learners that have reached the provincial standard on the EQAO assessments has improved over the past five years in reading, writing, and mathematics. To hold one’s own and to move forward, albeit in small steps, may be a significant accomplishment under these challenging conditions.

Fourth, perhaps there is more than meets the eye. We decided to examine more closely these seemingly rather average results, given the effort. And this is where we found “God in the details.”

### ***God Is in the Details***

We looked more closely at how the detailed components of the model were implemented at the seventeen schools that made up the first cohort. We found that there were nine schools that had consistently followed the thirteen components of the model. When we compared their performance to that of other groups, the results were dramatic.

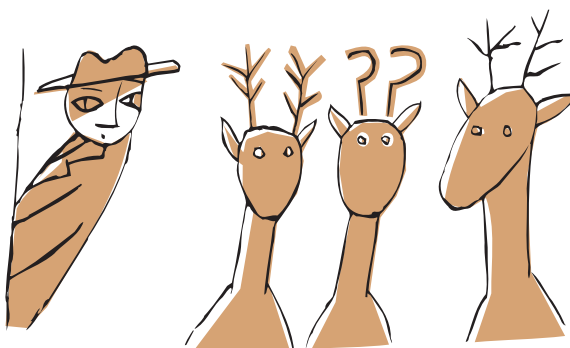
The nine schools that implemented the components consistently, despite being well below other York Region schools at the beginning of the strategy in 1998–1999 and being at the lowest end of the provincial average, outperformed both these groups within four

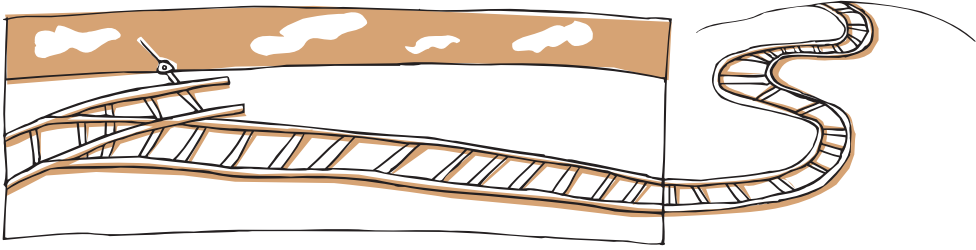
years. For example, in Grade 3 Reading, the nine LC schools were at 45 percent in 1998–1999. They progressed above both comparison groups within two years and have remained above the other groups since then.

The explanation for better performance seems to lie in more careful attention to the details of the LC model. These nine schools were led by principals and literacy teacher-leaders who understood and committed with will and perseverance to the specifics. For example:

- The nine school leaders clearly understood the model and, most important, lived the Beliefs and Understandings in the design.
- The nine school leaders clearly understood that they needed to do *all* the parameters – all thirteen.
- The nine school teams did constant self-evaluation, striving for alignment of the Beliefs and Understandings among the principal, literacy teacher, reading recovery teacher, and special education resource teacher. This involved “accountable talk” and corresponding action in an ongoing way during the school day.
- Competing priorities in the school and from some district leaders made it difficult to “stay the course,” but, again, these leaders did not let the “distracters” divert their energies and focus.

We have, then, an explanation to the mystery of lower-than-expected overall results. But what can we make of it? First, we are learning that effective change involves far more precise and detailed work than we thought (for elaboration of what it takes to achieve “breakthrough results,” i.e., results for all, see Fullan, Hill, and Crevola, forthcoming). Second, nine of seventeen is not a bad percentage for starters.





And we expect that the schools in the other cohorts will sort on how well the components of the model are being pursued with diligence and perseverance.

Thus, we have the makings of a critical mass of leaders. We think that the current state of affairs is very fragile, albeit potentially strong; we may not be far away from a tipping point to achieve system change.

Our conclusion is several-fold. First, a survey we conducted indicated that there is widespread support throughout the system for the model and the strategy being pursued. This support could help reach the tipping point for breakthrough change.

Second, we endorse one of our basic change findings, namely, that shared vision or ownership is more an *outcome* of a quality process than it is a *precondition*. You have to develop shared vision. We also know from our change work that, to a certain extent, change in *behavior* often precedes change in *belief*. We think that survey participants have had new experiences and that this is what has made them more positive.

Third, the work requires much more precision and focus than we or others thought. For example, in the nine- vs. eight-school comparison involving the first cohort, there was not much

difference in the attitude of the school leaders. In the eight less-than-effective examples, the “hearts” of the school leaders were in the right place. It is not surface beliefs that matter but, rather, commitment, staying the course, and the detailed know-how that comes from learning by doing and reflecting on practice.

In short, when we get to a more fine-grained analysis, we see that it is the details that count. In turn, this means we must develop strategies that help school leaders experience and learn more about how, precisely, to engage in continuous improvement in classroom practice. Such leaders conceptualize and carry out their roles with ever-increasing precision and commitment. They can walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

### **Next Steps**

There are essentially three broad themes that we believe are necessary to go beyond where we are – staying the course, becoming more specific, and widening the sphere of involvement.

*Staying the course* means holding the focus and the existing model. We saw that the intensive involvement of most schools is only recent, yet there is widespread support for the direction undertaken. LC is a learning approach,

which means that the model is based on continuous learning by doing. Staying the course means, for example, more intensive learning about focused balanced literacy practices, early intervention, and parental and community involvement and ownership. Above all, staying the course means that leaders across the district, at school and district levels, understand that they are at the early stages of an improvement strategy that requires ever-increasing attention on the ground.

Second, *precision and detail* are key. Therefore, new strategies are needed that increase the specificity and the opportunity to learn in context: more precise and intensive literacy support for selected schools will be needed. For example, during the 2005–2006 school year, twenty-seven elementary schools and six secondary schools will receive intensive school-based support focusing on improved student achievement in literacy. The schools receiving this additional support have been selected according to needs indicated by patterns in EQAO results, using a sophisticated analysis of socio-economic factors by the YRDSB Research Team and analyses from supervisory officers using contextual knowledge about the schools. Each of the thirty-three schools identified for intensive support will receive assistance from two curriculum consultants and leadership from one curriculum coordinator, who will work directly with the school administrator and literacy teacher in each school to extend schoolwide capacity for improved student achievement in literacy as defined by each school’s plan for continuous improvement.

Additional strategies that will lend themselves to greater precision include targeted “Literacy Walks,” in which school teams observe the work of others

---

We must develop strategies that help school leaders experience and learn more about how, precisely, to engage in continuous improvement in classroom practice. Such leaders can walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

---

and explain their own detailed work to participating groups external to the school groups. Similarly, action research will be another strategy that involves teachers' inquiry at a deeper level. Thirty-nine schools have applied for the action research grants from the curriculum department for 2005–2006. This is a marked increase from other years. This work is essential for embedding improvement in schools. Self-reflection at the school and classroom levels on “What works, what doesn't work, and what we can do differently” feeds into greater precision about literacy implementation and improvement. Annual reports, presented to school teams across schools and to district staff, will be part of the process. All Intensive Support Schools will be expected to have an inquiry/action research question by 2006–2007.

Third, *extending the net of learning outside the district* is a new strategy for accessing ideas and contributing to the development of others. For the 2005–2006 school year, YRDSB has received a special funding allocation from the Provincial Secretariat to support the expansion of the Literacy

Collaborative program to include the involvement of leadership teams from ten other regional school boards. The districts involved in this journey will join YRDSB administrators and teachers to take part in change-leadership-training sessions in order to address structures, skills, and strategies that promote regionwide literacy capacity building. These will be led by curriculum and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education research staff. The general notion is that districts develop best, in the long run, if they take the intellectual (knowledge-based) and moral (commitment to the system as a whole) stance that it is their responsibility to learn from other districts and to contribute to the learning of other districts.

In sum, there is more to getting it right than meets the eye. The experience of York Region is instructive; it shows that you can accomplish a great deal in a short period of time, but that this really just represents the beginning of a much deeper journey that has only just begun.

The goal of districtwide reform is to transform the culture of the district at the school and district levels – vertically and horizontally, in terms of how schools relate to the district (and vice versa) and to each other. We see in this work that the movement is from a we-they orientation toward a we-we commitment. Classroom teachers begin to identify with “my school,” not just “my classroom”; school staff develop commitments to “my district,” not just to the narrower “my school.”

Once the new culture reaches a critical mass, we believe that sustained districtwide reform will be within our grasp. As system capacity increases, given efforts yield greater return, because the whole system gets better at what it does. The extraordinary becomes

---

The goal of districtwide reform is to transform the culture of the district at the school and district levels – vertically and horizontally, in terms of how schools relate to the district (and vice versa) and to each other.

---

possible without superhuman effort.  
And when this happens, continuous  
improvement on a large scale becomes  
a reality.

---

*References*

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. 2005. *A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice*. Chicago: CCCUSR.

Fullan, M., A. Bertani, and J. Quinn. 2004. "New Lessons for District-wide Reform," *Education Leadership* 61, no. 7:42–46.

Fullan, M., P. Hill, and C. Crevola. Forthcoming. *Breakthrough*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press and Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Principals Council.

Sharratt, L. 2001. "Making the Most of Accountability Policies: Is There a Role for the School District?" *Orbit* 32, no. 1:37–42.

# Developing a Civic Infrastructure

Carolyn Akers

---

*In 2001, Mobile County, Alabama, raised taxes for the first time in forty years in support of education reform. A local education fund played a key role in mobilizing the community and continues to do so in supporting the school district*

**F**our years ago, voters in Mobile County, Alabama, approved a property tax linked to public education, the first successful tax increase for public schools in more than forty years. Schools in Alabama are chronically underfunded, due to constitutional limits on the state's ability to levy taxes. So the local tax levy was a significant victory for those in the county who believed that education had been shortchanged for years.

The passage was not considered a mandate, however. Voters expected to see results for those additional tax dollars. They expected to see changes in how the school system operated in the future. The demand for accountability increased.

In the same year the property tax was passed, the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) was named one of five national sites for the Standards and Accountability grant awarded by the Public Education Network. The overall goal of the community effort was to create a deep willingness across the community to support changes that would ensure a quality education for *all* students in Mobile County, regardless of where they lived or which school they attended.

The story of Mobile County is one of a true grassroots campaign in which

the citizens voiced that not only did they *need* to do something about the county's schools, they *wanted* to. An intensive public engagement effort, coupled with a specific reform strategy, began the momentum for change. As a result, a new public story is emerging about Mobile County schools – and about the community's role in improving them.

Three strategies became the focus of efforts in Mobile County: a citizen-driven long-range plan for school improvement, a data-driven system for decision making, and an accountability mechanism to ensure movement toward a strategic plan.

## ***Sustained Engagement***

Yes, We Can, as the citizen engagement approach was called, was a joint effort between the school system and the local education fund. The first step was to collect the voices of citizens from multiple sectors of the county. A Citizens Advisory Team emerged, with members designated as representatives of the various racial and geographic sectors of Mobile County.

Engagement does not happen by chance. It happens through the structure of strategic activities. The Yes, We Can initiative ultimately engaged 1,500 people and convened nearly sixty

*Carolyn Akers is executive director of the Mobile Area Education Foundation.*



discussions around kitchen tables and in living rooms, churches, and community centers. Additional conversations were held with teachers, principals, and members of the superintendent's student advisory committee. Participants discussed assets unique to the Mobile community, along with their aspirations for public education.

At one point in the effort, more than four hundred people attended a school board meeting convened to pass a community agreement created in the process. All participants wore nametags identifying their communities. School board members, seeing this broad-based, countywide force for change, unanimously supported the key tenets of the agreement.

The next step was to align the community's aspirations for its schools with a specific plan of action for change that would hold the board of education and superintendent accountable for results.

The Mobile County Public School System encompasses an area of 1,644 square miles, with an enrollment of 65,000 students in more than a hundred schools. MAEF understood that a strategic plan that would support high-quality education across the county had to be *developed by* citizens, not *sold to* them. So MAEF went back to the community. In a second phase of engagement, forty individuals representing diverse demographics discussed the "realm of the possible" for what schools and communities could achieve, based on issues identified in earlier discussions. From this, a Community Advisory Team drafted the PASSport to Excellence, a strategic plan for the district and the community that outlines five priority goals for the school system. The goal areas include nineteen performance targets in:

- student achievement
- quality district and school leadership



- communications and engagement
- governance
- equity

Unlike those of most urban school districts, the Mobile County strategic plan is considered to be community driven. This keeps accountability to the community at the heart of the school district's policy efforts. Also important were the structure and breadth of community engagement, which brought diverse sectors of the community into discussion with each other and the school district. This enabled the development of a shared vision, and these sectors of the community also are now positioned to drive action and policy change.

Engagement alone, while it is of strategic importance, is not enough. Bolstered by the federal No Child Left Behind law, the Mobile County school board and MAEF understood that the community agreement structured as part of the engagement efforts must be aligned to a rigorous reform effort focused on ensuring equitable access to high-quality public education for all students. The Baldrige Criteria for

Performance Excellence was adopted as the vehicle that would address the community's priority issues.

Baldrige criteria are reflected in changes that have since been made in the school system, including:

- Every principal in 100 schools has a single chart, known as a “dashboard,” that outlines student-achievement goals, identifies gaps between current performance and desired targets, and sets benchmarks for progress.
- Dashboards are posted in the campus lobby and updated regularly for school staff, parents, and the public to review.
- Professional development is focused on research-based classroom best practices as identified by DataWorks Educational Research.
- Commitment to world-class Baldrige standards for organizational improvement are included in all central office functions.
- Educators are planning for and monitoring results.

### ***Transformed Schools***

Central to the community aspirations that led to the strategic plan is the belief that what happens in the *classroom* matters most. The school board responded. Last spring, the school board allocated \$6.2 million toward improving

achievement of Mobile's five lowest-performing schools, through a set of policy changes called the Transformed Schools Plan. Principals and all teachers in each of these five schools were reconstituted. Some principals and teachers stayed, but only after re-applying for their positions. Highly qualified teachers were given a bonus of up to \$16,000 for voluntarily moving to one of these low-performing schools.

In all, the school system will spend approximately \$1.8 million in performance-based incentive pay, a policy based on performance indicators used in Denver. Another \$3.4 million will be used to buy textbooks and other supplies, extra professional development for teachers, and other means of support.

District policy and practice changed, too. After assessing principals' needs, central office staff created a leadership academy for principals designed around those needs. The school system also started a teacher-induction program in which new and returning teachers could participate. Parent organizers were placed in the transformation schools to help parents understand how to support and extend learning at home. For students in these five schools, the district has invested in a variety of wraparound services that students can access right at school.

Student-achievement data indicate that the schools are beginning to show progress. Recently released Stanford Achievement Tests and the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test confirm that the Transformed Schools are well on their way to “clear” status. Each school made significant gains – some as much thirty-point gains in reading and mathematics. The Transformed Schools that did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) were proficient

---

Central to the community aspirations that led to the strategic plan is the belief that what happens in the *classroom* matters most. The school board responded.

---

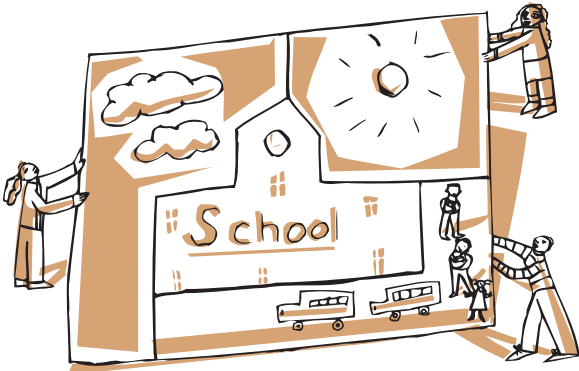
in all subgroups, with the exception of special education. The district made AYP for the year; 61 of the 94 schools met AYP, an increase from 41 out of 93 from the previous year.

**A New Public Story**

Broad-based engagement efforts continue to be applied. Now, as attention has shifted to implementation of the strategic plan, community engagement efforts have also shifted. Now referred to as Together We Can, the engagement effort continues to involve civic mobilization of Mobile’s citizens, students, and faith-based, business, and community organizations. This past spring, more than eight hundred members of the community joined the school district in a community-wide education summit to look at school progress data and recommit to the shared vision of the strategic plan. The summit is likely to become an annual event.

More than ever before, data is being used to drive decision making. The school system and MAEF are using a high level of transparency and communication about data throughout the community to build support for changes in policy, personnel, and practice. Each school in the system has a dashboard mounted in front entrances and hallways of schools that displays student-achievement data and compares it to the previous year. Dashboards show how students are doing school by school. The dashboards have been significant supports in creating common understanding and language among different sectors of the community – especially in the business and faith-based communities – and have been helpful in getting all sectors to focus on common goals.

The school district has also increased the transparency of the budget and the



strategic plan itself. Each year, the school district posts the budget and financial audits on the school district Web site for all to see. The strategic plan is also posted on the Web site. In addition, individual action plans are made public online. Action plans align goals on the strategic plan to the person responsible for accomplishing each goal. This way, the community knows whom to hold accountable for accomplishing each of the goals on the plan.

### ***MAEF: The Role of an Intermediary Organization***

Yes, We Can was not MAEF's first attempt at engagement. Indeed, in the thirteen-year history of the organization, MAEF had conducted three other strategic engagement efforts, ranging from community surveys conducted through utility-bill mailings to community forums. MAEF has always seen the community as an important partner in public education and has always had as its central mission the education and engagement of citizens across the county.

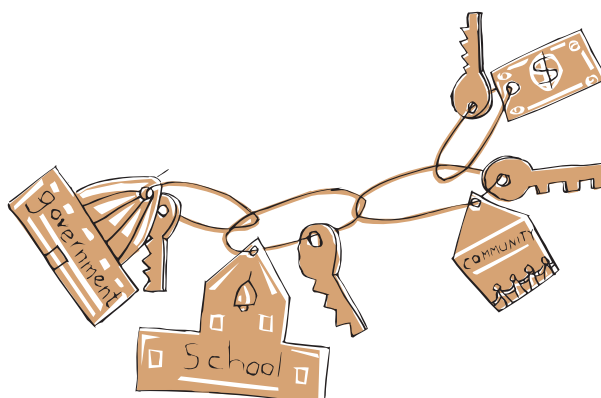
What MAEF learned over time, in its own experiences and in observing other communities, is that most improvement efforts get to a plan of action but then fall short on deploying

strategies that translate goals into practice. The difference in current engagement efforts is one of breadth and scale.

MAEF also has learned that continuous improvement requires continuous public engagement. As a continual reminder and representative of the community, MAEF applies equal measures of pressure and support to the school district as it makes the shift to a more accountable, more equitable system. Early engagement efforts were about collecting the voices of the people. Over time, MAEF has also moved toward facilitating agreement.

The single most limiting factor in community engagement efforts across the country has been the lack of school-system capacity to deliver needed change. School districts are fragile systems; lack of capacity in any single area (whether leadership, the quality of teaching, or resources) can stop reform efforts cold. Superintendents come and go; focus on a continual reform effort often goes with them. Knowing that, MAEF deliberately connected citizen concerns to an action framework. In this case, that framework was the Baldrige criteria.

As that reform effort deepens, the next phase of public engagement is about continuing to communicate for



genuine public ownership, deployment of ongoing school reform and engagement efforts, and empowering action through a broad cross-section of civic actors that represents key sectors of the community. MAEF is tracking progress and creating short-term wins, mapping organizations, and aligning targeted actions for impact.

Over time, the development of civic leaders and of civic stakeholders will be the vehicles that will mobilize the ongoing political will of the community to fund a high-performing public education system. In this way, a civic infrastructure is being built.

Because the infrastructure of the school system is fragile, MAEF is working across neighborhoods and sectors to establish a permanent, citizen-led structure for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the reforms identified and undertaken as a result of the Mobile County community agreement. This civic infrastructure can be a permanent fixture that brings pressure for change, mobilization of actors throughout the community, and support and resources. Mostly, this civic infrastructure can sustain attention to complex and difficult problems that simply cannot be solved overnight.

### ***So What? The Results So Far***

Short-term results are apparent. All 100 schools in the Mobile County school system have developed a data-driven dashboard to focus on raising the bar and closing the achievement gap. In addition, school-system-generated quarterly criterion-referenced tests provide data on student progress in meeting grade-level benchmarks in core academic areas. All principals have been trained to lead and monitor implementation of research-based best strategies matched to individual school needs. Supplemental services are aligned to

---

**The single most limiting factor in community engagement efforts across the country has been the lack of school-system capacity to deliver needed change. School districts are fragile systems; lack of capacity in any single area can stop reform efforts cold.**

---

address individual student learning needs in all schools, not just the Transformed Schools. All of the Mobile schools participating in the state's Alabama Reading First initiative rank in the top twenty; one school, Calcedaever Elementary School, is the first in the state.

As the leading community-based organization supporting the reform effort, MAEF continues to champion quality instruction for all children across all schools. This is done through support of the district's efforts in:

- assigning achievement specialists such as reading, writing, or math specialists to the lowest-performing schools in the system;
- conducting individual classroom assessments in every classroom in every school to align student work to the standards to assure rigor and equity;
- organizing the district's five clusters with quality leadership teams who monitor achievement progress on a regular basis;
- implementing, in collaboration with higher education, a rigorous math

curriculum, which is being studied as a model for statewide math instruction; and

- developing a data warehouse that makes student data accessible to classroom teachers.

### ***Now What? The Challenges Ahead***

The plan is in place, and the goals and nineteen performance targets have become the focus of school-district policy and practice. But the challenges continue. The next stage of Mobile County's journey will be to sustain attention to the strategic plan and accountability measures in the policy churn of a new school board; two new members took their seats this past spring. One of the key directions the new school board has already set is the redesign of key

communities, as well. For example, each community has its own faith-based community as well as the local business community. Within the school-system community, there are subgroups of school administrators, the central office, the school board and the neighborhoods each school or school-board zone serves.

The media in Mobile County play a strong watchdog role in the reform effort, and a central focus of the work is building relationships between the media and the school district. MAEF and the school system work strategically with the *Mobile Register* as well as local radio and television stations as part of the ongoing engagement and reform efforts. Media have regular access to student- and school-performance data, as well as to school-system-leadership rationales for decisions based on that data.

Despite the attention paid to developing and sustaining relationships, none of this work has been done in the absence of conflict. Like any other urban school district, these reform efforts are occurring in a climate of budget cuts, severe teacher and principal shortages, and the high-stakes, high-penalty culture of federal and state accountability measures. In addition, there is often conflict between various communities' needs and desires.

But what's changing is how the Mobile County school district and citizens are learning to address conflict openly. One example of how building relationships has led to better understanding is the superintendent's relationship with a group of "ambassadors," ministers from Black churches in the community, with whom he meets regularly. When a situation arose in which the superintendent was accused of unfairly targeting Black schools, he used data to make the case for his action.

---

**Engagement plus a strategic reform effort looks to be the right prescription to move all children to progress. But sustaining and spreading the effort is essential. The school board knows that progress can't stop now.**

---

central office functions. By all estimations, the strategic plan is not just *evident* in these changes; the performance indicators are *driving* these changes.

Due in part to Mobile County's Southern culture, efforts here are heavily focused on relationships, which are as complex as they are broad-based. These include the partnerships among sixty different local communities in Mobile County. There are communities within

Through the use of plain language in their community engagement process and the use of data in decision making and communicating about the decisions, the ambassadors and the superintendent have been able to mediate the conflict and keep their common focus on achievement of children in all schools, including those in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

The greatest challenge ahead is scale. Early data that show that the Transformed Schools are making progress is encouraging the school board to look hard at implementing these strategies across the district. The plan can only have serious implications if lessons learned from these efforts are implemented not just in five schools, but also across the school system. Resource alignment that has occurred in these five schools needs to be done system-wide. Data on the dashboards, which show the public a school's progress on student achievement, must be drilled down to the classroom level to identify specific strategies to move student learning ahead.

Mobile County also lacks a sufficient data-warehouse system. Viable curriculum and instruction strategies need to be aligned to ensure that more students are achieving at higher levels.

As these ongoing needs are addressed, communicating with one voice to an internal school-district and external citizen-based community remains a key priority. The capacity of the Mobile County Public School System and of the community at large must be built so that all parties are engaged in fact-based decision making.

Engagement plus a strategic reform effort looks to be the right prescription to move all children to progress. But sustaining and spreading the effort is essential. The school board knows that

progress can't stop now. MAEF will continue to develop the civic infrastructure that supports the changes needed in the school-system infrastructure. Both are essential to ensure that success for all students continues to be the focus for the county schools.



# Making a Reform the Work of the District: Lessons from Kansas City, Kansas

Steve Gering

---

*A decade-long partnership involving a school district, a foundation, and a national reform support organization offers lessons in sustaining a reform over time despite changes in district leadership.*

**L**ike many urban districts across the country, the Kansas City, Kansas school district had tried a number of reforms over the years to improve student achievement. And, like many districts, we had seen these reforms come and go at a rapid pace and leave little lasting impact.

In 1996, though, district leaders looked hard at achievement data and realized they had to try something different. For years our community had convinced itself that many students were well served by the district. But the data revealed that, in fact, we were *not* doing well by our students. The graduation rate was less than 50 percent and student-achievement rates on state and national assessments were well below average. Something had to be done.

With the help of a local foundation, the Kauffman Foundation, and a national reform support organization, the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), we developed and implemented a comprehensive reform – and have stuck with it for the past nine years. We have managed to do so despite a significant turnover in the superintendency.

The results have been impressive. The graduation rate in nonselective high schools climbed to 78 percent, reading achievement is up at all grade levels, mathematics achievement is up in elementary and middle schools, more students are engaged in school, and there are better relationships between students and teachers and among staff.

Of course, we still have a long way to go. But we have learned quite a bit about how to keep a reform going and make it the work of the district.

## ***Lesson #1: Top leaders must create a clear mandate and sense of urgency.***

Our reform journey started because, for the first time, we were honest and open about the state of student achievement. Associate Superintendent Bonnie Lesley's 1996 presentation to the school board exposed the grim reality, and the board seized this leadership opportunity and responded with a call to action. Kansas City's road to districtwide reform began with taking a risk, exposing the brutal facts, and a clear mandate for change.

*Steve Gering is deputy superintendent for teaching and learning for Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools. Previously, as executive director of instruction, he was responsible for the implementation of First Things First in all Kansas City's schools.*

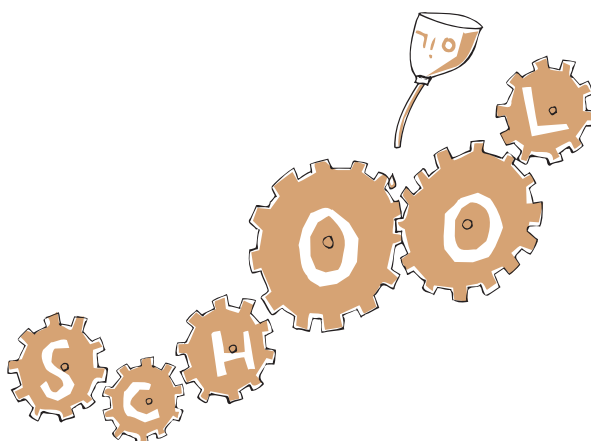


***Lesson #2: Districts can't do this work alone; they must have external pressure and support from highly competent partners.***

At the same time district leaders were confronting the data and the school board was mandating action, the Kauffman Foundation, a philanthropic organization based in Kansas City, Missouri, connected with Dr. James Connell, president of IRRE. Connell's background was in youth development, not education. However, he proposed that his theories supporting youth development also applied to schools and school systems.

The Kauffman Foundation commissioned Dr. Connell to write a "white paper" applying his ideas to schools. This white paper was the beginning of the First Things First reform and a starting point for a triangular relationship between Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS), the Kauffman Foundation, and IRRE. These three organizations became mutually accountable partners in a reform process. They created yearly "mutual accountability" plans to ensure a continuous supportive structure for the reform.

The relationship between the three organizations was unique in that it did not limit any of us to the traditional roles of funder, technical-assistance provider, and school district. This relationship was a partnership in which all three organizations held each other accountable for the work and engaged in rigorous conversations around the goals, strategies, and interim outcomes. These collaborative conversations resulted in flexing the reform to meet the changing needs of the district.



***Lesson #3: The reform must be singularly focused, systemwide, pre-K through 12.***

KCKPS's approach to reform was based on the premise that the entire school district needed improvement. To realize this, all schools, pre-K through 12, participated in the reform, along with central office. Staff members across the system, across grade levels, and across sites were able to discuss reform principles using a common language, resulting in a sense of collective responsibility for all the students.

The role of the district is an important aspect of approaching reform pre-K–12. Districts are by nature large, bureaucratic organizations that resist change. In many reform models, the district is ignored or seen as something to work around. Some reform models proclaim the district obsolete, allowing schools to be independent entities. In KCKPS, the role of the district was clear: to lead and support the First Things First reform framework in all schools. We had a single reform for the entire

school district, with a common set of principles, a common vocabulary, and common outcomes. This singular focus allowed and expected the district to become a player in the reform, as opposed to being on the sidelines or, even worse, a saboteur.

The reform work in KCKPS became the work of everyone in the system: the teachers, support staff, central office staff, and the board of education. In the early stages of the reform, the board agreed to a districtwide, two-hour early dismissal every Wednesday afternoon for staff development. Though this difficult decision was met with some resistance in the community, Wednesday afternoon early release became symbolic, both to district staff and community members, as an action that solidified the board's commitment to the First Things First reform.

School districts are not smart enough to focus on multiple reform initiatives. For a district to become fully engaged in reform, it must have a clear, singular focus that the system can rally

around and work to implement. The seven critical features of First Things First provided that focus for KCKPS.

***Lesson #4: Districts need a clear plan that addresses the urgency for change and focuses the system on the possibilities through reform.***

As KCKPS faced the reality of its student-achievement data, it also had to share the data with the community. If a district honestly shares student data that is unacceptable, the district needs to have a response to that data. As the superintendent shared the data with the community, his stump speech went something like this, “We have done good work with many of our students over the past many years, but for a large number of our students we have not been as successful. As you can see in our results, too many of our children are not graduating from high school and too many of our children are not achieving at high levels. We can do better, we have to do better, and we have a plan to do better. The plan is called First Things First.”

This overview was sufficient for community members, but school-district staff needed a clear plan that showed how everyone would become involved in the reform work and a timeline for implementation. The three partner organizations – KCKPS, IRRE, and the Kauffman Foundation – crafted this plan. The reform work began in KCKPS in 1997 with one-fourth of the district, the Wyandotte cluster of pre-K–12 schools, and by 2001 all schools in the district were to be engaged in the reform work. The plan also outlined how everyone in the system would become familiar with the reform and begin to take action steps to implement the reform.

---

School districts are not smart enough to focus on multiple reform initiatives. For a district to become fully engaged in reform, it must have a clear, singular focus that the system can rally around and work to implement.

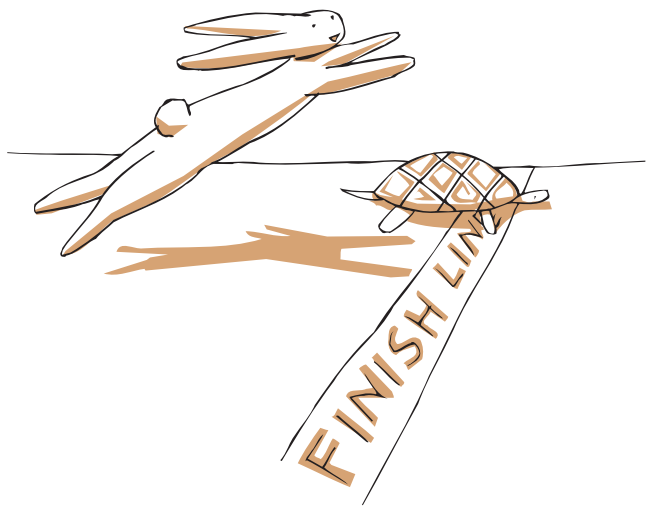
---

This plan and timeline created a sense of inevitability in the system. Even though the school district allowed staff to transfer out of the first clusters involved in the reform, as Jim Connell would often say of the plan and timeline, “You can run from the reform, but you can’t hide.” The reform would, over time, impact all the clusters and everyone in the school district. This inevitability was in sharp contrast to the history of reform in KCKPS and educational reform across the country.

***Lesson #5: Districts can’t wait for staff and the community to “buy in” before beginning systemic reform; it is leadership’s responsibility to lead the reform and facilitate buy-in through doing the reform work.***

One reason district staff did not give First Things First much of a chance for success was that it was a decision made by district leadership, not through a broad-based collaborative process. The district did not engage the community or the local NEA unit in making the decision to select First Things First, flying in the face of the customary reform “buy-in” process. It was and is today believed by many that a successful reform must have full buy-in from all stakeholders and an extensive collaborative selection process.

The Kansas City, Kansas experience contradicts this belief. KCKPS leadership selected the First Things First model without a large collaborative process. Following the selection of the reform, the leadership of the district set about the task of building buy-in through a collaborative implementation process. It would be inaccurate to say that everyone in the system bought into the reform. Many staff members retired earlier than they might have, had First



---

Districts wait to implement significant reforms, believing everyone must buy in before doing the work of the reform. This leads to reform burnout, and many times the end product of this elongated buy-in process is a watered-down reform model with minimal impact.

---

Things First not arrived on the scene, and some staff members left the system.

This could have been devastating for the district and for the reform, since this exodus of staff members occurred in the context of a teacher shortage in the Midwest. In fact, in 2000, the district started the year with over a hundred long-term substitutes, due to the departure of more teachers than normal and the shortage of available teaching candidates. This led to a chorus of naysayers saying, “We told you the reform would drive good people from the system.” However, even with these departures, the system was seeing improvements in attendance, graduation rates, and suspension rates.

Districts wait to implement significant reforms, believing everyone must buy in before doing the work of the reform. This leads to reform burnout before you begin implementation, and many times the end product of this elongated buy-in process is a watered-down reform model with minimal impact. In addition, stretching out the buy-in period allows resisters to rally and possibly sabotage reform efforts. Many well-intentioned reformers never get significant reforms off the ground,

due to an ill-fated belief that they must secure buy-in before they begin.

***Lesson #6: Districts must consistently seek out additional external supports and pressures to keep the reform going over the long term.***

Support and pressure from external groups were critical to KCKPS in its school reform journey. District leadership sought out ways to embed the reform in multiple external documents, grants, and outside service providers. For example, First Things First was written into the request for release from a twenty-year-old desegregation order. Once it was accepted by the court, First Things First was part of the plan to be released from the desegregation order.

First Things First was also a key part of a proposal for a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. The district received the NSF funding and the grant implementation was aligned with goals of the district reform framework. KCKPS’s application for a Small Learning Communities (SLCs) grant created additional outside pressure to effectively develop SLCs, an essential component of the reform.

Finally, the district's work with NEA, while not beginning until after the selection of First Things First, was essential to providing outside support and pressure. The local NEA unit was initially skeptical of First Things First. But the district reached out and the local NEA stepped up to the plate, partnered with the district, and engaged the support of national NEA, which began to recognize the work in KCKPS and highlighted the work nationally. This created a system of support and pressure that kept the district true to its reform plans and kept the local NEA engaged in the process. It was win-win for NEA and for the district.

***Lesson #7: The reform work must become the work of the system and not remain a reform program.***

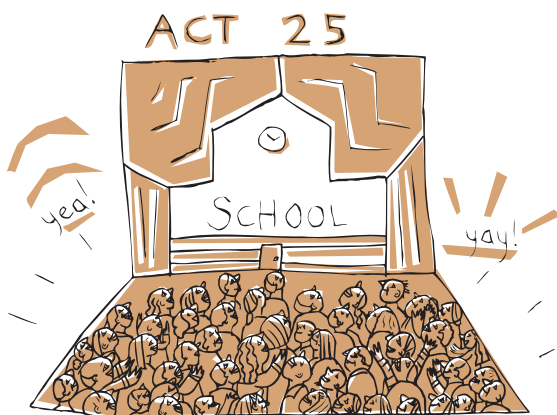
In 2001, Dr. Ray Daniels, superintendent of schools, declared that the school district was no longer in a reform but, rather, the reform was now the "work" of the district. This sent a clear message to the staff of the system that the district was not finished with the reform work simply because we had reached the end of our initial implementation timeline. The hard work of the system was just beginning; the various departments in the school system had to relearn their roles in a reforming system.

To support this deepening of the work, IRRE drafted a series of "leadership matrices" that explicitly stated the roles of the various central office personnel to support and lead the ongoing implementation of First Things First. These tools were used by the superintendent to clarify the roles of system leaders in personnel, business, technology, communications, federal programs, and curriculum, along with all other system leaders.

***Lesson #8: Developing leadership capacity around the reform work creates a system of leadership that supports and nurtures the reform work.***

KCKPS has invested significant resources in developing leadership within the system. Leadership development has focused on the reform work and not on generalized leadership activities. The district accepts responsibility for generating the next wave of leaders in the school system. Future principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches are developed in structured leadership activities that support development of leadership skills needed to be a formal leader in KCKPS. As a result, the system now hires the majority of principals, assistant principals, and central office leaders from internal candidates.

The leadership focus has also enabled us to maintain the reform during a succession of superintendents over the past eight years. After the initial commitment to reform in 1996, the then-superintendent announced



his retirement in 1997. The board of education named an interim superintendent and charged him with supporting the First Things First reform. After doing a national search for a leader who would not change the direction of the emerging reform work, the board selected an internal candidate, Dr. Daniels, who was an advocate of the First Things First reform. Most recently, upon the retirement of Dr. Daniels, the board once again selected an internal candidate, Jill Shackelford, to continue and build upon the reform work of the district.

This long-term continuity of leadership has been critical to the success and longevity of the work in KCKPS. Even though there have been four different individuals sitting in the superintendent's chair, the focus on the reform has not wavered. This is a tribute to the leadership role the board of education has played in this work.

***Lesson #9: Celebrate the successes, acknowledge the good work, and never be satisfied.***

It was not until the entire system had gone through the initial implementation of First Things First that the system began to see significant changes in academic achievement results. Early in the reform, the system saw positive changes in attendance, student and staff relationships, suspension rates, and graduation rates. These early results were highlighted and recognized by the district as evidence that the reforms were having an impact. The statements from the lips of the leadership were, "We are pleased with the positive results, but not satisfied." As the results have continued to improve over the years and student achievement has

risen, the refrain from the leadership has remained the same: "Pleased with the results, but not satisfied."

The work in KCKPS is far from finished. The district continues to work with IRRE and the Kauffman Foundation, as well as other outside consultants who provide support and pressure around the work. The basic tenets of the reform remain in place and the district continues an unwavering commitment to deepening the implementation of First Things First.

# Communities and School Boards: The Keys to Sustaining Reform

David Wynde

---

*A reinvigorated school board and community partners have set the Portland, Oregon, school district on a reform course.*

**I**n Portland Public Schools, we are committed to a school reform agenda to ensure that we offer the education that our students need to be successful in the complex and competitive world they face in the early twenty-first century. Our commitment is to every student, in every school, in every corner of our city.

One of the critical questions in any school reform agenda is how to sustain the work and the changes over time. We believe that there are at least three components that must be aligned to ensure the long-term success of the agenda: a school board to enact the policies, a superintendent to provide the leadership, and a community that demands and supports the work. It is often this final element, the relationship with the broader community, that is missing. In Portland, we have much work to do to build the community engagement that we think is necessary for long-term success for our students and our school district, but there are a number of ways in which the work to date has been supported by key community partners.

In this telling of Portland's story, I want to describe what Portland is doing and the role of the school board and other organizations in that effort.

## **Background**

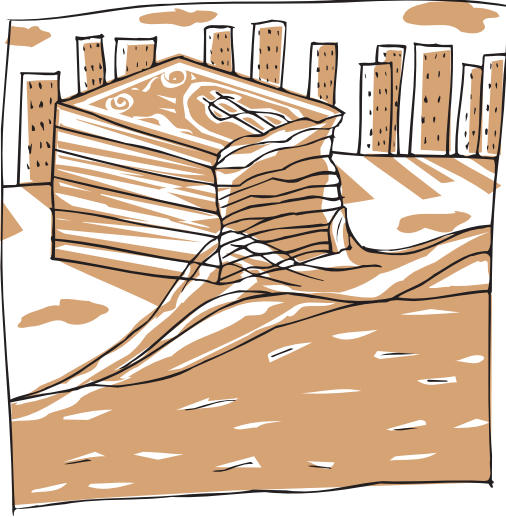
Portland Public Schools (PPS) is the largest district in the Pacific Northwest, with 47,656 students, approximately one hundred schools, and fifty special-needs sites. The district is quite diverse: more than 40 percent of students are members of ethnic minorities (including 16 percent African American, 13 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian American, and 2 percent Native American); 43 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; 14 percent require special education services; and eighty-five different languages are spoken at home, with 11 percent of students receiving English-language-learner services.

For many years, Portland was characterized by weak leadership, both in the superintendent's office and on the school board. After one superintendent was bought out of his contract in 2001, there was a failed search for a replacement. The school board was divided and fractious and perceived as unprofessional.

In 2003, though, the district leadership turned a corner. Four new members were elected to the school board, resulting in a much more effective board with a clear primary focus on student

*David Wynde has been co-chair of the board of education of Portland Public Schools since January 2005 and a board member since 2003.*





achievement. In 2004 we hired Vicki Phillips, former Pennsylvania secretary of education, as superintendent to build on the reform agenda we had adopted. In a short time, she has demonstrated strong leadership in improving the atmosphere in the school district dramatically and has changed the tone of the conversation about PPS in the broader community.

Community organizations played a significant role in producing and sustaining this turnaround in district leadership. Perhaps their most important contribution was in finding and supporting high-quality candidates for the school board. School boards play an essential governance role that is critical for the advancement of any school reform agenda. But being on the school board, particularly in a large urban district, can be a demanding and thankless proposition. Finding strong candidates for these positions (which are elected and unpaid in Portland) is not easy. The Portland chapter of Stand for Children, a child advocacy organization, endorsed candidates, mobilized grassroots support

to help them campaign, and raised funds for them. Board members from the Portland Schools Foundation (PSF), our local education fund, and some former school board members created a political action committee that provided tangible support and encouragement to candidates. These groups made it possible to elect candidates who were deeply committed to a school reform agenda but who did not necessarily have the public political experience or resources to run an election campaign independently.

The groups maintained their support after the election, as well. For example, PSF connected the newly elected school board with the Broad Institute for School Boards. The education and professional development this institute has provided has been critical to our developing a clear focus on our governance role.

### ***Major Challenges***

In addition to dealing with the leadership concerns, our work in PPS takes place against the backdrop of two long-term trends: persistent erosion in the funding level provided by the state for K–12 education and a decline in student enrollment. A third area of concern has been the effectiveness of central office.

### **Erosion of Funding**

Since passage of a property-tax limitation measure in 1991, the primary funding for K–12 education in Oregon comes from the state, which is highly dependent upon a statewide income tax for revenue. For Portland, this shift in the revenue source has resulted in more than a decade of reduced funding in real terms. The legislature has failed to make up the difference. In the most recently concluded legislative session, lawmakers agreed on a funding level for



public education that once again failed to keep pace with increased costs.

Several times over the past decade, the local community has stepped up to provide supplemental funding to mitigate the state-created deficit. Most recently, voters approved a parent-inspired, three-year, 1.25 percent county income tax to support eight county school districts, health and senior services, and public safety.

But the current situation is uncertain because of the expiration, last year, of local property tax and capital bond levies and, next year, the county income tax; the end of these three levies pose the possible loss in two years of just over 20 percent of PPS's \$400-million annual budget. This year's \$35-million deficit was met through budget cuts in teaching staff (\$15 million), central spending (\$10 million), and use of reserves (\$10 million). The loss of the local income tax (\$50 million for PPS) would be very serious. Portland's mayor has convened a working group of seventeen school districts from the tri-county metropolitan area, together with a number of our community partners already mentioned, with the charge to find a proposal to place before voters before the next school year.

### **Declining Enrollment**

A lower birth rate and higher housing prices have resulted in a 5,000-student (10 percent) reduction in enrollment over the past five years, with a further 10 percent reduction forecast by 2010. The role of the school board is to ask the right questions, make the tough decisions, and to ensure that policies and procedures are in place to address the situation.

Last fall, when enrollment data were reported to the school board, we asked a series of questions around the theme: "What do we, as a district, do

with this information?" Out of that discussion, a framework evolved for reviewing enrollment and other school data each year. In early 2005, the first round of that activity led to recommendations from the superintendent to the board that included closing one middle and four elementary schools and launching a comprehensive review of the structure of secondary education in one area of the city. After a series of public meetings and in spite of the understandable opposition of many families most directly affected, the school board made the decision to close the schools and move forward with the review process. In the past, these decisions were made on an ad hoc basis;

---

**In the past, these decisions were made on an ad hoc basis; now we have an operating framework to address these issues systematically and to make data-driven decisions in a way that also allows for public input and comment.**

---

now we have an operating framework to address these issues systematically and to make data-driven decisions in a way that also allows for public input and comment.

### **Concerns about Central Office**

The perception of weak leadership described earlier included a lack of faith in central office overall. Budget cuts eliminated 60 percent of central office staff over the last ten years, creating a capacity deficit.

In 2004 the school board joined with PSF to engage the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in a review process that produced five key recommendations:

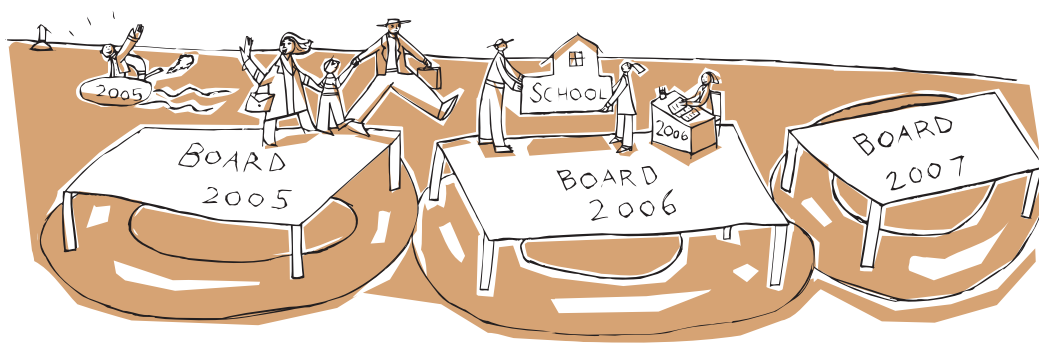
- develop and communicate a service orientation;
- build centralized guidance and support for instruction;
- make collecting, organizing, analyzing, and acting on data a priority;
- provide support for schools and students based upon their needs and assets;
- address unhealthy relationships and ineffective structures across central office and with schools.

This report (AISR 2005) has been the basis for a number of initiatives and will continue to provide the framework for action in the years to come. For example, the superintendent has made staffing changes to build a leadership team that can implement the necessary changes at central office and also lead the overall instructional-improvement effort in PPS. In addition, the school district – with assistance from PSF and leaders of the Portland business community – is retaining outside technical assistance to support the redesign of central office functions.

## ***Portland's School Reform Agenda***

It is the role of the school board to define and articulate the school reform agenda for the district. In Portland we have focused on three elements: first and foremost, improving student achievement, which we summarize as raising expectations for all students and eliminating the achievement gap that has plagued so many poor and minority children; second, fiscal accountability and increasing organizational effectiveness; third, building and improving relationships with staff and our broader community.

As a board, we have to ensure that our programs and practices align with this agenda. One essential element of that alignment is district leadership. When we recruited a superintendent, we looked for someone whose vision matched our already-defined theory of action, rather than someone who would provide his or her own answers to our questions – an important distinction when it comes to sustaining change over time. We wanted to be sure that the underlying direction and strands of the work would be independent of the specific leader in place at the time. We are proud to have Vicki



Phillips as our superintendent; she is providing great leadership on all three dimensions of the agenda.

We also aligned our work as a board behind this overall agenda. Our committee structure reflects these priorities. We have formed standing committees for Student Achievement; Finance, Audit & Operations; and Community & Staff Relations. We also make sure that our board meetings reflect these priorities, with particular attention to student achievement. It's all too easy for board meetings to become dominated by the business agenda that requires board decisions. We set out to ensure that we heard from instructional leadership, including principals and teachers, about the work taking place in schools, so that we could evaluate the impact of decisions that we make.

Our leading community partner, PSF, provides support for this alignment in several ways. The Foundation rewards outstanding educators and schools with its Excellence in Education Awards, which honor individuals and faculties that have demonstrated significant progress in eliminating the achievement gap. The Foundation also sponsors the Principal for a Day program, which connects business and community leaders with a school principal they shadow for the day. It's amazing how much someone's perspective on the current reality of public education can be transformed by a day with a principal in a school.

### **Community Engagement**

As these examples indicate, our community partners and the community at large have been extremely important in helping PPS develop and sustain a reform agenda. Portland is a community that consistently supports public schools. More than 85 percent of Portland parents send their children to the local

---

**When we recruited a superintendent, we looked for someone whose vision matched our already-defined theory of action, rather than someone who would provide his or her own answers to our questions.**

---

public schools. Voters have passed five different local funding measures to mitigate the impact of inadequate state funding.

PSF has been a key partner in mobilizing and engaging internal and external stakeholders around results-oriented reforms. PSF played a critical role in all five of the local funding measures passed in the last decade. The Foundation also raises money locally to fund innovative projects in PPS, with a focus on student achievement in schools with a concentration of low-income and minority students. The Foundation also designed and executed a process that developed a five-year strategic plan for PPS in 1999–2000. More than 1,200 community members were involved.

Stand for Children has become a strong grassroots voice – both locally and at the state level – on funding and program issues, as well as in school board elections and other ballot measures. Community and Parents of Public Schools – the local chapter of the national organization Parents for Public Schools – has supported the reform agenda in many ways, including the training of site councils (local school-governance committees) at schools

throughout the district, parent leadership conferences, and a speakers bureau to help communicate the latest developments on a range of district issues to schools and to the broader community.

As critical as these community organizations are, they cannot do the job independently of the district. For sustainable change to result, community efforts must support work taking place within the school district and align with the priorities set by the school board and the superintendent.

The importance of district-community partnerships was evident after the completion of the PSF-inspired strategic-planning process. The district leadership never took ownership of the plan or the process, there was no consensus about the school reform agenda, and the district lacked the capacity necessary to implement a strategic plan, fueling the crisis in confidence in PPS leadership. When the Foundation and the school district won a planning grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York to support high school redesign, even though the initial work with school-

level staff, parents, and students was effective, implementation was not funded because of concerns over district leadership capacity and commitment. Now that the district leadership is strong and stable and there is a greater level of consensus on the school reform agenda and priorities for action, the district and community partners, working together, can become more effective.

### **Next Steps in the Agenda**

Although the reform effort is relatively young, it has already shown results. In 2004–2005, the percentage of students meeting the state benchmark in both mathematics and literacy increased at all four of the state assessment levels (third, fifth, eighth, and tenth grades). Student test scores remain high at elementary levels.

At secondary levels, however, further work and reform are needed. A persistent achievement gap persists between students of color and from low-income families with respect to their peers. Individual schools have shown dramatic successes; the challenge is to take that success and expand it to every school and every child.

Superintendent Phillips and the school board are continuing the drive to ensure that all students are successful. Steps include:

- bringing greater rigor and relevance to the high school curriculum: raising graduation requirements, continuing to create smaller secondary schools, and expanding the district's portfolio of secondary options, including the possible use of a 7–12 model;
- changes in middle schools, recognizing the need for stronger transition both from the elementary grades and into high schools;
- a strategic plan built with community support to guide the school district through 2010;

---

**Public school systems are a reflection of the local social and political context. In Portland we have a school reform agenda and public school system that reflect the hopes and values of our city.**

---

- more strategically aligned and embedded professional development assisting teachers to reach all students more effectively; and
- a strategic investment in kindergarten – although state funding only covers half a day for this age group, in 2005–2006 the number of full-day kindergarten classes increased from just over 60 percent to 75 percent.

Another key area of work in the next three years is to deepen community engagement with, and in support of, the work of the school district to ensure the long-term success of this reform agenda. One goal is to ensure that there is an array of supports available for children and families so that children come to school ready to learn. Superintendent Phillips has designated a member of her leadership team to drive this effort within the district, which will also involve a number of public and private agencies that provide services for children and families.

Another goal is to develop a greater connection between secondary schools, higher education, and employers. The school board passed new graduation requirements last year that not only raised the number of credits required to be in line with the state university system’s entry standards, but that also included exploration of career pathways. Work is under way with leaders of the local business community, higher-education institutions, and the governor’s office to make this a reality.

A final goal is to maintain and deepen the civic will to support public education in the city through the efforts of a coalition of our community partners.

## Conclusion

Public school systems are a reflection of the local social and political context. In Portland we have a school reform agenda and public school system that



reflect the hopes and values of our city. The school board is committed to carrying out this agenda to ensure that every child, in every school, in every neighborhood gets the necessary education to be successful in the early twenty-first century.

We have recruited a superintendent to lead the implementation of this agenda, and we have wonderful staff dedicated to ensuring that this is successful. The work we have done so far has been supported by an array of community partners. Our ability to sustain and complete this effort will depend in no small measure on the continued support and engagement of these partners and the broader community.

---

### Reference

Annenberg Institute for School Reform. 2005. *Portland Public Schools: Findings and Recommendations from the Central Office Review for Results and Equity*. Providence, RI: AISR.

# Continuous Improvement: Sustaining Education Reform Long Enough to Make a Difference

Thomas W. Payzant

---

*Thanks to political stability and a design for continuous engagement and improvement for teachers and school leaders, Boston Public Schools has sustained a reform effort for ten years.*

**F**or the past decade, reform work in Boston Public Schools (BPS) has focused on all schools in the district, with the goal of improving teaching and learning for every student in each classroom, and on creating a new structure and set of practices districtwide so that the reform work is sustainable over a long period of time. While a great deal of education research over the past two decades has focused on issues of educational performance and improvement in individual schools, there is comparatively little inquiry into the challenges of improving large urban districts as a whole.

It may seem a reasonable assumption that if every school improves individually, then the district as a whole will of course be better. Many districts, including Boston, have outstanding examples of urban schools that have “turned around” in recent years. However, the challenges of moving a whole district are more than hoping that the whole will one day equal the sum of all its parts. By focusing on individual schools alone, large districts run the risk of creating a system of winners and losers where reforms are not taken to scale, where managing and monitoring a change process becomes hit-or-miss,

and where issues of equity can subsume the reform momentum.

The Boston district’s challenge has been to create and implement a long-range plan that will result in improvement in every school that affects every teacher and student, so that all students graduate with a high school diploma, ready for postsecondary education. Over the past decade, the district has aggressively worked to create a structure and practices in each school that will enable continuous improvement to be sustainable, regardless of changes in leadership or the political context of the district.

## ***The Importance of Political Stability***

Boston’s recent political circumstances relative to BPS have been uniquely favorable for educational reform. For the past ten years, unlike decades past in Boston and unlike many municipalities across the nation, Boston’s educational goals have not changed. The focus on carrying out standards-based reform, accelerating improved student achievement, and closing the achievement gap has been consistent from one year to the next. The initiatives to support these goals have emerged over time,

*Thomas W. Payzant is superintendent of Boston Public Schools.*



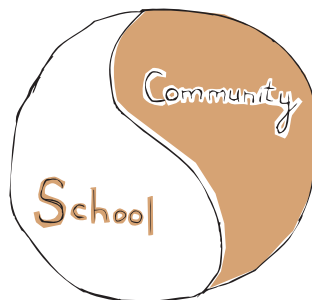
primarily in response to data and the plans of the school committee, superintendent, and school-based personnel, rather than to political pressures or pressures from special-interest groups.

### **The Price of Constant Reinvention**

Most educators would readily agree that change in schools is a multiyear process. But the reality is that most school districts are under enormous pressure to reinvent themselves every year, often as part of a political reaction to deal with funding realities, disaffected parents, or demands of state and local bureaucracies.

This annual reinvention has a high price. Principals and teachers, who must focus on improving teaching and learning for all students, often see little evidence of district follow-through from one year to the next, even though this follow-through is a prerequisite for their understanding the district's priorities. All too often, school boards and superintendents create a new set of goals each year before principals and teachers have a clear understanding of last year's goals and the necessary support for implementing them. As a result, there is often a disconnect between the stated goals and resource-allocation decisions.

The constant churn created by the rapid turnover of urban superintendents and school board members makes it difficult to ensure that effective systemic reforms begun by one board and superintendent are continued by others. New superintendents and new school boards often want to make their marks by initiating changes rather than sustain the strategies created by their predecessors, even when evidence suggests that existing programs are the ones that need to be sustained to meet long-term goals such as closing the achievement gap or getting all students to proficiency. There are no quick fixes or short reforms



---

**For the past ten years, unlike decades past in Boston and unlike many municipalities across the nation, Boston's educational goals have not changed.**

---

that guarantee continuous improvement in student achievement.

### **A New Political Climate in Boston**

Standards-based reform in BPS has benefited from a political climate that has made an enormous difference in the district's ability to sustain reform over time. In the early 1990s, following decades of political friction among school board members and between the school board and City Hall, a city referendum changed the district governance from an elected school board to one appointed by the mayor.

Shortly thereafter, a new mayor, Thomas Menino, took office and has served as mayor ever since. Early in his tenure, Mayor Menino led the effort to gain voter approval to continue the governance structure when the sunset clause established by the first referendum approached. This stability has eliminated one of the major barriers

that many urban districts continue to face: the intrusion of changing political agendas upon the implementation of long-term educational strategies and the inadequacy of resources that are necessary to bring about sustained school improvements.

#### **“Scaling Up” in a Stable Environment**

Boston’s political stability has meant that the school district could develop and sustain a coherent long-term plan for standards-based reform. Without long-term political support, central features of this plan – the goal of significant improvement in every school and taking effective programs and practices to scale – could not, in all likelihood, have been attempted.

“Scaling up” is very difficult when the political landscape is changing. With pressure to create new initiatives, the natural tendency is to work for small victories and isolated stories of success, while purposeful systemic improvement is sacrificed. Boston mayor Thomas Menino is completing

his third four-year term in 2005 and is running for a fourth term, with the continuous improvement of BPS a top priority. Elizabeth Reilinger has served on the appointed school committee for nearly twelve years and as chair for nearly eight years, and I have served as superintendent since October 1995. With a stable political climate, Boston has been able to address the significant challenge of how to improve every school in the district so that all students graduate with a high school diploma ready for postsecondary education.

#### ***Strategy for Continuous Improvement: Engaging Everyone in the Process***

Even with the advantages of a stable political climate, Boston in the mid-1990s needed a reform approach that would keep the focus on continuous improvement. Boston’s plan would have to engage people at every level of the educational process to maintain the energy for change, particularly during periods of declining resources for schools.

The plan we adopted in 1996, called Focus on Children, was developed through broad-based community discussions about the needs of Boston students and families. This plan, and a second one five years later called Focus on Children II, extended and deepened the focus on instruction and served as the blueprint for improvement throughout the system, from central offices to every classroom in every school.

Focus on Children brought standards-based educational reform to Boston. Standards-based reform is a radical idea: it is based on the premise that *all* students – not just those in the upper echelons of performance or in selective courses or schools – are expected to meet high standards.

---

“Scaling up” is very difficult when the political landscape is changing. With pressure to create new initiatives, the natural tendency is to work for small victories and isolated stories of success.

---



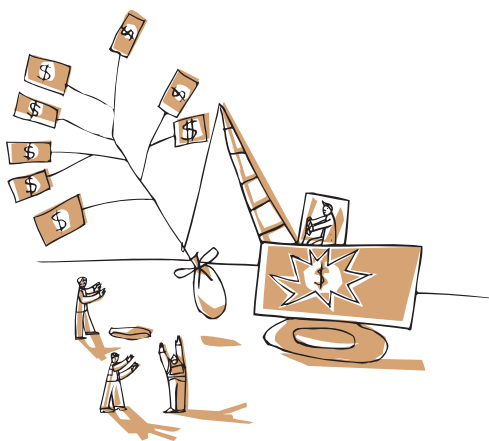
Earlier than many other districts that have adopted this approach, Boston developed standards, curriculum, and assessments as the core of the reform. But we recognized that if schools were really going to change throughout the district, Boston had to do more. The district had to develop a way for each school to buy into and actively engage in the process of reform. To this end, Focus On Children outlined a strategy called Whole School Improvement, which has been central to the district's reform work ever since.

While Whole School Improvement expects each school to develop a Whole School Improvement Plan and to implement it with support and evaluative feedback by administrators and school site councils, the essence of the plan is that the work of reform becomes a continuous process of improvement. Initially, the district set performance targets for schools each year and school-performance data were used for each school to evaluate its work, to take corrective action, and to raise the bar for improving outcomes the following year. Now, the targets are set by the state as part of the implementation of No Child Left Behind.

The work of continuous improvement takes place in schools, but the key to maintaining the improvement lies with engagement. Indeed, the premise of Whole School Improvement is that significant changes take place in schools only when the entire school – students, staff, family, partners – is engaged in the change process. Whole School Improvement is a collaborative process, requiring all stakeholders to look at a school's many challenges and opportunities – not in isolation, but in their entirety. The principal appoints and convenes an Instructional Leadership Team of teacher-leaders in the school to develop

the plan and engage the staff in its implementation. The expectation is that if schools successfully implement their Whole School Improvement Plans each year, the process of improving instruction school by school and teacher by teacher will become a part of the ongoing process of each school's development.

Evidence that the strategy has taken hold throughout the district is easy to find. Posters outlining the Six Essentials of Whole School Reform in simple, non-jargon language can now be seen hanging in school offices, hallways, classrooms, central offices, and



even in the corporate headquarters of companies involved in school-business partnerships. Included on the poster are expectations for schools, examples of what should be seen and heard in classrooms and around the school, and expectations for central office.

### ***Professional Development and Partnerships: Key Levers for Change***

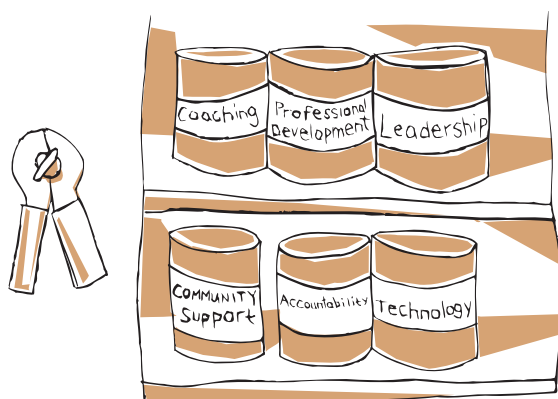
In addition to its plan designed to sustain reform over time, Boston chose and implemented strategies likely to

promote sustainability. One of the key elements of our plan was professional development. Like that of most districts, Boston’s professional development activity a decade ago was scattered across an array of district-managed programs without much connectivity and depended upon the individual initiatives of teachers and administrators. If improving instruction is at the heart of educational reform, then coherent, systematic professional development, focused on teachers as part of a school, is essential.

Because planning and decision making for these initiatives was based in the schools and engaged the “whole school” in the planning and buy-in process, there is greater likelihood that the initiatives will be sustained over time, even through leadership changes at the school or district level.

Working with external organizations has also been an essential aspect of Boston’s reform strategy. The design for professional development services has been enhanced by the deep and sustained participation of the Boston Plan for Excellence. Working actively with partner organizations creates opportunities for schools to take more risks, access new ways to successfully implement key initiatives, and draw upon resources and expertise in new ways.

As an example, the Boston Plan has worked with BPS to create the Boston Teacher Residency (BTR), a twelve-month program to prepare teachers to work in Boston’s schools. BTR’s priority is to prepare aspiring teachers to work in urban schools. BTR will increase its capacity annually with the goal of having 120 teacher residents – about one-third of the number the district hires each year – in the program by 2008–2009. Having a strong cadre of teachers trained and prepared for work specifically in Boston will contribute



significantly to sustainability of the district's reform work for years to come.

### ***Leadership Development: Another Key Lever for Change***

Boston has developed leadership initiatives to nurture and prepare school leaders to sustain reform over time. We created the School Leadership Institute to provide support for current principals and to train and prepare new ones to meet the human resources demands of the future. We also created the Boston Principal Fellows Program to widen the pipeline of qualified available principal candidates. Based on the Six Essentials, this program inverts the typical higher-education emphasis of educational theory over practice. In the Fellowship Program, theory is taught in the context of authentic work done in the classroom. The School Leadership Institute also includes a program to support midlevel school administrators.

Developing new leaders within the district who understand the challenges of standards-based reform and have the tools to engage with others to improve practice is probably the single most important tool for sustaining reform. Recent research supports this:

Ownership over the reform must shift so that it is no longer an “external” reform, controlled by a reformer, but rather becomes an “internal” reform with authority for the reform held by districts, schools, and teachers who have the capacity to sustain, spread, and deepen reform principles themselves. (Coburn 2003)

### ***High School Renewal***

Over the past four years, Boston has been paying particular attention to its high schools. Improving high schools, in Boston and throughout the nation, involves four challenges: raising student achievement to proficiency levels; closing the achievement gap; reducing

---

Developing new leaders within the district who understand the challenges of standards-based reform and have the tools to engage with others to improve practice is probably the single most important tool for sustaining reform.

---

the dropout rate so that higher test scores are not seen as a result of eliminating low performers; and raising the rate of students continuing their education in college.

### ***Smaller Is Better***

Boston is now changing its comprehensive high schools into small schools or small learning communities to help meet all of these challenges. In high schools organized into smaller units, teachers and administrators work more closely together and more cooperatively to meet the needs of every student. Students, especially low performers, are less likely to disappear into anonymity. As smaller schools define themselves around unifying themes and curricula, the connections to colleges and universities grow even stronger and the higher-education expectations that students will be able to meet become motivators for higher levels of student achievement.

### ***Seeing the Results***

We have evidence that these high school reform strategies are paying off. In 2001, the first year Boston tenth-grade students took the state MCAS tests in English Language Arts and Math as a graduation requirement, only

---

Adequate Yearly Progress results are going to exert pressures on schools that will have great potential to create even greater distractions for schools. The need for sustainability is going to be more urgent than ever.

---

40 percent achieved a passing score. Boston instituted a support program for students who needed help during their junior and senior years. After several retest opportunities in 2002 and 2003, 82 percent – more than double – passed MCAS and earned diplomas.

Another indication that Boston is moving in the right direction is that, according to an annual study conducted by Northeastern University (CLMS 2004), BPS's college-going rates have climbed steadily over the past several years. For the class of 2003 – the most recently measured group – Boston is a full five points higher than the national average: 74 percent for Boston, compared with 69 percent for the nation, which includes all suburban as well as urban schools.

### ***Preparing for a Transition***

This school year will be my last as superintendent of Boston Public Schools. During this final year, BPS will continue to deepen its work of closing the achievement gap and improving MCAS results with the goal of proficiency for all students. A new state requirement in science will take effect within the next several years, so we have begun to lay the foundation for improving science education at every level of the system. We are hoping to win renewals of several national foundation grants to sustain

our work, particularly in professional development and high school renewal.

No superintendent in his or her last year can be certain that initiatives or priorities will continue into the next administration. But the work we have done in Boston over the past decade has been consistently aimed at tackling the challenges of closing the achievement gap and meeting high standards for all by creating practices and structures in each school such as using data to make educational decisions, pursuing a whole-school approach to professional development, and working on improving relationships among staff, students, and parents. This work should be self-sustaining, especially since the city will have consistent political leadership for the immediate future with a commitment to continuing the work of the past decade.

### ***Sustaining the Momentum: Proficiency for All Children***

In the coming decade, the same challenge now faces every urban school district across the nation: achieving *proficiency* for all students. This will prove to be an enormous undertaking – one that will require schools and school districts to develop new and more effective ways to close the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups in order to reach the requirements of

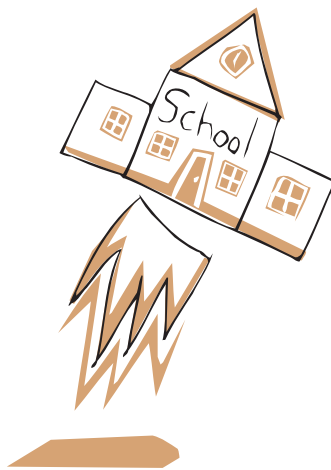
Adequate Yearly Progress as set forth in the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The requirements of the law are already increasingly controversial, as schools everywhere – in cities and suburbs – are confronting the likelihood of being labeled “underperforming.” Despite the controversies, there can be little argument that the goal is right and that closing the achievement gap is a moral responsibility that everyone in public education must embrace as a necessity.

In Boston, we have learned that a critical variable in closing the achievement gap is the quality of the relationships developed among adults in the system, students, and their families. We have seen evidence that even though poverty and parent education levels may correlate with low achievement, strong teachers providing excellent instruction can have a positive cumulative impact, so that children who perform poorly at young ages may still reach high levels of proficiency in high school. We have seen evidence that strong teaching and learning embraces the value of fostering warm and encouraging relationships with students and their families.

Meeting the goal of proficiency for all is a task that is going to require a lot of time, even as everyone recognizes the great urgency of the challenge. It is going to mean that the responsibility for meeting Adequate Yearly Progress and accountability for student performance can no longer be the work of district and school leaders alone, but must be owned more fully than ever before by everyone in a district and in each of its schools. It means that the focus on instruction, particularly on the use of classroom data to inform teaching strategies and decision making, must be sustained, without a lot of distractions. It means that teachers and teacher unions are going to have to be held

accountable for student performance in the same way that administrators have been. Adequate Yearly Progress results are going to exert pressures on schools that will have great potential to create even greater distractions for schools. The need for sustainability – of standards-based reform momentum, of the focus on instruction, of the use of data in deeper and more informative ways – is going to be more urgent than ever.

The unprecedented goal of proficiency for all is also going to mean that the debate will intensify about what public schools should and can do. Should public schools be expected to provide all the services and supports that children, youth, and families should have in America to enable them to access opportunity, be gainfully employed, and accept the responsibilities of citizenship and protecting the common good? Or will the demands of meeting proficiency and closing the achievement gap mean that public schools will have to concentrate all their human, financial, and other



resources on improving instruction, while external services and organizations step up more than ever before to support families of school-aged children?

Whatever the answers are to these questions, it seems clear from the work of the past decade in Boston that schools benefit considerably both from having a stable, consistent political environment and continuity of leadership from those who govern and leave school districts and schools. Given this stability, school districts and schools can, over time, develop the capacity to plan effectively, use data for instruction, organize themselves for effective schoolwide professional development, and produce genuine gains in student achievement. The key to sustaining education reform lies in the extent to which schools have internalized the goals of the district and engaged the whole school in focusing on the essentials of improving teaching and learning for all students.

---

*References*

Center for Labor Market Studies. 2004. *Follow-Up Study of Boston Public School Graduates*. Boston: Northeastern University.

Coburn, C. 2003. "Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 6:3–12.



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Brown University  
Box 1985  
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

Non Profit Org.  
US Postage  
PAID  
Providence, RI  
Permit #202