

The District Transition Review

Planning for Successful Change



Prepared by Systems Redesign, *Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

Your superintendent has announced his retirement.

Your school board has four new members.

Your district is implementing a new K–6 math curriculum.

You need a way to plan for an effective and successful transition. You need a District Transition Review.

Change is a constant in urban school districts: changes in mandates, changes in curriculum, changes in leadership. Educators struggle with what has been dubbed “policy churn.”

But change doesn’t always have to be detrimental.

The Annenberg Institute has developed and piloted a tool, a District Transition Review, which can help districts plan for successful changes in leadership by recognizing their accomplishments, acknowledging their weaknesses, and building on their strengths.

This guide (and the supplementary materials in the appendix) will help you understand what a District Transition Review is, what it can do for your district, and how to conduct one.

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Sample of a final transition review report

[available at www.annenberginstitute.org/resources/BostonCase.html]

What is a District Transition Review?

A District Transition Review is a brief, focused data-collection effort that helps districts plan thoughtfully for a change in administration. By reviewing the district's accomplishments and challenges, a District Transition Review can serve as a guidebook to the system, not unlike the kind of guide a tourist might read before visiting a foreign country.

The review provides an overview of key events in the system's history, a discussion of governance, translations of common terminology, and "maps" that can help newcomers, such as an incoming superintendent, traverse the often intricate labyrinths of district operations. It can also help sitting district leaders and key partners understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular policies and what changes need to be made as they move forward.

A District Transition Review can:

- Summarize important aspects of reform design, implementation, and outcomes
- Present the perceptions of multiple stakeholders about district progress and challenges
- Identify strategies for next steps for the board, the community, the new administration and other stakeholders to consider
- Focus school boards on their Key Work
(<http://www.nsba.org/site/page.asp?TRACKID=&CID=121&DID=8799>)

What problems does the District Transition Review address?

In many urban school districts, leadership turnover is common, with new superintendents coming in every two or three years and wiping the slate clean of the previous administration's reform efforts. Frederick M. Hess, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, has called this continual shift in direction "policy churn." He writes: districts "recycle initiatives, constantly modify previous initiatives, and adopt innovative reform A to replace practice B even as another district is adopting B as an innovative reform to replace practice A."

The consequences of this practice are serious. For one thing, the constant fresh starts wipe out the institutional memory within districts. As a result, a new superintendent comes in without any knowledge of what previously existed in the district. As one new superintendent said at a recent national meeting, the only thing he received when he started his job was a phone list.

In addition, the frequent stops and starts and changes in direction breed cynicism within districts. Teachers may be reluctant to try a new approach, knowing that a new leader might arrive two years from now and call for yet another way of doing business. Parents and community leaders may look warily at promises that the new approach will produce results, since the last approach, equally heralded, did not seem to yield dramatic gains.

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of the continual change in direction is the cost to district improvement. The evidence shows that reforms take several years to gain traction

and produce results, yet the continual policy churn never allows them to take root. Only by holding on to what's working while addressing what isn't can a new leader enable a district reform to thrive.

A District Transition Review creates a record of what the district has been doing, how well it has been doing it, and how various stakeholders view the district's programs and direction, thus providing continuity for decision making in a new administration.

When is a District Transition Review needed?

A District Transition Review is ideally done prior to any major change in district leadership or policy, such as the hiring of a new superintendent, turnover in board membership, or the adoption of a new assessment or accountability policy. Whether the district is anticipating a transition or is in the middle of one, it's a good time to think about whether you're on track and to bring the community and others into a conversation around strategic direction. The transition review can be used, for example, to identify the characteristics and skills needed in a new superintendent or to engage community partners in owning and supporting a new reform effort.

What is studied in a District Transition Review?

The scope of a transition review is delineated by two elements: a clearly defined timeframe to be examined and a specific focus for the research.

The timeframe might look back over the tenure of an outgoing superintendent or begin with the implementation of a major reform initiative. In either case, it should continue through to the most recent developments in the history of the system.

The focus of the research must be clearly defined from the outset and informed by an initial review of district documents describing key reform efforts. A transition review might focus on efforts to build instructional capacity or might emphasize systemwide efforts around accountability or curriculum. While the document review and interviews with informants will undoubtedly raise other issues, the review focus must continue to drive the research and the analysis of the data.

Who can commission a District Transition Review?

Any individual or group who has a vested interest in the future of the school district or the community could launch a District Transition Review. This could be a school board, a superintendent, a mayor, a local education fund, or a civic or community group active in education.

What personnel are needed to conduct a District Transition Review?

A District Transition Review requires leaders with both research and education backgrounds, including some individuals who work in or closely with the district and others who are not familiar with the day-to-day operations of the district. We suggest the following groups of people:

An External Review Team of three to four leaders from outside the school system under study, who bring deep expertise in complex urban school system reform. The External Review Team leads the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the final document. Using external reviewers maximizes credibility and gives district employees, community members, and other stakeholders interviewed in the process the opportunity to be candid. The local leaders who commission the District Transition Review might seek the input of others in their network (local education funds in other cities, national or state school board associations, etc.) to find such individuals.

A Research Staff of four to six people from outside the school system to review and summarize district documents, research key background information, record notes in interviews and focus groups, analyze data, and respond to drafts of the case. One of the research team members serves as the **Review Manager**. In addition to data documentation and analysis duties, the Review Manager coordinates and organizes the work of the External Review Team and the research staff. Local universities, especially those with graduate programs in education, may be a source for staffing the research team. Additionally, locally connected business leaders or other individuals involved in the district may be able to draw research staff from their organizations.

A District Liaison Team made up of six to eight district employees and partners who advise on the design of the transition review and review draft versions of the report. This small panel of key system leaders and partners also serves as an advisory group to the researchers from outside the system, who must draw on the expertise of district employees, stakeholders, and community members. The liaison team helps the external team gather important documents, identify a focus and a set of informants, and they review and comment on draft versions of the report. The liaison team should include one or two deputy superintendents who have worked in the district long enough to understand internal politics and to remember various phases of reform; representatives of key community groups and district partners; and at least one principal and one teacher representative. The leaders who commission the transition review will probably know the system well enough to identify key people to serve on this team. **A District Liaison Team Chair** leads the liaison team and helps to gather documents, schedule interviews and focus groups, and advise on the progress of the review.

How do you carry out a District Transition Review?

There are five major steps in a District Transition Review:

1. Establishment of guidelines and selection of the review personnel
2. Review of existing information on the district's reform implementation and reform outcomes
3. Research design and data collection
4. Analysis and writing
5. Public release of review findings

[Note: Asterisks indicate that supplementary materials are provided to support an activity.]

Step 1. Establishment of guidelines and selection of review personnel

The individuals or groups commissioning the transition review establish the overall purpose for the review and a timeline* for its completion.

The commissioning group also identifies and invites an External Review Team and, in consultation with the team, selects the Research Staff and the District Liaison Team.*

**Supplementary Materials*

Sample Timeline [to come]

Step 2. Review of Existing Information

It is important to have a strong understanding of both reform implementation and reform outcomes within the district. The External Review Team, along with the District Liaison Team, collaborate to compile a “briefing book” with key documents that can inform the review. These documents can include key district policies, research reports done by external organizations, and additional information gathered by the External Review Team (contextual information about the district, a reform timeline, budget summary, etc.).

All the documents are reviewed and summarized systematically by the Research Staff and loaded into a qualitative data analysis program (such as NVivo or AtlasTI). This database will be used to develop lists of informants and interview and focus-group questions.

Step 3. Research Design and Data Collection

Focus areas for the review* are developed through consultation among the District Liaison Team, the External Review Team, and the Review Manager. Once the focus areas have been agreed upon, the Review Manager works with the District Liaison Team to develop lists of additional relevant documents to review and informants to interview.

Individual and focus-group interviews* are carried out by the External Review Team, with support from the Research Staff. Informants should be granted confidentiality and should not be identified in the resulting report. Typically, informants are asked to reflect on the district's accomplishments and challenges during the period under study (e.g., the tenure of the exiting superintendent or after the implementation of a major policy change), as well as

on the key issues to be addressed in the future (e.g., under a new superintendent or under a modified policy). Additionally, individuals with knowledge in particular areas (special education, literacy, family/community partnerships, etc.) can be asked questions specific to their expertise. All notes from interviews and focus groups are then categorized by question or topic and loaded into the qualitative data program for further analysis.

**Supplementary Materials*

Developing a Focus Area [to come]

Sample Interview Structure

Step 4. Analysis and Writing

Following each day of data collection, the External Review Team debrief their thoughts and questions.* These debriefs serve as an initial guide to analysis. Research Staff read and analyze* notes from each of the focus areas to generate an early set of findings to be reviewed by the External Review Team. These findings can be altered or modified based on the External Review Team's comments and questions. A draft is also shared with the District Liaison Team (and the outgoing superintendent, if appropriate) for review and comment.

**Supplementary Materials*

Sample Debrief Questions

Analytical Guide

Step 5. Public Release of Findings

Once the District Transition Review has been finalized,* it does not sit on a shelf. Rather, it is shared with key groups throughout the city, particularly the school board, the superintendent selection committee, and community groups. Ideally, the External Review Team plays a part in facilitating discussions with such groups to help them think through their role in the next phase of reform. Additionally, local media outlets are apprised of the District Transition Review and are likely to use it as source material for daily stories and editorials. Local leaders who commissioned the review may want to use the its release as an opportunity to meet with newspaper editorial boards to discuss the future of the district, to hold community meetings to discuss the findings, or to revisit the mission and vision of the district with key stakeholders.

**Supplementary Materials*

Sample of a final transition review report

[available at www.annenberginstitute.org/resources/BostonCase.html]

What do you get out of a District Transition Review?

A District Transition Review can help engage the community in education, can assist district leadership to improve policies and develop new policies, and can help board members select and evaluate superintendents more effectively.

Specifically, the review helps district and community leaders take three steps *before* undergoing a major change. These are: take stock, listen to the community, and use data to identify strength and needs. These steps are well aligned with the data-informed decision making and community engagement at the heart of the National School Boards Association's *Key Work* initiative.

Take stock

Listen to Your Community

Use Data to Identify Strengths and Needs

Take stock. The District Transition Review can help district leaders, community members, and district partners identify the progress the district has made and the challenges that remain. These findings, which might be surprising, can help frame the task of searching for a successor superintendent by beginning to establish the skill set that the new leader must have.

Listen to Your Community. The District Transition Review should include interviews and focus groups with a broad range of individuals, including parents and community leaders as well as educators and administrators in the system. These interviews are likely to unearth perceptions about the district that leaders might not have been aware of.

A school committee or board that creates opportunities for school/community conversations will hear valuable information that will add to the search framework. It is possible that observations from diverse communities will, in fact, yield a fairly common theme, at once reinforcing strengths and identifying needs.

Use Data to Identify Strengths and Needs. The District Transition Review will provide a clearer sense of district strengths and needs, adding further to the understanding of the skill-set a new leader should bring.

After spending thoughtful time taking stock, listening to the community, and defining strengths and needs, the school board should have a clearer sense of the kind of leader the district should seek. Now the challenge lies in finding the person with the skills to build on those strengths and address unmet needs. To be sure, a candidate's personality and management style are important considerations and need to be part of the decision.

But by taking the time to analyze the district and the community through the District Transition Review, the board is more likely to continue its reform agenda in a successful direction.

Sample Interview Structure

Interview/Focus Group:

Date:

Facilitator:

Documenter's Initials:

Participant Background

Ask each member of the group for role in school, length of time in school and in the district. [Documenters also note race/ethnicity.]

Accomplishments

Ask generally about accomplishments in the current superintendent's administration. Then probe for accomplishments in key content areas, as well as in developing the organizational infrastructure for improvement, if not mentioned earlier.

Evidence

Focus on the kinds of evidence informants used to make their judgments about the accomplishments.

Challenges

Focus on what have been the challenges in making key improvements. Probe for demographics of city, students, and teaching force.

Moving Forward

Focus on sustainability. What should be preserved? What should be reworked or abandoned?

Clarifications/Additions

Final question: Anything to add or clarify?

Sample Debrief Questions

Debrief of External Review Team (ERT)

Names of participants (including ERT, Researchers, and Documenters):

Date:

Documenter's Initials:

Highlights

Thinking back over the day, what comments from participants particularly struck you?
Why?

Emerging Themes

What themes do you see emerging?

Questions

What key questions were raised for you by your discussions today?

Analytical Guide

1. The Nature of the Problem

How did informants describe the major challenges that the district has faced in improving how well students [in pre-K–5; in grades 6–12] perform? What was the district context for the improvement efforts (what changes in the city, who attends public schools, who teaches, who stays in teaching, etc. make up the context for the improvement efforts)?

2. Major Choices and Efforts

What are the two or three major choices and efforts (these should be thought of broadly and include curricula, standards, professional development, etc.) that the district has made in order to create the kind of organization that was needed:

- at central office (deputies, HR, etc.)?
- at the school sites?
- with core partners?
- with the wider community (e.g., community-based organizations)?

3. Degree of Success

Which of those efforts have had the biggest effects? What is the evidence? What failed (or is proving hard to change) and why?

4. Moving Forward

What efforts did informants say should be discontinued? Continued? Modified? Started? Which are the most urgent to pursue?

5. Obstacles to Continued Improvement

What are the two or three things most likely to get in the way of continued improvement if they aren't paid attention to?