

# Engaging Cities

*How Municipal Leaders Can  
Mobilize Communities  
to Improve Public Schools*

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A City-School Board Partnership to  
Rebuild the Akron Public Schools



## ■ *Support public schools as part of a vision for civic vitality*

In his eighteen years as mayor of Akron, Don Plusquellic has been a force for community and economic development; his support for local public schools was a natural extension of his long-term vision for civic vitality. In his view, if we are serious about creating new and better opportunities for our young people as they take on new workforce and citizenship roles, there is no responsible alternative but to get behind efforts to improve the schools.

“The loss of the rubber industry in the 1970s could easily have turned Akron into a

ghost town,” says Laraine Duncan, Akron’s deputy mayor for intergovernmental relations. Instead, today’s vibrant downtown area is anchored by a minor-league ballpark, new shops and restaurants, and office buildings with high occupancy rates. The new economic solutions developed by

Mayor Plusquellic’s administration have branded Akron as a city conducive to business incubation. Seeing a clear link between the long-term economic viability and quality of life in Akron and high-quality schools, Plusquellic believed that the future of the city’s economic revival depended on the system’s capacity to prepare its young people for higher education or the workforce.

### **An Opportunity Lost**

In 1997, the Ohio General Assembly created the Ohio School Facilities Commission

(see sidebar) to address the widespread problem – especially acute in urban centers – of decaying school buildings in Ohio. In signing the bill into law, Governor Bob Taft said, “We are building shining new sports stadiums across our state. Surely, we can afford to provide decent, safe places for our children to learn the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in life.”

#### **Ohio School Facilities Commission**

The Ohio School Facilities Commission provides funding, management oversight, and technical assistance to local school districts for construction and renovation of school facilities to provide an appropriate learning environment for Ohio’s schoolchildren.

[www.osfc.state.oh.us](http://www.osfc.state.oh.us)



*Breaking ground for the Helen Arnold CLC/Urban League construction project are Akron Urban League president Bernett Williams (left); school superintendent Sylvester Small; Helen Arnold’s daughter Cathy Lee; Mayor Don Plusquellic; children who will attend the new school; and city council president Marco Sommerville*

## ■ *Look for ways to take advantage of state matching funds*



Mayor Plusquellic addresses the gathering at the groundbreaking ceremony

### **Summit County Sales Tax Referendum 2002**

Summit Education Initiative: Issue 12 was a proposal for a one-half-percent sales tax that would have been distributed by a community improvement board to provide additional revenue for permanent improvements for school districts. The countywide measure failed to pass.

▲ Election Report 2002, Greater Cleveland Growth Association/Council of Smaller Enterprises, can be downloaded at:

[http://intranet.cose.org/pdf/election\\_report\\_2002.pdf](http://intranet.cose.org/pdf/election_report_2002.pdf)

The commission was charged with administering a capital fund of \$23 billion to improve school facilities throughout Ohio. About \$10 billion would be provided by the state, much of it from the state's tobacco-settlement fund. School districts would have to raise local matching revenues of between 40 and 60 percent of the state grant, depending on local capacity to pay. Akron stood to gain \$800 million over fifteen years.

Like most municipalities, Akron needed voter approval for a tax increase in order to qualify for its share of the capital fund. The city failed in its first attempt, a countywide sales tax referendum in November 2002. Laraine Duncan recalls,

The measure went down in flames countywide, although it passed in the city easily. There was a lot of resentment in other parts of the county that Akron would get the most revenue from the increase and would have the largest contingent on the monitoring board. The attitude was, Akron would be telling us how to spend our money. That wasn't the issue at all. Sadly, school districts outside of Akron didn't see the benefit to their bottom lines, and county residents rejected the idea that they should participate in helping the Akron Public Schools.

Mayor Plusquellic had worked tirelessly on the sales tax campaign and took the loss very hard. The night of the election, an emotional Plusquellic concluded his remarks by saying, "Hopefully, we're laying the foundation for people coming together. Thank you all – and we're not done yet!"

The mayor was as good as his word. Within six months, the city had rebounded from



## ■ *Keep acting on important issues even in the face of setbacks*

that loss to capture the needed local revenues through voter approval of a new tax measure, Issue 10 (see sidebar). The school board, the city council, and a coalition of community organizations, united under the leadership of the popular mayor, marshaled the political will needed to make it happen.

### What the Mayor Did

It was almost as though Plusquellic drew energy from his initial failure to raise the local revenues for the building plan. “Don cared so deeply about this issue that he was not going to leave a stone unturned to find a way to raise matching funds,” says Donna Loomis, Akron’s former deputy superintendent, who was the school district’s point person on Issue 10. “This was an opportunity you don’t want to blow. If the state offers you that much money, you don’t pass it up. In the face of the sales tax defeat, the mayor was trying to be creative and thoughtful and benefit everybody in the best way.”

#### *Championed a Successful Campaign for School Funding*

In his determination not to lose the opportunity for state funding, the mayor sought legal advice on other ways to raise local revenues after the sales tax measure failed.

### Issue 10

Mayor Plusquellic, Superintendent Sylvester Small, and community leaders launched an all-out effort in March 2003 to pass Issue 10, a proposed one-quarter-of-one-percent increase in the Akron city income tax with the goal of generating the matching funds needed to secure \$409 million from the state of Ohio to rebuild and renovate every school in Akron – without raising property taxes.

▲ “Issue 10 Kick Off,” City of Akron News Release, March 31, 2003:

[www.ci.akron.oh.us/News\\_Releases/2003/0331.html](http://www.ci.akron.oh.us/News_Releases/2003/0331.html)

▲ Duncan, Laraine, and Donna Loomis. 2005. “Funding and Rebuilding Schools as Community Learning Centers: Akron, Ohio,” *Voices in Urban Education*, no. 7 (Spring). Available on the Web at:

[www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/Spring05/Duncan.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/Spring05/Duncan.html)

Laraine Duncan describes the mayor’s tenacity and resourcefulness in finding a solution to the challenge:

Our mayor is not a person who surrenders easily, and he certainly didn’t want to give up \$800 million over fifteen years. With the help of our own law department and outside counsel, he was able to find a provision in the Ohio Revised Code that allows a municipality

## ■ *Explore all options, using expert advice*

## ■ *Appeal to a broad range of community needs*

to use income tax revenue to construct or improve “community learning centers.” We wrote a ballot measure, had it looked at by attorneys; it passed muster, and we put it before the voters.

Voters went to the polls in May 2003 to consider a measure that would raise the city income tax from 2 percent to 2.25 percent to fund a fifteen-year plan to rebuild and remodel schools and convert them into community learning centers. The advantage of the income tax approach over the county sales tax was that, while it was voted on only by Akron residents, it would be levied on any individual who worked in Akron, although it would not be assessed against pension income, Social Security income, or investment income. The measure was approved by 64 percent of the voters.

### **21st Century Community Learning Centers**

The 21st Century Community Learning Center program, a key component of President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act, is an opportunity for students and their families to continue to learn new skills and discover new abilities after the school day has ended. The program provides expanded academic enrichment opportunities for children attending low-performing schools, as well as youth-development activities such as drug and violence prevention programs; technology education programs; art, music, and recreation programs; counseling; and character education to enhance the academic component of the program.

▲ U.S. Department of Education 21st CCLC Web site:  
[www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html)

Cheri Cunningham, assistant director of law for the City of Akron and a key player on Issue 10, underscores the importance of the mayor’s resolve to the success of the measure. But as former deputy superintendent Loomis observes, “It wasn’t just the mayor who poured himself into this campaign. Every councilperson worked on Issue 10, as did community leaders.” Wards 3 and 4, home to many of Akron’s African American residents, had been steady supporters of the mayor over the years. Ministers and community organizations lent their support for Issue 10 and helped with voter turnout in those parts of the city.

### *Envisioned a Broader Role in the Community for Schools*

Deputy Mayor Duncan stresses the importance to the community of using the community learning centers (CLCs) for a wide range of activities outside of school.

One of the keys to the [successful] campaign is that we emphasized that these new or renovated buildings would truly function as community learning centers. As such, they will be open to the public at all times, including summer months. If a group wants to use the auditorium, they can. During the day, they will be learning centers. We want to keep kids safe; the people want facilities in their neighborhoods. There will be dedicated space for city employees in every CLC. This will serve as a hub for city services such as parks and recreation, health, and social services.



## ■ *Develop new kinds of community partnerships to support schools*

The CLC project builds on Akron's long history of community involvement in the schools. The school district has a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center (see sidebar on page 22) grant that includes a substantial tutoring component, partially paid for by the city, serving about a thousand kids. Duncan comments, "The city has quite a few after-hours programs in the Akron schools, including an after-school program that uses certified teachers to help ensure the program is aligned with learning standards. We offer myriad enrichment programs ranging from city recreation to chess club, theater arts, cooking, and sewing."

The transformation of all the city's schools to community learning centers opened the door for new types of partnerships, says former deputy superintendent Loomis. "We're seeing a number of other nonprofit organizations stepping up looking for ways to partner." Loomis says that other civic leaders in Akron are reaching a similar conclusion. "It's not financially sustainable to try to do this alone. We have to do a better job of combining our community networks and resources." One such partnership has led to the recent groundbreaking for facilities to be shared by the Helen Arnold CLC and the Akron Urban League (see photos).

*Mayor Plusquellic and other civic leaders speak at the groundbreaking ceremony; behind the podium are banners representing major partners for the Helen Arnold project: Akron Public Schools, the City of Akron, the Akron Urban League*



### A School-Construction Partnership

Akron's school district, city government, and community organizations have joined together to rebuild the city's schools in a new type of partnership called Imagine Akron Community Learning Centers. The partnership's Web site has information about the partners and their roles, along with plans and progress reports for each CLC construction project, photos, and the text of the joint use agreement governing the project.

[www.imagineakronschools.com](http://www.imagineakronschools.com)

### A Community Partnership to Rebuild Schools

Transforming Akron's entire system of fifty-seven schools to community learning centers is a more expensive and complex endeavor than previous attempts at city-school system partnerships. As Akron moves deeper into implementation, the realities of partnership are becoming apparent.

The governing mechanism for the new school-building partnership in Akron is a body called the Joint Board of Review (JBR), whose members represent the city government and the school district. The work of the board is governed by a joint use agreement, which provides a basic legal framework for the partnership.

While the JBR was able to hit the ground running because many of its members had worked together on the income tax

campaign, the group is finding that, like all collaborations, their joint efforts require a great deal of work. (See sidebar for more about the partnership and joint use agreement.)

The city's plan to transform all its existing schools into community learning centers – Imagine Akron Community Learning Centers – is an aggressive, fifteen-year plan to remodel or rebuild Akron's public school buildings. With joint funding from the state and local community, more than \$800 million is available for this program – the largest construction opportunity in the history of Akron. Four boards will oversee Imagine Akron: the Joint Board of Review, the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise and Workforce Development Advisory Committee, the Citizens Monitoring Committee, and the Community Learning Center Advisory Board.

David James, the school system's director of business affairs and a representative to the JBR, characterizes the new city-school partnership as “a bit of a shotgun marriage. We've been brought together through the good fortune of new resources, and now the hard work begins – for example, reaching agreement on which decisions are the purview of the JBR versus those that the city or the school board are free to make on their own.”

## ■ *Commit to a close working relationship between the city and the school district*



## ■ *Respect fiduciary obligations to taxpayers*

### *The District: Forging a Strong Relationship with the City*

Some tensions have already risen to the surface. For example, according to Superintendent Sylvester Small, Plusquellic was “furious” that the school board decided on a name for an existing school that is being rebuilt, a decision the mayor thought was the JBR’s to make. But Small and others suggest that the goodwill that was developed during the campaign for Issue 10 will enable all the parties to work through such differences and make the working relationship a smooth one.

“One of the stories from Issue 10 is how the school district and the city worked together on that campaign; everybody was in the same place from the start,” says Donna Loomis. “We had some good times together, and some tough times as well. That’s been healthy. We got to know every-

body. Our working relationship filtered into the joint use agreement. Yes, we had disagreements and discrepancies, but we worked together to resolve those.”

Another factor that will contribute to smoothing out the working relationship, Loomis says, is the commitment all parties feel toward the project. “One of our early breakthroughs was when we realized that it’s not the city’s money or the school system’s – it’s the *community’s* money.” And, Loomis adds, “we’re really trying to get beyond the ‘we/they’ stuff. This is really about new opportunities for our kids and our community.”

Superintendent Small agrees. “I’ve always felt that what will make or break the partnership is the quality of relationships between our organizations – and that starts at the top with the mayor and me. We both have strong opinions and sometimes differ on how the program should be run. But you can weather these storms if you have strong relationships to fall back on. We’re struggling through uncharted territory, but we’ll get there.”

### *The School Board: Pressures of Obligations and Responsibilities*

For their part, members of the school board say that they share the goal of improving the buildings and the city, but they want to be sure that they protect their obligations to



*Superintendent Sylvester Small challenges attendees at the groundbreaking to return when the building is complete and become active in the lives of the children who will attend the school*

## ■ *Commit to a strong, active role for the community*

taxpayers. Linda Omobien, a board member who served as president during the Issue 10 campaign, says, “I know that some have been critical of the board for appearing overly controlling, but one has to understand that we have a fiduciary responsibility to protect the assets of the school system. It’s one of the reasons that we were very specific about how long we are willing to cede control of the school buildings to the city.”

Joann Robb, the school district’s now-retired director of grants and strategic planning, who helped lead the Issue 10 campaign, adds that, despite the strong support for the plan, educators might be

reluctant to share their facilities. Similar concerns have doomed community-school efforts in the past in Akron, she notes.

We know we’ll be relying on young, relatively inexperienced individuals making six dollars an hour to run or help supervise some of the after-school activities in schools. We know that teachers and principals will not be happy to walk into a gym the morning after [a community meeting] and find equipment out of place. We will have to deal with the ‘Whose space is this?’ problem that has long been a thorn for the community-schools movement. We’ll also have to address that strong culture in schools that makes some outsider providers feel like second-class citizens.

### *The Community: The Right Kind of Involvement*

In addition to building a partnership with the district and school board to determine control and use of the new facilities, city and school leaders have also had to work through their relationships with the beneficiaries of the revenue – the community organizations that will use the new community learning centers. To ensure that the new and refurbished buildings serve as community learning centers in fact and not just in name, the partnership made a commitment that community residents will have a strong, active say in their design.

To enforce that commitment, the joint use agreement stipulates that a Community Learning Center Advisory Committee shall



Renderings of the Helen Arnold CLC and Akron Urban League, which will share the facilities, making the building a center for the entire community to enjoy

Photos courtesy of Akron Public Schools (5)

## ■ *Acknowledge real constraints and keep community expectations realistic*

be appointed to “review documents and provide advice and recommendations to the City and the Board of Education” (see the sidebar on the school-construction partnership on page 24). And there is also an understanding that community residents will have a say in the ultimate use and design of the centers. Recognizing that it is the community’s money, the partnership is asking, “What role should the community have in determining how the money is spent?”

Akron leaders have struggled with how communities should participate in the design process, how extensive that role should be, and how it could be sustained. Deputy Mayor Duncan concedes that many mistakes were made in the initial attempt to engage the community in the design of CLCs. During phase one design work, involving the first eight schools, she notes, “we hired a consulting firm that unintentionally created the impression that residents would have free rein in building design. We virtually invited residents to begin the design process from a blank slate. And the result was predictable: Every community wanted a learning center with a swimming pool and a pitched roof.”

The city changed course for phase two of the design process. While the new design process provides for a strong and continuous role for community residents, it is bounded by the amount and type of costs the state permits. Leo Jennings, vice

president of Burges and Burges, an Ohio consulting firm that had worked with Akron city officials on earlier political campaigns, won the contract to coordinate phase two of the community engagement work. Jennings says,

We’ve put together a three-part planning process that starts with an assessment of community needs and assets from the point of view of key leaders in the community – school principals, heads of provider organizations, the churches, local businesses, local elected officials, et cetera. That will help us identify six to ten programming options for the community learning centers – after-school and continuing education programs, health and social services, recreation, et cetera. Then we’ll hold open forums where community residents and parents can help us determine which

### **Community Meetings on School Building Design**

Citizen involvement was crucial to the process of converting Akron’s public schools into Community Learning Centers.

▲ “Schools, City poised to take next step in shaping Akron’s future; Planning Teams will help define, design, and build first wave of Community Learning Centers,” City of Akron News Release, December 5, 2003:

[www.ci.akron.oh.us/News\\_Releases/2003/1205b.html](http://www.ci.akron.oh.us/News_Releases/2003/1205b.html)



## ■ *Help business and unions to envision the positive economic impact of school construction*

of the options to pursue. Once we have community consensus, we can take that to the architects, who will make sure the building can accommodate that specific array of programs.

When asked what will make this fly, Jennings returns to the importance of programming. “What’s essential is that we get beyond the use of these buildings only for the obvious and traditional – for example, the evening basketball and rec leagues. The city really has to push for using the centers as community hubs that, if well designed and administered, can improve life chances for young people. There also needs to be an ongoing role for community governance of center programming and outreach.”

Yet, despite the improvements in the process of working with community groups, Duncan warns that the city and schools face a challenge because enrollment projections – on which state funding is based – show declines, and Akron may not be able to build as many facilities as residents had hoped during the campaign for Issue 10. “It’s going to be hard for residents to accept this,” she says. “Our Issue 10 campaign message promised that we’d all have all new schools.” But “some people are not going to have a school in their neighborhood. Since the state is paying 59 percent of the funds, we’re going to have to live with fewer schools.”

### *The Economic Impact*

A critical selling point during the campaign for Issue 10 was the impact that an \$800-million infusion of construction funds – the largest capital expenditure program in the city’s history – would have on Akron’s economy. Issue 10 was pitched as good for kids, good for workers, good for business, and a potential source of new job opportunities, especially for young people trying to enter a building trade. For this reason, business and the unions were strong backers of the measure. The superintendent, the mayor, and the president of the city council worked to ensure that Issue 10 would create as many local jobs as possible.

Community politics played a role in this, as well. In Wards 3 and 4, the focus of African American community life, residents have been steady supporters of Plusquellic over the years, and they turned out in big numbers to support Issue 10. Local leaders expected that passage would translate into new opportunities for residents, in addition to new buildings for the community.

Before the campaign, the city had meetings with trade unions and minority-owned firms and started a \$400,000 “capacity-building” program to try to level the playing field for minority-owned firms and help them win subcontracts on the construction projects. “We held career fairs with the Urban League,” Duncan says. “We’re doing everything we can to funnel people in that

## ■ *Use school improvement to help rebuild neighborhoods*

direction, to get them onto a job site and get training. We hope these are lifelong jobs.”

According to Duncan, the city looks at the CLCs as a significant part of an economic development strategy.

We’re going to rebuild neighborhoods. For example, one school will be moved across the street and connected to a city recreation center. We want to create a “learning corridor” anchored by a new branch library at the opposite end. On the site vacated by the old school, we can build thirty to forty houses. We’ve had a very successful partnership with the Home Builders Association throughout the city. Typically, these new homes sell quickly. People will live in the city when we build houses at a reasonable price. We have a good track record.

### **Vision for the Future**

When asked how he will judge the success of the CLC initiative five years out, Superintendent Small offers these thoughts: “First, I want the learning centers to be fully utilized from morning until night for programs that address the community’s priorities and local assets. Second, I will look for community pride and ownership of that building, so that not only parents of students, but other members of the community are taking full advantage of what they have to offer. And, finally, I want the narrow concept of ‘school’ to disappear altogether; these should be ‘centers’ of community life in every sense of the word.”

The mayor concurs with the superintendent’s vision for the community learning centers, adding,

As the mayor of an urban city, I can’t think of anything more critical to the future of our community than giving our children an excellent education and preparing them for the fast-paced new global economy. But, in a district such as Akron, where only about 20 percent of the residents have school-aged children, I recognize that many people feel disconnected from the local school district and what goes on in those buildings. I am optimistic that people generally do the right thing when they are given accurate information. I am hopeful that, by opening the doors to the public and inviting them in, there will be a sense that we must all take responsibility for educating our children.

Once they begin using the CLCs, they will feel more ownership of the facilities, and they may begin to see great value in participating in the education process by mentoring, tutoring, or reading to children. Finally, the public may begin to understand what it takes financially to educate our children, which could make the school levy process more successful.