

Engaging Communities

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Mobilizing Constituents to Demand and
Support Educational Improvement**
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Their Communities**
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Educational Reform**
Jeremiah Newell

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Warren Simmons, Executive Director

Editor
Robert Rothman

Managing Editor
Susan Fisher

Copy Editor
Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

Production & Distribution
Mary Arkins Decasse

Design
Gilbert Design Associates, Inc.

Illustration
Carolina Arentsen

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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

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A Citywide Partnership

Robert Rothman

Educators increasingly recognize, at least rhetorically, that community engagement is an essential component of education reform. They know that community engagement builds support for public schools and for a reform program and that the lack of engagement can doom any reform. The history of education is littered with examples of promising initiatives that faltered – and with school and district leaders who lost their jobs – because of public opposition.

Educators and community leaders also know that an engaged community provides needed ballast in times of transition or dramatic policy shifts. In urban districts, especially, where leaders typically last only two or three years, community engagement can ensure stability. New leaders will be reluctant to abandon or shift a course with community backing behind it.

Engaged communities also create pressure for improvement. Such pressure can help move a system that has served students poorly. And it can lend support to leaders who must gore some oxen in order to produce effective changes.

Despite the increased recognition of the need for community engagement, though, engagement is often a sidelight to reform. Educators think of engaging the community after the reforms are in place and they want to “sell” a package already developed, rather than work with the community to determine what is needed and how to implement it. Or educators engage a fairly narrow segment of the community and find, too late, that key constituents have been left out of the room

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

when decisions are made. Such efforts can undermine a reform, no matter how promising or successful.

What would authentic community engagement look like? How can genuine engagement serve the goal of educational improvement? This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* looks at ways the whole community can engage in education and demand and support changes that will benefit all young people.

Norm Fruchter and Richard Gray define community engagement and provide examples that illustrate the rewards of effective engagement and the costs of ineffective attempts.

Donald McAdams highlights the role of school boards in engaging broad sectors of the community in education.

Mayor Bill Purcell of Nashville discusses how that city has reconnected parents and schools and improved public support for education.

LaShawn Routé-Chatmon, Katrina Scott-George, Anne Okahara, Emma Fuentes, Jean Yonemura Wing, and Pedro Noguera describe an effort to involve communities of color in a project to eliminate achievement gaps at Berkeley High School.

Jeremiah Newell discusses ways that Mobile, Alabama, is engaging students in educational improvement efforts.



These articles illustrate that engagement is multifaceted and involves many “communities” within a city. Of particular importance are groups that have been poorly served by the schools. Despite a widespread belief, such families are deeply interested in their children’s education and will work hard for school improvement.

The articles also show that engagement is a long-term task. Communities that have been successful have created new structures and institutions to support engagement over the long haul and ensure that the public continues to have a voice and a role.

The good news is that there is some evidence that these efforts pay off in better outcomes for students. And over time, they strengthen communities. As Mayor Purcell notes, education is the most important thing a city does. The entire city has a huge stake in its success. An engaged community can make that success happen.

Community Engagement: Mobilizing Constituents to Demand and Support Educational Improvement

Norm Fruchter and Richard Gray

Community engagement is the active mobilization of organized groups around the common goal of improving education. Engaged communities can support and sustain reforms – and disengaged communities can jeopardize them.

Community engagement efforts in public education seek to identify, inform, and mobilize constituencies to improve and support their public schools and school systems. Because *community* and *engagement* are used so often and have so many differing meanings, we start by defining these terms. By *community*, we mean the range of organized constituencies in any geographically definable setting. Although *community* can include everyone who lives in a defined area, our definition focuses on *constituencies*, rather than *individuals*, and on those constituencies organized into groups and represented by group leadership. Engaging individuals who are not part of constituency groups requires intensive (and expensive) primary organizing strategies that transcend what most engagement efforts can mount. Therefore our definition of *community engagement* as a strategy depends on the existence of organized groups.

We define *engagement in public education* as the mobilization of constituencies organized as groups and the meshing of constituency groups into an active relationship around a common mission, goal, or purpose – the improve-

ment of public education in a specific setting.¹ Effective engagement depends on defining goals that a variety of constituency groupings can affirm and forging relationships and structures that build the capacity of those groups to pursue their common articulated purpose. Such engagement, ultimately, results in a shared culture of action and mobilization in which participating groups are evaluated by what they *do* rather than by what they *say*.

Community engagement strategies are usually a mix of *demand* and *support* components. The demand side involves a critique or indictment of a school or district's performance, challenges that specify how much more the school or district must do to improve their students' outcomes, and a set of proposals for how schools can meet those higher

Norm Fruchter is director and Richard Gray is a principal associate of the Community Involvement Program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

¹ For a complementary definition, consider how the Public Education Network's theory of action articulated the goal of public engagement for education in 2001: "to create public demand for good public schools... we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in students' achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools – with its own power and constituency – that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement." (PEN 2001, p. 11)



expectations that are bold, simple, and strategically compelling.² The support side involves identifying, mobilizing, and bringing into alliance the leadership of the constituency groups whose backing is critical to the desired reform and who will support – with time, resources, and political capital – the school system’s efforts to meet the challenge to produce better outcomes for the community’s children. Effective community engagement efforts can transform traditional “seeking permission” relationships between parents, community groups, and schools to “negotiated partnerships” committed to building a shared agenda for higher-quality education and student achievement. The issue of a more equitable distribution of power and resources across these entities is critical to achieving such a partnership.

² By *strategically compelling*, we mean that the solution embodies a persuasive theory of change which argues that if the campaign’s remedy is implemented, student achievement will significantly improve.

A Continuum of Constituencies

We define the continuum of constituency groups critical to effective community engagement efforts as: elite sectors; political leadership; civic and cultural organizations; and grassroots groups. Many community engagement efforts begin by targeting the leadership of elite organizations – the city’s corporate sector (leading industries, banks, insurance and real estate companies, utilities, and finance and law firms); the city’s dominant media (newspapers, television and radio stations); and the city’s leading nonprofit organizations (universities, hospitals, and large-scale service organizations and voluntary providers). The work of Clarence Stone and his colleagues (Stone et al. 2001) shows that such constituencies are a necessary component of sustained support for school reform. But Stone’s findings also caution that restricting public engagement to such elite groups risks limiting the desired improvements to the relatively narrow parameters those elites find acceptable. Moreover, elite-driven reform often masks or fails to address the critical race, class, and power imbalances that contribute to undereducating poor children of color.

Engagement efforts that target only elite sectors often downplay or marginalize the critical roles that can be played by intermediary sectors such as the city’s political leadership and its civic and cultural infrastructure. Engaging such groups can add immeasurably to the capacity for outreach and communication and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the engagement effort. Including grassroots groups is particularly critical for community engagement efforts to improve local school

systems, because such groups possess the latent political capacity necessary to challenge traditional race, class, and power dominance in many jurisdictions, especially urban settings.³ The persistence of poor-quality schooling in urban communities of color, for example, is intimately related to the limited social capital and political power of the constituencies who inhabit these communities. Improving urban schools and sustaining that improvement over time requires the engagement of grassroots groups which can challenge the power imbalances that have imposed and maintained these poorly performing schools across time.

Therefore, in addition to the elite sectors described above, local political leadership, leading components of the civic and cultural infrastructure, and grassroots community groups need to be part of effective community engagement efforts. Teachers unions and youth groups are also important constituencies to be included.

Political Leadership

The need to build support for engagement efforts among local political leadership is obvious. Elected officials control the fiscal resources that fund school systems; they also dominate the legislative arenas that determine educational policy. (Note that elected officials include not only the members of state legislatures and city councils, but also the elected members of local school boards or committees, who determine the educational and fiscal policies of most school districts.)

³ The Public Education Network developed a theory of action for public engagement that identified three complementary categories – policy-makers, organized groups, and the public at large (see Turnbull 2006).

Civic and Cultural Infrastructure

The need to engage leading elements of a jurisdiction’s civic and cultural infrastructure may seem less obvious. But civic, service, and advocacy groups such as the League of Women Voters, the NAACP and the Urban League, ASPIRA and La Raza, the library association, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls clubs, city-wide volunteer organizations that provide critical services to children and youth, as well as arts groups, museums, and other cultural organizations, are critical components of a successful engagement strategy. These groups’ memberships often include key elements of the city’s diverse constituencies, and their leadership is often committed to improving equity of resources and outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Grassroots Groups

Grassroots groups such as neighborhood-based housing and improvement associations, community development organizations, local service providers, and community-based organizing groups are also a critical component of

Improving urban schools and sustaining that improvement over time requires the engagement of grassroots groups which can challenge the power imbalances that have imposed and maintained these poorly performing schools across time.

How communities engage each of these constituencies varies, depending on the political and social dynamic in each community. And different communities have had different levels of success in engaging all constituencies.

engagement efforts aimed at systemic schooling improvement.⁴ We also include neighborhood-based religious institutions such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and others, along with their ancillary after-school, tutoring, and related adult and youth services.⁵ School-based constituencies such as parent associations or other neighborhood groups predominantly organized at the school site and, often, mobilized by local school administrative or teacher leadership are also important. In many racially divided cities, these groups represent critical constituencies of color whom school systems have served very poorly for decades. The experience, energy, passion, and commitment these con-

4 These local groups are often, but not always, affiliated with national organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, the PICO National Network, or the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

5 We include religious organizations because their membership is usually local and relatively stable and often has close contact with and experience of the quality of education the city's high schools provide. Members of neighborhood groups and religious institutions are also the most likely to send their children to local schools.

stituencies can mobilize is an invaluable component of any community engagement strategy.

Teachers Unions

The role of teachers unions in community engagement efforts to improve schooling is a particularly complex issue. In urban settings in which teachers unions are a strong political force, the teachers union is often part of the shadow governance of the district, and union contracts often include provisions that define instructional, personnel, or administrative policy. Such unions are often deeply implicated in the structures, policies, practices, and outcomes that community engagement efforts are trying to change. Yet, in many jurisdictions, unions are such powerful organizations that their support is critical to successful engagement campaigns, and their opposition can often truncate or diminish such efforts. If teachers unions cannot be persuaded to join the engagement initiative, early efforts should attempt to ensure that the union will not oppose the campaign.

Youth Organizations

Finally, youth organizations are critical components. Youth groups that work exclusively within schools, as well as neighborhood-based and citywide youth groups, are emerging as important actors working to improve both the in-school and non-school factors critical to the growth of youth capacity and potential.⁶ In many urban settings, school systems composed predominantly of White educators and administrators are failing to provide effective

6 We identify youth as crucial to engagement efforts not only because their "voice" includes their direct experience of the strengths and limitations of their schooling, but also for the power, authenticity, and idealism at the core of their vision and their organizing efforts.

education to poor students of color, who make up a large majority of many districts' student bodies. In those settings, the voices, the demands, and the organizations of young people are critical contributors to more effective public schooling, because their experience of the quality of the district's education and their ideas about alternatives are unique and irreplaceable.

Engagement in Practice

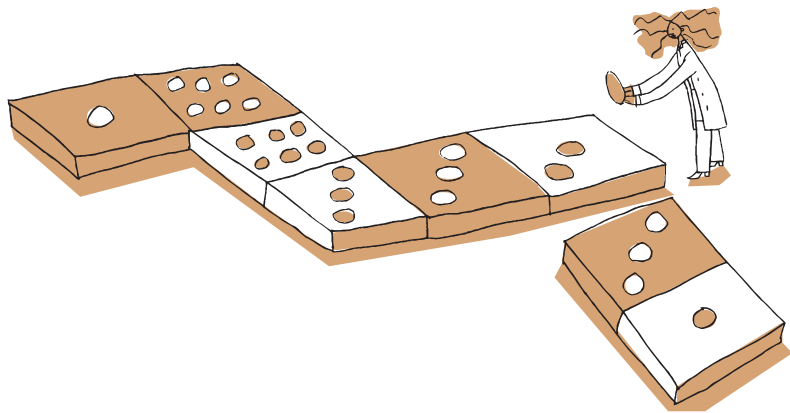
How communities engage each of these constituencies varies, depending on the political and social dynamic in each community. And different communities have had different levels of success in engaging all constituencies to support reforms. The Community Involvement Program (CIP), formerly at New York University and now a part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, has been working for several years to develop community engagement initiatives to support the work of high school reform in several sites that are part of Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools

for a New Society (SNS) initiative, an effort to redesign high schools in seven cities. The experiences in several of the SNS sites suggest some of the complexity, difficulty, and critical necessity of these efforts.

Boston

In Boston, representatives of several of the city's community groups participated in the initial round of SNS proposal development but were subsequently marginalized. Boston SNS site leadership's traditional approach to community engagement focused more on "informing" the community rather than opening avenues for grassroots constituency groups to participate in shaping the reform and helping to create the kinds of schools they want for their children.

CIP helped to mobilize an array of grassroots groups and encourage them to articulate their interest in rejoining Boston SNS as players with a clear voice in project decision making. The groups, particularly the Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON), decided that the Boston school system needed to create a cabinet-level posi-



In Providence, Rhode Island, the lead partner's definition of its role began to evolve as the organization became increasingly committed to maximizing community power in the initiative, rather than marginalizing community interests.

tion responsible for community engagement efforts. A district task force had come to the same conclusion, and the superintendent agreed to create a high-level post dedicated to community engagement. Once that position was effectively staffed, BPON and other community groups took a more active role in the SNS initiative. CIP worked with the Annenberg Institute to help the new deputy superintendent of community engagement become involved in the Boston High School Renewal efforts. CIP and the Institute also encouraged the site leadership to expand the base of groups involved in the reform process.

CIP staff met with several constituency organizations to assess what would encourage them to engage more intensively in the SNS process and helped facilitate discussions that produced a set of principles redefining the power relationship between community groups and the SNS Boston leadership. From those principles, a new grassroots coalition emerged, which will receive some SNS funds for community engagement work in the fall of 2006. Boston's Freedom House will coordinate the coalition and also join the site's reform leadership team.

Providence

The SNS high school reform initiative was structured as a partnership between participating urban school districts and external organizations that played the role of lead partner and fiscal agent in each district. In Providence, Rhode Island, the lead partner, a community-service organization, initially perceived its role as representing the spectrum of local community constituencies involved in schooling improvement and youth development. But the lead partner's definition of its role began to evolve as the organization became increasingly committed to maximizing community power in the initiative, rather than marginalizing community interests. With CIP's help, the lead partner mobilized previously excluded community groups to form the Providence Educational Excellence Coalition (PEEC). PEEC was very influenced by the example of CC9, the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 schools (now CCB), the first organizing collaborative established with CIP support and coordination in New York City.

PEEC began by successfully advocating for the restructuring of one of the city's poorest-performing high schools and has subsequently monitored the implementation of the redesign and transformation process in that school. Committed to becoming a data-driven organization, PEEC has reviewed and

analyzed school-system financing, student information and outcome databases, the improvement strategies of the state education department, and the nature of the Providence teachers union contract. PEEC members have spent considerable time in Providence schools, observing and learning from educators, students, and parents. PEEC members currently play critical roles on a range of implementation action teams at the restructuring high school.

Chattanooga

The Hamilton County reform began with the merger of the city (Chattanooga) and county school districts. A reform-minded superintendent, committed to improving outcomes, particularly for the merged system’s African American students, led a successful change effort: across a ten-year span, almost all the system’s indicators show considerable gain.

But several members of the County Commission, the elected body that funds the county school system, increasingly hampered the superintendent’s efforts. These opponents of reform consistently rejected the budget increases the superintendent’s initiatives required and also argued that the superintendent’s reforms were targeted to the city’s predominantly African American schools at the expense of the county’s predominantly White schools.

When the superintendent publicly criticized opposition commissioners for failing to fund the school system adequately, a classic modernization conflict (with a racial substructure) erupted. The superintendent and his supporters, including the Public Education Foundation, the very active and sophisticated local education fund, argued that the county’s economic development needs



required building a knowledge-based economy and that an improved school system was integral to that effort. The opposition commissioners argued that the current school system was effectively serving the county's children, that the reforms were unnecessary because many students did not need college preparation to thrive and prosper, and that the superintendent was squandering the system's existing resources.

In this highly polarized conflict, key voices were absent. The city and county's corporate sector, which generally shared the superintendent's commitment to

As the conflict escalated, the superintendent mobilized his supporters, including a countywide parents' association the school district had helped to organize. In a bitter finale, the superintendent, buttressed by three years of large test-score increases, won a very close vote for a school budget increase from the County Commission. But the fight was so bruising that the superintendent decided to retire, to defuse the conflict and create the possibility for a more supportive realignment under a new leader. In the ensuing selection process, the county's corporate community mobilized to ensure that the school system's reform direction continued. Corporate leaders took charge of the superintendent search committee and refused to nominate the educator supported by the opponents of reform. The school board then appointed one of the search committee's finalists, an African American deputy superintendent with considerable urban experience, by an almost unanimous vote. In the subsequent election for county commissioners, the corporate sector and a broad array of civic groups helped defeat key reform opponents, and the composition of the new County Commission is now far more favorable.

Effective engagement can help build enduring constituency support for school improvement and reform, a particularly important asset in a fluid political terrain in which superintendents and school board members are too often transient.

improving student outcomes, were mostly silent. Many of Chattanooga's African American constituencies, critical of the school system's past poor performance and unsure about how much to trust the superintendent's commitments, were also not significantly involved. The failure to engage these two crucial constituencies made the superintendent increasingly vulnerable to opponents' attacks, which focused on him as a symbol of ineffectiveness, rather than on the issue of improving the school system's outcomes.

The Role of Community Engagement

These three examples suggest the critical roles that community engagement can play in supporting and sustaining reform efforts, as well as the vulnerability of those reforms in the absence of such efforts. Boston's high school reform shows the cost of inadequate engage-

ment. The reform was essentially an elite-led effort involving key school reform intermediaries and the city's corporate sector. The absence of any significant community engagement efforts resulted in the non-involvement of key constituency groups, particularly those representing the city's African American and Latino communities. When the long-serving reform superintendent announced his retirement, those groups mobilized to articulate their concerns about the school system's failure to effectively serve their students. They published a report that critiqued the system's efforts and presented a set of improvement demands. The report was very critical of the implementation of High School Renewal, the SNS initiative in Boston Schools (Citizen Commission 2006).

In Providence, the lead partner's change in role perception led to the creation of a new coalition representing grassroots constituencies previously excluded from participation in the SNS reform. The coalition effectively supported the state education commissioner's recommendation for closing and restructuring a poorly performing Providence high school and is helping to monitor and support the transformation process.

In Chattanooga/Hamilton County, the failure to mount effective community engagement efforts isolated the superintendent and ultimately led to his decision to retire. Ironically, that retirement galvanized both the corporate sector and key civic and grassroots constituencies and contributed to a reawakening of political will that transformed the legislative landscape, producing new support for reform.

As these cases show, public engagement for schooling improvement can

fulfill a variety of critical needs. Such engagement can tap the ideas, energy, and experience of parents, citizens, and community constituencies committed to improving local school and school-system performance. Effective engagement can help build enduring constituency support for school improvement and reform, a particularly important asset in a fluid political terrain in which superintendents and school board members are too often transient. Engagement can strengthen the legitimacy and the need for school reform, as varieties of constituencies mobilize to articulate, fight for, and support the reform efforts.

Finally, building community engagement for school reform can contribute to the expansion and intensification of public participation in public education. Expanding the public's role in ensuring a high quality of education for succeeding generations will strengthen our nation's potential for consistent and effective democratic action.

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Urban School Boards and Their Communities

Donald R. McAdams

School boards derive democratic power from the people or from the people's elected representatives. Because of this, they can provide the leadership to redesign school districts and sustain reforms over time that provide equity and results for all children.

Who is in charge of America's urban schools? Everyone and no one. Americans love divided government, and schools are no exception. We have diffused power over schools to state legislatures, school districts, the federal government, state and federal courts, and, de facto, to education professionals and teachers unions. And yet, though power is diffused, school boards, arguably, have the balance of power.

School districts are the units that can most powerfully and quickly create good schools for all children in a community or allow good schools to drift into mediocrity – and school boards govern school districts. With rare exceptions, they are the body that, more than any other, determines the quality of education for urban children.

Boards select and evaluate superintendents, approve budgets, provide financial and management oversight, take the lead in campaigns for bond or tax levy elections, lobby legislatures for policy changes or additional resources, approve policies required to maintain the smooth operations of the district, and get directly involved in politically charged policy issues such as major facilities construction and renovation, property acquisition, the location of new schools, desegregation

litigation, magnet programs, attendance boundaries, school calendars, and textbook selection.

In addition to these “routine” governance responsibilities, boards committed to high achievement for all children must put forward a powerful vision for change, craft an overarching strategy for change – what I call a *theory of action* – and, through bold policy leadership, begin the work of redesigning their district. Fine-tuning the “one best system” (Tyack 1974) won't do the job.

The almost revolutionary changes required to redesign urban school districts are not just management changes. They cannot be accomplished in a few years, and they cannot be accomplished without broad community support. Only school boards – because of the democratic power they derive from the people or the people's elected representatives, because of their close links with the people, and because of their stability – can provide the leadership required to redesign and sustain over decades school districts that provide equity and results for all children.

Donald R. McAdams
is president of the
Center for Reform
of School Systems.

Board members, particularly those who are elected, are representatives. They cannot ignore public opinion. But all board members are also trustees. They have been given the authority to lead, and lead they must. They have an obligation to understand the complexities of urban school reform at a level well beyond their most informed constituents. They have an obligation to read, travel, and think so that they can understand, explain, and lead.

A Community’s Centers of Influence

How can boards do this work? Board members must first recognize that every center of influence and every voter count. Urban districts serve vastly different communities. Many districts closely overlap city boundaries, but not all. San Antonio has within its city limits many school districts, and Los Angeles Unified serves many cities. And then there are large districts on the edges of great cities that share no identification with the city itself. But though the communities they serve vary, most boards must deal with the same centers of influence: business elites, elected officials, parent activists, and media; and many boards also must reach out to religious leaders, foundation executives, and local education funds.

Business

In recent decades, especially since standards-based reform has brought to the attention of business leaders how poorly their communities’ schools are performing, business leaders in more and more cities have mobilized to support school reform. In fact, in every city where significant improvement has occurred, business leaders have made a significant contribution – sometimes informally, and, frequently, through formal organizations. However, business



involvement in many cities has had minimal impact because business leaders don’t know how to leverage their power and because business has a short attention span.

Business leaders sometimes focus on the wrong thing – teaching and learning. They have little credibility or expertise in this area and few opportunities to leverage districtwide change. Except for individual school/business partnerships that bring businesspeople into schools for tutoring or other purposes or fund instructional programs, there is little they can do to directly improve student achievement.

What business has in abundance is expertise to help district people create world-class business operations – something most districts need. Here business leaders have credibility, expertise, and access. Superintendents and district operations people usually welcome business assistance. For them, it is free consulting.

However, the most powerful lever for change in the hands of business leaders is the political lever. Though sometimes they would like to, business leaders cannot assume the powers of governance. They simply cannot work around the board of education. Business leaders can, however, significantly influence who is elected. Business influence and money has been the key to the election of numerous reform-minded school board members in many major cities. In a few cities, major district reform initiatives began with business action to recruit and elect a reform majority to the board of education.

The problem with business leadership is attention span. A crisis – a botched superintendent search, major business scandal, loss of state accreditation, or one more year of unacceptable student achievement on the state accountability system – brings forth business intervention. For a season, business leaders have a powerful influence on board elections, superintendent selection, and major district decisions.

But time passes, stability is restored, key business leaders move on, and attention drifts. After all, business leaders have companies to manage. A couple of school board elections come and go with no business intervention – perhaps a superintendent retires – and, years later, new business leaders suddenly discover they have an educational crisis in their city.

Recognizing the long-term value of business involvement and the tendency of business leaders to focus attention on other priorities when school districts are not in crisis, former Duval County Public Schools board chair Susan Wilkinson recommends that boards formally promote involvement whether it appears to be needed or not. “Boards,” she says, “need to approve policies and put into place processes that will ensure the continued involvement of business leaders. Advisory committees, periodic reports, regularly scheduled luncheons, or other formal processes are needed” (personal communication, January 4, 2005).

Elected Officials

Mayors matter, usually a lot. And often city council members or state legislators have significant influence. In cities where mayors or city councils appoint school board members, they are more than centers of influence; they, in effect, share governance power. This is also true where city councils or other elected bodies have the power to approve budgets. But even where there is no legal link between the mayor or other elected officials and the school board, these elected officials have power bases and enormous influence. And frequently they work hand in glove with business leaders.

For most school boards, business leaders, elected officials, and parent activists are the three most powerful centers of influence in the city. When aligned, they can make almost anything happen.

Like business leaders, elected officials also have a lot of other things on their mind. Though their attention span might not be short, for they are always there and always interested, they are also elected and have challenges to confront and constituents to keep happy. Like business leaders, they respond to crises and, in alliance with business leaders, their influence can be decisive. But unless school board members keep reaching out, educating, and involving, the attention of elected officials also drifts.

Parent Activists

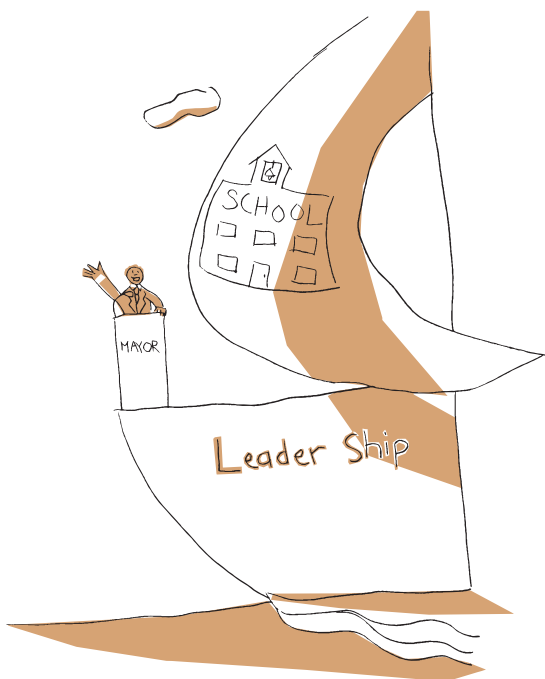
Parent activists, frequently stay-at-home professional women who have chosen to devote their time to homemaking and child rearing, but, increasingly, fathers and working parents, focus sharply and unrelentingly on the district as long as they have children in school. They are great allies of board leaders because they have knowledge of the schools, a strong incentive for improvement, and adequate time. Few board members neglect them, for they provide most of the ground troops for school board elections. Their weakness is that they know some schools well and are interested in a hundred small things, but few understand major systems issues.

For most school boards, business leaders, elected officials, and parent activists are the three most powerful centers of influence in the city. When aligned, they can make almost anything happen. But there are other power centers that cannot be neglected.

Media

Most urban districts have to contend with mass circulation newspapers and major television networks. The media are almost always a challenge. Despite their rhetoric about being guardians of





democracy – seekers of truth on behalf of the people – mass media companies are for-profit businesses that measure success with advertising revenues driven by circulation and viewer ratings. Like political conservatives, they seem to enjoy attacking urban districts for waste and corruption. Waste and fraud in the public schools, like violent crimes, attracts viewers.

Even the most objective and sympathetic reporters and editors have a job to do – and it is reporting the news, not helping the school district build civic capacity. Board members must accept that in most cities, newspapers and television stations are not power centers to be educated and won over. They are power centers to be managed.

Religious Leaders, Foundation Executives, and Local Education Funds

Many cities have influential religious leaders, most frequently pastors of large African American churches; involved foundation executives; and an active local education fund (LEF). Where these centers of influence exist, they deserve great attention. The support or nonsupport of powerful pastors can make or break a school board candidate in electoral districts with large African American populations. Foundation executives in some cities, Pittsburgh, for example, have sparked major reform initiatives. And in some cities, the LEF is a major player.

LEFs have sprung up in many major cities to stimulate school reform that benefits low-income and minority students. LEFs are nonprofit organizations supported by a combination of foundation dollars and local contributions that are used to increase the effectiveness and visibility of school and district improvement efforts. They provide direct service to students, as well as professional development opportunities to teachers and principals, and leverage local leadership and resources to sustain effective policy development and practice over time. In some cities, Boston and Portland, for example, by virtue of brilliant leadership and strong philanthropic support, they have become powerful forces for district improvement. Over sixty LEFs are members of the umbrella national organization Public Education Network.

Building Civic Capacity: The Role of the Board

These and other powerful centers of influence have a critical role to play in the sustained improvement of a city's public schools. Without them a board-superintendent team cannot long

maintain a reform agenda. But none of these centers of influence can replace the board of education.

All other centers of influence, except for the local education fund and parent activists, have other priorities to distract them. None of the others, except for elected officials, have the same grasp of politics. And none can reach around the board of education to make policy and oversee management.

However much other groups might claim from time to time to represent the interests of children or the public, where boards are elected, only the board has the democratic authority to speak for the people. And only the board is at the nexus where all the vectors of influence meet. The board of education has the responsibility, the sharp focus on education and only education, and the power. For all these reasons, the board of education, and only the board of education, can pull together a city's major centers of influence into a loose coalition with a common vision and maintain constancy of purpose over time. And also, for all these same reasons, over the long haul, elected boards have an advantage over appointed boards.

What needs to be done? First, the public must believe the district is honestly and openly acknowledging its problems and making concerted efforts to improve. Too many urban districts have minimized problems, made excuses, and put the blame for failures on individuals rather than acknowledged that problems are serious and systems ineffective.

It is difficult to balance advocacy with acknowledgement of failures, especially when some attacks are unfair, politically motivated district bashing.

Nevertheless, striking this balance is essential. Spirited responses to disinformation are sometimes required. These are all the more believable when they occur within a pattern of honest, open communication about district failures, along with steps the district is taking to respond to failures and improve systems.

Second, the public must also understand the board's core beliefs and commitments, theory of action, and policy framework. Building on a foundation of trust created by honest and open communication about what *is*, the board must build support for what *should be*.

It is not realistic to expect more than a few informed parents and voters to understand the theory and practice of urban school reform or be able to repeat phrases from the board's vision statement. However, most active parents and regular voters should know

However much other groups might claim from time to time to represent the interests of children or the public, where boards are elected, only the board has the democratic authority to speak for the people.

that the district is committed to high levels of student achievement and to eliminating the achievement gap and that the district is involved in a major reform initiative designed to attain these goals. And they should be able to identify the essence of the board's theory of action, such as a more tightly managed instructional system, more accountability for results, or the creation of more charter schools.

Selected business leaders, elected officials, parent leaders, members of the newspaper's editorial board, and others should know more. They should be able to give at least an elevator speech – about all the time most listeners will

give – outlining the district's goals, strategy, and most recent policy initiatives. Building this level of understanding and commitment is a time-consuming and never-ending task, but it must be done. And no one can do it better than the board of education.

The superintendent is a powerful member of the governance team and the spokesperson for the district, and urban superintendents are major public persons; board members usually are not. Superintendents have immediate access to the media and every major center of influence in the city; board members seldom do. Superintendents are like queens on a chessboard. They have more power and influence than any other person on or off the board of education, and they are point persons for building civic capacity.

Board members, however, have deep community roots and, collectively, especially if they are elected, know virtually every influential person in the city and thousands of people who are only influential in neighborhoods. They can be in many different places at the same time and, everywhere, they can talk with credibility about what is and what needs to be done. Collectively, they are the public's best teacher. Furthermore, as the representatives of the people, it is their responsibility to educate the public.

Together, a board-superintendent team can design and implement a powerful strategy to build civic capacity. The superintendent's job, with full board support, is to create a district infrastructure that includes highly effective people and systems to manage media relations, community partnerships, and parent involvement – and to personally be an evangelist for the board's vision for change.

Board members can be in many different places at the same time and, everywhere, they can talk with credibility about what is and what needs to be done. Collectively, they are the public's best teacher. Furthermore, as the representatives of the people, it is their responsibility to educate the public.

Board members, coordinating their work with the superintendent and each other, must continuously reach out to groups and individuals to build personal relationships and educate, educate, educate. Specifically, board members need to map centers and people of influence in the city, make assignments, and maintain up-to-date records of conversations and commitments. Let Republican board members take responsibility for courting Republican activists. Let Democratic board members do the same with Democrats. Let board members with contacts in the business community, ethnic communities, or any other communities take responsibility for nurturing relationships and building support for reform.

Board members should ask the board services office to establish a speakers' bureau so board members can systematically reach out to chamber of commerce organizations, service and civic clubs, professional and trade associations, and church or educational groups. If some group is looking for speakers, let them know that board members are effective public speakers and have a great story to tell. By e-mail and print newsletters; speeches, breakfasts and lunches; phone calls and conversations in the corridors of power; or wherever people will listen, board members need to reach out, win friends, and influence people.

To do this effectively, board members must continuously deepen their knowledge of urban school reform and the reform program in their district, continuously develop their skills as communicators, and coordinate their

talking points with one another and the superintendent in a coordinated outreach strategy. And they must work as if there is an election just ahead, for there always is.

With hard work and good fortune, the result of this outreach is that influential business leaders, elected officials, parent groups, and others with influence understand and embrace the board's core beliefs, commitments, and theory of action, and a majority of the voters believe the district is moving in the right direction. With this understanding and support, board-superintendent teams can lead fundamental district redesign, overcome powerful resistance to change, and even build support for more resources.

Can urban boards do this work? If urban districts are to be redesigned for equity and high achievement for all children, they must.

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Engaging a City: Building Public Confidence and Support for Schools

Bill Purcell

After years of mistrust between the schools and community residents, the mayor of Nashville set out to rebuild confidence by opening schools to families and city residents, and the effort has paid off in increased support.

After a campaign in which he pledged to make education the top priority of the city, Mayor Bill Purcell of Nashville began, soon after taking office in 1999, to engage the entire community and rebuild public support for Nashville Public Schools. Through activities such as First Day, a civic celebration timed to commemorate the beginning of the school year, and a campaign to encourage parents to bring their children to school on the first day, Mayor Purcell has generated substantial support for the schools. And, in turn, the city has raised the school's budget by more than 42 percent since he took office.

Mayor Purcell has a long history of involvement in education. As a state legislator, he sponsored the state's education reform act. He was director of the Child and Family Policy Center at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies. And he is the parent of a child in the Nashville Public Schools.

Voices in Urban Education editor Robert Rothman spoke with Mayor Purcell about the challenges and rewards of strengthening the relationship between schools and a city community.

What was the relationship between the community and the schools like when you took office?

I think, in retrospect, there was a significant amount of mistrust between the community and the schools. This went both ways. Schools wanted – genuinely wanted – the support of the larger community, but had an ambivalent attitude towards the active presence and involvement of parents. Parents felt that.

The school system had a great commitment to sharing the good news and good stories about the schools.

Parents knew that. But they also knew that the schools were very reluctant and, in fact, did not share the shortcomings that the parents and their students knew the schools suffered.

That, frankly, combined with the fact that the community's efforts to support the schools overall were not coordinated by the district, was at the heart of what I would describe as mistrust.

There were plenty of people trying hard to reverse this. The Chamber of Commerce actually had begun, almost ten years before I took office, to work to change this dynamic. And there were lots of people of good will on all sides

*Bill Purcell
is mayor of
Nashville,
Tennessee.*

of the equation trying to reverse this.
But at the core, “mistrust” would
describe the overall relationship.

*And you saw a concrete example
of that mistrust in a letter from your
daughter’s school.*

Oh, yes. I can still see the letter. I can
see it in my hands in the kitchen as I’m
sitting at the table reading, “Congrat-
ulations. School starts in two weeks.”
(Of course, that was a traditional school
communication at that time; they let
you know only two weeks in advance.)
The only printing in bold face was the
admonition that on the first day of
school, no parent shall enter the build-
ing. There was nothing else in bold
face. That was the one thing they wanted
to be sure you took away: you weren’t to
go into that place on that day.

There was no suggestion that
there was another day they encourage
you to come in. They wanted to be
darned sure you didn’t come in on that
day. And while that doesn’t describe
every principal in every school, that was
the overall feeling that probably encap-
sulates the culture of the district as well
as any other.

Education: The Most Important Thing a City Does

*How did you go about trying to change
that relationship?*

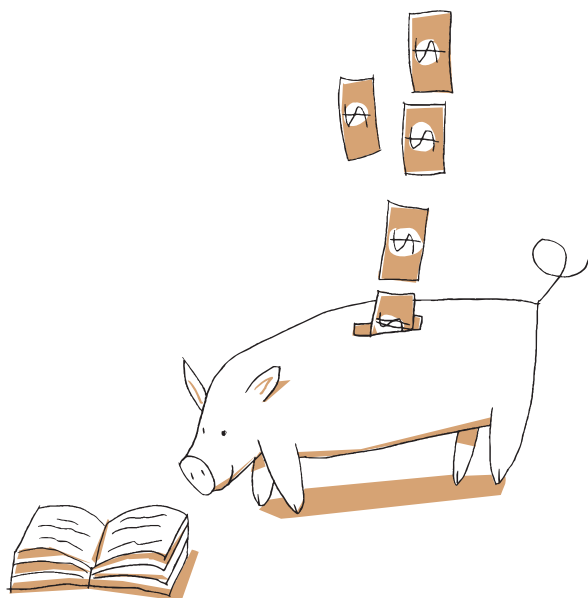
I started in earnest as a candidate.
I started out almost two years before
the election saying, from the beginning,
that education was the most important
thing that this city did. Period. And
I never left that message, from the
moment I announced that I wanted to
be mayor to the moment I was elected.

Having been elected, I continued
at every opportunity to reaffirm that
message. If there’s one thing that I



think we have established firmly, it's that education is now the most important thing that we do; it always was the most important thing that we do; and it always will be the most important thing that we do. This will never change, in this city or any other city that wants to be successful.

Then, in affirmation of that message, I became personally and highly focused on the schools themselves. I started talking early on about the importance of being in the schools. I had committed to visiting every school in the city during my first year as mayor – at that time there were 127 schools in the city – and I made those visits. I walked through every kitchen and every classroom in every section of the building and sent reports back to the school system about what I was seeing. I tried to make sure that every teacher and principal knew that I was there.



Welcoming Parents into the Schools

I made those visits myself and, during that period of time, pushed the First Day initiative. There was some initial reluctance. When I first met with the then–school superintendent, he thought it was a good idea, but why don't we do it on the first in-service training day in October? And I said, "Why would you choose that?" And he said, "Well, because there are no students in the building."

And I remember sitting there thinking, "I must not be explaining myself." Because that's exactly not what I want to do. I think parents should be in the building when there are kids there and teachers there and learning is going on. I think it ought to happen as soon in the school year as possible. That's the first day.

And, to the superintendent's credit, he relented, or agreed, depending on your perspective, I suppose, and said it was something they would try.

Accountability, with Support

We then offered a full-blown performance audit on the entire system, and offered to raise the funding for this from outside the school system. Normally, performance audits are paid for by the entity that's being audited, but in this case I felt that it was an innovation for the city, as a whole, and the school system, specifically, so I should raise the money outside. It was about \$500,000, as I recall, and half of it came from general government and half from foundations here in Nashville. They agreed to this, and we began the performance-audit process, which, truthfully, culminated in a very impor-

tant report and an important level of understanding and attention to the school system.

That was the process in the first eighteen months that I was mayor.

First Day: Engaging the Community

*How have these efforts developed?
I understand First Day is now a major event in the city.*

In terms of First Day, we now have roughly 21,000 parents and students appearing at the festival, which we hold, presently, on the day before school starts. From the first year, we had a higher level of attendance on the first day than we’ve ever had. In fact, the first year, they found, I think, 400 students who, traditionally, would have missed the first day – parents were out of town, they didn’t get the message, some problem – 400 kids who statistically never would have appeared on the first day, and some of them not for several weeks, were in school. We immediately noticed, because of this attention, higher PTA and PTO membership and participation.

And the combination of all of these things really allowed us to do one of the most important things, which was significantly increase overall investment in our schools. That investment is financial: the school budget in the city of Nashville went from \$397 million annually in the year that I came into office in 1999 to a total of \$563.2 million for the current year, 2006–2007.

We’ve had significant capital investments, which we began doing, on my watch, annually. We’ve done, basically, six annual installments totaling \$361.6 million.

As a result, I think you’d find here a much higher level of personal investment: investment by individual

We have established firmly that education is now the most important thing that we do. This will never change, in this city or any other city that wants to be successful.

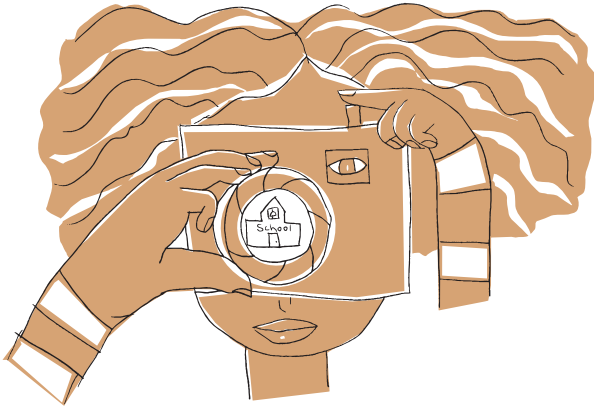
parents, investment by the business community overall. Our public alliance for education has raised \$4 million, which is something that wouldn’t have happened before; it *couldn’t* have happened before.

The Ultimate Goal: Improved Student Achievement

Were there other goals you had for engaging the community in the schools?

Ultimately, we all want performance to improve across the board. We have, still, a distance to go on that. I think what we find is a much higher level of trust in the results the system itself is producing.

In Tennessee, I sponsored, as House majority leader, the Education Improvement Act, which passed in 1992, and which started regular testing



As a result of this process, I think we have a general belief that we have to do better and we *can* do better and we *will* do better.

here. It was one of the earliest efforts in the country to bring regular and honest reports to parents. And it does so down to the subject and grade level, so you can tell how the third grade in your child's school is doing, and teachers and principals have information about the performance of individual teachers and classrooms.

The first year we had that in place was 1995. As a result of this process, I think we have a higher level of press interest and parental belief about what the school system itself is saying about how it's doing, about its accomplishments and its shortcomings. And a general belief that we have to do better and we *can* do better and we *will* do better.

At different points in our history, we weren't sure we *could* do better. At different points in our history, we were pretty satisfied we *wouldn't* do better overall. But, at this point, I think there is a general expectation in the community as a whole that we should, can, and will – and that we will do this in every school, not simply in certain sections of the city or certain magnet schools, but that, in fact, we can accomplish it across the entire system.

Investment won't continue without success, and I'm satisfied that success won't continue without investment of all the kinds I listed: money, and people, and general good will.

Successful Schools, Successful City

Now that the community is at this stage, what are the next steps?

I think the most important thing for me to imprint permanently is the notion that this is the way that schools – and the city in which they are located – succeed. You can't ever go back. There never will be a time when these schools

aren't the most important thing that we have to attend to.

And that's, frankly, what I'm busily doing this next year. I have one more year as mayor, and my strong commitment is to make sure that's a permanent part of the culture of this city. Because I care a lot about the schools and because I don't think the city can continue to succeed without it.

The good news for us is that, with this focus, there have been other visible signs of success for the city. The last two years in a row we've been the number-one city in America for the expansion and relocation of businesses. Last year, we were the number-one city in America for corporate headquarters relocation. *Kiplinger's* magazine, two months ago, said we were the city in America that anyone should choose to live in – the number-one choice. These are indications, I think, along with lots and lots of individual decisions by corporate leaders to bring their headquarters here, that, in fact, this city is leading in a way we didn't lead before in America. This has everything to do with what we've been doing, first and foremost, focusing on education.

That connection is clear now, and my goal is that it is never forgotten or lost.

Creating Demand for Equity: Three Theories for Transforming the Role of Parents in Schools

LaShawn Routé-Chatmon,
Katrina Scott-George, Anne K. Okahara,
Emma Fuentes, Jean Yonemura Wing,
and Pedro Noguera

Countering a widespread misperception about families of color, an initiative to close achievement gaps at Berkeley High School demonstrates that parents will work hard to improve education for their children.

Parents are frequently cited as the ultimate cause of disparities in student achievement. As a child's first teacher, parents generally have a strong influence on learning during early childhood. These influences, clearly manifest in the development of early literacy skills (Adger, Snow & Christian 2002), shape the intellectual foundation for future cognitive development. Parental influences on learning and academic achievement do not end after infancy but continue throughout adolescence. Several researchers have shown that the educational and socioeconomic background of parents plays a decisive role in the formation of student attitudes and habits toward school (Lareau 2000; Epstein & Hollifield 1996). Richard Rothstein (2004) has argued recently that middle-class, college-educated parents provide their children with such a wide range of advantages

that it is nearly impossible for schools to counter the effects to create a level educational playing field.

From the start, the Diversity Project – an effort by teachers, staff, students, parents, and researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, to address the racial disparities in academic performance at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, CA – recognized that parents play an important role in shaping the educational experiences of their children. However, unlike researchers who perceive working-class parents and parents of color as a hindrance to the achievement of students, we believed that under the right conditions, these parents could play a powerful role in advancing their children's educational interests. In addition, because we understood that the achievement gap at Berkeley High School was not merely an educational issue but also a political one, we understood that no change at

LaShawn Routé-Chatmon was Diversity Project co-director and is now director of the Oakland Unified School District High School Redesign Initiative for the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools.

Katrina Scott-George, after working as a parent activist for equitable and thus excellent education for all children, moved her son from Berkeley to Oakland public schools and took a job with the Oakland Unified School District trying to reform that system.

Anne K. Okahara was co-chair of the Diversity Projects Parent Outreach committee and is now community engagement specialist for the Oakland Unified School District.

Emma Fuentes worked with parents in Berkeley Organizing Congrega-

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the school would be possible without the active involvement of parents.

We wanted parents to be genuine partners in the educational process. We wanted their concerns to be taken seriously, and we wanted to make it possible for them to work with other parents to create popular demand for the type of transformational education they wanted to see for their children.

This article analyzes the role of parents in the Diversity Project. We examine how parents of color at BHS went from being marginal and excluded from the educational process to becoming active participants in decision making at the school. The experience of parents in the Diversity Project is in essence a story about the politics of equity and the politics of empowerment.

From Parent Outreach to Organized Communities: The Diversity Project's Evolving Strategy

The experiences and treatment of different groups of parents at Berkeley High School historically have varied widely based on the race and class of parents, with poor and working-class parents of color facing numerous obstacles that have made it difficult for them to play an effective role. In the same way that the school marginalizes many African American, Latino, immigrant, and low-income students, the parents of these students are often distanced from school activities. The distancing is due in part to linguistic and cultural differences that separate parents from BHS staff, but also due to a basic lack of power on the part of parents of color within the school community. Recognizing the need for parents of color to be more effectively engaged at the school, the Diversity Project chose to confront these issues directly.



In schoolwide focus groups conducted by the Diversity Project in the 1996–1997 school year, teachers shared their views about obstacles that prevented all students from meeting teacher expectations. Responses were quite broad, spanning a range of topics including school structure, policies, and culture. Numerous responses related to perceived deficiencies among the parents of struggling students. For example:

- A perception that parents of color are not adequately involved in the school
- A belief that many parents of color are not good role models
- An assumption that parents of color do not provide guidance to their children
- A belief that parents of color do not encourage, support, and set high expectations for their children

Thus, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, the prevailing belief among many BHS teachers toward students of color who were struggling

tions for Action and the Coalition for Excellence and Equity and is now an assistant professor in teacher education at the University of San Francisco.

Jean Yonemura Wing served as co-chair of the Diversity Project's Class of 2000 study and is now manager of research and best practices for the New School Development Group of Oakland Unified School District.

Pedro Noguera was Diversity Project co-director and is now a professor of sociology at New York University and executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education.

The push for greater equity was most likely to come from those parents whose children were least well served at Berkeley High School – parents who were widely viewed as “those parents who just don’t care.”

academically is that their parents “just don’t care.” Over the course of four years of research carried out at the school, the Diversity Project uncovered evidence from a variety of sources that revealed just the opposite.

Recognizing the discrepancy between teacher assumptions about parents and student beliefs about parental expectations, the Diversity Project undertook a research strategy aimed at eliciting information from the parents themselves. We deliberately designed a research strategy that would simultaneously create conditions and opportunities for parents of color to become organized so that they could demand changes at the school. We knew that the push for greater equity was most likely to come from those parents whose children were least well served at Berkeley High School – parents who were marginalized within the high school community, whose voices were seldom, if ever, heard, and who were widely viewed as “those parents who just don’t care.” We believed that

without the wisdom and organized political strength of parents of African American, Latino, language-minority, and lower-achieving students, transformative change toward achieving diversity with equity would be impossible.

Following are a series of theories of change that guided the work of the Diversity Project at different points in time, as we sought to organize marginalized parents as a crucial force for equity reform.

THEORY ONE: If you reach out to parents and ask them what their experience has been and what they would like to see changed, they will tell you. And if you make that information public, the school will respond.

The Diversity Project established the Parent Outreach Committee in the summer of 1997 to carry out its research agenda among parents of color and parents of lower-achieving students. Like the project’s research committees, Parent Outreach included Latina/o, African American, Asian American, and white parents, as well as teachers, administrators, classified staff, and researchers from the university. Some members of the committee occupied dual roles – they were both BHS staff and parents – and this provided the committee with a unique vantage point from which to study the issues.

The main work of the Parent Outreach Committee consisted of organizing a series of focus groups that would specifically target the parents of students who were doing poorly academically. The goal was to use the focus groups to solicit the concerns parents had about the school and then

to synthesize what we learned. We wanted to be sure that these parent concerns could be considered by the principal's Strategic Planning Work Group (a staff-based group empowered in spring 1998 to draft a five-year plan for Berkeley High). In this way, we hoped to use the research as a tool to increase the likelihood that the voices and concerns of parents of color would begin to influence the direction of the school.

We saw the focus groups as part of the project's action research strategy. We envisioned the research process as a vehicle for mobilizing parents of color. The theory of change underlying the strategy was that as parents expressed their concerns and ideas for school change, they would also see the need to become organized so that they could influence the direction of the school as a political force that could no longer be ignored. Our role as researchers was to lay the groundwork for what would ultimately become an ongoing, parent-led, diverse, and broad-based movement of parent activism at the high school.

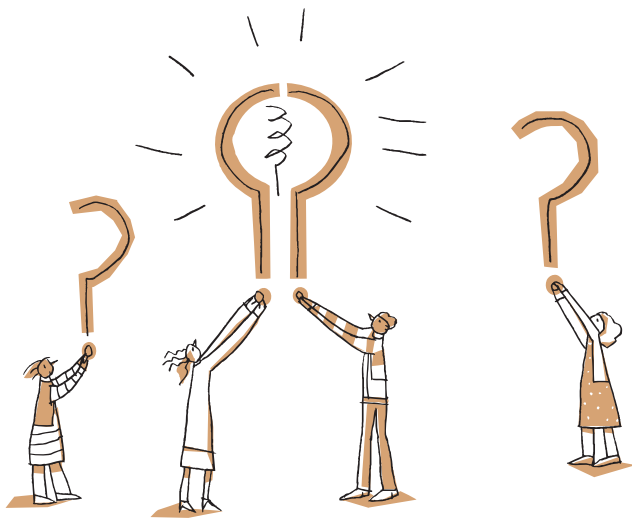
This strategy proved successful in reaching parents of Latino and African American students. To increase the numbers of those who could participate, we organized focus group meetings in homes, churches, and community centers, so that the meetings were accessible. At each set of meetings, we typically provided food, child care, and translation services so that there would be few barriers to participation. Despite these efforts, we were least successful in engaging immigrant parents of lower-achieving Asian students. Lack of language proficiency in any Asian language, the absence of ties to the leaders within these groups, and the

nonexistence of a common community, language, or identity among the various Asian nationalities challenged our outreach efforts with this constituency.

The structure and work of the Parent Outreach Committee and its subcommittees encouraged collaboration, participation at varying levels, and the development of parent leadership. In the focus groups, we posed the following questions:

- What has been your experience as a parent at Berkeley High School?
- What do you need from the school to better support your child's academic and personal growth at Berkeley High School?
- What are your suggestions for positive change at Berkeley High School?

These questions were used to spark discussions that often covered a broad range of topics. The feedback





from parents was thoughtful, passionate, and insightful. Parents addressed a wide range of concerns, including problems related to school organization and structure, unfair school policies, ineffective operating systems and procedures, the lack of effective student academic support, a negative school climate and culture, poor teaching and the lack of cultural diversity in the school curriculum, inadequate counseling and academic placement, and lack of attention to school safety. Repeatedly parents talked about difficulties their students experienced in making the transition from the smaller middle schools to the large, impersonal high school. Most frequently they described the school's unresponsiveness to their own questions and concerns and its lack of an effective early warning system to inform them about their children's attendance or grades. They also spoke of difficulties in contacting teachers and other staff, along with a host of unresolved issues that had a negative impact on student academic performance.

What became clear is that while parents had a lot to say about problems at the school, the school's institutional procedures for how parents should engage with teachers and other personnel were at odds with what parents of color needed or had in mind. This contributed to these parents' often experiencing strained and even hostile relations with the school. A mother of one African American male student who later became a leader in the Diversity Project's Parent Outreach efforts coined a term, "The Pissed-Off Theory," to describe her experiences and observations related to home-school relations for parents of color in the school district. She explained, "By the time parents of color get to school, they're pissed off. They typically find

out way too late that something is wrong, so by the time they get to the school, they're angry, and teachers are going to know it."

By the end of the school year, the Parent Outreach Committee had successfully conducted eighteen focus groups: six among parents of Latino students conducted in Spanish, nine among parents of African American students, one among Asian parents of various national origins conducted in English with translation, and two among parents of lower-achieving students of all races. In all, more than 180 parents participated. As one mother of an African American student expressed, "Well, we certainly blew the myth out of the water that parents of color just don't care!"

Ultimately the focus groups created a public space where parents felt heard and understood within a small and supportive atmosphere. They were able to share their concerns and cast their troubles not simply as an indication of their own shortcomings as parents, but to see the ways in which the structures and culture of schooling at Berkeley High School contributed. The focus groups also made it possible for parents to see that the difficulties they encountered as individuals were part of a larger pattern of institutional indifference to the needs of their children.

The strategy also proved to be an effective organizing strategy. At a community forum in May 1998, called to solicit responses to the draft strategic plan, nearly half the parents in attendance

The school's institutional procedures for how parents should engage with teachers and other personnel were at odds with what parents of color needed or had in mind.

were African American and Latino, and the vast majority had participated in the Diversity Project's parent focus groups. At a school where parents of color are generally absent from school events, this outpouring drew considerable attention. Because they had participated in the focus groups, many of the parents raised concerns about the strategic planning process, which excluded parents, and posed questions about how they would be included in decision making. Afterward, several teachers commented that this was the first meeting they had ever attended in which the parent composition matched that of the student body.

THEORY TWO: Parents can advocate for themselves and on behalf of their children, and their role in the school should be institutionalized for long-term impact.

In the focus groups, parents consistently raised the need to continue meeting and organizing. While the focus groups affirmed that parents were not alone in their concerns, the experi-

ence also drew attention to the need to institutionalize the involvement of marginalized parents of color. Following up on this sentiment during the 1998–1999 school year, the Parent Outreach Committee secured start-up funding to establish the Parent Resource Center at Berkeley High. The center opened its doors in the fall of 1999 and was staffed by two part-time parent liaisons.

The Parent Resource Center was seen as a way of responding to the various needs expressed by parents through the development of a structure that could improve parents’ interaction with the school. Irma Parker, the lead parent liaison since spring 2000, explains the logic behind this strategy:

One of our charges from the Diversity Project was to help get disenfranchised parents to feel more welcome in the school, and to help them navigate the high school and advocate for their children. But the Diversity Project also recommended that we should start talking to these parents and form a parent group, basically for parents of African American and Latino students, because they were the kids that were mostly affected.

Armed with Diversity Project research and recommendations and with their own data in hand, PCAD moved into action. PCAD went to the school board and asked what the board was going to do about the high failure rate.

We realized the critical importance of providing assistance to parents who were dealing with immediate school-related problems and crises. At the same time, we realized that dealing with individual crises would never be sufficient to solve the systemic inequities at the high school and create broad-based parent demand for change. Furthermore, a parent center, no matter how well staffed, could never serve all of the hundreds of parents in need. For this reason, the Parent Resource Center was, by design, part of an inside-outside advocacy model.

As an institutionalized “inside” advocacy model, the center has served as a point of contact for many individual parents and families who previously did not know how to interact with the school. It helps parents arrange meetings with teachers and administrators, answers questions about school and district policies, and provides assistance to parents who are experiencing difficulty with their children. In addition, the center has hosted numerous, well-attended Saturday workshops, drawing sixty to eighty parents at a time to discuss topics such as teen anger management, college funding, student rights, teen depression, parent-teen communications, kids and the law, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, small schools, and when and how race makes a difference in students’ experiences at school. In 2003, the Parent Resource Center initiated the Positive Minds group mentoring program for at-risk young men, which Parker says “has turned around their lives and made it much easier, not only for these kids, but for teachers in the classrooms who were having problems with these kids.” The center also has collaborated with city government and other public agencies in devising strategies for soliciting

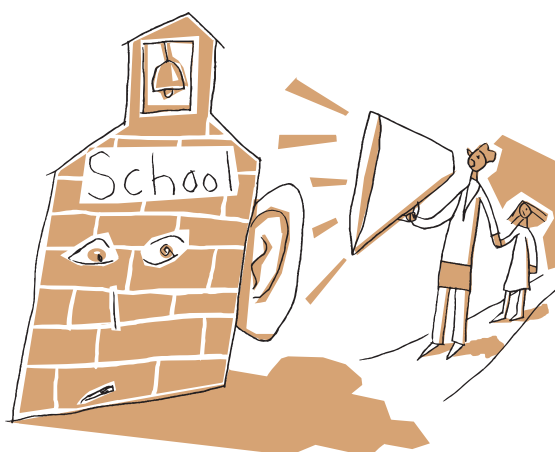
parental input on a variety of youth-related issues. At the suggestion of teachers, the Parent Resource Center has planned and conducted a professional development workshop for school staff on how to communicate effectively with parents.

Parker concludes,

I think that the Parent Resource Center has been a saving grace for disenfranchised parents. So many parents come in now, and they're just happy to know that whatever their concerns are, somebody's going to value them and work with them in a timely manner, or just listen. You know, a lot of people just call – sometimes their kids run away, their kids are on drugs. And we're dealing with all kinds of things. I think that basically the high school, and for sure the district, does not know the scope of the work we do in here. It's much, much more than just answering the phone and referring parents to different rooms or taking a note to your kid. That's the least thing we do here. We do some heavy-duty work here. So I think it's just an amazing place.

THEORY THREE: Working with the school has not produced sufficient demand. We must present the school and district with an organized community armed with a vision of what we want schools to look like, with outcomes we care about.

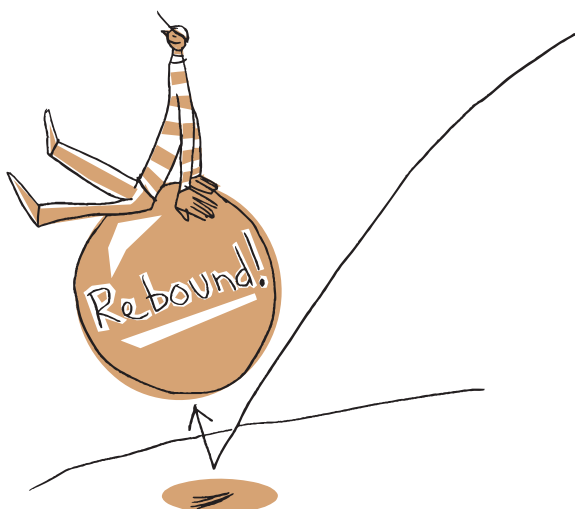
Picking up where the Diversity Project left off, two parent groups – Parents of Children of African Descent (PCAD) and Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action (BOCA) – began organizing within the African American and Latino communities, respectively. These groups have relied



heavily on the research carried out by the Diversity Project as they have taken on the difficult process of transforming the role of parents in schools.

The PCAD Steering Committee studied all of our data and reports on the inequities and disparities uncovered in the class of 2000 study. At the same time, they began collecting data on the high failure rate for class of 2004 ninth-graders, who were disproportionately students of color. Through their research, they discovered that as many as 150 freshmen were receiving Fs in two or more of their core academic classes during their first semester of high school and 250 were receiving at least one F. Without emergency intervention, PCAD saw that it was unlikely that these students would graduate from high school, much less go on to college.

Armed with Diversity Project research and recommendations and with their own data in hand, PCAD moved into action. PCAD went to the school board and asked what the board was going to do about the high failure rate. They presented a detailed analysis



of the problem, showing which courses had the highest rates of failure (ninth-grade algebra), but the board failed to act. Irma Parker recalls that during one conversation about the problem, the principal stated, “To be honest, we really don’t know how to educate African American kids.” Given these responses, the twelve-member PCAD Steering Committee worked tirelessly from December 19, 2000, through the holidays, and by January 4, 2001, these parents unveiled a document: “A Proposal: Plan of Action on Behalf of Under-achieving Students in the Berkeley Unified School District.” The stated goal of the plan of action was:

For intervention to be successful, it needs to be appropriate and intensive enough. Each succeeding intervention that fails increases the sense of hopelessness, frustration, and anger. The interventions proposed here are designed to satisfy a very specific goal: Every ninth-grade student will be given the support they need to complete the state and high school grade-level requirements for ninth-graders and be prepared to enter tenth grade. (p. 9)

For students who failed a combination of two or more classes in English, history, or math, the plan called for a radical intervention program consisting of erasure of failing grades earned in the fall semester and the creation of a small school-within-a-school for the spring semester and summer school, with student-teacher ratios of twelve-to-one, double-period English and algebra classes, and required parent participation, among other features. In this way, every student would have the opportunity to get back on track for graduation.

Before going to the school board for a decision, PCAD took the plan of action to the community at the Stone Soup Luncheon organized on the Martin Luther King Day holiday, January 15, 2001. Despite having just a week to get the word out, more than eighty-five people – including city councilpersons, current and past school board members, the mayor’s office, teachers, parents, the Berkeley Black Firefighters Association, the NAACP, and others – turned out in support. However, as might be expected, not everyone supported the plan, and the parents knew that winning school board approval would be a struggle. School board vice president Shirley Issel expressed a view that the proposed intervention was not necessarily the school’s responsibility:

What the parents are asking for is a confident assessment of academic, psychosocial, and medical needs of the kids and to create an intervention to address the needs of students who are at-risk at a variety of levels. That’s what parents are supposed to do. (Mays 2001, p. 1)

However, by the time of the January 23, 2001, school board meeting, the parents’ proposal had garnered overwhelming public support and

had independently raised \$40,000 in contributions. Although one board member was adamantly opposed to the proposal, the plan received district funding to hire five new teachers. The money was enough to serve only 50 of the 250 students identified by PCAD. Nevertheless, the parents had accomplished what many thought was impossible: in just forty-five days, they had designed a concrete plan of action and secured board approval to open a full intervention program by January 30, 2001, the first day of the spring semester.

The program, known as REBOUND!, proved to be an effective intervention. Nearly all of the students enrolled in the intensive second-chance courses passed and were back on track by the time they entered the tenth grade. The program also highlighted systemic but alterable conditions in Berkeley's K–12 public schools that reproduce large-scale failure, year after year, for hundreds of students of color. REBOUND! was more than a one-time intervention program: it was a call for systemic change, such that future ninth-grade classes would no longer have a need for such a drastic intervention.

PCAD's success reminds us that transforming a school to produce greater equity in academic outcomes requires more than just good ideas. Ultimately, to change the structure of a school in a way that closes the achievement gap requires a change in power relations. If the parents of students who do the least well academically are disrespected and excluded from the governance process, it is highly unlikely that their children will be treated fairly and be provided the kind of education

they deserve. The experience of groups like PCAD also shows that deliberate action is needed to interrupt patterns of inequality. Their experiences demonstrate that simply working with the school or district cannot produce the change needed when educational and political leaders are unwilling to support their efforts. Parents have to become partners with each other to create demand for the type of transformational education they want to see for their children and must present an organized community, promoting a vision for equitable schools.

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Placing Students at the Center of Education Reform

Jeremiah Newell

In Mobile, Alabama, school and district leaders seeking answers about the quality of schools turn first to those most affected: the students themselves.

Margaret Mead, the eminent American anthropologist and intellectual, once wrote, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” In public education, there is a growing realization that “changing the world” is not only needed, but essential to the continued success of our nation as a whole. Yet, as Mead noted, in order for successful reform to be sustained, it must be brought about by a “thoughtful” and “committed” public. One of the most effective ways of “bringing the public back into public education” is through deep and authentic public engagement.

In Mobile, this form of public engagement became the catalyst for an aggressive, innovative, and (as test scores are indicating) effective public education reform. The effort began with a public mobilization in support of the first property-tax increase in over forty years. Building on that success, the Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) and the Mobile Area

Education Foundation (MAEF) created the Yes We Can initiative to engage and connect our community to its public schools. Through this engagement initiative, some 1,500 members of the community convened in some sixty discussions around living rooms, kitchen tables, churches, and community centers about what type of community they wanted and what type of public schools they needed to fulfill those goals. From this information came the PASSport to Excellence, a strategic plan for the district and the community that outlines five priority goals for the system, followed by nineteen performance targets. The five goals are: student achievement, quality district and school leadership, communications and engagement, governance, and equity.

The Mobile strategic plan, unlike those of many urban school districts, is community driven. Thus, the community stays at the nucleus of the reform work. Public engagement has created the will for sustained education reform in our community. But the reform is more likely to be sustained because Mobile has seen the need to engage the most important stakeholders in the conversation: students themselves.

Jeremiah Newell is a junior at the University of South Alabama and director of student engagement for the Mobile Area Education Foundation.

Student engagement is a relatively new piece of the puzzle for education reformers. But, when students are asked their viewpoint, powerful answers follow. There are many different approaches to student engagement; some involve engaging youth in their own learning or in the learning of their peers (FYI 2005).

In Mobile, the effort focused on engaging students around improving educational opportunities (FYI 2005). This is, perhaps, the most difficult of all forms of youth engagement, for students must be placed in an adult atmosphere. Students may be unfamiliar with how to work with adults or, even more commonly, adults are not comfortable working shoulder to shoulder with students.

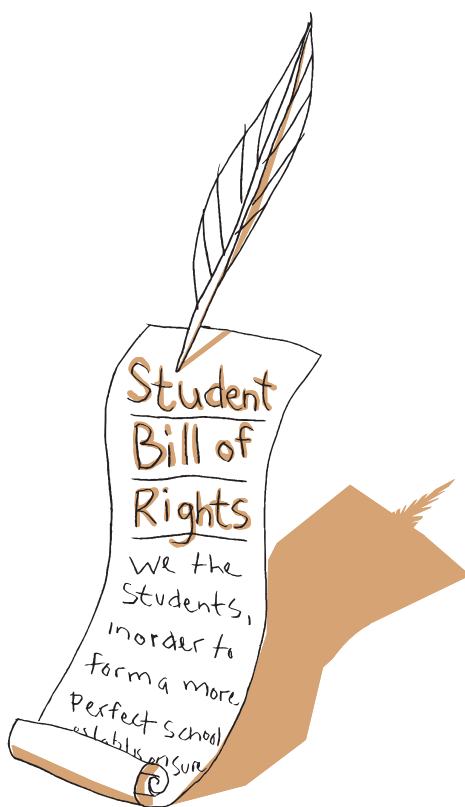
To engage students successfully, then, certain conditions must exist: there should be a recognized vehicle for students to work through; the work should be authentically led by students; and the work should be aligned with the overall plan for strategic reform in an area. Mobile's experience illustrates how those conditions yield successful student engagement.

Infrastructure Is the Key

Although the Yes We Can initiative is the most systematic effort to engage youth in education reform, Mobile has been experimenting with forms of student engagement for over a decade. In 1993, for example, local leaders saw the need to consider student suggestions in educational reform, and, in response, a group called Students for the Betterment of Education was created. This

group drafted a Student Bill of Rights outlining what they believed were the biggest concerns facing students.

Later, the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council took its place and exerted more of an influence on local education. This initiative encourages student input in the education process and develops young leaders as educational advocates. The advisory council is composed of an eleventh- and twelfth-grader from each of the fourteen high schools in Mobile County. They meet monthly with Harold Dodge, superintendent of the MCPSS, to bring questions and concerns to him, and he strives to resolve every issue and reassure the students that their voices are, indeed, being heard. This group was instrumental during the Yes We Can Initiative. They represented the

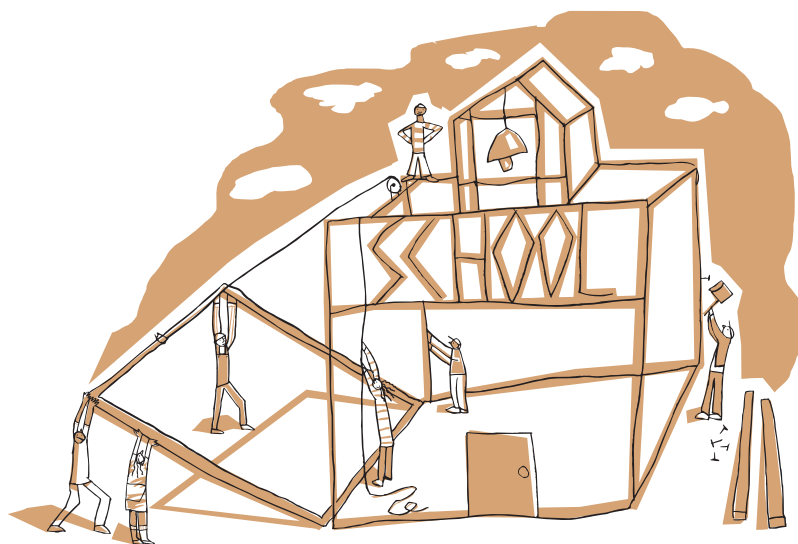


student voice in the community meetings by contributing, recording, and facilitating these meetings. In addition, over the last thirteen years the council has taken on such issues as class size, arts programs, state school funding, alcohol policies, commercialism in the schools, and teacher quality.

To ensure that members of the Student Advisory Council are prepared to address these issues effectively, MAEF and the MCPSS provide training for them. Each year, the council travels to Fairhope, Alabama, for a weekend retreat at the Camp Beckwith Lodge. This activity helps to develop leadership, teamwork, and goal-setting skills and helps to establish genuine friendships among council members. After the Beckwith retreat, members of the council are prepared to work together to address the concerns of their peers. In addition, further training and instructions are given on the specific initiatives for the year.

But in order for this council to be so effective, more than quality training is needed. The contributions of these young people must also be highly valued by adults. This is the case in Mobile. Superintendent Dodge views his advisory as an extension of his adult leadership team and considers their opinions carefully. If the advisory students point out problems with facilities, teachers, administration, or any other concerns at their schools, he addresses them. “If you want to know what’s really going on in a high school,” says Dr. Dodge, “bring a group of high school kids together and ask them. You will get an answer that it is candid and truthful.”

Because the superintendent places such a high value on student voices, individual principals and teachers value them also, and each of the fourteen high schools in the district has created its own Principal’s Advisory Council (PAC). Each PAC is comprised of at least two students from every grade level. It is mandated that both advanced and regular students are selected from every grade level. This is done to ensure



that a cross-section of students is represented on the council. The PACs meet with their principals behind close doors at least twice a month. They use suggestion boxes, classroom visits, and personal interactions to gather the concerns of their student body. In turn, they are charged with disseminating the responses from administration to the rest of the student body. Thus, the PACs have become the recognized vehicles for student voice, and by working together with the other student organizations, they are effective at engaging the student body around school concerns. Because each member of the Superintendent's Advisory Council is a member of a Principal's Council, issues can travel (if necessary) from the students' desk all the way up to the superintendent.

By utilizing a Superintendent's Advisory Council and Principal Advisory Councils, Mobile has created an infrastructure of student engagement that is recognized and truly empowered. Student work around education reform is neither fragmented nor marginalized.

Student Leadership Is Essential

In Mobile, we have learned not only that the *structure* of student engagement is important, but that *who leads* the structure is equally important. Countless initiatives had been developed by adult members of the community to involve students in education, but they were only moderately effective in bringing select groups of students together. But the MCPSS and MAEF believed that the most effective way to engage thousands of high school students would be if students themselves engaged their peers. To that end, the Superintendent's Advisory Council has taken the role as lead committee for youth engagement. In addition, I was brought in, as just an eighteen-year-old college freshman and

Putting the students in charge of the engagement work has proven to be very successful. It makes the work truly authentic. As young people, we are able to relate best with our peers.

a former member of the Superintendent's Advisory Council, to take student engagement to the next level. Thus, from the top down, student engagement is led by students themselves.

Putting the students in charge of the engagement work has proven to be very successful. It makes the work truly authentic. As young people, we are able to relate best with our peers. It has allowed us to figure the most effective ways to connect with other students and, in turn, they seem to relate better to us. It is also amazing how students respond when they realize that students are leading this work. Natalie Salter, a high school senior, noted, "Students have an opinion. I am so proud to take what kids have to say straight to adults. And, then, they do something about it!"

If students worked on initiatives that didn't align with the community plan, their work would have become fragmented and minimally effective. So students met to consider what they could do to support the plan.

Alignment Is Imperative

Mobile's public engagement initiative led to the adoption of a citizen-driven, long-range strategic plan, known as PASSport to Excellence, which has roles for all stakeholders – parents, teachers, community leaders, and faith-based organizations. Students were no different. If students worked on initiatives that didn't align with the community plan, their work would have become fragmented and minimally effective. Thus, it was imperative that student work be aligned to the strategic plan. So students met to consider what they could do to support the plan. In all of those discussions, one of the five community-developed goals stood out – *equity*. Goal five – *equal access to needed resources* – recognizes that equity in course offerings, programs, and services, as well as access to quality teaching and rigor, are essential to ensuring success for every student in Mobile County.

The MCPSS is the largest school district in Alabama, with 68,000 students attending 100 urban, rural, and suburban schools. One in ten students in Alabama attends school in Mobile County, which has extensive geographic and economic diversity and includes the third-poorest community in the

country. Two of three students in the school system qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch. Nearly 50 percent of students are African American, and 45.6 percent are White; 17.8 percent of students receive special education services and 1.4 percent are limited-English proficient.

The MCPSS and MAEF asked students, how can this large system serve this diverse population equitably? In an initiative called the Equity Project, more than one hundred students from all high schools in the district audited the course offerings of each of their high schools to determine the level of equity. In addition, they helped to develop important questions to ask their peers about the quality of instruction, the safety of the school environment, the perceptions of school climate, and the reasons for school skipping and dropout in every high school. The effect was 9,100 student voices that provided insight for both the MCPSS and the community at large.

The project found that over three-fourths of students agreed that their school is adequately preparing students for the future. However, three in five students described their courses as of medium difficulty, and four-fifths said that they would work harder if their high school set higher standards by offering more demanding and interesting courses. In addition, 88 percent of students responded that showing how

things they learn in school are relevant to the real world would help them learn. Thus, these findings suggest, if schools raised the level of rigor while taking care to show the relevance of what is being taught, students would respond by working more diligently to meet the higher standards.

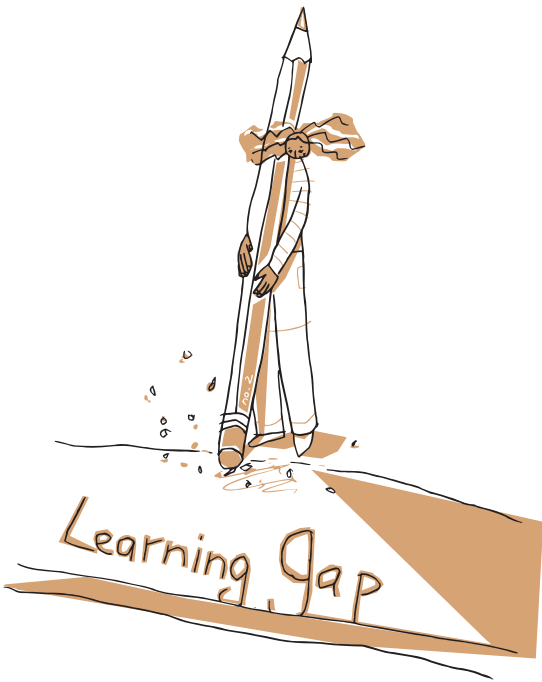
The findings also spoke to the efficacy of the district’s efforts to engage students in education. Two-thirds of the students agreed that they are involved in decisions that affect them. However, only half of the students felt that high school administrators discipline all students fairly, and slightly more than half indicated that their school’s faculty and staff do not value what all students have to say. Many students also said that teachers do not provide the one-on-one communications with them that they need, and that the climate in high schools is far from collegial. These are important indicators that could suggest the relationship between the faculty and the administration and the student body is less than trusting.

In response to the findings, an observation tool created by the Forum for Youth Investment is being piloted in a high school in every district feeder pattern. This tool is being used by a team of students, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members to identify best practices and eliminate ineffective ones while engaging and empowering every stakeholder within these particular schools so that a more youth-centered learning environment can be created. What’s most notable about this approach is that student voice will play the central role. It will

provide the opportunity for adults to listen to students as they decide together how to address the concerns highlighted in their survey data and, thus, improve their high schools.

The Benefits Are Clear

Since the student equity report was released in April 2006, the findings have become a major topic for discussion in the community. The *Mobile Register*, Mobile’s major paper, published a two-page story outlining the responses to the student survey (Havner 2006). And each high school has requested school-specific data. Now, with their finger on the pulse of how students feel about their education, educators and community members can accelerate their work to improve the



quality of public education in Mobile. As Mayor Sam Jones, the first African American mayor in the over-three-hundred-year history of Mobile, put it:

I think education is a partnership. It's a partnership between the school system, parents, students, and the community as a whole. We all have a responsibility to make it better. It's not just any one segment of the population's responsibility. It's all of our responsibility.

Another benefit of the Equity Project has been that considering how students feel has become the norm in all levels of the MCPSS. Schools are using their school-specific survey reports to address the key issues students identified. And the voice of students will be included in the Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE), a process developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform to help the district reexamine the way it supports schools and students. Additionally, Mobile has received a planning grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors to work with The Education Trust to begin charting a viable strategy for high school reform, and the student equity audit and perception data will be among the key research data to help map that course. Student voice is making an impact on current practice and future planning in Mobile.

The Future Is Challenging

Despite the many positive effects, challenges to future student work are very real. We must continue to refine our model to ensure that every sector of the student population's voice is heard and valued. This will involve, primarily, ensuring that the quality of student advisories is high at every high school and expanding our advisories to middle schools. Through such refinements

(slated to begin in phases in August 2006), students will be able to capture the voices of tens of thousands of students in Mobile County. Adult leadership at both the district and school levels will be essential to ensuring success of this work. If the value of student voice does not continue to be appreciated by adults, student voices could easily be marginalized.

However, the greatest challenge for student engagement will be seen as Mobile begins to take a hard look at how to improve its fourteen high schools. High school reform is truly the Goliath of education reform. It is the haven of the "traditional," "status quo," and "business as usual" mentalities. To help break through these views and keep the conversation on what's best for young people, student voice and leadership will be key in creating the will for change in our high schools. This will require massive mobilization of students, powerful research into the status of our high schools, and loud cries for change from our students. But we are poised to do just that. With a flexible infrastructure, authentic student leadership, and an aligned and relevant mission, our students are prepared for the challenge.

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