

CHAPTER 3:  
TRANSFORMING EVENTS:  
A LOCAL EDUCATION FUND'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE  
LARGE-SCALE URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

*Barbara Neufeld, Education Matters, Inc.*

*Ellen Guiney, The Boston Plan  
for Excellence in the Public Schools*

**The Boston Annenberg Challenge**

THE BOSTON PLAN for Excellence in the Public Schools (BPE), a local education fund established in 1984, spent its first eleven years awarding grants to Boston teachers and schools with the hope of improving teaching and, thereby, student achievement. Convinced that this strategy could not lead to sustainable schoolwide or districtwide improvement, BPE's Board of Trustees asked the BPE leadership to consider how to better invest in enhancing student achievement in the Boston public schools. With this charge, in 1995 the BPE hired Ellen Guiney

as executive director. Guiney worked with Boston's new superintendent of schools, Thomas Payzant, to develop a model of whole-school change intended to have a sustainable impact on schools and on the Boston Public Schools (BPS) as a system.

The BPE committed all the income from its endowment and raised an additional \$3 million, dedicating \$4.5 million to a four-year reform initiative it called 21st Century Schools. This approach to whole-school improvement focused on instruction. It was designed to be congruent with the superintendent's plan for school reform and began in 1996 in twenty-seven (20 percent) of the district's elementary, middle, and high schools.

Shortly after the BPE began its work, Boston became an Annenberg Challenge site with the BPE designated as a recipient of Annenberg Foundation funds and fiscal agent for the Boston Annenberg Challenge (BAC). Funds were now available for a BAC director, a second cohort of reforming schools, and additional coach support for the 21st Century Schools. With the advent of the BAC, the BPE's 21st Century Schools became known as Cohort I, while schools beginning their work with Annenberg funds were designated as Cohort II. In November 1997, the 21st Century Schools' approach to school improvement was adopted by the Boston School

*This paper was written collaboratively by Barbara Neufeld, Senior Research Associate of Education Matters, Inc., who took the lead in outlining the paper, and Ellen Guiney, Executive Director of the Boston Plan for Excellence, who reviewed and clarified a number of points. The paper was reviewed by Thomas Payzant, Boston's superintendent of schools, before public distribution. The original version of this paper was presented at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans and it was revised in June 2002. Support and data for this paper came from an evaluation grant from the Boston Annenberg Challenge and a four-year, OERI-funded (#R215U7008) qualitative evaluation of the Boston Plan for Excellence.*

Committee as the model for school reform in all of the district's schools.<sup>1</sup>

In two short years the BPE, which had comprised three staff people and a controller in June 1996, had transformed itself into an organization responsible for directing school reform in a cohort of Boston schools, in partnership with the BPS but formally outside its jurisdiction. In today's language, the BPE turned itself into an intermediary organization working in a public/private partnership with the BPE.<sup>2</sup> During the summer of 1999, BPE assumed management of the entire BAC.<sup>3</sup> BPE was now an intermediary organization responsible for school reform in half of the district's schools.

Taking on reform in sixty-one schools and trying to support and improve the district had a significant impact on the BPE-BAC. The organization had developed by learning more about teaching and learning and how to improve them; hiring and training people to support the reform effort from inside the BPE-BAC;

1. Boston's reform model is now called whole-school improvement rather than whole-school change.
2. Gillian Cohen (2000, p. 1) defines intermediary organizations as "independent bodies comprised of multiple stakeholders [designed] to push systems to change both from within and without." McDonald et al. (2000) argues that "intermediary organizations are invested with special resources to support change, and they are presumed free of ordinary interests and ordinary political pressures. They may be designed to be temporary or to stay in business indefinitely.... [To do their work] these private interests need to combine their outsider's perspective and clout with insider access." Fullan (2000) also talks about the important role such external organizations can play in school reform. In some cities, a new organization was created to forward the implementation of an Annenberg Challenge grant. This was not the case in Boston, where the BPE began its partnership with the BPS before Boston received an Annenberg Challenge grant, and the BPE was, at the outset, the fiscal agent for the BAC.
3. Despite the BPE's responsibility with respect to the BAC, there remained a distinction between the two organizations. Each maintained its own governing board. When the BPS and the BPE began joint management of the BAC, cochairs Ellen Guiney of the BPE and Timothy Knowles, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning of the BPS, agreed to keep the BAC governing board in order to maintain broad representation for the BAC. It included, for example, the president of the Boston Teachers Union and representatives of corporate, cultural, and foundation communities. The BAC board was phased out when Annenberg funding ended in 2001. Until that time, the BPE referred to itself as the BPE-BAC. We refer to the organization as the BPE-BAC when talking about the work of Cohort I and II schools. We refer to the BPE when we discuss the organization before or after Annenberg funding.

linking its efforts to those of the BPS and the rest of the BAC; and developing new political skills and relationships with schools, the BPS, and other external forces to meet the challenge of working overtly to change BPS policies and practices from the outside, while also partnering with the school district and schools.

Those researchers who suggest that intermediary organizations can have a powerful impact on school improvement, such as Fullan (2000) and Cohen (2000), point to the knowledge, skill, and resources that such agencies can provide. We have found scant research that addressed the knowledge, skill, and resources that intermediary agencies might need to fulfill such potential. In this chapter, we describe and analyze what has been involved for the BPE-BAC since it took on an explicit partnership role in school reform. The case study explores the changes in the BPE-BAC that accompanied its metamorphosis to an intermediary organization.

We argue that taking on this role fundamentally changed the work of the BPE-BAC. It placed enormous demands on the organization's human and financial resources, as well as its educational knowledge and skills, while simultaneously exposing the organization to the exigencies of the political context the public school system faces. These exigencies led the BPE-BAC to make hard decisions about positioning itself within this political landscape. Finally, enacting the role of an intermediary organization remains extraordinarily difficult and, we argue, depends on the will and capacity of both the local education fund and the local school district. Nonetheless, the role has shown promise in Boston and may be a viable approach to reform in other settings as well.

To develop this argument, we begin by discussing conditions in Boston that seemed essential to the formation of the BPE's role. Second, we describe key organizational and technical demands on the BPE during the start-up phase. Third, we illustrate demands on the BPE-BAC to sustain and deepen the work by

discussing the organizational structures and activities that the BPE–BAC initiated and implemented jointly with the BPS. Fourth, we assess the strengths of the BPE–BAC as an intermediary organization and the challenges the BPE continues to face. In this vein, we consider the prospects for the BPE sustaining its role as an intermediary organization in school reform. We conclude with thoughts about the implications for other agencies that might want to take on similar roles and relationships with their local school districts.

## ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR BEGINNING THE BPE'S INTERMEDIARY ROLE

The BPE and BPS collaboration came at a propitious moment in Boston. The superintendent had laid out a comprehensive reform agenda. An unusually supportive mayor and his appointed school board shared that reform agenda and were willing, to a degree seldom found in urban districts, to let the superintendent lead. They offered their support, including a substantial increase in school funds each year. Strong financial support for school reform also came from local private foundations and corporations.

However, it took more than these factors to facilitate the partnership. In particular, the partnership

## *The Education Matters – Boston Plan for Excellence Partnership*

Education Matters, Inc., and the Boston Plan for Excellence have been working together since BPE determined, very early in planning its new role, that it would need an outside evaluator to assess two aspects of its work in an ongoing way: the effect of its work on student, school, and district performance; and the efficacy of its theory and implementation of school reform. With assistance from Dr. Kay Merseth at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the BPE presented a sketch of its work to potential evaluators. BPE eventually formed an agreement with Education Matters, based on its past work and its willingness to

make its qualitative analysis formative as well as summative. (BPE also engaged Policy Studies Associates in Washington, D.C., to conduct a quantitative evaluation of its work.) BPE anticipated it could benefit greatly over time from Education Matters' experience in studying school reform in urban districts across the country. From the outset, Education Matters and BPE collaborated on developing evaluation questions each year that addressed significant areas about which the BPE needed to learn.

At several key points in the last five years, the BPE refined its work based on Education Matters' reports. Two examples are illustrative. First, the BPE on-site coaching model began with the idea

that coaches would know what needed to be done from day to day to support schools, that they would be willing to support BPE's reform framework as laid out, and would be able to work more or less independently. These assumptions turned out to be only partially right, and Education Matters' reports led to the creation of weekly professional development for coaches and far greater co-construction of the work. Ultimately, the reports led to BPE completely redesigning its on-site coaching model and increasing its effectiveness.

A second example was equally important. As the case study in this chapter lays out, BPE's outside organization

status means that it has very little authority and influence with schools that do not want to undertake reform work. After a four-year struggle with this issue, Education Matters' reports helped both the superintendent and the BPE recognize that they had to address BPE's status directly. The ultimate solution was for BPE to support only those schools willing to work with it and to take on the cutting-edge reform work that the BPE was evolving.

was built on a solid foundation that included certain key components. By detailing these essential conditions for beginning the BPE's role as intermediary organization supporting the BPS, we are not arguing that they are the only conditions under which such a partnership could develop. We suggest, however, that conditions will need to exist that establish the knowledge, skill, and trust of the district and the intermediary agency, such as the following:

- The key actors, Ellen Guiney and Thomas Payzant, knew and respected one another. They shared similar views of what it would take to improve schools so that all children achieved high standards, and they had unusual access to researchers and practitioners who were leading thinkers in urban school reform. Both had also engaged in four years of extended discussions as members of the Pew Forum on Education Reform. As a result,
4. The theory of action is that improved instruction will improve student achievement, and that the way to improve instruction is to support teachers at the school as they learn in collaboration with one another. Collaborative learning is facilitated by asking teachers and principals to engage in specific activities, called Essentials, which, when undertaken with support, help to change the social structure of each school. The goal is to have people work together to arrive at a common language, common practices, and common goals for their students. The activities help school staff recognize their own learning needs as well as those of students; they also lead to reorganization of time, student groupings, staff, resources, and measurement of progress. Teachers and principals focus, initially, on one content area, most often literacy, and research "best practices" in that area. Their research and adoption of "best practices" involve them in attending to the content to be taught and its alignment with state and district standards. All Boston schools use as a guide the district's Plan for Whole-School Change that describes the Essentials on a one-page chart. The theory asserts that schools cannot undertake this work by themselves. Rather, they need leadership within the school and support from without (coaching, for example) because the work is often threatening and difficult. Virtually all of the additional funding schools receive is for professional development that integrates teachers' learning with their practice, gives participants ongoing feedback, and makes these activities a whole-school, collegial endeavor.
  5. Gillian Cohen (2000) suggests that prior working relationships may not be essential for the successful formation and continuation of an educational intermediary organization. However, evidence from school-university partnerships and professional development schools suggests that organizations spend a considerable amount of time learning about each other, working out differences, and developing trust prior to beginning their core work. At the least, Guiney's and Payzant's experience working together enabled them to begin core work expeditiously.

Guiney and Payzant shared a vision of whole-school change<sup>4</sup> and a personal working relationship that enabled them to jump-start the joint venture with trust already in place.<sup>5</sup>

- The personality and self-confidence of the superintendent were also crucial. It was necessary for the superintendent to believe that he could maintain his status as the district's leader even as the BPE worked with the first cohort of reforming schools. It was essential that he be able to make two points clear to the local school committee, BPS central office administrators, school-based administrators, teachers, and parents: first, that he had "signed off" on the ideas undergirding the BPE's reform plan, and second, that although the BPE would begin school reform with one set of schools, the district would subsequently support all schools in the same work.

Despite Payzant's support for the partnership and his belief that it could create healthy tension within the BPS, many in the central office and schools were troubled by the joint venture. Payzant's confidence in the BPE's work and his conviction that the effort was truly collaborative helped him persuade some that the partnership did not represent abdication of authority or responsibility. Still, the BPE did not have the support of all key BPS administrators, and the BPE's role continues to worry many central office administrators.

- The BPE brought considerable strength to the enterprise for three other reasons. First, it had large sums of money to support the effort, having marshaled more than \$4 million for initial work in the 21st Century Schools. Then, when the Annenberg Challenge grant of \$10 million was awarded in 1996, the BPE-BAC was designated a major recipient of funds because the Annenberg Foundation thought the 21st Century initiative had "great promise." Annenberg stipulated that \$4.5 million of the \$10 million grant be used to start a second cohort of schools along the same lines. This recognition from a powerful outside foundation greatly strengthened BPE-BAC's influence with the BPS.

A second strength related to the first is that members of the Boston business community who served on the BPE board of trustees had learned that an investment over the long haul was needed in order to accomplish meaningful changes in the schools and district. The leaders were seasoned actors in the school reform arena and supportive of a reform agenda that would not demand a “quick fix.”

Third, The BPE was an established, respected organization with a history in the schools as a result of its previous grants program. It was not a newcomer or upstart in its involvement with schools.

With these conditions in place, Payzant and Guiney still had to negotiate decisions in order for the BPE to begin work. The district required, for example, involvement in approving the schools included in the first cohort, and also assurance that the schools would be told they were still accountable for their BPS responsibilities. Payzant insisted on this latter point, unmistakably emphasizing that schools would receive no special treatment other than BPE support. The BPS also had to observe carefully to see whether the BPE had the capacity to work effectively with a large sample of schools. After all, the BPE had no track record in this regard, and it was a considerable risk on the part of the superintendent to agree to such an experimental partnership. Negotiating these aspects of the partnership took knowledge, skill, and time. Such negotiations continue as the work moves forward.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL AND TECHNICAL DEMANDS ON THE BPE IN THE START-UP PHASE

To get the 21st Century Schools up and running, BPE had a number of tasks to complete. It had to design the reform activities in which schools would engage. To do this, the BPE conducted separate focus groups with principals, teachers, and parents, and sought advice from national experts. This process convinced the BPE that the missing parts of standards-based reform were unremitting attention to instruction, accompanied by “best-practice”-oriented professional development for teachers and principals that focused on specific student learning goals linked to standards.

As BPE designed the reform, Guiney met frequently with Payzant to ensure that the initiative supported his thinking and experience. The BPE also had to develop an effective and fair selection process and a communication strategy for notifying schools about the grants. Payzant and Guiney had agreed that the BPE would not “cream” the schools with the most potential, nor take on too many difficult schools to give the design a proper test. Finally, once the schools were selected, the BPE needed sufficient human capacity to engage them in initial reform activities and then to design and lead the implementation of further phases. This led the BPE to provide on-site coach support for the work and to hire a director for the initiative.

On-site, whole-school-change coaches had several responsibilities. During the first year they helped schools to assess their instructional needs, select an instructional focus, create structures to engage teachers in working together on instructional issues, and learn how to use both new and existing resources in creative, instructionally focused ways. Coaches were also to instill a belief in teachers and principals that they could turn low-performing students into high achievers by significantly improving their practice. To provide this support, the BPE had to recruit, select, prepare, support, and ultimately, evaluate the coaches.

The BPE also had to employ additional professionals to support implementation and design the next phases of the work. The BPE “borrowed” a Boston principal, Gloria Woods, who knew the reform com-

*Coaches were to instill a belief in teachers and principals that they could turn low-performing students into high achievers by significantly improving their practice.*

ponents and had the leadership skills to help develop and direct the work.<sup>6</sup> Though hiring a successful BPS principal was crucial to the initiative, it required adjustments for all involved. Woods had to establish new relationships with her former fellow principals and with central office staff. Similarly, she and Guiney, who still had a significant voice in the development of the 21st Century Schools, had to figure out ways of sharing responsibilities. It took time, stamina, and determination to create viable responsibilities and authority within the BPE.

During the first year, staff scrambled to keep ahead of dozens of unanticipated questions from schools. Most questions related either to how schools could use their funds or to whether schools had to comply with information requests from central office if they had already given the BPE similar information. BPE staff could deal with the former, but the latter presented difficulties. The first-year work put enormous demands on the knowledge and skill of the organization and its staff.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL AND TECHNICAL DEMANDS ON BPE–BAC OF SUSTAINING AND DEEPENING REFORM

Once the partnership was under way, the BPE learned almost immediately that it had to develop its capacity to respond individually to twenty-seven schools that were beginning reform at different stages of readiness. The BPE–BAC had to balance the culture and context

of each school with the first-year requirements of its reform agenda, constantly reassess the extent to which its decisions and supports were likely to lead schools toward improving instruction, and determine what resources and tools would help schools implement the intense focus on instruction.

We next describe some demands on the BPE–BAC that were associated with

- working in schools that had varying capacity to undertake reform;
- school- and district-level factors leading to collisions between the BPE–BAC and BPS approaches;
- the end of the cohort structure in June 2001, the advent of a set of schools called Effective Practice schools, and the start of the BPE's role as a research and development arm of the BPS.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, we discuss how the BPE–BAC organized strategies to facilitate school and district reform. In describing these factors, our goal is to heighten understanding of what it meant for the BPE–BAC to work as an intermediary organization and, therefore, what other public education funds might need to ponder if they or their constituencies consider this to be a viable role for them.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Demands on the BPE–BAC That Arose from Work at the Schools**

The BPE–BAC experienced many school-related demands. Each required the BPE to develop additional expertise and often to add new staff.

#### **Ongoing Need for Coaches to Ensure Focus on Instruction**

BPE had estimated that schools would have new organizational structures and strategies in place by the end of year one. It would then phase out the role of whole-school-change coaches. However, the BPE learned quickly that this phase of the work required sustained attention and funding over considerably more time. Also, as schools chose their instructional focus, they needed another kind of coach to help teachers implement the instructional strategies they would learn in professional development. Thus, with BAC funds, the BPE created the position of content

6. Woods's school was one of the 21st Century Schools, and she had stood out among the principals by her grasp of how this reform differed from what schools had done before. In retrospect, Guiney realizes that the BPE gained enormous credibility for its work as a result of choosing Woods to direct it. She was not fully aware of the import of this choice at the outset.

7. The end of the 2000–2001 school year marked the end of the Boston Annenberg Challenge as a formal organization in Boston. The BPE–BAC ended and the BPE became the primary intermediary organization once again.

8. This chapter focuses on the kinds of work the BPE–BAC took on as an intermediary organization and the impact on the knowledge and skill needs of the organization. Analyses of the implementation and impact of the different aspects of reform can be found in external evaluation reports prepared for the BPE and the BAC. See Neufeld 1999 and Neufeld and Woodworth 1998, 1999.

coach – a coach with expertise in the school’s instructional focus.

For both sets of coaches, the BPE had to figure out

- what coaches needed to know and know how to do;
- how to develop that knowledge;
- how to build on what the coaches were learning through their work;
- how to provide the coaches with helpful feedback;
- how to evaluate their work.

This was a tall order fraught with challenges for an organization that a short time ago had been awarding grants to individual teachers and schools.<sup>9</sup>

### **Need for Tools to Implement Reform**

BPE required schools to direct their energy toward instruction, but few schools had the knowledge or capacity to do so. As a result, it fell to the BPE to figure out how to help them. For example, if the BPE wanted schools to reassess their use of flexible dollars, it had to devise a way for them to do this. If the BPE wanted schools to use performance data from standardized tests to inform instructional decisions, it had to figure out how to get productive and efficient results.

Most often, BPE responded by creating or finding tools to help schools deal with these problems:

- It developed and tested a Resource Review Guide.
- It developed FAST Track, a computer program that expedited data input and analysis.
- It gave coaches and schools a protocol for looking at student work (LASW).
- It designed a Phase Chart that described developmental stages of implementation so that schools could assess their own progress on the reform Essentials.

With a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant from the federal government, the BPE garnered additional resources to assess and improve the work. The grant also enabled the BPE to create a new tool, a “coaches’ binder” that assembled in one place all the information schools needed to connect coaching to whole-school improvement.

*BPE required schools to direct their energy toward instruction, but few schools had the knowledge or capacity to do so.*

### **Transferring Capacity to School-Based Leaders**

Initially, the BPE provided schools with externally funded supports, such as the coaches, that enabled them to focus on instruction. As the end of the grant cycle grew near, the BPE–BAC turned its attention to what schools would need to sustain the new instructionally focused practices without the coaches, for example, and/or how to work with schools to find ways to continue external help when it was needed. Toward this end, it created Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) networking meetings and asked coaches to transfer leadership skills to others in the school. With respect to LASW, the BPE–BAC created a series of professional development sessions designed to help teachers and others learn how to facilitate these sessions.

### **Facing Weaknesses in School-Based Leadership**

Throughout the reform effort, the BPE–BAC faced the reality that a few schools lacked leadership from the principal for implementing reform and/or commitment from the teachers to do the work. In this area, BPE–BAC felt the limits of its authority as an intermediary organization. It could not insist on cooperation. Nor could it remove a principal who appeared incompetent or unwilling any more than it could replace teachers who refused to implement practices voted on

9. Neufeld and Woodworth (1997) elaborated the complexities that arose from the early work in schools and from getting the coaching work right and continued their analysis of the coach role in two later reports (1998, 1999). Neufeld (1999) focused on whole-school-change coaches.

*In becoming a school reform intermediary organization, the BPE–BAC had to strive to become the kind of responsive learning organization it hoped the schools would become.*

by their colleagues. Given its limited options, the BPE–BAC stopped funding schools that did not demonstrate a genuine commitment to the reform agenda. Assuredly, other schools noted this action. Nonetheless, the strategy of cutting off uncooperative schools did little to improve implementation in others.

Ultimately, for BPE–BAC to remain effective, it became critical, especially during the last two years, for BPS to join it in establishing procedures for applying district pressure and support to schools that seemed uncommitted to or unable to implement the reform. These procedures gave the BPE–BAC “authority by association.” When schools did not implement the reform effectively, the BPE–BAC cohort director and the BPS superintendent and deputy superintendents discussed each situation, then visited schools together. This collaboration enhanced the BPE–BAC’s authority and the resources brought to bear on schools that were struggling with the reform initiative.

Even with “authority by association,” however, the BPE–BAC had to convince schools that its work had merit. To the extent that the BPS, teachers, and principals saw value in what the BPE–BAC proposed, they continued to grant it authority. This meant that the BPE–BAC had to be cautious in developing its tools and strategies and had to figure out the right entry points for reform so that its work would be seen as beneficial. The BPE–BAC had to be aware of the latest research findings and strategies for technical assistance. It had to ensure that each school with which it worked had the opportunity and requisite supports to succeed in reform. In becoming a school reform intermediary organization, the BPE–BAC had to strive to become the kind of responsive learning organization it hoped the schools would become. All of this meant that the BPE–BAC had to take a far longer view of its role in reform than it envisioned at the outset.

### **Demands on the BPE–BAC That Arose from the District Context**

One reason for creating intermediary organizations is to bring to bear on school reform the knowledge, skill, and independence of an organization unhampered by the traditions, policies, and practices of the district or school. However, even though the BPE–BAC was formally independent of the district, its work was influenced and constrained by many of the same factors that impinge on the district and schools. An outside perspective may enable an intermediary organization to highlight policies and practices that thwart improvement, but an outside perspective will not enable the intermediary organization to disregard the district context.

In this section, we detail several examples of how the district context was of great concern to the BPE–BAC and how the BPE–BAC addressed these challenges. In describing the BPE–BAC’s responses, we aim to highlight the range of knowledge and skill needed by the BPE–BAC, and we emphasize the ways in which dealing directly with the district context led the BPE–BAC to take a more public and political posture than it had ever previously taken.

### **Alternate Approaches to Implementing Standards**

Both the BPE–BAC and the BPS were committed to implementing standards-based reform in all of the district’s schools. But they began their work with different ideas, resources, and capacities for moving ahead.

The BPE–BAC invested much training and time with coaches, teachers, and principals to help them learn how to look at student work in teams, assess the work against standards, and assess the quality of the assignments and strategies teachers had used. In addition, teachers were asked to discuss what follow-up they would use to improve their assignments and instruction to help students improve their work. The BPE–BAC saw LASW sessions as the arenas for discussing issues of the quality of student work and implications for instruction.

In contrast, the BPS had begun to implement standards before the BAC funding began to support the LASW professional development sessions. Some key



central office administrators were not convinced that the BPE–BAC’s approach was one they wanted to replicate or could replicate in light of its demands for on-site coaching support. In addition, some approached the implementation of standards-based reform as they would any new policy – through relying upon explicit directions for the use of newly developed tools. For example, the BPS created guidelines for a series of products to be completed by students and Task Descriptions – checklists for teachers to follow as they assigned and graded the students’ products. The BPS approach assumed that by providing teachers with explicit directions about the requirements for students’ work that met standards it would enable teachers to understand these standards and also move them toward new teaching strategies that would enable students to meet the standards.

These two competing approaches – LASW and products/Task Descriptions – led to problems in Cohort I schools, where teachers objected to having to implement two approaches to standards reform. Given the choice, teachers often preferred the Task Descriptions, which were faster and less threatening to use. The Task Descriptions neither required them to share work in small groups, nor to pay explicit attention to changing instruction. In meetings and private discussions, the BPE–BAC objected to the required products and Task Descriptions, arguing that they were low level, counter to the goals of standards-based reform, and unlikely to lead to changes in teaching and learning.<sup>10</sup> The district acknowledged the limitations of the Task Descriptions and allowed schools to use other rubrics to assess student work. However, teachers continued to use the Task Descriptions.

### **Approaches to Principal Professional Development**

The BPE–BAC and the BPS agreed that principals must be informed about instruction and the new strategies their teachers were learning if they were to have an effective leadership role. Yet, many years into the reform, monthly sessions for all 127 principals were still very brief and lacked a coherent focus, and half the session time was spent on operations issues. As a result, the BPE–BAC held its own principals’ meetings. But the demands on principals’ time were enormous, and principals urged the BPE–BAC to collaborate with the BPS on their professional development. The BPE–BAC was invited to join the BPS in

developing the new approach to professional development for principals and headmasters which began during the 1999–2000 school year. Collaboratively, they planned the principals’ summer retreat and all-day meetings held five times during the year. Each meeting included attention to instruction and time for principals to meet in cohort and school-level groups. This represented another way in which the BPE–BAC and the BPS extended their collaboration.

### **Pressure for Increases in Standardized-Test Scores**

In Boston, as in many districts, standardized-test scores have taken on increasingly serious consequences for students and schools. The district has tied students’ Stanford Achievement Test, ninth edition (SAT-9) scores to decisions about promotion, retention, and access to specialized remedial services. The state requires students to take the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests (MCAS), given in a number of grades and tied to state standards. Beginning in 2003, high school students will have to pass MCAS at the tenth-grade level in order to graduate from high school. As a result, there is enormous pressure on teachers and students to increase students’ test scores.

In theory, testing should not conflict with the BPS/BPE–BAC reform strategy, which postulates increased student achievement as the result of good instruction. However, the BPE–BAC faced challenges in sustaining that position and maintaining attention to teacher professional development. First, it could not promise that front-loading attention to teachers’ learning would quickly increase test scores. Its approach to reform relied on steady, meaningful improvements in instruction. Second, demands for higher test scores are a reality to principals, teachers, and district leadership. Yet focusing on the immediate goal of improving test scores might divert attention from the long-term reform agenda or even undermine it. Third, the BPE–BAC encouraged teachers to use a range of assessment strategies to determine student achievement and, most important, to provide

10. Based on their work in other districts as well as Boston, Neufeld and Woodworth (1998) specifically addressed the serious limits of Task Descriptions.

themselves with feedback on instructional strategies. These approaches to assessment were more complex than that required by a standardized test.

The immediate problem for the BPE-BAC was how to keep its work from being judged prematurely, on the basis of standardized-test results. It had to resist short-term interventions in favor of helping teachers improve how they teach, especially their lowest-performing students, and implementing performance assessments that would indicate students' progress towards high-quality work. As a result, the BPE-BAC worked to develop and strengthen performance assessments that provide alternate ways of looking at student progress and to develop tools that allow schools to track these data efficiently.

#### **Limitations Related to the District's Negotiated Teacher Contract**

The BPE-BAC worked with teachers in the context of their negotiated agreement with the BPS. In implementing its reform agenda, however, the BPE-BAC found a number of contract provisions hindering the learning communities desired in schools. We identified two areas in which the negotiated agreement provided a difficult context. One was the Boston Teachers' Union (BTU) contract provisions for teacher transfer, bumping, and hiring. The contract in force at the time enabled more-senior teachers to appropriate positions from satisfactory new teachers through the transfer process. In addition, there was nothing to require that teachers transferring to a school be selected by the school's teacher selection team or agree to implement the school's instructional focus and practices.

At the very least, these provisions led to two problems. First, new teachers who had worked hard and were making good progress in growth and team involvement may have had to leave the school against the wishes of the principal and other teachers. From the BPE-BAC's perspective, this meant that teachers in whom it had invested large sums of money could be lost to the schools. Second, this contract provision made it difficult to create sustainable teams of teachers to implement new instructional strategies. Having to incorporate a teacher new to

the school who either was not yet trained in that school's program or who refused to learn and use the program contradicted basic assumptions undergirding the reform.

Another problem was that the BTU contract stipulated that two-thirds of the teachers in a given school must approve changes such as schedule changes. This policy meant that one-third plus one teacher could stymie a faculty's desire to create a block schedule or to bank time for professional development. In addition, teachers had considerable discretion over how they used their planning time. The two-thirds contract provision led to situations in which well over half of the teachers in a school wanted to make schedule changes to support reform but were stymied by their dissenting colleagues. The BPE-BAC was under considerable internal pressure to figure out how to address these issues. Yet, the BPE-BAC, as an intermediary organization, was not the entity that would negotiate a new contract.

#### **Limited Capacity at the District Level**

Although some high-level central office administrators participated in professional development for principals/headmasters, these learning opportunities did not always engender the depth and breadth of understanding they needed to implement the reform agenda. As a result, BPE-BAC found itself somewhat at odds with BPS central office staff in two arenas.

First, some central office administrators who worked directly with schools and/or teacher leaders still viewed the implementation of standards-based reform differently than the BPE-BAC. For example, BPS's design of the standards-facilitator role, in place until the end of the 1998–1999 school year, did not encourage the kinds of teacher reflection about practice that the BPE-BAC deemed essential.<sup>11</sup>

Second, BPS internal policies and practices devolved responsibility for professional development to many different units within the BPS. Until the 1999–2000 school year, the district had not developed an overarching plan for teachers' professional

11. See Huebner and Neufeld 1999 for a detailed discussion of this role and the limits of central office capacity to support it.

development or ensured that teachers' learning opportunities were connected to the district's reform agenda.<sup>12</sup> As a result, professional development did not always support whole-school reform efforts and sometimes even contradicted the kinds of instructional practices schools were trying to implement.<sup>13</sup>

The BPE–BAC could neither operate as if these central office professional development practices did not exist, nor put alternative strategies in place. Instead, the BPE–BAC turned to new organizational structures.

### **BPE–BAC-Initiated Strategies to Facilitate the Work of School and District Reform**

Throughout the development of its partnership with the BPS, the BPE–BAC initiated a number of inter-organizational structures that had been part of BPE's original proposal. These structures included two standing committees: the Annenberg Working Group (AWG), made up of the partners participating in the BAC, largely key BPS and BPE–BAC reform leaders; and the Resource Action Team (REACT), made up of two principals, top BPS administrators responsible for funding and personnel, Ellen Guiney, and BPE's policy director. These committees met in addition to regular one-to-one meetings between BPE–BAC and BPS.

The structures had two goals: to increase coherence and communication to the schools about school reform, and to address systemic issues that interfered with schools' efforts to improve instruction and increase student achievement.

#### **Annenberg Working Group**

The BAC was a complex arrangement of players from inside and outside the system from the outset. Besides the BPE, the BAC included Harvard University, which received a major grant; the Center for Collaborative Education, which coordinates Boston's Pilot Schools – its in-district, charter-like schools; and the Center for Leadership Development, which is run by the BPS but jointly governed by the Boston Teachers' Union. The AWG was created to bring together these partners to monitor implementation and to keep the reform effort moving forward constructively and consistently. The superintendent agreed to attend at least half of each meeting and, for the most part, did so.

The AWG aimed to get beyond logistics and information sharing to become a problem-solving body.

*Professional development did not always support whole-school-reform efforts and sometimes even contradicted the kinds of instructional practices schools were trying to implement.*

To this end, it can cite two important accomplishments. One was its collaboration on the Plan for Whole-School Change chart, adopted by the Boston School Committee, to unify the reform effort across the district and guide schools in defining what constitutes evidence of an improving school. Second, the group advised the superintendent on important issues such as how to measure a school's progress in the reform, what accountability mechanisms to use, and how to implement the literacy models approved by the district for schools' use.

Ultimately, however, the AWG did not function effectively as a problem-solving group. It lacked specific focus and, as a result, dealt with too many issues. It had become too large to work effectively as a group. It tended to operate in a crisis management mode, which meant that its planned agenda gave way to discussions of immediate concerns. Meetings were frequently rescheduled due to time conflicts and the travel plans of key members. Much of the work began to take place in other, more targeted venues. While there was collaboration, it was not taking place within the AWG.

12. For a thorough discussion of limitations of current professional development planning and spending practices in a number of urban districts, see Miles and Hornbeck 2000.

13. During the 1999–2000 school year, the BPS outlined its approach to professional development to the school committee and took steps to align and increase professional development resources targeted to whole-school reform.

### Resource Action Team

The superintendent convened the Resource Action Team (REACT) at BPE-BAC's request to study and overcome barriers to schools' effective use of human, financial, and time resources. The REACT team is made up of top administrators, school principals, and BPE-BAC policy experts. As the 21st Century initiative got underway, the schools found that district policies, practices, and contracts often blocked them from using their resources to most effectively improve instruction. REACT's methodology involves researching school-based problems through case studies and bringing to bear interdepartmental expertise to analyze and solve these problems. The case studies start with a problem in a school and build up to an analysis of the systemic forces that led to the problem. Working with the case studies, REACT's members use their expertise to examine the problems schools face and identify how the district needs to change to address those problems. BPE-BAC does the time-consuming work of interviewing and listening to people in both schools and the district offices, then preparing the analysis that illuminates events. The BPS delegates authority to REACT, since the administrators who participate have the power to make changes in policy and practice.

In the first year, REACT documented a host of school-level problems and made recommendations that resulted in some important school-level solutions. Since then, REACT has concentrated on fixing root problems rather than those of single schools. It has effected several major policy changes. For example, as a result of a REACT report on the fragmented spending of professional development funds, the district tightened its oversight of professional development and established spending guidelines. At the

*REACT demonstrated the potential for an intermediary organization to have a significant impact on the district and schools.*

end of school year 2000–2001, the BPS and the BPE agreed that it was important to take another look at the coherence of professional development spending. REACT was scheduled to update the initial analysis for the 2001–2002 school year.

REACT also developed a platform for teacher contract reform strategically linked to the district's reform initiative. REACT documented the urgency of addressing these recurring problems of teacher transfer and the required two-thirds votes (detailed above). Though these contract provisions had been considered intractable, the joint deliberations of the BPS and the BPE in REACT led to a decision that they were too critical to ignore. Unlike the professional development report, however, REACT agreed that the case studies and paper pertaining to teacher contract reform should be published independently by the BPE.

Taking responsibility for this publication was a bold step into dangerous territory for the BPE. The BPE needed to figure out how to publish its findings and recommendations without appearing to engage in teacher bashing. Initial BTU response to the BPE-BAC report, circulated in spring of 2000, was extremely negative and resulted in a work-to-rule job action that continued through that school year and into the next.

Nonetheless, several changes advocated by BPE were incorporated into the final contract, and they have made a difference in building collegial teams at schools. The provision that allowed senior teachers to take the positions of first-year teachers who would have liked to stay was eliminated. Important changes to deadlines increased a school's opportunity to hire new teachers who were a better fit with the school's reform plans. Finally, the percentage of votes needed to make major instructional changes (although not the school schedule) dropped from two-thirds to 55 percent, a more manageable percentage to attain.

These examples from REACT demonstrate the potential for an intermediary organization to have a significant impact on the district and schools, the extensive capacity needed by the intermediary organization to fulfill this potential, and the fragility of the intermediary organization's position, in light of its capacity to create conflict as well as resolve significant problems.

## **The End of the Cohort Structure and a New Role for the BPE**

Spring 2001 marked an important point in the organization of the BPE–BAC itself and in the partnership between the BPE–BAC and the BPS. In May, Superintendent Payzant notified twenty-six schools that they had achieved the status of Effective Practice (EP) Schools (the creation of the EP category was coupled with the end of the district's cohort organization). Their status was made public at a ceremony held at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston. These schools – drawn largely from Cohorts I and II but with some from Cohort III<sup>14</sup> – had demonstrated considerable progress in implementing the Essentials and had also begun to show clear, important progress in student achievement.

The announcement coincided with the end of the BAC and, for the BPE, the beginning of a new role and responsibilities with schools and the BPS. In this new role, the BPE works exclusively with EP schools to deepen the schools' accomplishments, to document their success so they can inform the work of other BPE schools, and to collaborate with EP schools on initiatives that complement the Essentials.

At the top of the BPE's agenda with EP schools is piloting a new "lab site" model for coaching called Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL), to accelerate and deepen professional development.<sup>15</sup> Other plans include developing a network of EP principals and headmasters to identify the learning that helped them to become effective leaders, determine what these principals need to continue their learning, and use their learning and experiences to inform principal/headmaster preparation in Boston. Although this new work will be with only twenty-six schools, it will develop and pilot ideas for potential use across the entire district.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion: Demands on the BPE–BAC as an Intermediary Organization**

The BPE–BAC became a different organization as a result of leading school reform in two cohorts of schools. It greatly expanded its role and its in-house capacity. As the BPE took on the challenge of working as a research and development arm of the district, it had to retool itself for the work at hand. Throughout,

*The BPE–BAC created a working relationship with the BPS which enabled it to have a significant impact on practices and policies. In doing so, it became both more influential and more vulnerable.*

the organization had to maintain its relationships with the schools, the district, and its own staff. None of this work has been easy.

The BPE–BAC created a working relationship with the BPS which enabled it to have a significant impact on practices and policies. In doing so, it became both more influential and more vulnerable. By standing at the forefront of reform and supporting two cohorts of schools, it gained standing among the schools and with the district. By allying with the district on important issues of policy and practice – such as professional development spending – the BPE–BAC increased its value to the superintendent. By taking a public position on contractual issues – albeit one supported by the BPS and the mayor – it incurred the wrath of the BTU which could stymie the BPE–BAC efforts. The BPE–BAC gained considerable influence, but it had to consider the political nature and consequences of its actions more than ever.

14. There were, in all, four cohorts of reforming schools in Boston. Cohort II began the year after Cohort I, etc.

15. This model is based on work being done in New York's public schools by Lucy McCormick Calkins at Teachers College, Columbia University. Each EP school will have the full benefit of a coach with expertise in aspects of Readers' and Writers' workshops for several six-week cycles during the year. The workshop approach is one of the superintendent's priorities for the 2002–2003 school year.

16. This section was adapted from a memo presented to the board of trustees of the BPE on October 2, 2001.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES:  
THE BOSTON PLAN  
FOR EXCELLENCE AS AN  
INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION

The BPE–BAC was able to work effectively because it brought certain strengths in short supply within the BPS and most other urban school districts. We turn next to these strengths and to the challenges the BPE continues to face.

### Strengths

*Stable financial resources.* The BPE’s permanent endowment gives it a base of operating support and financial independence. In addition, receiving the large Annenberg grant of \$2.5 million in the critical early years of reform enabled the BPE to concentrate on designing and implementing the reform rather than on fund-raising.

*An ability to stay focused on instruction.* The BPE does not have to contend with the multiple issues faced by districts and individual schools, which often get in the way of sustained attention to improving instruction.

*Time for reflection, research, and planning.* Although the BPE must resist the temptation to become engaged in so much ongoing work that, like its school and district counterparts, it has little or no time left for the important professional activities of reflection, researching, and planning, the organization most often has been able to include these activities as part of its ongoing work. The BPE sees these activities as essential to developing the next steps of reform, and they are supported by the BPE board.

*Ability to network outside of Boston.* The BPE leaders learned from others engaged in urban school reform through participation in, for example, the Pew Forum, cross-site Annenberg Challenge meetings, and the Public Education Network. Early in the reform, BPE–BAC benefited greatly from a direct connection with strong leadership in New York City Community School District 2 and participating in the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. More recently, BPE benefited from a direct connection with Lucy McCormick Calkins, whose work helped spur

the development of the CCL model of coaching for the EP schools. These organizations and activities engage BPE leadership in conversations about their work and afford them opportunities to learn from others engaged in similar enterprises.

*Freedom to choose which issues to study.* Because of its external status and its partnership with the BPS, the BPE has the capacity to identify issues that it and the district deem problematic and then propose ways to address them collaboratively, with the BPE taking the lead in staffing. In this manner, the BPE–BAC initiated the study of professional development discussed above and supported the study of the impact of BTU practices associated with hiring, transfer, and bumping policies. Operations are easier at the BPE; it can make decisions and expend funds more quickly than the BPS. In addition, the BPE does not have to respond to every issue that presents itself, a luxury that school districts lack.

*Ability to experiment with new roles and practices.* The BPE has the capacity to try out new job possibilities with people it hires and then keep or end these jobs depending on their effectiveness. For example, the BPE–BAC tried to create an administrative assistant position at the high school level to free principals from some administrative work so that they could spend more time on instruction. The position did not work well, and the BPE–BAC terminated it after one year. The BPE–BAC experimented with a range of similar strategies to support literacy development at the high schools. As an intermediary organization, it does not have to commit to a large-scale effort before knowing whether that effort is likely to be effective. It can, as a result, serve as a research and development organization for the district.

*The capacity to produce communications for professional development.* The BPE designs and produces *Focus*, a newsletter that addresses the progress of reform in Boston and includes informative articles about reform in other districts using related strategies. For example, one issue reported on important research in Chicago about links between the quality of teachers’ assignments and the quality of student work. Another issue reviewed the whole-school improvement agenda

and its components to help teachers and principals remember how the parts are connected and are designed to lead to increased student achievement.

These strengths contribute enormously to the BPE's effectiveness, as does the fact that the BPE does not have to run the BPS on a daily basis. The organization has the luxury of being able to focus on a few issues and deal with them in depth. This could not have happened without the agreement and support of the BPS, which granted access to the schools. Nor could the BPE be as strong as it is without the support of its board of trustees, which provides needed flexibility and a reasonable time frame for the work. For example, the BPE board committed the interest on its endowment to support whole-school change and raised funds to support the school-based work. BPE board members take the case for supporting the BPS and its progress to their constituencies. They have been willing to publicize school district problems, such as dysfunctional high schools and a rigid teachers' contract. Board members visit schools at least once each year, developing first-hand knowledge of the work of reform. The board's participation provides the superintendent with a public push to take positions that are unpopular with, for example, the union or the high schools.

## Challenges

The BPE has challenges as well as strengths. Some are associated with the organization's place outside of the formal school system, transforming itself as it tries to change schools. Others arise from the exigencies of doing school reform – from the endless issues that need attention and the temptation to address them all. And some come from trying to change policies and practices of the district.

*Difficulty of getting teachers on board with the reform agenda.* Getting teacher buy-in was a challenge from the outset. This was not a simple task for many reasons, including school cultures in which teacher autonomy was sacrosanct and, therefore, in which individual teachers might feel no compulsion to work with one another in small groups, let alone with the BPE-BAC.<sup>17</sup>

*Questions about BPE's authority.* BPE must continually nurture and sustain enough authority to do its work.

Although it has worked with the BPS as a partner in reform, individual principals and many teachers still consider the BPS as the only authority to shape their work. Indeed, the more work that was demanded of principals and teachers, the more BPE-BAC found it necessary to seek explicit BPS support. Individual principals even suggested that work would have a better chance of being done if the superintendent directed them to do it.<sup>18</sup> Questions about BPE authority become more salient as the reform work continues. It is important that the BPE has now redefined its role in the relationship with the BPS as that of a research and development organization.

*Perception of partisanship on behalf of BPE.* The BPE must walk a fine line to avoid being seen as an organization co-opted by the district. The more the BPE works in collaboration with the BPS, the greater this danger may become. This will be especially likely if the BPE agrees with the BPS on issues that are not supported by principals and teachers.

*The difficulty of assigning credit and shouldering blame.* As an intermediary organization, the BPE has to figure out how to deal with "credit" for the reform. An intermediary organization can only be successful if the district is successful, and the intermediary ultimately benefits if the district garners the public credit. The challenge for the intermediary organization is to figure out how to describe its role for funders and researchers so that partnerships are acknowledged and supported. At some point, the BPE may have to respond to district claims that it did not work appropriately toward fulfilling the reform agenda. It may have to shoulder blame as well as garner credit for its work.

17. The state's (and less often the BPS's) strategy of using average standardized achievement scores to determine school performance, a strategy that masks the impact of individual teachers and the impact of instruction on different racial, ethnic, and SES groups, coupled with the fact that in Boston, as elsewhere, student achievement is not a component of teacher evaluation, provided some teachers with a rationale for concluding that their work was already good enough. The BPS use of disaggregated data will now expose variations in student achievement along a number of dimensions.

18. We are not sure that a request from the superintendent would garner greater compliance with BPE-BAC requests. Certainly, schools have been known to disregard requests from "downtown" with considerable impunity.

*Internal communication issues.* The BPE has had to figure out how to communicate to its own staff, including coaches, its overall plans for reform at the schools and how its work at the district level informs those plans. One challenge was the need to lay out to staff and coaches enough of the reform agenda for them to understand the overall plan, while, at the same time, the overall plan is always under development. The inability to solve this communication issue led, at times, to hard feelings between the BPE–BAC leadership and its coaches and other staff. At times, the coaches thought that the BPE–BAC was losing its independence. Internal communications remain an area for further organizational development.

*Issues in relationship with coaches.* The BPE continues to struggle to get its relationship with coaches right. Hired for their knowledge and skill, coaches have been essential to implementing reform. However, they did not have a hand in designing the reform agenda. This led to different opinions about how to help schools move forward. In addition, coaches were continually frustrated by demands on their time from both the schools and the BPE. The BPE–BAC worked closely with coaches to address these and other issues and achieved some improvements. However, this aspect of BPE’s role remains a challenge.

*The stretch in capacity needed for districtwide scale-up.* Having influenced the BPS to implement new practices across cohorts, the BPE faces the challenge of districtwide scale-up. The BPE–BAC encouraged

Cohort I schools to implement performance-based assessments to collect usable data about students’ progress throughout the year. Although schools varied in what they produced, they tended to agree that the activity advanced their ability to improve teaching and learning. Performance-based assessments, they agreed, were also an important way of demonstrating student learning that supplemented standardized-test scores. The BPS required schools to implement performance assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics during 1999–2000. This new policy was based on the BPE–BAC’s experience with performance-based assessments, the development of the district’s promotion policy and transition services (which demanded that schools measure particular students’ progress throughout the year), the district’s desire for systemwide measures of student progress without waiting for results from the SAT-9 and MCAS, advocacy from several principals for clear expectations about the use of assessment instruments, and the need for the district to identify assessment instruments to help inform instruction. This scale-up required a great deal of work from the schools very quickly, but was not accompanied by sufficient professional development on how to create and analyze performance data in a timely fashion. The challenge for the BPE and the BPS is to find ways to support scale-up that are likely to lead to high-quality practices.

*The danger of becoming overextended.* The BPE faces the challenge of setting realistic parameters for its work. The BPE’s strong partnership with the BPS helped to greatly expand its work. The most dramatic expansion came when the BPE became the BPE–BAC and doubled the number of schools it worked with. This additional school-based work stretched its human resources thin. Scaling back to the twenty-six EP schools was, in part, an effort to avoid becoming overextended and, therefore, subject to the same kinds of capacity dysfunctions that are endemic in the district and schools.

*Having influenced the BPS to implement new practices across cohorts, the BPE faces the challenge of districtwide scale-up.*



## Factors for Future Success

Working with schools to help them improve teaching and learning has been exciting, challenging, and rewarding for the BPE. Working on these issues in partnership with the BPS has, likewise, been exciting, challenging, and rewarding. The work caused the BPE to seek out knowledge and skill with respect to teaching and learning, school organization and culture, and strategies for change. It led the leadership to experiment with ways to transform best practices in literacy instruction, assessment, collaborative school-based planning, and professional development into usable knowledge in a range of schools. And, it led the BPE to work on issues of great significance to the district and its reform agenda.

The partnership has made progress; the role of the BPE is strong. Yet, at the same time, it is potentially unstable and its continued existence depends on

- the ability of the particular people currently in place to get the structural relationship between the BPS and the BPE right so that the relationship outlives the current leadership;
- student outcomes and test scores that support continuation of the reform strategy;
- continued external funding for significant, high-quality coaching and other essential supports;
- the superintendent's willingness and capacity to support internal BPS change that would transform the BPS into a continuous learning organization that can support school reform and improvement;
- the BTU's agreement to changes in supports for teachers, for example, implementation of CCL; and the BTU leadership's success in establishing the Boston union as a participant in school reform;
- the school committee's willingness to continue to support the partnership and role of the BPE;
- the school committee's willingness to continue to shift and add funds to support the reform agenda;
- the school committee's commitment, when the time comes, to select as the next superintendent someone willing to sustain the current reform and work with the BPE as a partner.

*To the extent that an intermediary organization is successful, it becomes susceptible to many of the same interests and political pressures brought to bear on the district.*

## IMPACT OF AND PROSPECTS FOR THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS

Currently, there is great interest in marshaling the forces of external, intermediary organizations to support the implementation of standards-based reform in the nation's cities. The BPE, a local education fund; the BAC, an externally formed organization; and the two organizations operating as the BPE-BAC all fit the description of such organizations as envisioned in the literature. However, as interesting as the idea may be, the potential for such organizations to operate effectively depends on a constellation of conditions that support the role in both the organization and the school district. This role demands a great deal of new knowledge and skill on the part of the external organization, and such organizations are not free of local interests and political pressures. In fact, we would argue that, to the extent that an intermediary organization is successful, it becomes susceptible to many of the same interests and political pressures brought to bear on the district.

BPE-BAC placed itself in the midst of several perplexing questions: How can urban school systems transform themselves so that all students in all schools achieve at high standards? How can we scale up the best of what we know about improving teaching, learning and school organization so that all schools become high-achieving places of learning?

Fullan (2000) argues that we have been unable to answer such questions because we have had too simple an understanding of what it takes to implement reform at the school level and of how the school context, or what he calls the "surrounding

infrastructure,” can influence the course of reform. He suggests that

schools *need* the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them [parents and community, technology, corporate connections, government policy, and the wider teaching profession] a productive one. (p. 583)<sup>19</sup>

Fullan further argues that schools that figure out how to take advantage of external forces can use them to select and integrate innovations, work constantly on connectedness, choose staff development carefully, and work on applying what they learn.<sup>20</sup> By doing this, schools can overcome two enemies of reform – overload and extreme fragmentation. But Fullan’s focus is on the ways in which schools need to figure out and organize what the outside can provide. It is not on what it would take for the outside to actually be organized to provide the appropriate help, nor on what it would take for schools to figure out how to organize the chaotic array of resources.

We agree that schools and districts need to take advantage of what is available in their environments, but we think it is naive to assume that all external, intermediary organizations necessarily have the capacity to support coherent reform that focuses on instruction. Nor do we think it would necessarily be in their interest to do so. As we have demonstrated, taking on such a role fundamentally changes the intermediary organization. Not all intermediary organizations would see this as a benefit.

The story of the BPE–BAC as an intermediary organization is the story of an external force that organized itself and offered its services to a school district and to individual schools. We think it is instructive to consider what it has taken for one such intermediary organization to marshal its forces to get the work done. By doing so, other such organizations might thoughtfully consider whether and how they might take on similar roles in their own school districts.

19. Fullan cites Bryk et al. (1998) as the source of the bracketed list.

20. David K. Cohen (1982) has also written about the role and impact of external, extragovernmental organizations in support of school reform policies.

## References

- Bryk, Anthony, Penny Bender Sebring, David Kerbow, and Sharon Rollow. 1998. *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Cohen, David K. 1982. “Policy and Organization: The Impact of State and Federal Educational Policy on School Governance,” *Harvard Educational Review* 52:4.
- Cohen, Gillian. 2000. “Lessons from the Annenberg Challenge: Intermediary Organizations as Persuasive Agents of Change.” Unpublished masters thesis. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
- Fullan, Michael. 2000. “The Three Stories of Education Reform,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 81:8, 581–584.
- Huebner, T., and B. Neufeld. 1999. “Memo on Standards Facilitators.” Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.
- McDonald, Joseph, Milbrey McLaughlin, and Tom Corcoran. 2000. “Agents of Reform: Role and Function of Intermediary Organizations in the Annenberg Challenge.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.
- Miles, Karen Hawley, and Matthew Hornbeck. 2000. *Rethinking District Professional Development Spending to Support a District CSR Strategy: Version 5.1*. Resource Reallocation no. 3. Arlington, VA: New American Schools.
- Neufeld, Barbara. 1999. “The Boston Annenberg Challenge: Baseline Evaluation Report.” Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.
- Neufeld, Barbara, and Katrina Woodworth. 1997. “Focus on Coaches: A Memo from Education Matters, Inc. to the Boston Plan for Excellence.” Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.
- Neufeld, Barbara, and Katrina Woodworth. 1998. “The Boston Plan for Excellence’s 21st Century Schools Program: First Year Evaluation Report.” Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.
- Neufeld, Barbara, and Katrina Woodworth. 1999. “The Boston Plan for Excellence’s 21st Century Schools Program: Midyear Evaluation Report: 1998–1999.” Cambridge, MA: Education Matters.