

Foundations For Success

Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement

Goals of the Study

The movement to reform education in the U.S. is fundamentally about improving urban public schools. Every debate about standards, testing, governance, busing, vouchers, charter schools, social promotions, class size, and accountability are discussions — at their core — about public education in the cities.

These discussions are worth having, for nowhere does the national resolve to strengthen its educational system face a tougher test than in our inner cities. There, every problem is more pronounced; every solution harder to implement. The burden of not solving these problems or implementing successful improvement strategies has fallen disproportionately on the African American and Latino children, children with disabilities and those learning English who live in the poverty-stricken cores of America's major cities.

The nation cannot afford to ignore these communities, for urban schools enroll a large share of America's children. While there are 16,850 public school districts in the United States, one hundred of those districts serve approximately 23 percent of the nation's students. These districts, many of which are located in urban areas, also serve 40 percent of the country's minority students and 30 percent of the economically disadvantaged students.

This report and the longer-term project of which it is a part focus on the potential role of the school district as an initiator and sustainer of academic improvement. While there has been much research on what makes an effective school, there is relatively little on what makes an effective district. In fact, many see large urban school districts as a source of problems rather than solutions. But for school improvement to be widespread and sustained, and for our nation to reduce racial differences in academic achievement, large urban districts must play a key role.

Over the past several years, the Council of the Great City Schools has embarked on an effort to understand student achievement patterns in large urban school districts and to develop ideas for how more districts can raise achievement. Previous Council research has shown that academic achievement is improving in urban schools and has identified a set of urban school districts that are making the fastest improvements, both overall and in narrowing differences among racial groups.

This report extends the existing research by examining the experiences of three large urban school districts (and a portion of a fourth) that have raised academic performance for their district as a whole, while also reducing racial differences in achievement. It

attempts to use the experiences of these school districts to address the following questions:

1. What was the historical, administrative, and programmatic context within which student achievement improved in these districts?
2. How can we characterize the nature of the changes in student achievement, and what were the sources of these changes (specific schools, subgroups of student, etc.)?
3. What district-level strategies were used to improve student achievement and reduce racial disparities?
4. What was the connection between policies, practices, and strategies at the district level and actual changes in teaching and learning in the classroom?

The Council and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) intend to use the answers to these questions to identify hypotheses for further study of promising practices at the district level and to develop recommendations for technical assistance in support of reform efforts in large urban school districts. Further, the Council and MDRC hope to encourage a line of discourse and research regarding the role of large urban districts in school reform.

The Council's Achievement Gap Task Force, together with its Research Advisory Group (which is made up of nationally-known researchers and practitioners), identified three case study districts. These districts: Houston Independent School District; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; Sacramento City Unified School District; and a portion of a fourth (the Chancellor's District in New York City) were selected because they met the following criteria:

- They demonstrated a trend of improved overall student achievement.
- They demonstrated a trend of narrowing differences between white and minority students.
- They were improving more rapidly than their respective states.
- They were a set of geographically representative urban school districts.

What was the Methodology for the Study?

This research is based on (1) retrospective case studies of these districts and (2) comparisons of their experiences with other districts that have not yet seen similar improvements. The case study districts are used to develop hypotheses about the reasons for improvements in achievement. The comparison districts provide a partial test of the hypotheses emerging from the analysis of the case study districts. While the comparison districts cannot provide definitive support for the hypotheses developed in the case study districts, they were used to discard possible hypotheses and to better understand what is unusual about the case study districts.

The Educational Challenges Facing Urban School Districts

The large urban school districts examined in this report face a common set of challenges that exist above the level of individual schools. The primary challenges include:

Unsatisfactory Academic Achievement

The reform efforts were driven by the concern that schools were failing their students — especially low-income and minority students — and that improving this pattern was the district's most important priority. In both the case study districts and the comparison districts, achievement for minority and disadvantaged students was noticeably below that for white and more affluent students. And the differences by race and economic status increased as students grew older.

Political Conflict

In each of the three case study districts, there had been a period when the school board was divided into factions, and much of its activity revolved around disputes over resources and influence. The school board's "zero sum" arguments often dealt with salaries, hiring and firing decisions, student assignment procedures, and school construction and closings. Factional disputes between department heads, the board versus the superintendent, superintendents versus principals, or principals versus teachers were common and often became serious and personal. At times, infighting was intense because the district was a major employer (especially for groups that historically faced discrimination in the labor market) and because participation in educational politics was a stepping-stone for higher political office. As a result, the leadership in these districts was often not focused primarily on improving student achievement.

Inexperienced Teaching Staff

Each of the case study districts acknowledged that they needed to deal with the fact that much of their teaching staff was relatively inexperienced and suffered from high teacher turnover, especially once teachers gained some initial experience. In part this was due to the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers when school districts in the surrounding areas could offer teachers higher salaries, better facilities, a less challenged student body, and were seen as less stressful working environments. These difficulties were compounded by the limited training that the districts offered new teachers before they entered the classroom.

Low Expectations and a Lack of Demanding Curriculum

In each of the districts, staff felt overwhelmed at times by the great challenges that many of their lower-income and minority students faced. This led some staff to reduce expectations for achievement in the lower grades and justify the students' lack of progress. In the higher grades, where instruction and expectations can differ starkly across groups of students, low-income and minority students were under-represented in college preparatory and advanced placement classes. In some schools that served primarily low-income and minority students, the more demanding classes were offered infrequently or not at all.

Lack of Instructional Coherence

The study found that all districts suffered from having different educational initiatives and curricula in individual schools. Likewise, the districts discovered a lack of alignment between instruction and the state standards. Each of the districts had recently experimented with site-based management, which had produced a variety of different educational strategies within each district. This often proved confusing to school-level

staff and difficult for the district to support. Additionally, the professional development strategy was fragmented; professional development was not focused on a consistent educational strategy (either of instruction or curricula) and often consisted of one-shot workshops on a series of topics.

High Student Mobility

Previous research suggests that moves between schools can undermine student learning. This problem may be exacerbated by variations in instructional approach. District leaders believed that the high rate at which students moved from one school to another within the districts disturbed the continuity of instruction students received in subjects such as reading and math. Some staff also noticed higher rates of mobility in the low-income student population and considered that another strike against their ability to achieve.

Unsatisfactory Business Operations

One of the most frustrating aspects of daily life for teachers and principals in ailing urban schools is the difficulty they face in getting the basic necessities to operate a school. All too often, school facilities were poorly maintained or dangerous, students were taught by substitutes for part or even all of the school year, and teachers lacked an adequate supply of books and materials. At times district business operations were managed by staff who had been promoted because of tenure in the district, rather than their particular qualifications. Administrative systems were outdated and cumbersome, and new expertise was needed to bring them up to speed. In some of the districts there was the perception — and too often the reality — that direct political influence by school board members and other elected officials affected decisions such as hiring, promotions and assignments, and contracts for supplies or services. Finally, school level staff viewed the central office as unresponsive, bureaucratic, and micromanaging, rather than working to find real solutions.

Three Key Contextual Factors That Affect Change

1. The Uncertainty of Funding

None of the case study districts were in desperate financial circumstances, but each of the districts faced budget pressures, in some years had to cut back spending, and had lost bond elections to raise funds for capital improvements.

2. State Focus on Accountability

Evolving state accountability systems with strong academic achievement goals helped focus local attention on student achievement. Thus, each of the three case study districts operated within a broader policy context that emphasized student academic achievement, concrete goals for improvement, and incentives and consequences for performance.

3. Local Politics and Power Relations

The process of decision-making in the case study districts was complex and had to accommodate many different interests. However, there were important differences from older, central city districts where interest group politics are more volatile and where the vast majority of residents and the student body are from a single racial group.

Key Findings

The Need to Establish Preconditions for Reform

The individual histories of these faster-improving urban school districts suggest that political and organizational stability over a prolonged period and consensus on educational reform strategies are necessary prerequisites to meaningful change. Such a foundation includes:

- A new role for the school board whereby a new board majority (or other governing unit) focuses on policy level decisions that support improved student achievement rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district.
- A shared vision between the chief executive of the school district and the school board regarding the goals and strategies for reform.
- A capacity to diagnose instructional problems that the school system could solve.
- An ability to flesh out the leadership's vision for reform and sell it to city and district stakeholders.
- A focus on revamping district operations to serve and support the schools.
- A matching of new resources to support the vision for reform.

What Were the Districts' Strategies for Success?

The case study districts' approaches to reform shared the following elements in common:

- They focused on student achievement and specific achievement goals, on a set schedule with defined consequences; aligned curricula with state standards; and helped translate these standards into instructional practice.
- They created concrete accountability systems that went beyond what the states had established in order to hold district leadership and building-level staff personally responsible for producing results.
- They focused on the lowest-performing schools. Some districts provided additional resources and attempted to improve the stock of teachers and administrators at their lowest-performing schools.
- They adopted or developed districtwide curricula and instructional approaches rather than allowing each school to devise their own strategies.
- They supported these districtwide strategies at the central office through professional development and support for consistent implementation throughout the district.
- They drove reforms into the classroom by defining a role for the central office that entailed guiding, supporting, and improving instruction at the building level.
- They committed themselves to data-driven decision-making and instruction. They gave early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals as well as

trained and supported them as the data were used to diagnose teacher and student weaknesses and make improvements.

- They started their reforms at the elementary grade levels instead of trying to fix everything at once.
- They provided intensive instruction in reading and math to middle and high school students, even if it came at the expense of other subjects.

How Did the Comparison Districts Fare in Their Efforts?

While the comparison districts claimed to be doing similar things, there were several important differences that prevented them from achieving similar gains:

- They lacked a clear consensus among key stakeholders about district priorities or an overall strategy for reform.
- They lacked specific, clear standards, achievement goals, timelines and consequences.
- The district's central office took little or no responsibility for improving instruction or creating a cohesive instructional strategy throughout the district.
- The policies and practices of the central office were not strongly connected to intended changes in teaching and learning in the classrooms.
- The districts gave schools multiple and conflicting curricula and instructional expectations, which they were left to decipher on their own.

What Were the Trends in Academic Achievement?

- The academic achievement data collected as part of this study suggest that the districts in this study had indeed made progress in academic achievement and that this progress had begun to reduce racial disparities in student performance on standardized tests. Progress in each of the case study districts, moreover, generally outpaced statewide gains.
- This was particularly the case for the low end of the achievement distribution. The patterns of change and the magnitude of changes do not suggest that they were driven by small numbers of schools or students or were the sole result of state "effects."
- Progress was greatest at the elementary school level, and there was evidence of some improvement in achievement trends at the middle school level. However, these school districts are not yet generally making progress on overall achievement and racial differences in high schools.

Implications for Next Steps

In many ways, these findings represent good practices for any type of organization: set priorities and specific goals; identify appropriate roles for parts of the organization; select or develop the techniques needed to move toward the goals given the local context, staff, and student body; collect and use information to track progress, identify needed

refinements and areas of special needs; and stay on course long enough for the effort to pay off. There are few surprises here, just hard work.

But taking these common-sensical steps in the complex world of urban school districts with many diverse stakeholders, frequent leadership changes, competing priorities, limited resources, and difficult-to-manage bureaucracies is not a straightforward process. A key contribution of this study, therefore, is to suggest some priorities for urban school districts and to provide concrete examples of how several urban school districts successfully focused on student achievement and what they saw as necessary steps toward improvement.

This study is exploratory in nature, and is not designed to yield definitive conclusions regarding the factors that drove achievement in these particular districts. However, the evidence gathered in these districts does support a few tentative conclusions that further technical assistance and research efforts should endeavor to test. These hypotheses are interrelated, but can be loosely categorized into several topic areas: the foundations for reform; instructional coherence; and data-driven decision-making. In particular, the evidence in this report suggests the following hypotheses regarding the role of the district in urban school reform.

Building the Foundations for Reform

- The nature of the local political and public discourse about schools is important and can be changed. But first, school board, community leaders, and superintendents must agree that improved student achievement is their top priority.
- A sustained focus on enacting effective reforms is possible when a common vision is developed that is supported by a stable majority of the board, and when the school community and general public are engaged in providing feedback and support.

Developing Instructional Coherence

- The central school district office can play a key role in setting district-wide goals, standards for learning, and instructional objectives; creating a consistency of instruction in every school; and supporting the improvement of instruction and the effective delivery of curricula throughout the district.
- Urban school districts face specific challenges. Providing a systematic, uniform, and clearly defined approach to elementary instruction may improve student learning and have an even larger positive effect on the disadvantaged and minority children served by these districts.
- Giving teachers extensive professional development to ensure the delivery of a specific curriculum may be more effective at improving instruction and raising student achievement than distributing professional development resources widely across schools or educational initiatives.
- Requiring, encouraging, or providing incentives for highly skilled administrators and teachers to transfer to low-performing schools may improve the stock of staff at those schools and help disadvantaged and minority children succeed.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

- Teachers may be able to use achievement data as a tool to help them improve instructional practice, diagnose students' specific instructional needs, and increase student learning/achievement. However, teachers and principals need such data given to them at regular intervals from the start of the academic year, along with training in the use of these data to diagnose areas of weakness.
- Students may be assigned to classroom situations that are more beneficial to them if administrators carefully use assessment data in placement decisions to identify students with the potential to do more demanding work. This practice may also increase the odds that disadvantaged and minority students will be able to qualify for high-level classes.

The experiences of these districts, and the perspectives of the leaders in these districts, suggest one final hypothesis: doing all of these things together can have a much larger impact on the performance of a district than doing any one of them alone. Indeed, unless a district tries to reform their system as a whole, trying any one of these approaches may be a wasted effort.

In the end, the findings in this study underscore the importance of the district as a unit of analysis for research and as a level of intervention for reform. It is important next to refine the hypotheses regarding promising practices at the district level and establish a strong empirical basis for understanding the relationship between these educational improvement strategies and changes in teaching, learning, and student achievement in large urban school systems. The findings also underscore the importance in testing these strategies in diverse settings as possible, so as to establish their applicability to the systems where reform is most needed.