

# Urban School Systems and Education Reform: Key Lessons From a Case Study of Large Urban School Systems

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*Foundations for Success*, a study conducted by MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools, examined the reform efforts of 3 large urban school districts and a portion of a 4th that had been successful in improving student achievement and reducing racial achievement gaps. This article summarizes the key findings of the study and discusses the implications for research and technical assistance. A full description of the study, methodology, and findings can be found in *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement* (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

## GOALS OF THE STUDY

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

These discussions are worth having, for nowhere does the national resolve to strengthen its educational system face a tougher test than in our innercities.

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<sup>1</sup>The full report is available at [http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/Foundations\\_Abstract.pdf](http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/Foundations_Abstract.pdf) or <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/47/full.pdf>. In addition, a video presentation summarizing the key findings from the report can be found at [http://www.mdrc.org/announcement\\_hp\\_32.html](http://www.mdrc.org/announcement_hp_32.html).

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 African American and Latino children, children with disabilities, and those children 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 nearly 14,000 public school districts in the United States, the largest 100 of these districts contain 17% of all public schools, employ 21% of all public school teachers, and serve approximately 23% of the nation's students—including 30% of the nation's economically disadvantaged students and 40% of its minority students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Most of these districts are located in or near major cities. Clearly, any successful attempt to address the major challenges facing public education in this country and to reduce racial achievement gaps must address the issues facing these school systems.

The *Foundations for Success* study, and the long-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 improve student performance. 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.

*Foundations for Success* extends the existing research by examining the experiences of three large urban school districts (and a portion of a fourth) that have simultaneously raised academic performance throughout their districts and reduced 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 each of these school systems?
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 students, 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 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.

### How Were the Case Study Districts Selected?

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 over a period of at least 3 years.
- They demonstrated a trend of narrowing differences between White and minority students.
- They showed consistent improvement over at least a 3-year period and were improving more rapidly than their respective states.
- They comprised a set of geographically representative urban school districts.

### What Was the Methodology for the Study?

This research is based on (a) retrospective case studies of these districts and (b) 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>In addition to extensive document review, the field research consisted of two 2-day visits to each case-study district, and one 2-day visit to the comparison districts. The first visit was focused on the district leadership, including the superintendent, executive staff, and board members. The field research team also interviewed leaders of teacher and principal organizations, as well as informed observers such as local reporters. The second site visit focused on collecting school-level information and connecting it to district-level reforms. During this visit, the field research team conducted focus groups with teachers and principals from a variety of schools throughout the district and followed up with key district personnel. The methodology is discussed in detail in Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002).

## THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Prior to embarking on a period of effective reform, the large urban school districts examined in this report faced a common set of challenges. These challenges appeared in the case-study, as well as comparison, districts. Moreover, they appeared to exist above the level of individual schools. The primary challenges included the following:

### Unsatisfactory Academic Achievement

The reform efforts in these districts were driven by the concern that schools were failing their students—especially low-income and minority students—and that improving student achievement 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 and Lack of Focus on Improving Achievement

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" conflicts 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 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 facts that much of their teaching staff was relatively inexperienced and that they suffered from high teacher turnover, especially once teachers gained some initial experience. Moreover, less experienced teachers with fewer credentials were often concentrated in the schools with the greatest needs. This was due in part to the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers when school districts in the surrounding areas could offer teachers higher salaries, better facilities, a less chal-

lenged 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 could differ starkly across groups of students, low-income and minority students were underrepresented 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 field research indicated that all of the districts in the study suffered from the presence of disparate, often incompatible, educational initiatives and curricula in place at individual schools throughout the district. 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. District leaders believed that this lack of coherence across the district was a key impediment to instructional improvement.

### High Student Mobility

Previous research suggests that student mobility from school to school can undermine learning. This problem may be exacerbated by variations in instructional approach. Prior to each district's reforms, 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. District leaders believed that the higher rates of mobility in the low-income and minority student populations exacerbated the consequences of instructional inconsistency across schools and undermined students' 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, challenging, 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 individual histories of reform efforts and the process of improving instruction and achievement varied in important ways across these districts. Nevertheless, our retrospective study of the reforms in the case-study districts revealed some important themes regarding the pathway to reform.

## 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 the following:

- The creation of a shared vision between the chief executive of the school district, the school board, and key stakeholders throughout the district regarding the goals and strategies for reform. This vision should be focused on improving student achievement above all other goals.
- The evolution of 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 diagnosis of the district's major instructional challenges, and the development of a strategy for addressing them.
- An ability to flesh out the leadership's vision for reform, and achieve buy-in from city and district stakeholders.
- A focus on revamping district business operations to serve and support the schools.
- Locating and matching new resources to support the vision for reform.

## What Were the Districts' Strategies for Success?

The approaches to reform certainly varied across the school districts included in this study. Nevertheless, the case-study districts shared a number of important elements in their reforms:

- They focused on student achievement, specific achievement goals, and 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, to hold district leadership and building-level staff personally responsible for producing results.
- They focused attention 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 district-wide curricula and instructional approaches, rather than allowing each school to devise its own strategies.

- They supported these district-wide strategies at the central office through consistent, centrally organized, thorough professional development and training. Support focused on consistent implementation of the chosen curriculum 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.
- Recognizing that many of the problems with curriculum alignment and basic skills arise early in students' education, they began by concentrating their reforms at the elementary grade levels. Over time, they began to explore and embark on reforms in middle and high schools.
- 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 regarding 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. Instead, instructional strategy was left to the schools.
- The policies and practices of the central office were not strongly connected to the intended changes 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-sense 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 towards improvement.

This study also underscores the need for additional research regarding systemic reform in large urban school districts. The experiences of the districts in this study reinforce the hypothesis that there is a set of challenges that are common across most urban school districts. Moreover, many of these problems appear to be systematic in nature. Many of them occur simultaneously across many schools in a district, while some of them appear to exist above the level of the individual school.

This study is exploratory in nature and is not designed to yield definitive conclusions regarding the factors that drove achievement in these particular districts. It does not provide a sufficient empirical basis for claiming that one particular approach to reform is more effective than another. Nevertheless, it strongly suggests that the school district can be a powerful force for reform, either driving educational and instructional improvement or hindering efforts to pursue reform. Given the importance of large urban school districts in the educational landscape in this country—as well as the systemic nature of the challenges facing urban schools—researchers, providers of funding, and others should place a high premium on reliable research regarding policies and practices that could improve education in urban settings on a systemwide basis.

While not yet definitive, the evidence gathered in these districts supports 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: building the foundations for reform; developing instructional coherence; and improving teacher quality in low-performing schools.

### Building the Foundations for Reform

The educational reforms in each of the case-study districts were preceded and accompanied by substantial efforts on the part of the district leadership to build and maintain a context that would support effective reform. The experiences of these districts strongly suggest that successful reform efforts must attend to the political and organizational dynamics that can either enable or inhibit reform. Previous research has explored the relationship between the local context and effective reform; nevertheless, there is still much to be learned.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, research regarding urban school reform should continue to pursue these issues. The experiences of these districts suggest that useful research might explore the following hypotheses:

- The nature of the local political and public discourse about schools is important and can be changed. But first, school boards, 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 problem of instructional coherence, as suggested in these case studies and defined in the very limited literature on the subject, refers to a lack of focus, direction, consistency, and effective support for a program of educational improvement in many urban schools. In particular, Newman, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001) defined instructional program coherence as “a set of interrelated programs for students and staff that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment and learning climate that are pursued over a sustained period” (p. 297). The underlying problem often appears to be the existence of too many unsustainable, unrelated improvement programs. Combined with a lack of a coherent vision for school improvement, the result can be instructional chaos.

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Hess (1999) and Cuban (2001).

The experiences of the districts described in *Foundations for Success* suggest that this problem is common in urban schools and urban school systems. Moreover, they suggest that more successful districts do something about it. In particular, the districts in this study responded by embarking on a number of initiatives intended to increase the effectiveness of the central office at supporting high-quality instruction and creating more consistency and coherence across the district. These efforts generally focused on the areas of curriculum, professional development, and data-driven instruction.

1. *Curriculum.* With respect to curriculum, the case-study districts took the perspective that, rather than continue to delegate instructional decision making to the school level, the central office would need to provide guidance if they were going to improve instruction throughout their systems. As such, they adopted uniform and relatively prescriptive curricula for reading and mathematics instruction in the early grades. This suggests that research on this issue might explore the following hypothesis: A systematic, uniform and relatively prescriptive approach to elementary instruction might improve student learning and have a disproportionately large effect on achievement among disadvantaged and minority children. More important than the particular choice of curriculum is the notion that the curriculum be implemented consistently across the district, and that its implementation is effectively supported by the central office.

2. *Coherent teacher professional development.* Closely associated with the idea of instructional coherence is the notion of an organized, district-level approach to professional development. The case-study districts in *Foundations for Success* provided extensive, centrally organized professional development that was focused on the effective implementation of the district reading and math curriculum. The implicit hypothesis embedded in this approach is that providing extensive, focused professional development organized around the delivery of a specific curriculum is more effective at improving instruction and raising student achievement than professional development resources distributed widely across schools or educational initiatives.

3. *Data-driven instruction.* The literature on assessments suggests that large-scale assessments administered in most states are primarily designed to rank order schools, and are typically not well suited to help teachers improve instruction or modify their instructional practice. In particular, while they can provide data on how well students performed on a test, they often cannot provide detailed information regarding students' performance or learning needs with respect to specific skills or knowledge (Barton, 2002; Black & William, 1998a, 1998b; Guskey, 2003).

Instead, the literature suggests that frequent assessments that are tied to the specific curriculum being taught by the teacher, available to the teacher immediately, and easy to analyze down to the level of the individual student are most useful for improving instruction (Barton, 2002; Black & William, 1998a, 1998b; Guskey,

2003). Unfortunately, few teachers receive formal training in assessment design and analysis, and fewer than half of the states require competence in assessment for licensure as a teacher (Guskey, 2003). However, the literature also suggests that using appropriate assessments to guide and refine instruction is an important part of what effective teachers do (Black & William, 1998a, 1998b).

As part of their reform efforts, the case-study districts dramatically increased the availability of ongoing assessment data that was tied to the curriculum, and trained teachers, principals, and central office staff to use these data to understand instructional challenges and improve their practice. The practices across all districts were not the same, but they shared common elements. The experiences of these districts regarding data-driven instruction suggest the following important hypothesis: Providing achievement data to teachers at regular intervals, beginning early in the academic year; training teachers and principals in using these data to diagnose areas of weakness; and helping them to develop an instructional response will improve instructional practice and increase student learning/achievement.

4. *Cumulative effect: System-level coherence.* The goal of these initiatives was to create coherent support and guidance for instructional improvement across these systems. An important hypothesis emerging from the *Foundations for Success* study is that doing these things in combination with one another is likely to have a greater effect than doing any one of them alone. In short, tried in isolation, any one of these strategies is unlikely to create instructional coherence across a set of schools. However, if implemented in an integrated fashion, these interventions represent an opportunity to pursue important ideas regarding how a central office can support instruction across its schools.

### Improving Teacher Quality in High-Poverty/Low-Performing Schools

A second set of hypotheses emerging from the *Foundations* study—hypotheses present more widely and clearly in education research literature—concerns district efforts to improve the quality of the teaching force at low-performing schools and at schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students.

It is well established that teachers' knowledge and skills are key determinants of student performance (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Druva & Anderson, 1983; Ferguson, 1991; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000). Unfortunately, it is also true that non-White and/or economically disadvantaged students are far more likely than their White, more affluent counterparts to have uncredentialed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001); to have teachers who score lower on standardized literacy tests (Ferguson, 1998); to have teachers holding emergency or probationary certification in math and science (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000); and generally to have teachers who are less effective (Bridges, 1996; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Yet, it is more disadvantaged students who may well benefit the most from hav-

ing cadres of strong teachers in their schools. We know of no previous systematic, multi-site efforts to test whether and under what conditions (a) substantial numbers of highly skilled teachers will transfer to high-poverty schools, (b) teachers in those schools can be induced to pursue additional qualifications, and (c) whether resulting changes in teacher characteristics can improve student performance in high-poverty schools.

Not surprisingly, the case-study districts in *Foundations for Success* suffered from a shortage of experienced and qualified teachers, and they believed that the inexperienced and often less qualified teachers were disproportionately concentrated in schools serving poor and minority students. In response, these districts undertook systematic efforts to increase the supply of more highly qualified and credentialed teachers at schools with high concentrations of poor, minority, and low-performing students. The strategies applied in the case-study districts suggest several important research questions regarding teacher supply and the allocation of resources to schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students.

- What is the effect of financial incentives on the supply of teachers willing to work in high poverty schools? Can financial incentives increase the supply of teachers available to schools serving poor and minority students?
- Can these incentives increase the presence of teachers with specific characteristics or dimensions of teacher quality in low-performing schools?
- What effect do these changes in teacher quality have on teaching, learning, and student achievement patterns in these schools?
- What do the answers to these questions imply about the most effective allocation of resources designed to improve the education of disadvantaged children?

## BEYOND BASIC PERFORMANCE

The reform strategies pursued by the districts studied in *Foundations for Success* represent a set of hypotheses regarding district-level strategies for improving student achievement. These approaches are not without their critics, especially with respect to our definition of instructional coherence. Critics charge that these approaches do not necessarily represent a blueprint for getting disadvantaged and minority students to the higher levels of student achievement which are characteristic of their White counterparts in more affluent districts. For example, some argue that these instructional coherence strategies may increase the proportion of students meeting basic proficiency standards, but that this can come at the expense of students meeting standards for excellence. Others argue that teachers are primarily motivated by the nonpecuniary aspects of their jobs and the provision of financial incentives diverts scarce resources from important alternative uses. The leaders of

the *Foundations for Success* districts would acknowledge that they are still in the early stages of reform, and that they have focused largely on strategies that would improve student performance at the lowest performing schools in their districts. In general, they have been successful in accomplishing, or at least making meaningful progress toward, this goal.

We believe that careful research exploring the questions and hypotheses outlined in this study would present an opportunity to learn whether such tradeoffs exist. By carefully testing the effectiveness of these reform strategies, it will be possible to ascertain whether they increase the percentage of students meeting basic proficiency standards or affect the percentage of students meeting standards of academic excellence. If there appears to be a tradeoff, we will be able to explore ways to change the terms of the tradeoff through further efforts in program design that pursue the goal of academic excellence.

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. An important next step is to refine this set of 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.

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