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Education in the Inner Cities

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## **Emerging Models of Governing School Districts**

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As efforts are made to improve student outcomes, various reform models have been adopted to change schools' operational processes and governance structures. To explore some of the issues and research connected with these emerging models of governing school districts, the Laboratory for Student Success and the Institute for Educational Leadership cosponsored an invitational conference on October 5–6, 2000 in Washington, DC, commissioning papers and inviting speakers to relate their experience and research on these models.

Speakers included Dr. Kurt Schmoke, former mayor of Baltimore and now a partner with the law firm Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering, who pointed out that, among other things, education is a quality-of-life issue; families often choose their homes because of the quality of neighborhood schools, and move away because of bad schools. The state of education in a city is the state of life for families with children in that city.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams of Washington, DC emphasized the importance of overcoming complacency and skepticism in the struggle to improve education. He remarked, "Effective education is not an option, it is a necessity." He stressed the importance of after-school programs, rapid change, parent involvement, and teacher quality.

Dr. Rod Paige, Houston Independent School District superintendent of schools, remarked that educators need to think differently about school governance. He said no part of an organization offers a higher leverage opportunity for organizational change than its governance. He listed three key policy decisions: overall organizational goals, hiring of key personnel, and monitoring and accountability systems. He said, in order to make the organization work better, focused decision making is required, rather than a consensus among all stakeholders. He said stakeholders should be regarded not as customers but as partners. Subsequent to this conference, President George W. Bush selected Dr. Paige to be the new U.S. Secretary of Education.

Other conference participants included Dr. Betty Hale, Vice-President of the Institute of Educational Leadership; Dr. Lucian Yates, superintendent of the Harrisburg, PA Public Schools; Dr. Cozette Buckney, chief education officer of the Chicago Public Schools; and Dr. Dale Kalkofen, Vice President of New American Schools.

The three papers summarized in this issue of *The CEIC Review* are entitled "Redesigning Public Schools to Improve Student Performance: Two Emerging Models of School Governance," "Changing Governance Structures in the Chicago Public

Schools," and "Emergent Governance Models for Public Schools and School Districts: The Case of New Jersey, of Urban Districts in New Jersey, and the Challenges of Being an Urban District Superintendent in New Jersey."

In addition to speakers and presentations, plenary sessions (on school governance/operations and the 21st-century school district) and small-group discussions (on such topics as how to organize your school for the 21st century, with particular emphasis on improving low-performing schools) were held.

Among the next step recommendations emerging from this conference were: more discussion and exchange opportunities between superintendents and board members; school board development and professional development; workshops and professional development events for each stakeholder role group (i.e., superintendents, board members); use of distance learning for follow-up or future professional development; development of a model for conversation and collaboration among stakeholders; the creation of "central offices" that are service oriented; reaching all students in the district—public, private, charter, and choice; ongoing professional development; and stronger policies and procedures for retaining quality staff and removing unsatisfactory staff. ☘



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# Redesigning Public Schools to Improve Student Performance: Two Emerging Models of School Governance

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Transforming schools from low to high performance is at the top of our nation's agenda. To improve school quality and raise performance, educational leaders at the district, state, and federal level are faced with the challenge to:

- **Address Socioeconomic Disparity**—Thirty percent of the children in urban areas are poor compared to 18% for the nation as a whole. Urban schools are twice as likely to enroll minority and immigrant children than the national average. When compared to the national level, students in urban areas are three times as likely to live in extremely impoverished neighborhoods.
- **Improve Teaching and Learning**—Urbanity and poverty intensify the magnitude of constraints on teaching and learning. While only 23% of the fourth graders in high poverty schools performed at the basic level or higher in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests, almost 70% of their peers did so in schools with less poverty outside the urban setting. A substantial number of teachers in urban and rural settings are teaching in areas in which they did not earn a minor or a major in college.
- **Manage the technological gap**—Digital divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” will widen if public schools lag behind in developing learning opportunities to meet the technological challenge.
- **Sustain Leadership Quality**—Urban superintendents have an average tenure of less than 3 years. Top talents are leaving the public sector for the fast-growing sector of e-commerce.

- **Regain public confidence**—While 67% of the urban school board members rated their schools as A and B, only 49% of the urban public did (NSBF, 1999). The public seemed half as likely than the board members to agree that the schools were “doing a good job” in preparing students for college, keeping violence and drugs out of schools, and teaching children who don't speak English.

To address these complex tasks more effectively, policymakers have adopted various reform models to change the school's operational processes and its governance structure. Two emerging models of school governance reform that are designed to improve student performance *within* the public educational sector are: (1) “integrated governance,” a term that we developed based on our research in Chicago, and (2) charter school reform. These two models demonstrate the range of institutional options that policymakers can select in their efforts to improve accountability and management.

The two emerging models differ along several design dimensions. Integrated governance adopts a “corporate model” to improve school management and finance, it seeks to raise academic standards for all students system-wide, it applies sanctions and targets support to turn around low-performing schools, and its power is decentralized and governed by system-wide standards. The charter school model adopts consumer-based preferences to promote competition, it seeks to raise performance and promote alternative assessment, to turn around low-performing schools it uses site-specific strategies that may be part of a reform network, and there is strong autonomy at the school level.

Whereas integrated governance relies on system-wide institutions and standards to target low performance, charter schools focus innovation and promote alternative assessment in a market-like environment. Understanding these emerging models will help in developing the proper balance of various reform strategies.

Integrated governance maintains a proper balance between site-based decision making and system-wide performance-based accountability. It focuses on district-level capacity to reduce institutional fragmentation and raise academic accountability. This kind of restructuring is based on:

- a clear vision of educational accountability that focuses on academic standards and performance outcomes;
- strong political support to improve the operation of the school system;
- district-level capacity to intervene in failing schools; and
- a mix of direct intervention and support strategies to meet the challenges faced by urban schools.

This emerging model is likely to spread as an increasing number of mayors have gained control over the public schools, including the mayors of Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, Oakland, Baltimore, and Detroit. Mayoral control may not necessarily turn into integrated governance reform; for example, mayors may be reluctant to play an active role even though they are granted the legislative authority; mayoral control may be constrained by state legislative compromise; or civic leadership may be the driving force behind a more focused, performance-based accountability framework.

More importantly, integrated governance reform is not simply a

recentralization of authority nor can it be fully understood by focusing only on the issue of city takeover. Instead, integrated governance redefines the responsibilities and enhances the capacity of the district-wide leadership. Given its strong focus on raising student performance, integrated governance legitimizes system-wide standards and policies that identify and target intervention at low-performing schools. In effect, integrated governance creates institutional pressure and support that are *necessary* to address a key limitation of decentralization, namely, that organizational changes at the school site are not sufficient for academic improvement *system-wide*. While decentralization may produce successful reform in some schools, system-wide improvement is not likely to occur unless district-wide leadership has the political will and the capacity to implement outcome-based accountability.

During the last decade, Chicago has undergone two major phases of reform, each promoting a particular set of policy strategies. While the 1988 reform empowered the parents and community representatives at the school sites with the establishment of Local School Councils (LSCs), the 1995 reform substantially strengthened the authority at the district-wide level.

### **Local School Council as Decentralized Reform**

The Chicago School Reform Act (P.L. 85-1418), passed in December 1988, was grounded in the belief that parental control can lead to educational improvement. The Act created the 11-member Local School Council (LSC) in each of the 550 schools in the district. The LSC is made up of six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal. Only parents whose children enroll in the school are eligible for the parental seats. Community members are elected from the geographic area served by the school. Teacher representatives are chosen among the teachers in the school. Consequently, the make up of LSC reflects racial, ethnic, and income

diversity of the neighborhoods in the city. Because the LSC appoints the principal, the percentage of principals who are African American has increased from 37% to 50%, and the percentage that are Latino has increased from 7% to 11% between 1989 and 1994. The LSC also has the power to establish a school improvement plan, develop a curricular focus, and set budgetary priorities. But the 1988 reform fell far short of its promise to improve schools across the district. By the seventh year of LSC empowerment, state and local political leaders and various groups of stakeholders were increasingly frustrated with the mixed outcomes under decentralized governance. Further, the decentralized model did not improve organizational effectiveness for the system as a whole. Financially, the school board was unable to eliminate a \$150 million deficit and, in 1993 and 1994, resorted to borrowing to keep schools operating. Politically, Mayor Richard J. Daley was frustrated because his power over school board appointments was constrained by the nominating commission created by the 1988 legislation.

### **Integrated Governance to Improve Accountability**

Declaring an “educational crisis,” the governor and state legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act in July 1995. This law integrated school governance by placing authority for the public schools under the control of the mayor and by providing the district with enhanced powers over financial, managerial, and educational matters. Drawing on corporate management practices, the 1995 reform created the position of the chief executive officer (CEO) that oversees the top administrative team, including the chief education officer. The CEO was given authority to place poorly performing schools on remediation, probation, and intervention.

Integrated governance is designed to facilitate policy coherence and improve organizational effectiveness. Not only was the mayor given the responsibility over schools, the 1995

reform eliminated competing sources of district-level authority, such as the school board nominating commission, and suspended the functions of the school finance authority. Powers were granted to the citywide board of trustees to hold LSC accountable to system-wide standards. The district acted on these powers to reallocate financial and managerial resources towards an accountability focus through downsizing the central office, privatizing several district functions, and monitoring poorly performing schools, principals, and teachers.

By strengthening the district-wide authority of the system, the 1995 reform shifted the balance of power between the central office and LSCs. Prior to 1995, LSCs had broad authority, but there was little direct accountability or oversight. For example, state Chapter 1 funds went directly to the schools, but the board remained accountable if the money was misused. Organized constituencies in the broader school community often influenced selection of principals by the LSC. The new administration has signaled the LSCs that they can no longer operate with complete independence, and have incorporated the LSCs into the overall system by defining standards and responsibilities they must adhere to in such key decisions as hiring and firing of the principal.

The 1995 reform has enhanced the ability of the central administration to perform financial and management functions efficiently. It increased the school board discretion over revenue allocation, allowing the board to prepare a balanced budget and successfully negotiate two 4-year contracts with the teachers’ union, including substantial raises for teachers, bringing both financial and labor stability to the system. As bond companies upgraded the CPS rating several times, the board was able to issue \$2 billion of bonds to fund a decade-long capital improvement campaign. Unlike the 1988 reform, the 1995 reform sharpened its focus on

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low-performing schools and their students.

To illustrate how the district uses a mix of pressure, support, and professional incentives to improve school performance, we focus on two sets of key initiatives: probation and reconstitution, and academic promotion.

Probation, reconstitution, and academic promotion are examples of formal regulatory intervention, although they also involve some support and limited professional discretion. Under probation and reconstitution policies, the district can intervene in schools with less than 15% of their students scoring at national norms on either the reading test of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for elementary schools, or the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) for high schools. The district provides schools with a probation manager to help direct school improvement efforts, and schools must hire one of several external partners the district has contracted to assist schools in improving instruction and student achievement. A similar support system exists for schools under reconstitution. These schools have less than 10% of students scoring at national norms. The district can remove a principal from a reconstituted school and all teachers must reapply for their positions. In 1995, 21 schools were placed on remediation and, in 1996, 109 schools were placed on probation. Seven high schools have been reconstituted; five of the seven had their principals replaced, and about 30% of the teachers were not rehired.

The board of trustees ended “social promotion” of students in third, sixth, and eighth grades who did not meet set levels on standardized tests. These students were required to participate in a system-wide summer school called the Summer Bridge Program. The central office provides Bridge teachers with “structured” lesson plans that identified lesson objectives and materials, the order of activities, how the teachers should present the materials, and the instructional format teachers should use. At

the end of the 7-week program, students take the ITBS again. If they meet or exceed the district benchmark, they are promoted to the next grade. If they fail, they are retained and placed in a class with no more than 15 students.

The district’s junior/senior academy initiative is also central to the district’s High School Redesign Plan. Chicago provides a rich experience in school reform in the last decade. A key lesson learned from the decentralization experiment is the need for system-wide standards and intervention to address the challenge of student performance. The LSC and its supportive network alone are not sufficient to promote educational improvement system-wide. Indeed, decentralized reform may have widened the capacity gap among schools to raise performance. Instead, district-wide leadership is needed to apply both pressure and support to schools. Such a mix of intervention strategies did not occur during the period of LSC dominance because the reform ideology with its strong antibureaucratic sentiments did not allow for the proper functioning of the central office.

The 1995 reform constitutes a major effort to reduce organizational fragmentation with integrated governance. Mayor Daley took on the new responsibility for improving education and has demonstrated his ability to use his political capital to bring about coherent policy. Because of integrated governance reform, the Chicago Public Schools are no longer complacent with their performance. The top leadership has engaged in ongoing self-learning and has made serious efforts to fine-tune many of its reform initiatives.

Taken as a whole, the post-1995 strategies of sanctions and support have improved the overall conditions that lead to better student performance across the system. Better test scores are seen not only in elementary schools but also in the more problematic high schools since 1996. If the current pace of student gains can be sustained in the longer run, the Chicago experiment in integrated governance may serve as a national model for transforming urban

school systems. Indeed, integrated governance has gained national attention. With a sharpened focus on accountability, former President Bill Clinton’s educational improvement plan, as announced in his 1999 State of the Union Message, proposed an end to social promotion, a phasing out of teachers who lack subject area competence, and an effort to reconstitute low-performing schools. In light of the accountability focus as proposed by President George W. Bush, Chicago’s reform experience since 1995 will be valuable to policymakers and researchers nationwide.

### **Charter Schools as a Reform Model**

In contrast to the seemingly recentralizing tendency under integrated governance, charter school reform aims to significantly reduce regulatory control from the central administration and union agreements. Although they are labeled as public schools, charter schools are distinctive in several major aspects. The school’s charter or contract explicitly spells out the conditions and expectations for outcome-based performance. The authorizing agency can be the local school board, the state, or other legal entities (such as universities). Once established, charter schools enjoy substantial autonomy in setting curriculum, teacher salaries, and work conditions, although they are bound by state regulations regarding safety, health, dismissal, and civil rights. School funding follows students to the charter schools, which operate on a multiyear renewable contract.

Charter schools are guided by several design principles. They aim to:

- create a new structure of school autonomy based on performance contract;
- limit central office control over curriculum, instruction, and personnel decisions;
- grant parental preferences on schooling opportunities; and
- promote innovation and alternative assessment on student performance.

Since 1992, when the first two

charter schools opened in Minnesota, the number of states with charter legislation and the number of charter schools in operation have grown steadily. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have passed laws allowing for the creation of charter schools. In the 1999–2000 academic year, 1,689 charters were in operation, and there are an additional 305 approved to open in 2000–01. At least one district in California has converted to a system of charter (or contract) schools. Enrollment in charter schools increased to about 2.5% of the nation’s public school student population in 1999–2000. In Arizona, California, and Michigan, charter enrollment figures are much higher.

Charter school advocates have identified two kinds of innovative effects: (1) charter school can create competition, maintaining a better fit with the needs of their “customer-parents,” and thereby pressuring regular public schools to improve in order to maintain their share of the student “market”; and (2) enjoying substantial autonomy from the central office, charter schools can serve as laboratories for developing new educational ideas and practices, fostering and following through on innovative ideas from which traditional public schools in the district can learn. But are these claims supported by the knowledge base in the current literature?

Not surprisingly, the literature is split on the issue of whether charter school competition pressures public schools to improve. Most of the research has found light to moderate effects, more prevalent in smaller or mid-sized districts where the system is often more nimble and the impact of a few charter schools is more readily felt. Legislative compromise—capping the number of charter schools, cushioning the financial blow to traditional district schools, or reducing the autonomy of charter schools—may lessen the effects. Educational reform was also influenced by past performance and the eagerness of the district leadership to undertake change. While

there is some evidence suggesting district response to competition, starting charter schools is such difficult work that a significant amount of time may be needed before producing strong, system-wide impacts on school districts. In districts where charter schools made an impact, districts made “piece-meal” instead of system-wide changes, and were most concerned with expanding their school day by offering new add-on programs. In short, given the mixed evidence on charter school impact, more research is needed on what works and what doesn’t in charter school as a system-wide reform.

As for charter schools promoting innovative practices, researchers have asked two related questions: (1) Are charter schools engaging in classroom innovation, with new methods of teaching? (2) Are district schools able and willing to integrate those classroom innovations into the mainstream curriculum? On both of these issues, the empirical evidence tends to be mixed. While innovations were found, many were structural, few were either free-standing or independently replicable, and no evidence of significant sharing or dissemination of practices from charter schools to district schools was found. Some evidence suggests that changes in organizational and institutional arrangements may prove more significant than any academic innovations. The literature remains unclear on whether charter reforms are actually “adding value” to student learning.

### Conclusions

The two emerging governance models represent a continuum of institutional possibilities for urban educational reform. At one end of the continuum is integrated governance, which redefines the responsibilities and enhances the capacity of district-wide leadership. Given its strong focus on raising student performance, integrated governance reform tends to target resources on and apply pressure to low-performing schools and students. A challenge is to recruit leadership that has the vision to apply pressure and provide support

to low-performing schools.

Concerns about the potential of excessive central direction have prompted some reformers to support the charter school model, which represents the other end of the institutional reform continuum. While decentralization may facilitate innovative practices and promote more efficient use of resources, the charter school model is likely to be unevenly implemented across different settings. Given charter schools’ autonomy, system-wide standards are not likely to be considered a high priority. Whether charter schools are able to recruit high-quality leaders will be a critical challenge. Equally important is the charters’ capacity for turning around low-performing schools and students.

From a broader perspective, the two emerging models call our attention to the complex challenge of reengineering low-performing schools with a particular focus on leadership and management issues. More specifically, this review of the two models raises several issues in the area of educational leadership, including: the role of states and districts in designing and implementing alternative systems of accountability; leadership qualities and management practices that are necessary for implementing the reform models at the district and school level; the kind of technical assistance that is needed to ease organizational transition and improve effective management in settings where political leaders at the state and city level have taken a more active role in education; principals’ strategies in developing school-wide vision and implementing strategic plans that are designed to raise student performance; the ability of public school leadership at the school and district levels to respond to an emerging competitive environment given the increase in the number of charter schools; and effective ways in which noneducators can collaborate with school professionals to turn around low-performing schools. ❧

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# Changing Governance Structures in the Chicago Public Schools

Cozette Buckney, *Chicago Public Schools*

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the country has been searching for ways to improve public schools. Proposed solutions have focused on virtually every aspect of education, from curriculum and teacher certification to outcomes and accountability. Recently, more attention has been focused on the issue of governance—that is, who is responsible for making the policy and operational decisions about schools. Traditionally, that responsibility has rested with local school boards, the vast majority of which are elected. But as dissatisfaction with public schools, particularly those in the large urban districts, has grown, other forms of governance have been proposed and even implemented.

## Chicago Reform, Part I

The Chicago Public Schools has led the way in alternative forms of governance, beginning in 1988 with a decentralized structure. The Chicago School Reform Act (P.A. 85-1418), passed by the Illinois legislature in 1987, dramatically shifted the control of the schools away from the central bureaucracy to the parents. The reform law created in each school an elected local school council (LSC) comprising six parents, two community residents, two teachers, and the school principal.

The LSCs were given extensive powers. They helped write and approved the mandatory school improvement plan, and approved the school's budget, including the use of discretionary funds. The law transferred control of state funds for poor children directly to the schools these children attended, taking more than \$200 million out of the district's control and giving it to the LSCs to spend.

The most important and controversial power given to the LSCs was the authority to hire the

principal, who was given a 4-year contract. Principals no longer had tenure, but could be replaced at the end of their contracts. The reform law also gave the LSCs more say in the selection of school board members.

The law was a major victory for the advocates of decentralized decision making, giving control of the school councils to the parents and giving these councils real power to shape the students' education. But the performance record of the LSCs has been uneven and, 5 years into the decentralized reform effort, it was apparent that serious problems existed. By 1995, elementary schools showed little improvement, high schools continued to spiral downward, dropout rates were high, school buildings were overcrowded and/or deteriorating, the school system was facing a \$150 million shortfall, and public confidence in the schools was almost nonexistent.

## Chicago Reform, Part II

In 1995, the state legislature passed a new reform law creating a new form of governance—sometimes referred to as *integrated governance*—which balances centralized responsibility with local decision making to establish accountability for performance.

The essential features of this new governance structure are:

- Responsibility for the school system was given to the mayor of Chicago.
- The mayor was given the power to appoint the school board.
- The mayor also appoints a chief executive officer (replacing the general superintendent of schools), who in turn appoints a chief operating officer, a chief fiscal officer, a chief educational officer, and a chief purchasing officer.
- The chief executive officer was given greater authority to monitor

the performance of schools, to place schools on remediation and probation, to recommend to the board schools to be placed on intervention and reconstitution, and to intervene in schools that were in "crisis."

- The school board gained greater management rights in negotiating with employee groups.
- Greater flexibility was given to the school district in the use of local and state revenues. The ability to accumulate funds for future years and a 4-year financial plan have been vital in restoring the district's financial stability.
- The school board was given the power (in 1997) to establish certain requirements that candidates for principalship had to meet.

This new reform act created an overall structure of authority and responsibility to support local decision making. The act made it clear that the purpose of reform was not local empowerment but improved student achievement. The success of this governance model is determined by the interaction between central authority and local control.

While the concept is sound, the devil is in the details. Mayoral control is succeeding in Chicago because of the way the involved individuals have implemented the legislature's design. Putting the mayor in charge of the schools brought several important benefits. Obviously, there is greater accountability for the performance of the schools; everyone knows whom to hold responsible, and they can voice their sentiments in the voting booth. Because the mayor wields more political power and influence than the old school board did, he has greater credibility with the business community and with political leaders in the city, the state, and Washington, DC.

Prior to 1995, the school system suffered in splendid isolation, separate from other city agencies, but today all city agencies are working cooperatively for the same purpose: to improve life in the city. The sense of teamwork is evident in things like the passage of tax increases proposed by the school board and additional funding from the state.

The greatest responsibility of the mayor is the selection of the school board and the chief executive officer. Perhaps guided by the maxim “if you want a job done, give it to a busy person,” Mayor Richard M. Daley selected for his board business leaders who are also active in the community. The board president, Gery Chico, is a former chief of staff for the mayor and managing partner in a major law firm.

Having a small board consisting of knowledgeable and experienced individuals has served the school system well. They have clearly focused the board on monitoring the performance of the school system, making policy, and improving management and operations systems. The current board functions more like a corporate board of directors than like a traditional school board.

In keeping with the corporate look of the new school board, the new administration was headed by a chief executive officer: Paul Vallas, Daley’s budget director and a former teacher. The new administrative team assembled by Daley, Chico, and Vallas consisted of two major sectors: education and support. The key education appointments were all drawn from within the school system; all had served as successful principals of schools in Chicago and were knowledgeable about the school system. The support leadership was new to the school system, but they had extensive experience in their specialties. The new administrative team had a degree of professionalism in all areas that was unseen before.

It also had a new charge from the mayor: make the school system the

best in the nation. Change and innovation were the order of the day. The bureaucracy—which had lost much of its purpose during the first phase of reform—was reduced in size, refocused on providing services to schools, and reenergized with a new sense of urgency. The school system’s new motto was “Children First,” which became the touchstone for all decisions.

One early sign of the new team’s approach was its handling of the projected budget deficit and the looming contract negotiations. Within 6 weeks, the administration and board had negotiated a 4-year contract with the employees and produced a balanced budget that placed an additional \$117 million in the schools.

#### **Building an Accountability System**

The power to intervene in failing schools had been included in the original reform act, but had scarcely been used. In part, this was because the school system had no clear standards or expectations for what students were to learn. Although the Illinois State Board of Education had adopted state goals for learning, there was no link between these goals and what schools were teaching. Social promotion was established policy—retaining students in grade was widely discouraged—even though barely one quarter of the elementary-school students were reading at or above national norms. What was needed was an accountability system that would comprise three components: standards, support, and assessment.

The new administration quickly developed a comprehensive education plan designed to improve the schools. For high schools, this meant setting specific graduation requirements that include a strong core curriculum. For elementary schools, it meant the elimination of social promotion and the adoption (for grades 3, 6, and 8) of specific criteria for promotion.

It also meant creating academic standards—expected outcomes. These were developed for every grade

from kindergarten through high school in English/language arts, math, science, and social studies. The world-class standards were carefully sequenced, linked to the state’s learning goals, and accompanied by “curriculum framework statements” which define the curriculum for each standard and can guide teachers in developing their lesson plans.

These standards, graduation requirements, and promotion criteria gave local school councils and school staff the necessary structure and framework for making responsible decisions about how to educate their students. It also gave the administration and the school board a clear basis for measuring students’ progress and schools’ performance.

To help the schools meet these expectations, the administration provides a broad range of support. Model curricula with lesson plans were created for the core subjects and offered to schools to use at their own discretion. After-school programs incorporating extra instruction and tutoring were initiated in more than 300 schools, primarily to help children having difficulty in reading and math. An intensive summer program was developed for students who were in danger of not being promoted. Schools were given additional teachers, and retired teachers were hired as tutors. This year, more emphasis is being given to teacher-assigned grades, student attendance, and standardized tests in decisions to promote or retain elementary school children.

The school board and the administration have a clear responsibility to ensure that every child receive a good education. The accountability system defines “good education” and helps students to attain it. But when students are falling behind, the school district must step in.

As mentioned earlier, students in grades 3, 6, and 8 must meet specific criteria in order to be promoted. These

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criteria include earning minimum scores in reading and math. Students who fail to attain these scores in June are required to attend the summer school program in reading and math and then retake the test. If they still fail to meet the criteria, they are retained in grade for the next year and given significant support. If they are overage in eighth grade, they are enrolled in a transition center until they can meet the criteria for high school admission. Beginning this year, the criteria specify a range score for promotion. Students at or above the top range score are promoted; those below the bottom range score attend summer school and are retested. Those between the two scores attend summer school and are then promoted.

This stringent promotion policy has been remarkably successful in raising student performance. It motivates students to apply themselves in class, since promotion is no longer automatic; it ensures that students are mastering the basic skills for learning and prevents students from being moved ahead into classes for which they are unprepared; and it ends the corruption of high-school classes, in which teachers had to neglect those students who were prepared for high-school work to focus on the needs of those who were woefully behind.

When a large proportion of students in a school are not progressing satisfactorily, it is reasonable to conclude that the school is not functioning effectively. In these cases, the administration must intervene on behalf of the students. In Chicago, this has taken the form of probation or intervention/reconstitution.

Beginning in 1996, schools in which less than 15% (subsequently raised to 20%) of the students were reading at or above national norms were placed on probation. The first year, 109 schools were put on probation. However, this action is not punitive; the aim is to target aid to help schools solve organizational, operational, or personnel problems that impede student achievement.

Probation brings a school a probation manager to help the school staff diagnose the problems and develop appropriate solutions. It also brings an external partner—normally a university or other expert—to assist the school in carrying out the solutions. Schools needed to reach at least 20% (now 25%) of students at or above the norm to be taken off probation.

Intervention is necessary for schools with long-term failure patterns that have failed to improve under probation. In 1997, seven high schools were reconstituted. Essentially they were closed and then reopened with a new program and a newly selected staff. Six of the seven received new principals. All staff—teaching and nonteaching—had to reapply for their jobs. About two thirds were selected; the rest sought positions at other schools. This fall, the administration selected five schools with persistent failings for intervention. A single theme runs throughout the entire accountability process: not punishment but improvement—doing whatever is necessary so that students are learning those things they need to know for success in college and life.

The accountability process does not end local decision making. Schools that meet standards are left alone. Even in probation schools, the local staff is intimately involved in the decision-making process. Only in intervention is local decision making significantly reduced, but these schools are dysfunctional. The integrated governance structure provides a sound balance between local control and central oversight.

## Results

Integrated governance works. For 5 straight years, the percentages of students scoring at or above the national norm in reading and math on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the high-school version, the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency, have risen. Compared to their low points, the number of students scoring at or

above the national norm has risen in elementary-school reading (a 67% increase) and math (77.6%), and in high-school reading (72.2%) and math (117.4%). These gains extend across the spectrum of students; the percentage of students scoring in the bottom quarter of the national norm has diminished significantly. Other measures are also improved; the graduation rate has increased from 44% in 1991 to over 65%, the dropout rate has continued to decline, and both enrollment and attendance are increasing. Clearly more improvement is needed, but it is reasonable to conclude that the school system has put in place the right governance structure, programs, and other initiatives for continued progress.

## Conclusion

Changing the governance structure of a troubled school district is often an attractive idea. Certainly, it has proved efficacious in Chicago. But other districts have been less successful with similar changes. A successful takeover by the state or the mayor requires more than simply shifting power and responsibility; it calls for a coherent plan for bringing about the right changes to improve learning. It also calls for the right political environment. A governance structure that works in Chicago may not work in other cities simply because the political dynamic at the city and state levels are different.

One important factor in Chicago's success is that all the major segments of the community have come together to support education reform: the unions, business, academia, civic organizations, community groups, city government, and the state. Serious resistance from any of these groups could significantly impede the change process. Thus, changes in governance need to be carefully planned, taking into consideration all the particular circumstances of the school district. While Chicago's experience can offer valuable lessons for others, one size doesn't fit all. ❧

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# Emergent Governance Models for Public Schools and School Districts: The Case of New Jersey, of Urban Districts in New Jersey, and the Challenges of Being an Urban District Superintendent in New Jersey

James H. Lytle, Trenton School District

I am the superintendent of schools in Trenton, NJ, one of the 30 so-called “Abbott” school districts in the state—districts which must implement whole school reform, a complete restructuring, as the result of a 1998 consent decree entered into by Gov. Christine Todd Whitman’s administration and the New Jersey Supreme Court. The importance of this consent decree is that it commits New Jersey far more directly to urban school reform than any other state in the union. Many states have gained notice for whole state reform efforts (e.g., Kentucky, California, Texas, Tennessee), but only New Jersey is concentrating education reform in its urban districts. The state has, in effect, taken over all 30 urban districts and is now engaged—or more accurately, *enmeshed*—in an attempt to manage and micromanage reform in all 30 districts.

The consent decree was the culmination of over 25 years of litigation regarding equity issues in New Jersey urban school districts. The most important component, in terms of funding, was the agreement on parity aid in the state subsidy formula. All New Jersey districts are ranked on a 10-point scale in terms of ability to pay for public education costs. The parity aid agreement requires that the 30 Abbott districts be funded at the same per pupil expenditure level as the wealthiest districts in the two top ranks, a provision that has had very immediate benefit for all Abbott districts. Where parity aid proves insufficient to implement the required components of Abbott, districts are entitled to supplemental funds, both for preschool and for K–12 programs and services. Abbott requires that all 3- and 4-year-olds living in Abbott districts have access to free preschool, independent of family income, though the adminis-

tration determined that this could *not* be accomplished through the expansion of existing preschool programs, but rather through approved community providers. The court took the lead in insisting that all urban schools must adopt “research-based,” comprehensive school reform models within a 3-year period. In elementary schools, eight models were approved (e.g., Modern Red School House, Comer), with Success for All being the default model. The court held that there were no demonstrably successful models at the secondary school level, so secondary schools were given somewhat greater latitude in selecting school improvement programs, although national models (e.g., Coalition for Essential Schools, Talent Development) were clearly preferred by the Department of Education (DOE).

Another component of the court-determined school improvement model was reduced class size. Abbott regulations require that preschool classes not exceed Teacher/Student ratios of 1:15; for grades K–3 the ratio is 1:21; for grades 4–8 the ratio is 1:23; and for grades 9–12 the ratio is 1:24. A key DOE decision was that the reduced class sizes of Success for All schools, with 1:8 ratios during reading periods and with certified teachers as tutors, would also be applied to elementary schools which had chosen different models, even when the model did not require smaller classes or added staffing. The result was a dramatic increase in the cost of Abbott implementation.

## Trenton Public Schools’ Abbott Implementation Strategies

When I arrived in Trenton as the new superintendent—at about the same time as the Abbott regulations were issued—I was aware that Trenton had a very poor relationship

with the DOE and was just emerging from a period of intensive state oversight. The district was also losing enrollment to a contingent of newly opened charter schools, and in deep difficulty because of special education program compliance problems. The mayor, the board of education, parents, the media, the community, and even the district’s employees had lost confidence in the district’s ability to provide safe and effective schooling.

My sense was that if we played our cards right, Abbott could be an opportunity rather than a problem for us. I also calculated that, given the weight of the government actors and advocates behind Abbott, the regulations were going to be implemented whether the urban districts liked them or not. Our strategies evolved as our senior administrative group interacted with the board, our school communities, our employee organizations, and the DOE. Our strategies include:

- Submit every plan on or before deadline.
- Be first in line, not last.
- Set out to be the “model” district in Abbott implementation, thereby demonstrating that the timetables and agenda were not unreasonable or undoable.
- Get ahead of the DOE in areas where they were unsure how to proceed (e.g., school-based budgeting, preschool program implementation, facilities planning, program evaluation design).
- Address DOE areas of concern or dispute (e.g., special education).
- Keep our local elected officials—the mayor, city council, and our legislative delegation—informed, thereby presenting an informed and united front in dealing with the DOE.

(continued)

- Adopt deficit budgets (for FY 2000 and FY 2001) based on the costs of full implementation of the Abbott provisions, then file appeals with the DOE and courts for full funding.
- Conversely, accept DOE offers of funding for programs, staffing, etc. that have not been requested.
- When dealing with the press, speak of Abbott at all times as an opportunity for Trenton, and not impugn individuals or support at the DOE.
- Create new markets (in our case a hugely successful dropout recovery program) and maintain good relationships with potential suppliers (i.e., the community-based preschool program providers).
- Form partnerships with major universities, foundations, and government agencies for research projects and experimental programs (i.e., enhance our “legitimacy”).
- Be proactive, not reactive. Make Trenton a “can-do” district.

At least in terms of additional funding, the Trenton strategies have proven successful. For both FY 2000 and FY 2001, the Trenton Public Schools have received proportionately more supplemental funding (relative to student enrollment) for whole school reform and for early childhood/preschool than any city in New Jersey. In 2 years, our per student expenditures have increased by \$3,000 to over \$12,000, making us among the best funded urban districts in the country. When funding for our facilities projects was recently approved by the legislature (\$317.5 million), Trenton again received a higher proportion of its request than any city in New Jersey.

### Leading in This Policy Environment

While New Jersey’s intervention in its urban districts has led to a number of changes in traditional approaches to school district governance and decision making, none of these

changes reduces the responsibility of the state’s urban superintendents (and their boards) for providing quality education for their students. The question remains: *What does it mean to lead in this policy environment?*

The risk is in complying, and the reward is in complying. Leadership in this context means:

- persuading one’s community that the costs of complying with new state regulations will be outweighed by the benefits, both in additional resources and in learning opportunities for students.
- pressing principals, teachers, school management teams, and central office staff to complete plans and reports accurately and on time.
- removing school principals who cannot lead reform and replacing them with those who can.
- recruiting a cadre of young minority administrators who bring a deep sense of moral purpose to their work (and who are attracted to Trenton because they do not have to jump all the hurdles of large urban districts, and can work in a setting with resources adequate for doing the work in a responsible way).
- developing contracts with our teacher and administrator employee organizations that support reform.
- persuading teachers and administrators that the comprehensive school reform models are worth trying, while maintaining a degree of skepticism.
- obtaining and attracting the additional financial and other resources needed to support change.
- being willing to work with DOE in supportive ways even when being oppositional in others.
- being accessible to the media, and using every opportunity to present the district in a favorable light.
- understanding the dynamics of disruptive change and, to the degree possible, making them work to the organization’s advantage.

- understanding that reform will only occur if and when a deeper sense of community responsibility and diffused leadership can be established.
- becoming a skilled “sensor,” one who collects and interprets soft data, and daring to be different, to capitalize on one’s unique characteristics and abilities.
- creating a learning organization, modeling good teaching in one’s own work, and keeping teaching at the front of the organization’s priorities.
- making inquiry a core process; tying accountability to institutional research; and teaching administrators and teacher leaders how to use data for formative purposes, with the emphasis on interpreting, redesigning, and changing practice.
- making school-specific descriptive and performance data public, readily available, and the basis for community engagement in improving schools.
- forming partnerships with major universities, foundations, and government agencies for research projects and experimental programs to enhance our legitimacy in the eyes of our community and the DOE.
- keeping the moral purpose of our reform efforts at the center of all discussions of change.

### Working to Become a Learning-to-Learn Organization

Since schools and school districts are supposed to be organizations whose first purpose is to help their students learn, then it would seem obvious that they should themselves be learning organizations and that their employees should experience them in that way. As one familiar with the literature on learning organizations, and as one who has tried to create these sorts of organizations in whatever leadership role I have held, I came to Trenton with the intent of making us a learning and a learning-to-learn organization.

I began my service in Trenton by conducting a series of public “fish-bowl” meetings on our budget. I asked division heads to explain their budgets to me while sitting at a small conference table in the middle of our administration building auditorium. The table was surrounded by chairs, employees and the general public were invited to attend, and the meetings were televised on our public access channel. After a walk through of his or her budget led by the division head and then questions from me, the audience was invited to participate by asking questions and making recommendations. The meetings gave me an opportunity to quickly establish new norms. All budget information was public. All monies belonged to the schools, their parents, and their students. And I had an opportunity to establish myself as knowledgeable about budgets and operations.

As Abbott implementation moved forward in the fall of 1998, we continued to use budgeting as a way to support and drive reform. We designed a laptop-based spreadsheet and the accompanying instructions, taught principals and School Management Team members how to use the computer and how to develop a budget to meet state expectations, and met a very tight deadline. The ancillary benefit was that principals, teachers, parents, and our employee organizations emerged from the process with a much greater understanding of costs, priority setting, and resource utilization than they had had before the process began.

There are a number of other examples of how we have been working to create a “learning to learn” organization. Last year I used two thirds of the biweekly principal meeting time to teach a course in organizational theory so that we might move toward a shared understanding of schools as organizations. In each of our employee contract negotiations, we have increased tuition benefits for further education. We have also used negotiations as an opportunity to learn the history of the employee groups, an

approach that greatly increased trust between the board and administration and the employee groups, and led to early settlements of our major agreements. Recently we have begun the process of making school descriptive and performance data public by developing detailed school profiles which will be available to teachers, parents, and the community in booklet form and on our website.

As superintendent I have developed two complimentary strategies to build support for change. One is to emphasize that our mission is insuring that as many students as possible who enter our ninth grade complete high school and go on to college, work, or military service (or combinations of the three). I remind everyone that what *our* parents and community want—more than higher test scores—is for their children to become responsible, self-supporting adults. That is why we have redesigned our high school into career-oriented small learning communities, each with college, community organization, and corporate partners, and why we have initiated dropout-recovery and adult high-school programs. My mantra is that we have no excuses. Our district has every element necessary to insure that our kids are successful: adequate funding, strong political support, agreements with our employees that support reform, a board committed to the best interests of children, and partnerships with a wide array of area educational, corporate, business, and social service organizations.

The other strategy is to focus on the long-standing problems we need to reduce or eliminate to improve our performance and opportunities for our students, including high rates of dropping out, special education referrals, suspension as a disciplinary strategy, retention in grade, course/subject failure, and high-school proficiency test failure. *All* of these indicators are ones over which we have control, all are demonstrated by research to relate to negative student outcomes, and all are ones where we have begun to show improvement

(e.g., doubling the number of high school graduates in 1 year; reducing suspensions by over 50% in 2 years). We have also made a concerted effort to recruit minority administrators and teacher leaders who have a deep sense of commitment to increasing opportunities for children of the city. A substantial majority of the administrative appointments we have made to principal, vice-principal, and central office positions have been African-American or Latino, and a majority of them have come from outside the district. Interestingly, much of the credit belongs to School Management Teams who have consistently recommended the strongest of the available candidates, not simply the insider they already know.

In leading this complex change effort, it has been important for me to act in ways articulated by Peter Senge: being a designer, steward, teacher, and generator of tension. But I have become acutely aware that, in many ways, I am a middle manager, working between the state and the district I am paid to lead. As I hope this paper suggests, that means walking a very tricky tightrope. ☘

## The CEIC *REVIEW*

Robert Sullivan  
*Editor*

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