



Strengthening Urban Boards

School boards must lead the way in reforming city schools

BY DONALD R. MCADAMS

School districts are the buckle in the American system of public education. They hold together communities and schools and translate state policy into effective action. They provide schools with resources, personnel, standards, operating policies, support services, and management systems.

Clearly, however, not all school districts—or school boards—are as effective as they should be. In a 1992 report, *Governing Public Schools: New Times, New Requirements*, Jacqueline Danzberger and her colleagues at the Institute for Educational Leadership charged that school boards had failed to establish a climate of change and orchestrate a coherent strategy for reforming America's public schools. Specifically, they asserted that boards were not providing far-reaching or politically risk-taking leadership for education reforms and that

they had become another level of administration, often micromanaging the school district.

They also asserted that boards—particularly those in diverse communities—were so splintered by their attempts to represent special interests or board members' individual political needs that they could not govern. Moreover, according to the report, boards did not exercise adequate policy oversight, nor did they have adequate accountability processes and processes for communicating about schools and the school system with the public. They showed little capacity to develop positive and productive lasting relationships with their superintendents and paid little or no attention to their governance performance and to their needs for ongoing development of their capacity to govern.

The governance of America's public schools might have improved since 1992. The National School Boards Association and state school boards associations have certainly focused on improved governance.

NSBA publications, especially *Leadership Matters: Transforming Urban School Boards* (1999) and *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* (2000), are valuable tools for helping boards understand and practice good governance. And there is evidence that America's public schools are improving. But have school boards—especially urban boards—improved that much?

The 100 largest U.S. school districts enroll 23 percent of all public school students, the majority of them minority and poor. Some excellent schools are in these districts. Extraordinary principals are able to achieve extraordinary results.

But look at student achievement data for urban school districts. Fewer than half of the high school freshmen graduate four years later. More than half are not reading or solving mathematics problems at grade level. Would anyone call this success?

Most urban school districts are improving, but they are still not educating all children to high levels of achievement. By this

standard, even the best urban districts are performing poorly. And by this standard—the only standard that really matters—urban boards are also performing poorly.

NO MORE EXCUSES

We no longer say all children can learn—today we say all children *will* learn, and at high levels of achievement. Urban school board members must accept the responsibility for all children reading at grade level, mastering basic skills, and graduating from high school ready either to enter college without remediation or to enter the workplace as valued employees. No more excuses. No more blaming children or parents or society. It is our job to educate all children.

Admittedly, school boards cannot do it all by themselves. Establishing rigorous content standards, high performance standards, and accountability systems is best done by the states. But where states are leading the way—and most states are—boards have the responsibility to build district reforms on the foundation of state reforms. Indeed, effective reform leadership by school boards is the most promising frontier for improving student achievement.

We know what makes an effective classroom. If the best practices in instruction for reading, mathematics, writing, and science were employed in every classroom in America, student achievement would skyrocket.

We also know what makes a good school: vision, focus, leadership, high acad-

emic standards for all students, care and love for each child, involved parents and communities, an adult learning community, and assessment and accountability for results.

What we don't know is how to create high-performing school districts. Good research on school district governance, organization, management, and performance is sparse. The excellence that exists in some urban schools cannot be brought to scale until we create functional, effective school districts. And we will not create functional, effective school districts unless school boards understand and practice good governance and reform leadership.

How will we do it? By changing the way we think, changing the way we lead, changing the way we govern, and focusing our governance on effective theories of action for change.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

First, we must change our expectations. Children, like adults, tend to perform to expectations. We must expect all children to achieve at high levels and make our expectations clear to them, their parents, and the communities we serve.

Far too many Americans, including many board members and educators, expect less from poor children. Urban board members need to be out front on this issue. We need to continuously educate our school people and our communities to expect the same performance from urban schools that middle-class communities expect from suburban schools.

Expectations will not change quickly. Everyone knows about the minority achievement gap. But what everyone does not know is that student achievement, though powerfully influenced by a child's background, is not determined by that background.

As the Education Trust argues, poverty and racism make learning more challenging but not impossible. The Trust has analyzed so-called frontier states—that is, states that have reached the current frontier on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test for poor and minority students. If minority children in all states performed as

well as minority children in frontier states, the achievement gap would be cut by a third or more.

The evidence is there for all to see. Poverty and race do not predetermine educational achievement. Minority children in some states outperform minority children in other states by up to four years of learning. What is the difference? It is the education the children receive.

IT TAKES A CITY

So what should boards do? First, we must become community leaders and commit ourselves to building civic capacity for sustained change.

We understand that effective governance and reform leadership will not guarantee results. School boards govern school districts, but they do not have power independent from the people who elect or appoint them. School reform takes time. And over time, superintendents and board members come and go. It takes a city to reform an urban school district.

Civic leaders must view school improvement as a priority and use their influence to help elect and support strong reform board members—and keep doing so election after election. Board members must develop and communicate a clear theory of action for change, govern by policy, appoint and support a strong reform superintendent, and pay attention to succession planning.

To improve urban schools, three centers of power must be in alignment: civic leadership, the school board, and the superintendent. Alignment means more than trust. It means shared commitment to a comprehensive improvement strategy.

To create this alignment in America's great cities, the obvious place to start is with school board members. They have the key position in the middle. They represent and they govern.

Board members understand the needs of parents. As political leaders, they are networked with the business and civic elite of their cities. They have the legal and fiduciary responsibility. They oversee the management of the district. They appoint superintendents. They approve all major policies. They provide political cover when

superintendents have to make unpopular management decisions. Whether elected or appointed, they have influence and access to centers of power. Who better than board members to advocate, educate, and build civic capacity for sustained change?

GOVERNANCE AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER

Good governance is the "how" of school reform. Boards must understand and practice the fundamentals of good governance. Most board members know the principles: unity, stability, respect for one another, a close relationship of trust with the superintendent, governance by policy, the absolute avoidance of any involvement in management, effective meetings, constant communication with the public, research and data-driven decision making, and much, much more.

It's easily said, but why is it so difficult to do? Because governance is the exercise of power, and urban school governance is the exercise of power in an arena where power is diffused, roles are unclear, and there is little agreement on the purpose of schools.

In America's diverse democracy, the public schools are supposed to be all things to all people. We expect schools to build character, keep order, prepare youth for responsible citizenship, provide a rigorous academic education, teach job skills, and on top of all this solve the nation's social problems and blend together (or paper over) numerous competing value systems. School boards must do all this, and they must do it in the fishbowl of the political arena.

Urban district governance is, in short, politics, and urban board members are politicians. As such, they must understand the political environment, manage volatile public issues, map the power and influence structure of their communities, maintain good relations with mayors and other elected officials, and build and manage a balanced network of influential people representing diverse interests. They must also maintain relationships and sometimes manage conflict with numerous power centers: state officials, teacher unions, the media, and all those in the city who think they must be consulted before any decision

is made about the public schools.

Elected board members, especially, are expected to help individual constituents and neighborhoods with issues that need district attention. Often, this help is appropriate and necessary, and without it good things would not happen. Often, however, the help that is requested pulls a board member into micromanagement. It is not always easy to know the difference between positive constituent service and negative micromanagement. Is it any wonder effective governance is difficult?

Yet it must be done. Urban boards must govern well. Without good governance, no urban school district can sustain a reform agenda long enough to fundamentally change urban schools. Without good governance, good schools in urban America will always be the exception, not the rule.

ACTING FOR CHANGE

Good governance by itself—even good governance combined with high expectations for all children and broad civic support for better schools—is not enough. Boards that want to transform school districts must have an effective game plan. They must understand that school districts are complex, open, large, and dynamic. They must understand that, in the political arena, they are susceptible to numerous outside forces and inherently unstable. The district's business and education functions are intertwined, and policies to solve one problem may create problems elsewhere in the system.

The law of unintended consequences all too often prevails. Reducing class size can lead to lowering teacher quality for poor children. Financial stipends for bilingual teachers can increase the time children spend in bilingual programs. Standardized tests can narrow the curriculum. Promotion standards can increase the need for alternative schools.

Boards must approach all reform policies and the design of management, business, and education systems with a clear understanding of whole systems change. This understanding is a prerequisite to formulating theories of action for change. Theory is critical. Without theory, it is difficult to link actions with improvement. Without theory, it is difficult to anticipate unintended consequences or uncover zones of wishful thinking. Effective, sustained reform without a theory of action for change is impossible. Boards need to understand and critique alternative theories of action and select one that meets the needs of their district.

Most theories of action—smaller class size, a certified teacher in every class, modern facilities, standards-based reform, professional development, managed instruction, charter schools, contracting for educational services, vouchers—can be grouped under two heads: (1) improving the current system through additional resources and better management, or (2) changing the system through the introduction of marketplace forces.

No board activity is more important than formulating a theory of action and devising

an effective strategy for advancing it. This is hard work. It requires familiarity with the literature on urban school reform, knowledge of reform initiatives in other cities, a thorough understanding of the district and the city's unique characteristics, and a great deal of collaboration with the superintendent and civic and community leaders.

Boards need to be very clear about two points. An effective theory of action for change is not a strategic plan. It is the foundation on which a strategic plan is built. And it is the board's responsibility, not the superintendent's, to develop it. Superintendents, especially if they are new to the district, are not likely to understand the district's and the city's unique characteristics and needs. The board understands the community it serves, is positioned to build broad consensus for a sharply focused theory of reform, is there for the long haul, and has the legal and moral responsibility to lead.

No, school boards cannot reform urban districts by themselves. On the contrary, without a strong, reform-minded superintendent who shares their theory of action for change, boards are helpless and reform is impossible. Superintendents reform school districts. Boards enable them to do so. But boards must lead the way.

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