

Chattanooga

The Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) and the Public Education Foundation (PEF) have closely partnered in the past several years to increase investment in and achievement outcomes of Hamilton County’s public schools. Two multimillion-dollar efforts aimed at transforming nine low-performing elementary schools and reinventing all the County’s seventeen high schools are centerpieces of a larger strategic push that embraces leadership and capacity development, teacher recruitment and retention, attention to disaggregated data, resource targeting, and community engagement.

The teachers union, local and national foundations, and the City Mayor have also played key partner roles. Achievement at the elementary level and engagement and participation at the high school level have been trending upward for the past three years, race- and poverty-linked gaps have narrowed, and in 2003 the nine urban elementary schools made greater gains in reading than 90 percent of schools in the state on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS).

In this session, we’ll delve into a school system’s efforts to sustain and accelerate equitable improvements in learning with a consistent set of strategies. The case of Hamilton County allows us to explore this work and the partnerships supporting it in the context of chronic state underfunding, competing notions of equity, and differing values and expectations in a geographically large and diverse community.

Background

In July 1997, the Chattanooga City Schools and the Hamilton County School System merged into one. The two could hardly have been more different. Chattanooga City schools were highly urban, poor, and African American (64 percent). Achievement and standards were low. Hamilton County schools were suburban, more economically diverse, and overwhelmingly white (94 percent). Achievement was significantly higher than in the city schools.

Total Enrollment	40,191
White	62.8%
Black	33.0%
Hispanic	2.4%
Asian	1.5%
Native American	0.2%
Limited English Proficient	1.6%
Students with disabilities	16.9%
Economically disadvantaged	49.7%

Demographic Information

Today, the Hamilton County Department of Education serves some 40,000 students in a county of 312,000 residents. More than 20 percent of school-aged residents attend nonpublic schools. Chattanooga (population 155,000), the county seat, is Tennessee’s fourth-largest city.

Jesse Register, superintendent since 1997, made early moves aimed squarely at curriculum and instruction, even while dealing with the merger’s immediate fallout: the challenge

of creating a whole new system in the context of dissatisfaction among pockets of city and county parents, residents, and elected officials. Raising the bar on the whole system and closing the city/county performance gap would require evolving application of a consistent set of strategies. Among the most significant:

- building leadership and teaching capacity through investment in multiple forms of professional development;
- raising and redeploying resources to support improved instruction (e.g., consulting teacher roles);
- working with union and other partners to recruit and keep good teachers and move the best teachers to the neediest students;
- demanding, using, and making accessible disaggregated student and system data;
- building a common vision among parents through advisory structures; and
- redesigning central office roles and reporting lines to focus on instruction and equity.

The PEF has been an ongoing strategic partner, particularly in teaching and leadership improvement and in community engagement. It plays a key role in two of the HCDE's most ambitious externally supported efforts.

The Benwood Initiative is funded by a \$5-million grant from the Benwood Foundation to PEF and is matched by another \$2.5 million raised by PEF. The five-year effort begun in 2001 employs several school-level strategies in the system's nine most challenged elementary schools, but its signature element is a focus on strong teaching. Funds support, for example, development for classroom teachers, the provision of reading specialists for struggling students, and coaches for new teachers. The Benwood Initiative has received national recognition for its achievement improvements, particularly in reading. But equally striking is the innovation and success in attracting, supporting, and keeping good teachers. Chattanooga's mayor contributed to the effort with support for individual and school performance bonuses, housing incentives, and free tuition at the master's level.

HCDE also participates in Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools for a New Society (SNS) initiative. While the Benwood Initiative concentrates resources intensely on underserved and previously neglected schools at the elementary level, the challenges of high school under-engagement and under-performance led local leaders to decide on a systemwide focus for their participation in SNS. Each of the seventeen high schools – whether urban, suburban, or rural; whether zoned or magnet – is developing its own blueprint while pursuing shared goals of curricular relevance and rigor, improved teaching, more-engaging experiences for students, and greater flexibility to meet student needs. A recently adopted single-path diploma, which raises graduation requirements for all students (beginning with the graduating class of 2009) so that a diploma ensures eligibility for a four-year college, puts systemwide policy behind the high school transformation effort. A total of \$14 million is being dedicated to high school reform at scale – \$8 million from Carnegie and an additional \$6 million raised by PEF.

The talent pool for all the district's improvement efforts has been enhanced by the HCDE-PEF leadership development partnership. Annenberg Foundation funds have supported a two-year Leadership Fellows program to give emerging leaders – aspiring principals, assistant principals, consulting teachers, and coaches – skills to lead deep change and handle day-to-day management. Annenberg Funds have also supported the Carnegie matching requirement.

The Presenters

- Dan Challenger** President of the Public Education Foundation
- Norm Fruchter** Director of the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University and a site consultant to Hamilton County as part of Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools for a New Society initiative
- Jesse Register** Superintendent of the Hamilton County Department of Education

For More information

www.hcde.org/

www.pefchattanooga.org/www