

# From Smart Districts to Smart Education Systems

## A Broader Agenda for Educational Development

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The heightened attention devoted to district reform in recent years is a welcome development. It represents a recognition that the reform movement's attempts to ignore or bypass districts would fail to yield results in an equitable way and that the state-based or school-by-school approach would be unlikely to engage communities in a way that would sustain reforms over time.

The district efforts have begun to yield promising results. Yet despite their promise, these efforts face two significant limitations. The challenge ahead will be to address these limitations and move forward to accomplish the ambitious aims of reformers.

The first challenge is sustainability. With an average tenure of two and three-quarters years for most urban superintendents,<sup>1</sup> districts are constantly buffeted by shifting reform winds. And old reforms do not necessarily go away when a new leader comes in with a new strategy; districts possess the vestiges of multiple reforms that operate amidst the principal strategy pursued by current system leadership.

Moreover as Hubbard, Stein, and Mehan observed, reform is political and cultural as much as it is technical.<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia's struggles under David Hornbeck's leadership in

the late 1990s and, more recently, Alan Bersin's departure from San Diego, are reminders that shifts in district leadership and reform strategy can occur despite substantial gains in student achievement. Reforms that fail to build political support and promote favorable attitudes, beliefs, and norms are as susceptible to failure as those that are technically unsound.

The belated recognition of the political and cultural dimensions of reform is reflected in the renewed emphasis on community engagement as an essential element of district reform. At the same time, districts face the technical struggle of balancing their approaches to reform in order to build the capacity needed to sustain reform and achieve results at scale – that is, to raise achievement and narrow performance gaps in the vast majority of schools, not just a few.

A second challenge is to understand the qualitative changes in knowledge and skills required for students to move beyond basic

<sup>1</sup> Council of the Great City Schools, "Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary," *Urban Indicator*, Vol. 7, No. 1, October 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Lea Hubbard, Mary Kay Stein, and Hugh Mehan, *Reform as Learning: When School Reform Collides with School Culture and Community Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

levels of performance to attain proficiency. Unfortunately, our national preoccupation with standardized-test scores fosters the misconception that learning can be reduced to knowledge and skills that can be taught and learned additively. For instance, on the 2003 NAEP reading assessment, the average scores of African American and Latino fourth-graders in Boston were 23 and 24 points, respectively – lower than the average obtained by their White counterparts. Without additional information about the qualitative meaning of these numerical gaps, it would be easy to assume that they could be closed by having African American and Latino students work harder and longer.

In fact, though, attaining higher levels of performance requires qualitatively different skills. To attain proficiency in reading and beyond, students must possess the ability to comprehend what they have read, analyze its connections with their own experiences, and make broad inferences that go beyond the text. Simply getting better at the basic skill of decoding is not enough.

The mismatch between the skills and knowledge requirements of the global econ-

omy and democratic society and the limited conceptions of learning assessed by standardized tests reflects the dangers inherent in using tests rather than the standards themselves as the major driver of school reform.<sup>3</sup> The premium placed on creativity, collaboration, interdisciplinary work, communication, cultural literacy, and technology should also undermine the credence of reforms grounded in discipline-based work practiced largely using print materials in classrooms and at home. Basic skills alone cannot catapult all students, especially those on the unfavorable side of the achievement gap, to the educational achievement levels required for success in today's world.

### Can Schools Make the Difference Alone?

Despite heartening evidence that a growing number of schools serving African American, Latino, and low-income students can beat the odds and produce dramatic improvements in academic performance,<sup>4</sup> a lack of resources and stability within many large urban school districts and the poor communities they serve prevents success from spreading across schools and over time. Hurricane Katrina revealed painfully that the economic, social, and cultural levies that isolated and impoverished generations of New Orleans's poor and African American residents were active accomplices to the educational failure produced by the public school system's mismanagement and turmoil.<sup>5</sup>

But these economic, social, and cultural levees are not unique to New Orleans; they exist in many of this country's major cities.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Simmons, "The Fading Promise of Standards-Based Reform," in ed. Anne Lewis, *Shaping the Future of American Youth: Youth Policy in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, 2003); Thomas Sobol, "Beyond No Child Left Behind," *Education Week* 26 (4), September 20, 2006, 38, 44.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Education Trust, *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students* (Washington, DC: Education Trust, November 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Now They're Wet: Hurricane Katrina as Metaphor for Social and Educational Neglect," and Jonathan Kozol, "Segregation and Its Calamitous Effects: America's 'Apartheid' Schools," *Voices in Urban Education*, No. 10, Winter 2006.

And as with New Orleans before the hurricane, in these cities poverty is hidden: downtown revitalization and neighborhood gentrification efforts have eliminated the towers of public housing complexes that once made poverty highly visible in places like Chicago, Baltimore, and Newark. While cities have progressed in decreasing the concentration of poverty through mixed-income developments and rent subsidies, it is not at all clear that these strategies have countered the effects of inadequate health care and nutrition, high levels of transience, low rates of parental education, and cultural isolation that continue to distress low-income families.

### Supplementary Education

As Gordon and Bridglall note, access to basic services is not the only difference between families in poverty and more affluent families. Middle-class and affluent families often have the resources needed to build the various forms of capital that enhance and extend school-based learning. The music lessons, sports leagues, national and international travel, concerts and museum visits, and internships that dominate the weekend and after-school experience of more-advantaged children and youth serve to build the networks, values, dispositions, and knowledge that reinforce and accelerate school-based learning. By contrast, many of the supplemental resources available to low-income children in after-school programs, often by providing remedial basic skills instruction, tend to decelerate learning further by failing to make connections

between academic content and the more meaningful, complex, and rewarding challenges found outside of school. The dulling effects of basic-skills instruction is echoed in the voices of struggling students who lament the fact that their school assignments are not sufficiently challenging.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of compounding academic failure by combining low-quality instruction during the regular school day with narrowly conceived remedial instruction after school, Gordon and Bridglall argue that communities should provide supplemental education for poor children that would entail “services related to health and nutrition, guidance, tutorials, mentoring, summer enrichment, travel, exposure to institutions of high culture, and the social networks through which opportunities for upward mobility are mediated.”<sup>7</sup> The strength and urgency of their argument is underscored by studies revealing that the national economic revival that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by a gradual decline in the availability and quality of supplemental supports for poor adolescents and preschool-age children.<sup>8</sup> The paucity of supports for learning leaves poor children and youth with the

<sup>6</sup> Patricia A. Wasley, Robert L. Hampel, and Richard W. Clark, *Kids and School Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Edmund W. Gordon and Beatrice L. Bridglall, “The Challenge, Context, and Preconditions of Academic Development at High Levels,” in eds. Edmund W. Gordon, Beatrice L. Bridglall, and Aundra Saa Meroe, *Supplementary Education: The Hidden Curriculum of High Academic Achievement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam, *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); Forum for Youth Investment, *After School for All? Exploring Access and Equity in After-School Programs*. Out-of-School Time Policy Commentary #4 (Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment and Impact Strategies, 2003); available online at [www.forumfyi.org/Files//ostpc4.pdf](http://www.forumfyi.org/Files//ostpc4.pdf), retrieved October 12, 2006.

daunting task of meeting the skill requirements for the creative economy while being equipped with low-quality schools and minimal access to community resources for learning.

After-school programs can help fill those gaps. But evaluations of some prominent initiatives found that the programs produced disappointing results. Reflecting on these findings, Kane suggested the need for after-school programs to strengthen enrollment and participation, by requiring parental commitment as a prerequisite for enrollment and by identifying leading indicators to academic test-score improvement (e.g., increased attendance and homework completion, improved grades, etc.) that may show improvement prior to yielding results on standardized tests.<sup>9</sup>

While these changes may be warranted, enacting them would do more to make after-school more like school and reduce the ability of these programs to offer the kinds of enrichment experiences that enable middle-class and more affluent students to acquire the various forms of capital that support higher levels of achievement and development. Moreover, one has to question the efficacy of a strategy that relies on urban schools that are often already beleaguered by poor performance, lower teacher

quality, high staff turnover, and inferior facilities and materials to serve as hubs for extended services.<sup>10</sup> The student, parent, and community alienation that is often engendered by years of failure presents a formidable barrier to establishing the foundation of trust between the school and the community needed to create strong linkages between learning assets in and outside of school. Supplemental educational supports that rely solely on schools as a primary source for learning and development, then, overlook the reality that many schools lack sufficient resources and that stronger resources may be available in other organizations such as churches and mosques, community development organizations, reform support organizations, businesses, and cultural institutions.

## The Development Model

Rather than extend services from schools that may be weak to begin with, many districts are experimenting with what Mark Warren refers to as the “Development Model”—encouraging community organizations to create or operate schools as a way of blending the staff, programs, and services these organizations often already operate in community settings with academic programs provided during regular school hours.<sup>11</sup> The El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in New York City is a notable example of this trend. El Puente, a community development organization located in North Brooklyn, established the academy in 1993. El Puente Academy capitalizes on the larger organization’s programs in art and culture, community health, and environmental improvement to provide meaningful

<sup>9</sup> Thomas J. Kane, “The Impact of After-School Programs: Interpreting the Results of Four Recent Evaluations.” A working paper of the William T. Grant Foundation, January 16, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Mark Warren, “Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform,” *Harvard Education Review* 75 (2), Summer 2005.

tasks and adult and peer mentors and to promote students' contributions to their school, families, and community.

In contrast to the school-as-hub service model, the development approach broadens and builds connections among a variety of assets that communities possess to support student learning. These include the funds of knowledge that are often not tapped in school, but remain highly useful and meaningful.<sup>12</sup> For instance, parents and relatives who are highly skilled workers, as well as immigrants who were once professionals in their former countries, can contribute their skills and knowledge to help develop students' skills and interests. Moreover, unlike the school service model, the development approach focuses on strengthening students along with their families and communities. This approach expands the availability of resources needed to build the various forms of capital students need to move beyond basic skills and reduces the extent to which academic advancement alienates students from their families and communities.

### **Intersections between the Development Approach and District Reform**

El Puente Academy was the product of a larger school reform effort sponsored by what was then known as the New York City Board of Education, in partnership with a local reform support organization, New Visions for Public Schools. Since 1993, New Visions and the district (now called the New York City Department of Education) have supported the development of well over a hundred new schools operated in partnership with arts and cultural institutions, community development groups,

health centers, and higher-education institutions. Over time, as the number of schools operated by partnerships between the education department, New Visions, and local groups expanded, their presence compelled the district to enact reforms that would make this approach to supporting schools the rule rather than an exception or limited experiment.

The growth of schools operated by external groups under district contracts, charters, or other forms of agreement have forced school boards, central offices, and unions representing teachers, support staff, and administrators to refashion policies and practices to encourage flexibility, innovation, and collaboration while maintaining accountability for performance and attention to core curriculum guidance. The emergence of smart districts that govern and manage portfolios of schools has created opportunities for the expansion of school-community partnerships, along with increased pressure for the kinds of district reinvention needed to ensure attention to equity and excellence in outcomes and practice. The interdependence between school-community partnerships and district reform is evident in the development of the New Century Schools in New York City, in the schools operated by non- and for-profit providers in Philadelphia, and in the school networks being established by the Oakland Unified School District.

<sup>12</sup> Luis C. Moll and Norma Gonzalez, "Engaging Life: A Funds-of-Knowledge Approach to Multicultural Education," in eds. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education, 2nd Edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

## The Emergence of Local Education Support Networks

As the number of partnerships involving schools and external organizations expands, districts and communities must ensure that their growth does not deplete the availability of quality partners for the next generation of interested schools and communities. The push to attach partners to individual schools, however, can quickly strip communities of available assets and deny scarce resources to others. In addition, assignment of organizations to individual schools undermines the ability of both parties (schools and partners) to share knowledge, tools, and strategies across schools and community organizations.

The attachment of partners to individual schools also fosters a needless quest for “uniqueness,” with each school and partner seeking to make its approach or theme distinct from that of others. This rush to distinctiveness often elevates innovation over quality, as though poor parents and students valued variety over effectiveness. (Oddly enough, many of the same districts that promote educational choice and innovation for poor students and families embrace the rigorous uniformity of Advanced Placement courses and college prep curricula when catering to the needs of middle-class and more affluent parents.) The point here is that innovation without quality represents no choice at all, and districts using partnerships must strike a balance between innovation and quality and should rethink approaches that limit scarce community resources to individual schools.

## From Smart Schools to LESNs

As districts consider how to generate more leverage from the development strategy, several are collaborating with colleges and universities, reform support groups, and community development organizations to establish partnerships that support networks of schools rather than individual ones. These neighborhood-based networks of schools and partner organizations are known as Local Education Support Networks (LESNs). The shift of emphasis from school-based partnerships to LESNs allows multiple schools and partners to pool their resources (e.g., knowledge, tools, funds, facilities). Moreover, LESNs typically treat a local neighborhood or community as a hub for learning, thus increasing opportunities to engage families, cultural institutions, businesses, faith institutions, and community development organizations in the design and implementation of learning activities.

LESNs typically strive to pursue an integrated approach to academic, cognitive, social, and cultural development and treat the development of strong families and communities as an essential component of school reform. Three examples of LESNs illustrate different ways school network-community organization partnerships have pursued this approach.

### *The Harlem Children’s Zone*

The Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) is a nonprofit community-based organization that furnishes a range of services, including day-care and preschool programs, parenting classes, violence-prevention initiatives, tutoring, cultural activities, and healthcare

services, to more than 8,600 economically disadvantaged children in Central Harlem. During the bulk of its thirty-year history, HCZ (formerly the Rheedlen Centers) was limited to providing its school-based supports at the end of the regular school day, thus reducing opportunities to enrich both the schools' curricula and HCZ-provided community-based education supports through collaboration. The barriers that prevented this collaboration were removed, however, when HCZ was awarded a charter to operate a school. The charter agreement has allowed HCZ to establish the Promise Academy, a school that will eventually serve up to 1,300 students from preschool through grade 12.

Adding a K–12 school to its portfolio of services enabled HCZ to develop a more comprehensive network of supports for child and youth development – one that removes artificial boundaries between learning in school and learning in community settings. The presence of a K–12 school also allows HCZ to build a pathway of supports for learning and development from birth through adolescence, thus reducing the arduous tasks that parents and students often face as they seek to create a through-line for learning in the visual and performing arts, science and mathematics, or law and social justice as students move from elementary to middle and high school. Developing educational pathways out of a patchwork of school programs, while difficult for parents with means, is almost impossible for families with limited resources with respect to time, transportation, finances, knowledge, and social networks.

### *St. Hope Academy/Public Schools*

Led by Kevin Johnson, a former professional basketball player, St. Hope Academy was established in 1989 in Oak Park, a neighborhood composed largely of poor and working-class families in Sacramento, California. The Academy was designed to serve 250 students in grades 3 through 12 by offering integrated academic and youth-development programs in health, language arts, drama, mathematics, music, and character development, among other areas. The Academy also augmented students' school-based learning activities with adult mentors and neighborhood development activities that reinforced ties between academic achievement, career development, and community revitalization in and beyond Oak Park. As part of Sacramento Unified School District's high school transformation effort, St. Hope was granted a charter to transform Sacramento City High – a large, comprehensive and underperforming high school – into five separate small schools. The original Academy has now been incorporated into an independent charter school district serving close to 2,000 students. The charter district includes an early childhood development program, an elementary school, a middle school operated in conjunction with the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), and five small high schools specializing in the arts; health sciences; law and public services; mathematics, engineering, and science; and business and education.

True to its broader focus on community development, the St. Hope Public School District continues to connect its educational programs to larger economic and

community development efforts in Oak Park, which include opening a range of new small businesses like a bookstore, theater, and coffee shop. Like the Harlem Children’s Zone, the St. Hope Public School District recognizes that strong families and communities provide vital assets to support students’ educational growth.

### Smart Education Systems: A New Old Idea

District transformations such as the ones in Philadelphia, Oakland, New York City, and Chicago that result in school systems with permeable rather than closed boundaries have enhanced opportunities to strengthen and align school- and community-based learning activities by incorporating the assets of communities in ways that integrate in and out-of-school learning opportunities on a systematic basis. At the same time, LESNs in New York, Sacramento, and other communities are able to draw on the resources of schools, community organizations, higher education, and cultural and faith institutions to construct meaningful learning activities that incorporate academic, cognitive, social, and cultural components of learning without sacrificing high standards and attention to basic skills – something that schools would find difficult to do alone under the pressure to improve standardized-test results.

The next step in the transformation of these systems to support high levels of learning for all students is to connect the

neighborhood web of educational supports LESNs provide with the citywide partnerships that have the capacity to engage a broader range of partners. We call this bigger system a “smart education system.”

The concept of a web of resources that a smart education system entails is not a new idea. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s New Futures Initiative, launched in 1987, was one of the first comprehensive multicity efforts to improve education outcomes in high-poverty communities by fostering public policies and practices that would integrate services across multiple systems (e.g., health, education, employment, child welfare, social services, juvenile justice) to support improved education and related outcomes for students.<sup>13</sup> New Futures pursued this strategy by promoting the development of new local governance structures called collaboratives to act as interim mechanisms connecting fragmented delivery systems. Toward this end, collaboratives composed of elected officials, business leaders, public agency officials, parents, and community representatives were formed in each of the seven New Futures communities to develop localized approaches to system integration and alignment.

In reflecting on the lessons learned from New Futures, the foundation and its partners noted that, “in many low-income communities, service-system and institutional-change initiatives like New Futures may, by themselves, prove insufficient to transform educational, social, and health outcomes. The emerging lesson is that in some environments, system reform efforts must be augmented by social capital and economic

<sup>13</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Building New Futures for At-Risk Youth: Findings from a Five-Year Multi-Site Evaluation* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995).

development initiatives that target the whole community.”<sup>14</sup>

While the failure to build social and economic capital in poor neighborhoods prevented New Futures from reaching its full potential, it is noteworthy to point out that at the time, local education systems faced minimal pressures for systemic change. New Futures was launched well before the standards movement raised expectations for learning and created national and state assessments that unmasked the full dimensions of the achievement gap and pressured districts to change under threat of state takeover of schools and entire school districts.

Moreover, state and mayoral oversight of school districts has allowed the collaboratives that were voluntary structures under New Futures to become formal governance mechanisms. In cities like Boston, Chicago, and New York, where mayors have direct control over the schools, the school superintendent is a member of the mayor’s cabinet.<sup>15</sup> Increased mayoral control of education, then, has enhanced the ability of municipal governments to form strategic alliances among the school district, other city agencies, cultural institutions, and businesses using the authority and bully pulpit of mayors. These alliances create policies and conditions that foster the development of a *smart education system*.

### What Is a Smart Education System?

In order to understand what we mean by “smart education system,” it is helpful to unpack each word in that phrase.

**Smart.** While the word *smart* has a particular educational connotation, the word has also acquired a specialized meaning in the technology world. In contrast to conventional technologies, which do one thing, over and over again, smart technologies are nimble and are able to learn and adapt to new situations. They are thus more efficient and provide the services that are needed.

For example, conventional dishwashers use the same amount of water for each wash, no matter how many dishes are in the rack. Smart dishwashers, by contrast, are able to “know” how many dishes are in the rack and adjust the amount of water the supply. Further, they “learn” the habits of the user and make adjustments for people who tend to wash more dishes or those who wash less each time.

In similar fashion, a smart education system is nimble, adaptive, and efficient. It provides differential supports to different young people and families, depending on their needs. It is able to attract new partners to augment its capacity when needed. And it collects and uses data and makes adjustments depending on what is working and what needs to be changed.

**Education.** Clearly the inequities in access to resources and services are vast. *Educational* does not mean *academic*, however. The range of services provided in a smart

<sup>14</sup> Douglas W. Nelson, “Foreword,” in Annie E. Casey Foundation, *The Path of Most Resistance: Reflections on Lessons Learned from New Futures* (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Warren Simmons, Ellen Foley, and Marla Ucelli, “Using Mayoral Involvement in District Reform to Support Instructional Change,” *Harvard Education Review*, 76 (2), 2006, 189–200; Michael W. Kirst and Fritz Edelman, “The Maturing Mayoral Role in Education,” *Harvard Education Review*, 76 (2), 2006, 152–163.

education system is rather broad – everything from after-school activities to cultural enrichment to internships in local businesses, and much in between. The services also help to remove some barriers to learning many young people face. For example, many young people who are in foster care endure frequent disruptions to their schooling because they frequently move from house to house – and school to school. A smart education system would engage the foster care system to minimize such disruptions and ensure that young people in foster care could continue to learn in an uninterrupted way.

But what distinguishes a smart education system is the focus on educational services. The goal is to ensure that all young people are supported in and out of school in their learning and other areas of development (e.g., health, social skills, cultural competence, character development, motivation, and self-discipline) that support academic achievement.

**System.** The services and supports a smart education system provides already exist in most cities, for the most part. But as New Futures recognized, they do not constitute a system. Young people and their families must negotiate their own way through the opportunities that are available, and if they make it through them at all it is almost by accident rather than design.

A system, by contrast, is aligned to the needs of the community. School districts and their partners in city agencies and private organizations – with community members acting as full partners – locate services and supports where they are needed

and in ways the community wants. They coordinate such services to avoid duplication and make it easier for children and families to take advantage of them. They disseminate information about available opportunities widely. And they provide transportation and other supports to make access easier.

In addition, the agencies and organizations that provide services pool their resources to ensure the availability of high-quality services that are customized to meet the needs of students, families and communities. And they are accountable to the community – people know who is in charge and whom they can hold responsible for achieving excellence and equity.

### **What Does a Smart Education System Look Like?**

The kind of smart education system we envision does not yet exist, citywide, in any city in the United States. However, the press for school district transformations that promote high standards and decentralizing decision making and resource control (fiscal, human, material) to school networks and community partners provides an essential foundation for change. This practice must be accompanied by citywide governance structures that forge interfaces among city agencies with responsibility for children, youth, and families, as well as with cultural institutions and museums, businesses, and nonprofit organizations that provide services which support student learning. Moreover, linking neighborhood-based and citywide alliances ensures a more equitable exchange between elites and grassroots organizations than is possible through citywide collaboratives that are

often dominated by the perspectives, politics, and values of elites.

A smart education system, then, is dependent upon community engagement that engenders the effective exchange of ideas and information between elites and grassroots community leaders and organizations. To provide one example, in many cases a community's definition of what constitutes valued arts activities differs from the definition that might be developed by more advantaged members of a community. The result is a potential conflict: to some in a city, legitimate arts are defined as classical music and playing in orchestras, while in less-advantaged, culturally diverse communities, communities, arts could involve hair-weaving, painting of fingernails, and a variety of activities that actually add value and are important in a community, but aren't valued by elites.

An engaged community that provides equitable access to information and decision making for grassroots and "grasstop" organizations provides both the demand for continued improvement and support for the sometimes-difficult decisions that improvement entails. By contrast, as the recent history of reforms shows all too clearly, a lack of engagement can scuttle technically sound improvement efforts based on political, social, or cultural conflicts, or as Carolyn Akers, the director of the Mobile Area Education Foundation in Alabama, is fond of saying, "education reform isn't rocket science; it's political science."<sup>16</sup> In many cases, though, it's both: reform involves the technical challenge of building new structures as well as the political challenge of rearranging

power relationships. Creating a smart education system is no different.

The technical challenges can be formidable. Many cities lack the capacity even to conduct an inventory of existing services. Budgeting and information systems vary widely among agencies and organizations and may be technically incompatible. And few cities have the experience of using new information to drive policy changes.

Technology can help alleviate some of the technical challenges. Denver, for example, has used global positioning systems and census data to match the availability of recreation facilities in high-poverty neighborhoods. And Boston and other cities have developed sophisticated student-information systems that could be used to create an extensive database of information on learning opportunities in and out of school. But the challenge, there and elsewhere, is to enable district and community leaders to understand how to use the information effectively.

The political challenges are perhaps more substantial. Many cities that have attempted to forge partnerships between districts, community groups, and other agencies have found that school districts tend to want to take the lead in such partnerships and are reluctant to cede resources or authority. In other cities, political leaders are eager to spread services evenly, rather than concentrate them in areas with the most need. And few organizations have a history of

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Akers, "Developing a Civic Infrastructure," *Voices in Urban Education*, No. 9, Fall 2005.

working together; bringing them together sometimes breed suspicions about motives.

### **Building a Foundation for Smart Education Systems**

Strong communities are as vital to the development of smart education systems as they are to successful schools. The relationships among people in successful schools corresponds with Sergiovanni's definition of "community" as people "bonded to a set of shared ideas and ideals" in a way that is "tight enough to transform them from a collection of I's into a collective We."<sup>17</sup> Another aspect of "community" that often characterizes examples of successful reform is what Kretzman and McKnight describe as an internal focus where "the primacy of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control" is emphasized.<sup>18</sup>

This significance of an "internal focus" is evident in the knowledge that school staff seem to have about the students and their families, in their understanding of the resources required to accomplish their work, and in their commitment to achieving their collective goals. Many successful urban schools, like El Puente and the St. Hope Academy, began by making important shifts in their thinking about external communities, as revealed by their outreach strategies and collaborative stance with families and community-based organizations

and groups. In partnership with the community, these schools have also taken a critical step to move beyond the enumeration of deficits to the identification of assets that may already exist, both in school and in the community.

The LESNs outlined in this chapter apply these principles to create a network of learning opportunities grounded in the assets and experiences of schools and key partner organizations within a specified neighborhood or community united as much by shared values, experiences, and aspirations as by physical boundaries set by geography or politics.

Smart education systems, however, require the develop of shared values, experiences, and aspirations across the diverse swath of communities that exist within most cities – the communities flush with energy and ambition based on new housing and business development and those with equal hope and ambition but that operate with fewer resources (political, social, fiscal) available to support their efforts. The cities that build wary, sometimes-temporary, but often-productive alliances between the multiple communities within their borders possess a common set of features that act as a scaffold for cross-cultural and cross-sector dialogue and action.

These features, outlined below, represent the beginning of an infrastructure to support and sustain smart education systems.

### *Leadership Development*

Cities comprise diverse communities with varying sources of leadership (e.g., neighborhood associations, unions, community development corporations, faith institutions, social clubs, civic organizations,

<sup>17</sup> Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert, *Reforming Districts: How Districts Support School Reform; A Research Report* (Seattle: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, September 2003); Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Jody Kretzman and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path to Finding and Mobilizing the Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, Institute for Policy Research, 1993).

governmental agencies, arts and cultural institutions). These varied sources pose a challenge for developing leaders with a core set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge from communities with divergent experiences and cultures. Building a consensus viewpoint and knowledge base while respecting difference requires skilled and concerted cross-sector leadership development that is often lacking at the local level.

Advocates, community leaders, government officials and school board members with major roles in education often come to this endeavor with little formal or shared knowledge about education practice and policy, and few vehicles to address this shortcoming. In comparison, state and national leadership is supported by a bevy of organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Business Roundtable, the National Governors Association, and the Learning First Alliance that strive to build cross-sector understanding and consensus about the current status of education and its implications for future policies and practices. There are few local equivalents of these organizations, yet these types of supports are sorely needed to provide a common foundation for shared understanding and collective action.

Local intermediary and reform support organizations, such as the local education funds in Chattanooga and Portland and the collaborative in El Paso, have included this role in their already-crowded portfolio of work. In addition, local affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation assume this responsibility for parents and community groups. These organizations, however, often perform this function as a byproduct of

their other work, rather than as an explicit responsibility, and often do so with little direct funding by foundations. To develop the leadership needed to strengthen and expand cross-sector coalitions, local communities and their partners must invest in leadership development that will create and inform a network that includes local government leaders and their key staff, school board officials, union leaders, community-based organizations, faith institutions, and higher-education representatives, among others.

### *Applied Research*

As with education, the various systems that provide support for youth and community development offer diverse services that vary widely in quality. The quality varies within programs as well as between them; a low-performing school might include an exemplary arts program, for example. But the heterogeneous nature of these services contributes to varied perceptions about the nature of the “elephant.” And, often, these differing perceptions fuel conflicts about the nature and urgency of problems based on experiences that vary along race, ethnicity, income, and neighborhood.

Applied research provides an essential base for building a shared understanding of about a system and its differential impact on outcomes and experiences in specific settings. While guided by theory, organizations such as Research for Action in Philadelphia, Education Matters in Boston, the Consortium for Chicago School Research, and the Annenberg Institute’s own Community Involvement Program (formerly housed in New York University’s Institute for Education and Social Policy)

conduct research on problems posed by local constituents that include community-based organizations, school districts, local funders, and municipal leaders. In doing so, they pay specific attention to the enactment of policy and practice with an eye toward understanding how and why change achieves or fails to achieve desired outcomes within or across communities.

Research of this kind is more context sensitive and practice oriented than traditional “scientific” research and evaluation activities, which often seek to minimize or control the very factors (e.g., teacher and student mobility, practitioner choice and motivation, prior levels of achievement, community resources) affecting the shape and progress of reform. While these controls help isolate and determine the effects of a particular intervention, they also obscure and oversimplify the forces educators, students, parents, and advocates must confront when they apply a design under the varying conditions that exist across schools and communities.

To build smart education systems that improve the quality and effectiveness of reform, local leaders and practitioners need more information and data that discern the course of implementation, not just its destination. These data often fuel constructive discussions in superintendent cabinet meetings, local business roundtable gatherings, editorial board briefings, teacher network meetings, parent and community forums, and labor-management negotiations – the very settings that the scientific research community struggles to reach through national clearinghouses, regional laboratories and centers, and scholarly journals.

### *Local “Skunk Works” or Innovation Incubators*

Contrary to the widespread perception that we know little about “what works” in education and other sectors, school districts and other systems, in fact, confront a cornucopia of “best” practices, “effective” programs, and evidence-based designs. What they often lack is the knowledge and means to incubate and adapt “proven” practices at the scale needed to improve and connect learning activities across distinct communities. Although this challenge is complicated by basic research and evaluation studies that overlook implementation prerequisites, a growing number of university- and community-based nonprofit organizations are serving for school systems what Lockheed, the aircraft corporation, called “skunk works”: a site for applied research and development.

The Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools; New Visions for Public Schools and the Center for Arts Education, both in New York City; the Boston Plan for Excellence and Center for Collaborative Education, in Boston; and the Philadelphia Education Fund, along with Foundation, Inc., in that city, are examples of organizations partnering with local school districts to support the design and implementation of new ideas. Their work includes the development of small schools; arts curricula and programs; authentic forms of student, school, and district assessment; and the development of school networks operated by nonprofit and for-profit organizations.

Local skunk works have also helped nationally and locally developed designs make the mutual adaptations needed to foster improvement, rather than chaos, within

larger systems of schools.<sup>19</sup> The critical role played by these organizations is often ignored by national research and evaluation studies focused more narrowly on outcomes and design fidelity, rather than adaptations required by varying contexts.

#### *Alternative Governance Structures*

Structural or policy barriers that require the intervention of independent governing bodies involving different sectors (e.g., education, housing, health, social services) stymie even the best design and implementation efforts. Educators in secondary schools, for example, are often frustrated by student attendance and behavior problems exacerbated by policies and practices followed by the foster care and juvenile justice systems that operate beyond the reach of schools but whose presence is felt deeply by them just the same. Similarly, community groups operating recreation, education, and health programs chide districts for policies that limit their access to students and facilities while calling for families and neighborhoods to do more.

To achieve the kind of smart education system we envision, communities must restructure larger systems in education, health, recreation, and economic development that pose boundaries for cross-section planning and collaboration. While the creation of cross-agency collaboratives and neighborhood councils represents a step in the right direction, these arrangements are usually voluntary and operate within the constraints of systems that fragment communities and families into isolated individuals with specific needs.<sup>20</sup> Mayoral cabinets

for children and families established in Boston and New York lend authority to these arrangements, but often sacrifice community engagement for centralized collaboration.

#### *Public Engagement Mechanisms and Strategies*

When local governing bodies are slow to respond to felt needs, communities can pursue change through court actions, appeals to state and federal governments, and the building of local demands for change. All of these actions involve some form of public engagement to lift awareness, build constituency, and drive action. Data from public opinion surveys indicate that the American public, overwhelmingly, considers education a top national priority.<sup>21</sup> However, these same surveys show that the public believes that the nation's schools are not equipped to provide a high-quality education for all.

As a result, the volume has been turned up on the “quiet revolution”: public engagement.<sup>22</sup> Yet we have much to learn about the design and implementation of effective strategies to engage the public within and across communities in different regions of the country. To advance this work, communities need a broader understanding of how

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kronley and Claire Handley, *Reforming Relationships: School Districts, External organizations, and Systemic Change* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, April 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Casey Foundation, *The Path of Most Resistance*.

<sup>21</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform, *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change* (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998); Public Education Network and Education Week, *Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates* (Washington, DC: Public Education Network, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Annenberg Institute, *Reasons for Hope*.

partnerships and leadership emerge and develop given differences in context and purpose, as well as the kinds of tools and expertise individuals and organizations need to heighten the quality and effectiveness of their engagement strategies in the context of an ever-changing community.

#### *Vision and Action Artifacts*

The leadership, research, and public engagement endeavors outlined previously often lead to the production of vision frameworks and action plans intended to guide ongoing or periodic reviews of progress and action by the community. The form these vision statements and frameworks take varies considerably, along with the manner in which they are distributed and used. Despite the paucity of information about promising practice in this area, communities continue to extrapolate the business sector's emphasis on the importance of mission statements and action frameworks for organizational development and restructuring.

Given the importance placed on these tools, several questions warrant further study:

- What level of detail and sophistication is necessary for these frameworks to inform and engender action on the part of key target groups and systems?
- What corollary activities, tools, and products are needed to augment these frameworks so multiple groups can inform their development and use them to guide changes in policy and practice?
- How might different audiences modify these resources over time to address the need for continuous, evidence-based

inquiry and adaptation to promote equity and excellence?

- What role can educators, community-based groups, intermediary organizations, higher-education institutions, and others play in the development and modification of these resources over time?

## Conclusion

While much work remains to define and develop the scaffolds needed to create smart education systems, the potential payoff is high. And there is a strong desire on the part of municipal leaders, community organizations, and philanthropic groups to work through the challenges. For years, cities and funders have tended to focus either on schools or on out-of-school learning opportunities, even while recognizing that each needs the other. But they have been reluctant to work together. The demands to close the achievement gap and the innovations and outcomes created by system transformation informed by community development could finally create environments in which the partnerships educators and community leaders have long sought might build the smart education systems needed to develop creative communities that drive and derive benefits from a creative economy.