

# Engaging Cities

*How Municipal Leaders Can  
Mobilize Communities  
to Improve Public Schools*

Michael Grady

Robert Rothman

Hal Smith

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University  
in cooperation with the Institute for Youth, Education, and  
Families of the National League of Cities

Mobilizing the **Denver** Community  
around Latino Academic Achievement



## ■ *Convene leaders from a range of constituencies to tackle critical challenges together*

In December 2003, a group representing a coalition of Latino community organizations and activists in Denver met with Mayor John Hickenlooper to express concerns about the mayor's relationship with the Latino community. A few months after the meeting, the group issued a series of recommendations to the mayor, including a proposal that he convene a summit on Latino academic achievement.

### **A Community States Its Needs**

The group did not have to push very hard to see that recommendation adopted. In fact, Mayor Hickenlooper had already been considering a similar proposal. A school

board member, the Reverend Lucia Guzman, executive director of the mayor's Agency for Human Rights and Community Relations (see sidebar), had spoken out about having the school district tackle the issue of Latino achievement. Guzman and Maria Guajardo Lucero, executive director of the Mayor's Office for Education and Children (see sidebar on page 9), had attended a two-day conference in Washington, D.C., on the issue. And both recognized that Mayor Hickenlooper's approach to municipal leadership was to bring together leaders from a range of communities to consider what they could do to tackle critical challenges. "We've tried not to be the ultimate problem solver, but to be a catalyst," Hickenlooper says.

*Mayor John Hickenlooper gives high fives to Denver's Summer Scholars*



### **Mayor's Agency for Human Rights and Community Relations**

The Agency for Human Rights and Community Relations was established in 1948 by the City and County of Denver. The agency empowers communities to address local issues, strives to promote equal opportunity, and protects the rights of all regardless of race, color, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, or disability.

▲ Agency Web site:  
[www.denvergov.org/HumanRights/default.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/HumanRights/default.asp)

■ *Follow up on productive discussions to make sure they lead to action steps*

Hickenlooper convened the Mayor's Summit on Latino Academic Achievement (see sidebar on page 13) on October 20, 2004. By all accounts, the meeting was a resounding success. Some three hundred people, including business leaders, elected officials, community activists, and educators, attended and addressed issues like teachers' roles, parent engagement, the role of language, preschool, and access to higher education. Many say they emerged from the meeting with a renewed commitment to act to improve Latino achievement in Denver.

But to Hickenlooper, the test of the meeting would be what came afterward. He pledged to hold a follow-up meeting 100 days after the summit to consider what happened in

the wake of the first meeting and what next steps participants might take. The second meeting drew an overflow crowd and led to new partnerships and pledges for action. The issue is now a high priority for the community. "This wasn't just something to have and walk away from," he says. "We wanted to have actionable results."

### **Strong Schools Mean Strong Neighborhoods**

Hickenlooper was elected in June 2003 in his first try for public office. A successful entrepreneur, Hickenlooper had helped spark the revitalization of an aging section of Denver known as Lower Downtown, or LoDo, which is now one of the most



*Mayor Hickenlooper attends a music class*

## ■ *Look for strategic advantages and returns on taxpayer investment*

vibrant sections of the city. In many ways, Hickenlooper approaches municipal leadership like a businessman, seeking strategic advantage and ensuring that the taxpayers' investments reap returns.

During his campaign, Hickenlooper stressed often that a strong city depended on strong neighborhoods, which depended on strong schools. He pledged during the campaign to visit a Denver public school each week, a pledge he has, by and large, kept.

Despite the mayor's strong interest in education, he did not set out to take over or run the school system. "What I should be doing is working as hard as I can with the system. We have to help it achieve the best

results possible," he says. "I'm conscious there are other systems out there. But there are historical reasons why the system is the way it is. Things that look like mistakes to us have sound reasons behind them."

According to former Denver Public Schools superintendent Jerry Wartgow, Mayor Hickenlooper was his biggest cheerleader. "Denver is the envy of a lot of other cities," Wartgow said shortly before his retirement in 2005. "There is a great relationship between the mayor's office and the school district. I can't imagine it being better. It's not a matter of turf."

If anything, the relationship between the school system and the mayor grew even stronger after Wartgow's retirement, when

### **Mayor's Office for Education and Children**

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The Mayor's Office for Education and Children is committed to helping Denver children grow up with the strengths, knowledge, and skills necessary to become confident and successful residents. The focus is on the first two decades of life, from infancy to young adulthood. Established in 1995, the office advocates for the children, youth, and families of Denver and serves as the city's liaison to Denver Public Schools.

▲ Office home page:

[www.denvergov.org/Education/default.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/Education/default.asp)

## ■ *Cultivate collaborative, supportive relationships with school district leaders*

## ■ *Use the power of the mayor's office to rally voters in support of funding for public education*

the school board selected Hickenlooper's chief of staff, Michael Bennet, as the next superintendent of schools. As an indication of Hickenlooper's support for the school system, the mayor, in fall 2005, campaigned hard for a ballot measure to raise property taxes by \$25 million to support a new compensation system for teachers (see sidebar). The measure passed, approved by 58 percent of voters.

### **"Denver Voters Pave Way for Incentive Pay"**

This article in *Education Week* by Bess Keller (November 9, 2005) describes Denver voters' approval of a property-tax increase to finance a new compensation plan for Denver teachers – based on incentives, rather than seniority – that attracted national attention. The measure was designed by a district-union team and backed by the mayor, the city council, other business and civic leaders, and a campaign war chest of more than \$1 million, mostly from foundations and businesses.

- ▲ Article:  
[www.edweek.org/agentk-12/articles/2005/11/09/11denver.h25.html](http://www.edweek.org/agentk-12/articles/2005/11/09/11denver.h25.html) (limited access with free registration)
- ▲ More on Denver's teacher compensation system:  
[www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Jupp.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Jupp.html)
- ▲ Excerpt from "Creating Faculties that Support School Communities," Brad Jupp, Teacher Coordinator, Denver Public Schools/Denver Classroom Teachers Association, *Voices in Urban Education* no. 5 (Fall 2004):  
[www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Jupp.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Jupp.html)

### **What the Mayor Did**

In his efforts on behalf of the schools, Hickenlooper has sought to focus on areas where the mayor's office can provide an advantage. "I try to look at ways to help the schools without stepping on toes," he says. One area of focus has been after-school programs. The mayor has worked with city agencies such as the Parks and Recreation Department to coordinate their maps of services with those of the tax assessor's office so that the city can determine whether low-income neighborhoods have access to after-school services.

In addition, the mayor has lined up private funds to pay "last dollar" college scholarships for students in one middle school who graduate from high school, and he is trying to raise funds to extend the program to all middle schools. He is also using city bonds to finance low-interest college loans for all Denver students. Students who sign up for the program will also have up to \$1,500 of the loan waived at the time of graduation.

Hickenlooper has also addressed early childhood education, a traditional focus of the Denver mayor's office (see sidebar on page 11). He has worked with cultural institutions to launch a campaign, the 5 By 5 Program, to encourage all young children to have at least five cultural experiences – visits to museums or the symphony – by the age of five. Hickenlooper also convened a summit on early childhood education in February 2004 – the model for the Latino summit. In addition to generating ideas for

## ■ *Focus on areas where the mayor's office can provide an advantage*

improvements in programs, the early childhood summit produced an immediate outcome: a local water company pledged to contribute ten cents to early childhood programs for every bottle of water sold.

### *Backed the Call for a Latino Summit*

The Latino Summit addressed all levels of education, but it also represented Mayor Hickenlooper's approach of seeking solutions from across various sectors of the community.

To many Denver residents, the need for a focus on Latino academic achievement was obvious. Latinos make up the largest and

fastest-growing segment of the student population in the city and are among those with the greatest needs. Currently, 57 percent of the students in Denver Public Schools are Latino, up from 45 percent a decade ago. And Latinos are much more likely than other students to live in poverty and to have parents with less than a high school diploma.

Student-achievement data suggest that achievement gaps between White and Latino students are substantial and growing. White students are more likely than Latinos to receive satisfactory grades in high school, and much more likely to complete advanced



### **The Mayor's Early Childhood Initiatives**

The 5 By 5 Program, sponsored by the Mayor's Office for Education and Children, aims to provide the city's children with five cultural experiences before they reach the age of five. This free program, made possible through in-kind and financial support from the city's cultural partners and corporate sponsors, is available to Denver Head Start families with children under the age of five. The program, building on Mayor Hickenlooper's "Invest in Success" early childhood education summit, strives to introduce arts, culture, and play to spark imagination and stimulate creativity and learning.

- ▲ 5 By 5 Program:  
[www.denvergov.org/dephome.asp?depid=1950](http://www.denvergov.org/dephome.asp?depid=1950)
- ▲ Early childhood education summit press release:  
[www.denvergov.org/Mayor/1688press1218.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/Mayor/1688press1218.asp)

## ■ *Engage the community rather than impose solutions*

coursework. Only 29 percent of Latinos in the high school class of 2003 graduated from high school in four years, compared with 51 percent of White students.

Former superintendent Wartgow and others have noted that cultural and language issues make Latino education a special challenge. Some 15,000 students in Denver come from families where Spanish is the first language, and many are immigrants who are unaware of the services available to them. According to Wartgow,

If you look at the demographics of the district and analyze the gap in achievement, it's crystal clear there is no way the district can achieve its goals unless we focus on Latino students. The school populations have shifted, but it's not just a different color.

But the issues surrounding Latino education in Denver go well beyond the challenges of

improving schooling for English-language learners, notes Nita Gonzales, president and CEO of Escuela Tlatelolco (see sidebar), an independent, community-based school. "Don't use immigration as a scapegoat," she says. "They are not succeeding with fifth- and sixth-generation Chicanos. They don't even speak Spanish. Something is dramatically wrong when you are losing children who grew up here."

Because of these stark realities, the idea of a summit on Latino academic achievement sparked little opposition. However, Guajardo Lucero notes that a number of people suggested that the gathering could focus on improving achievement more generally, rather than just on Latinos. And some in the African American community asked when the city would hold a summit on African American achievement. The mayor insisted on the need for a summit focused on Latinos.

### *Engaged the Wider Community*

In keeping with the mayor's approach of engaging the community rather than imposing solutions, Guajardo Lucero sought input on the summit from a broad range of individuals and organizations. She held coffees with some one hundred individuals to gather suggestions on the content and the format of the meeting, then convened a smaller group, made up largely of members of Denver's Latino community, to plan the meeting.

To her surprise, many more people wanted to take part in the event than they had originally planned on, so Guajardo Lucero

#### **Escuela Tlatelolco**

Escuela Tlatelolco is a community-based private school, developed in the late 1960s to provide an alternative education for young Chicanos, Mexicanos, and Raza Indigena, especially those who have not had success in traditional public school settings. The school aims to provide these students with academic proficiency and instill in them cultural pride, confidence, and leadership.

▲ Escuela Tlatelolco:  
<http://escuelatlatelolco.org>

## ■ *Involve a wide range of people with different experiences and viewpoints*

asked some to serve as volunteers and others to contribute financially. In all, the group raised \$75,000 to stage the summit. “Once people got wind of it, there was a great interest,” Guajardo Lucero says.

To ensure that the meeting accomplished the goal of engaging the broader community, the planning group resisted pleas to focus the meeting solely on teachers’ or parents’ concerns. And they were strategic in extending invitations and assigning roles at the summit. For example, the group made sure to invite people from organizations that had focused on educational improvement, but not necessarily on Latino

achievement, and had them moderate sessions so that they would stay and attend to the discussion. “People from organizations that would not have mentioned Latino achievement sat up a little straighter,” she says. “It helped turn some people around.”

The process of gathering input and engaging people from a range of sectors of the community was cumbersome, but Mayor Hickenlooper is convinced it produced a better outcome. “It makes everyone’s work harder to have so many people involved,” says Hickenlooper. “But you end up with a final product that’s far superior to whatever a city agency could come up with by itself.”

*Former mayor Federico Peña speaks at the Mayor’s Summit on Latino Achievement*



### **Mayor’s Summit on Latino Academic Achievement**

There is extensive documentation on the Web about the Mayor’s Summit on Latino Academic Achievement, including a message from Mayor Hickenlooper; the opening presentation by Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, about closing the achievement gap; the closing presentation by Federico Peña, calling the business community to action; demographic information; a summary of the issues; a student mural; a video of the summit; conference proceedings; and results from the attendee evaluations. Some three hundred business, civic, and educational leaders attended the summit.

- ▲ Summit Web site:  
[www.denvergov.org/latinosummit](http://www.denvergov.org/latinosummit)
- ▲ Federico Peña’s closing address:  
[www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316582.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316582.asp)
- ▲ Kati Haycock’s keynote address:  
[www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316572.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316572.asp)
- ▲ Report, “Today’s Latino Student: America’s Future Human Capital,” can be downloaded at:  
[www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316711.asp](http://www.denvergov.org/LatinoSummit/template316711.asp) (click on Denver MayorSummit04.pdf), by Excelencia in Education (Web site: [www.edexcelencia.org](http://www.edexcelencia.org))

## ■ *Create a sense of urgency and educate citizens and businesses that they can make a difference*

### *Kept to Clear Goals*

One key goal of the meeting was to broaden awareness of the challenges and possible solutions, Hickenlooper says.

A lot of what the mayor's office can do is keep communicating different aspects of the challenge. It becomes almost like an education issue in and of itself: a) creating a sense of urgency, and b) educating citizens and business that they can make a difference on something that's of great importance to them – their business's future, the city's future. With a lot of large issues, part of people's inaction is rooted in a sense of hopelessness – the belief that they're not going to be able to make a difference. That's obviously wrong.

To highlight the challenges, the Colorado Children's Campaign, an advocacy organization, prepared a report that presented the stark data on demographics and educational outcomes (see sidebar). The report was an eye-opener, according to Van Schoales, vice president for education initiatives and executive director of the Colorado Small Schools Initiative at the Colorado Children's Campaign. "I'm not sure most people knew the majority of kids in DPS are Latino, and I'm not sure most people knew that those kids are not succeeding or the magnitude of the problem," he says. "Just getting [the data] out there is a critically important first step."

Another goal of the Latino Summit was to help make sure all participants understood the importance to the city's future of



### **Colorado Children's Campaign**

The Colorado Children's Campaign has worked since 1985 to mobilize individuals and organizations to think and act on behalf of children, with particular attention to the health, education, and safety of children most at risk.

- ▲ Colorado Children's Campaign:  
[www.coloradokids.org](http://www.coloradokids.org)
- ▲ Colorado Small Schools Initiative:  
[www.coloradosmallschools.org](http://www.coloradosmallschools.org)
- ▲ Report: Denver's Latino Students: A Snapshot of Education and Opportunity, October 2004. Available for download at:  
[www.coloradosmallschools.org/resources/cssiresearch.html](http://www.coloradosmallschools.org/resources/cssiresearch.html)

## ■ *Keep the momentum going with follow-up conversations leading to concrete strategies*

solving the problem of Latino achievement. Here, former mayor Federico Peña played a key role. In a closing address, Peña, a former U.S. Secretary of Energy and Transportation and currently the managing director of Vestar Capital Partners, spoke directly to the business community about the challenge. “We are losing the global war to produce the smartest and most creative workforce in this century,” Peña said. “We must act now, and we must especially focus on Latino students.”

A third goal of the meeting was to highlight successes and show that the problem could be solved. In a keynote address, Kati Haycock, director of The Education Trust (see sidebar on page 16), provided data on schools and districts from around the country where Latino children achieve at high levels. The conference showcased some local examples of schools that had succeeded with Latino children, and students themselves played key roles as presenters. (For links to the addresses by Federico Peña and Kati Haycock, see the sidebar on the Mayor’s Summit on Latino Academic Achievement on page 13.)

“You don’t have to reinvent the wheel,” says Antonio Esquibel, the retired director of Rocky Mountain SER (Service, Employment, Redevelopment) Head Start. “Part of it is convincing people that if you address Latino education in a certain way, you can be successful.”

### *Kept the Momentum Going*

The summit produced some immediate results. Darlene LeDoux, principal of North High School, was so impressed by Haycock’s presentation that she went to Washington, D.C., a few weeks after the summit to attend The Education Trust’s annual conference. She then arranged for two staff members from the Trust to visit her school and speak with members of the faculty. “We were in the middle of reform already at North,” says LeDoux. “Haycock’s presentation reinforced our thinking.” North has now contracted with The Education Trust to help with their reforms, and staff members attended the organization’s 2005 annual meeting.



*A student speaks at the Mayor’s Summit on Latino Achievement, with the Summit mural “En Transición” in the background*

## ■ *Keep action steps high on everyone's agenda*

Elsewhere, there was considerable enthusiasm for keeping the momentum of the summit alive. As promised, the mayor held a second meeting in February to take stock of plans 100 days after the summit. Initially, officials expected a relatively small group, who would meet for two hours and come out with an action plan. But more than two hundred people attended the follow-up meeting – more than the hall could accommodate – and the organizers extended the agenda to four hours. The participants heard from a reporter who had been spending the year at North High School, a leader of a community activist group, Superintendent Wartgow, and the head of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, and then worked in small groups to plan strategies.

Out of these and subsequent conversations, some concrete strategies emerged. For example, the city contracted with the BUENO Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder (see sidebar) to prepare briefing papers on ways to support English-language

learners in early childhood education and to train Head Start staff to meet the needs of English-language learners. More than half of all children in Head Start in Denver speak a language other than English at home; the vast majority of these children speak Spanish.

Mayor Hickenlooper and his staff have also kept the issue of Latino achievement high on the agenda in the Denver public schools. In his weekly school visits, the mayor asks principals what they are doing to support Latino students. And the planning group for the summit has briefed the DPS curriculum department and the new chief academic officer on issues around Latino achievement.

### **The Road Ahead: Old Divisions, New Players**

Over the longer term, city leaders hope that the connections among the broader community represented at the summit can galvanize improvements in achievement for Latino children. To be sure, the one-day

#### **The Education Trust**

The Education Trust works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college, and forever closing the achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth. Its basic tenet is that all children will *learn* at high levels when they are *taught* to high levels.

▲ The Education Trust home page:  
[www2.edtrust.org/edtrust](http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust)

▲ The Education Trust Annual Conference:  
[www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/Conferences+and+Meetings](http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/Conferences+and+Meetings)

#### **BUENO Center for Multicultural Education**

The BUENO Center for Multicultural Education is an integral part of the School of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Through a comprehensive range of research, training, and service projects, the center strongly promotes quality education with an emphasis on cultural pluralism. The center is deeply committed to facilitating equal educational opportunities for cultural and language minority students.

▲ BUENO Web site:  
[www.colorado.edu/education/BUENO](http://www.colorado.edu/education/BUENO)

meeting and the follow-up did not magically create a citywide coalition for educational improvement. As several participants noted, some divisions remain, even within the Latino community, where Chicanos and recent immigrants do not always see eye to eye. But the summit provided a rare opportunity for the various sectors to meet and consider the issues, notes Gully Stanford, precollegiate program coordinator for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. “The willingness of the city to do this means that we can all [work together] in an atmosphere of exploration rather than blame,” he says. “In the past, the only venues were confrontational.”

Indeed, the summit brought new players to the table. Although Denver has a long history of Latino activism in education – in the late 1960s, thousands of Latino students walked out of school after a racial incident – Mayor Hickenlooper and the summit made sure the activists were heard, says Esquibel, the retired Head Start director. “In the past, we would sit in or protest just to cosponsor an event,” he says. “Here, they said, ‘What can we do? Give us ideas.’”

Likewise, the business community and higher-education institutions, spurred by the leadership of figures such as former mayor Peña and their participation at the summit, have indicated that they are ready to undertake more comprehensive efforts to improve education in Denver. “I do believe business is beginning to play a more important role, beyond individual initiatives,” says Linda Alvarado, the president of a local construction company. “As business leaders,” she adds, “it is our job to be aware of trends. There are more than 50 percent Latinos in the Denver public schools. This is our workforce.”

