

Engaging Cities

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

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Restoring Public Confidence in the
Nashville Public Schools



■ *Embrace education improvement as a chief public policy priority*

It was mid-afternoon and Mayor Bill Purcell was still animated about his visit early that morning to Hume-Fogg Academic High School. He had addressed a large assembly of students, teachers, and alumni who had gathered at Nashville's oldest school to commemorate the 150th anniversary of its founding. "Following the roll call of the graduating classes," Mayor Purcell recalled, "A woman rose from the audience and silently held a graduation medal over her head. Now, everyone assumed it was *her* medal and she had been overlooked in the official program. But it wasn't. When she

was recognized from the podium she explained that it was her father's graduation medal from the Class of 1925, and his affiliation with Hume-Fogg meant so much to him and his children that she felt compelled to speak.

"It was a very moving moment and reaffirmed for me why we all work so hard to make the schools work," the mayor continued. The same bond and sense of legacy is how this mayor wants all of Nashville's citizens and students to feel about their schools.

Taking a Stand for Educational Success

The high-stakes assessment terms of No Child Left Behind have made for perilous times for educators and civic leaders alike. Some local elected leaders who have no legal obligation or authority over the schools have chosen to stand clear, out of fear that their political futures will be harmed by associating with failing schools. As the list of low-performing schools in many cities steadily grows, these leaders see public schools as a risky venture.

Nashville's Purcell, on the other hand, embraces education improvement as the



Nashville mayor Bill Purcell chats with students at the Mayor's First Day Festival on August 15, 2005

Child and Family Policy Center

The Child and Family Policy Center was created in 1996 to bridge research, policy, and best practice to benefit children and families. Through grants from the Danforth Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center manages the Policy Maker's Program and co-sponsors the Family Re-Union Conference hosted by former vice president Al Gore.

The mission of the Child and Family Policy Center is to develop, promote, and implement public policy and community strategies that strengthen children and families through research, advocacy, and education.

www.vanderbilt.edu/VIPPS/C&FPC/index.htm

- *Recognize the importance of developing future human capital to the community's civic health*

chief public policy priority of his administration. When asked why, he explains that "it's a lot about who I am." Prior to being elected mayor, Purcell was director of the Child and Family Policy Center at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies – a center whose mission is to benefit children and their families through research, public policy, and best practices (see sidebar). Before that, he was majority leader of the Tennessee House of Representatives and chair of the Select Committee on Children and Youth. Purcell served five terms in the Tennessee House, beginning in 1986. He was chief architect of the Tennessee education reform. He started his career as a legal-aid attorney.

Given his orientation, it comes as no surprise that Purcell put his office squarely behind an effort to improve the schools. While Nashville's nine-member, popularly elected school board and their appointed director of schools have complete day-to-day authority over the 70,000-student district, it is the mayor who processes the school board's annual operating and capital budget request. It is the mayor's responsibility to then make an overall city budget recommendation, which includes schools, to the city council for approval.

Like other mayors who choose to stake their political careers on improving schools, Purcell views it as a social imperative. These mayors see that the future civic health of their communities is more than building stadiums and light-rail systems; increasingly, public leaders see that the well-being of their cities is tied in fundamental ways to developing future human capital. They believe that their city's schools and other social institutions must do more

■ *Use the unique leverage points of the mayor's office to advance educators' goals*

to prepare young people to take on their future family and civic obligations and that choosing not to deal with this issue is simply not an option. And the better than 80 percent of Nashvillians who voted for Purcell's reelection in 2003 seem to agree.

Sharing Leadership to Improve Schools

Purcell is not a fan of the takeover models used by some of his fellow mayors in New York, Chicago, and Cleveland. With a touch of irony, he explains: "I know it's hard to believe, but every once in a while you do get a bad mayor, so why would you want a bad mayor running your schools?"

The alternative that evolved in Nashville and other cities features shared leadership between school leaders and the mayor, in which each side plays to its respective strengths. In many cities where mayors have become more active in schools in recent years, city hall takes the common-sense approach that the day-to-day management of the schools is best left to the educators. The mayors, meanwhile, use their unique leverage points of public opinion, municipal services, and funding authority to advance local education goals.

Mayor Purcell has pursued this strategy since he took office in 1999, says longtime mayoral advisor Marc Hill. "It all started



On the first day of school, Mayor Purcell talks with parents at Julia Green Elementary School about the importance of community involvement

■ *Call together a broad coalition of civic leaders who share a belief in developing the human talent of young people*

during the mayor's first campaign, where he pledged to voters that he would visit every public school in the Metropolitan Nashville district in his first year in office." These were anything but superficial visits. As Hill notes, "The mayor would walk the halls with his staff, talk with teachers, the principal, even students." Aides would take detailed notes about problems with the facility, the quality of the learning environment, and the roles of parents and the community, all based on conversations he'd have with the staff and students. These notes

would be translated into memos and sent to the director of schools with an expectation for swift action.

This shared-leadership dance between city hall and the school district produced a few bruised toes at the start. However, over time, what evolved was a mutual understanding about roles and responsiveness.

What the Mayor Did

Purcell recognized that pursuing a big budget increase for education at the outset of his term would be a difficult sell. The public's opinion of the schools was too low to support such a reward. Like many urban districts, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools were losing student population to private schools and to more affluent school districts in adjoining Davidson County. Moreover, new arrivals to greater Nashville were avoiding buying homes in Nashville, in large measure due to the poor reputation of the public schools. The schools were beleaguered by the symptoms familiar to urban systems in decline: physical facilities in disrepair, stagnant test scores, chaotic learning environments, and high teacher turnover.



Students enjoy free entertainment in Nashville's downtown arena at the 2005 First Day Festival

■ *Actively promote parent and community involvement*

Celebrated Schools: First Day

Purcell realized he had to tackle these reputation and support problems head on. He started by calling together a broad civic coalition of leaders who shared his belief that developing the human talent of young people was a social imperative. In 1999, this leadership coalition of representatives from business, higher education, and community-based organizations joined the mayor in sponsoring a signature back-to-school event called the First Day Festival (see sidebar). According to Hill, “Education is the most important thing the city does. First Day is the chance to focus the whole city on the start of school with the idea that if we can create that kind of citywide enthusiasm, it will carry forward throughout the year.”

Since 2000, the Mayor’s First Day Festival has been a citywide celebration that takes

place the Sunday prior to the first day of school. The event includes a full afternoon of attractions and activities at or around the city arena in downtown Nashville. Billed as a good time for all ages, First Day features musical entertainment, storytelling, puppet and magic shows, and roving mascots. It also offers back-to-school giveaways from its many corporate sponsors, including the much-coveted back-to-school backpacks. In more recent years, the event has made a special outreach to teenagers, with back-to-school concerts at a separate venue.

At the lead-up to the 2003 event, Purcell was quoted as reminding parents that “part two” of the Festival begins the following morning, when all parents are encouraged to accompany their children to school, as he does with his daughter, a high school senior. By the fall of 2005, the event was attracting in excess of 20,000 people.

Mayor’s First Day Festival

The Festival features family fun, educational entertainment, and free school supplies and snacks. There are outdoor activities as well as live music in the park adjacent to the Gaylord Entertainment Center. The Web site contains information about the Mayor’s First Day Festival 2005, a description of the activities, a link to the Mayor’s Honor Roll of companies with leave policies that allow families to attend the event, and archives of past Festivals.

www.nashville.gov/mocyc/firstday_2005/

Teen musicians perform at the 2005 First Day back-to-school party for high school students



In no small measure, First Day has benefited human relations among the Nashville community, uniting groups of organizations and citizens who normally have little contact on a day-to-day basis. V. H. “Sonnye” Dixon, pastor of Hobson United Methodist Church and recent past president of the Nashville Chapter of the NAACP, reflects on First Day in the context of Nashville’s troubled history of race relations: “First Day is one time when we take down the walls that separate us and celebrate together.”

Engaged the Community: First Week

The downtown event has been used by schools as a springboard for further engagement with parents and community. Following the citywide celebration, all schools sponsor First Week activities that provide incentives for parents, neighbors, and community providers to visit the schools. According to a school counselor at Inglewood Elementary, “The public libraries, Boys and Girls Clubs, and social service organizations all use this prime opportunity to sign up kids and parents for extended learning activities.” The staff at this school

credit the mayor for the big bump they’ve seen in parent and grandparent participation. The counselor adds, “He’s really the only person in Nashville who can create a buzz and hold the attention of the local media.”

At Dan Mills Elementary, which serves an older, working-class section of Nashville about fifteen minutes northeast of downtown, First Day triggers a series of welcome-back activities that span the first few weeks of the school year. “We host a whole series of events to welcome kids and their parents or grandparents back to school,” says Principal Patti Yon. The school sponsors a “Walk Your Child to School Day” on the first day of school and a “Boo Hoo Breakfast” to help parents of new kindergartners cope with the emotions of dropping off their five-year-old for the first day of school.

Principal Yon adds that “our back-to-school campaign actually begins on July fifteenth, when I return to school and we begin registering new students. Our director of schools [Dr. Pedro Garcia] insists that schools be prepared to provide a full-day learning

PENCIL Foundation Partners program

PENCIL Partners are Nashville-area businesses, organizations, and faith communities who partner with a Nashville public school. PENCIL Partners volunteer time and other resources to help children achieve academically, develop life skills, and make a successful transition from school to career. The Web site contains links to program descriptions and to the Partnership Coordinator’s Manual.

www.pencilfd.org/partners

■ *Build on strategic partnerships with local businesses*

experience on the first day of school. My staff and I are ready to welcome parents, and our teachers are ready to teach their students, on day one. There is no such thing as a throw-away day at Dan Mills.”

Built Civic Partnerships

Leaders are quick to point out that Nashville has a rich heritage of business partnerships with the public schools. One of the bases for this is the PENCIL Foundation, which arranges business-school collaborations through its PENCIL Partners program (see sidebar on previous page). Partner organizations and volunteers support their sponsored schools in a variety of ways, including financial contributions, awards and incentives, special events, tutoring, and mentoring.

A few years ago, Purcell introduced his Mayor’s Honor Roll, which lists all the local employers who have release policies for employees to visit their children’s schools, especially on the first day (see sidebar). The mayor set an example for Nashville’s employers by successfully pushing through reforms to the civil service code, which

provides up to three hours of release time for city employees to visit their children’s schools on the first day of school, and six additional hours throughout the year to attend parent-teacher conferences and volunteer in their children’s classrooms (see sidebar). By the start of the 2005–2006 school year, Mayor Purcell had named 130 local employers to the Honor Roll. Business leaders acknowledge that it’s not likely they would have done this without the mayor taking the lead.

Fifth Third Bank was one of the organizations that followed suit with this family-friendly parental-leave policy. According to the bank’s president, Todd Clossin, it has resulted in a win-win situation for employees and the company alike. He sees “improvements in morale” and, he believes, in workplace productivity. “Parents aren’t preoccupied about whether their kids made it to school OK and generally how they’re faring on their first day of school.” In past years, “folks would be sitting at their desks on the first day of school worried about how their kids were making out. Now they have peace of mind and are functioning

Family-Friendly Parental-Leave Policies

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Mayor Purcell has set an example by making sure city employees have time off to visit their children’s schools, and many private employers have followed suit.

▲ **Section 4.17: Parent Teacher Conferences**

In 2000, Nashville’s city government passed a civil service rule – Section 4.17 – to provide leave for city employees to visit their children’s schools.

www.nashville.gov/mocy/firstday_2004/section4.17.htm

▲ **The Mayor’s Honor Roll**

The Mayor’s Honor Roll recognizes businesses that allow and encourage their employees to take their children to school on the first day.

www.nashville.gov/mocy/firstday_2005/business.htm#hono

■ *Encourage family-friendly
leave policies*

■ *Restore public confidence and willingness to make long-term investments in the schools*

better in the workplace. I know *I* am – and that’s from the perspective of a parent of young children.”

Restored Public Confidence

Activities such as First Day and an independent performance audit that recommended increased investment helped restore public confidence in the Nashville schools. That confidence was bolstered by a new director of schools, Pedro Garcia, who came to town with a strong commitment to improving student performance. With renewed support, Mayor Purcell banked on the confidence that the public would be willing to back increased funding for the

schools. He was right. The city council approved his request to increase annual funding for schools from \$397 million in 2000 to \$503 million in 2003. In addition to increases to the operating budget, the council approved \$165 million in capital funds for new schools and school renovations.

Nashville educators attribute much of the steady increases in civic confidence and investment to the mayor. Garcia says that Mayor Purcell’s broad-based effort to heighten public confidence in the schools has paid off in increased public participation and investment. The effort involved many civic and educational leaders, but Garcia



Mayor Purcell is joined by Nashville business leaders and school officials for a press conference in August 2005 to encourage companies to join the Mayor’s Honor Roll

■ *Prepare to sustain reform in the face of leadership changes*

makes it clear that it could not have come together without the mayor's leadership: "This is a process that's evolved over the years with the help of a lot of local leaders, but there's no doubt who's at the head of this parade."

Verne Denney, former school board president who now heads up the district's Student Assignment Services, remembers a time in the not-too-distant past when the reputation of the Metro Schools was "in the dump." The system was hemorrhaging students to independent schools and families relocating to the region were choosing the suburbs over Nashville. Today, Denney observes, Mayor Purcell is helping restore public confidence and participation in the schools. "And there's evidence that we're regaining our share of the 'educational marketplace,'" he adds.

Likewise, the current board president, Pam Garrett, sees more evidence that parents view the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools as a viable option. The Board makes a concerted effort to reach out to key civic organizations at least once a month. These key groups include the NAACP, Chamber of Commerce, PENCIL Foundation, local education fund, and local Board of Realtors.

The Challenge of Leadership Change

With any large-scale civic campaign that is identified with a few key leaders, the question arises: Does the movement survive when the leaders leave? Last spring, Pedro Garcia was named a finalist in the search for a new superintendent in Miami, signaling that he may want to move on. And Bill Purcell has decided not to run for a third term.

The prospect of leadership change doesn't worry board president Garrett. She believes that the civic will and capacity are too deep to crumble in the wake of one or more key leadership moves. "Anyone trying to alter any major aspect of this new commitment would face heavy resistance from the community and civic leadership," she says. "For one, our business leaders would go 'nose to nose' with any effort to dismantle some of the important traditions, from First Day to our business partnerships to the Mayor's Honor Roll. These changes are here to stay." This resolve will be tested in 2007, when Nashville will elect a successor to Mayor Purcell.

What's Next? Looking Ahead

Educators from the schools to the school board agree that Mayor Purcell has delivered on his commitment to increase public support and investment in Metro schools. Four years of steady gains, increases in school funding, and greater community and

■ *Cultivate strong bonds among individuals, organizations, and civic leadership*

business engagement certainly created favorable conditions for school success; however, there wasn't much to show in terms of student gains. When interviewed in late 2004, the mayor was clear that 2005 was a critical mark in this effort – the schools had to prove to civic leaders, the business community, and citizens alike that their added investment and commitment to schools was paying off. So it was with great

pride that school leaders reported in August 2005 that Metro Nashville Schools showed significant, across-the-board achievement gains at all grade levels on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program.

In addition to sustaining these gains in student performance, the mayor wants to take the community-school partnership concept to the next level. He knows that research



At Andrew Jackson Elementary School, Mayor Purcell (center) and Director of Schools Dr. Pedro Garcia (on the mayor's right) are joined by students and community members for the official opening of the new school year

■ *Show civic leaders, the business community, and citizens that their investment and commitment pays off*

shows how important it is for youth to have a responsible adult to turn to for guidance, and he admires some of the mentoring programs that have grown up through the PENCIL Partners. He would like to see mentoring relationships between adults in the community and youth in middle and high schools, especially for students at greatest risk of dropping out.

An instinct for focusing on the quality of human relations seems to be what makes the Purcell administration's efforts to drive school improvement in Nashville work. Cultivating strong bonds among individuals, organizations, and civic leadership has been Nashville's leading strategy to build stronger families and communities. Stakeholders in the future of the city look forward to the day when it will be commonplace for graduates of the Nashville schools to raise their graduation medals with pride to honor a lifelong bond with their schools.

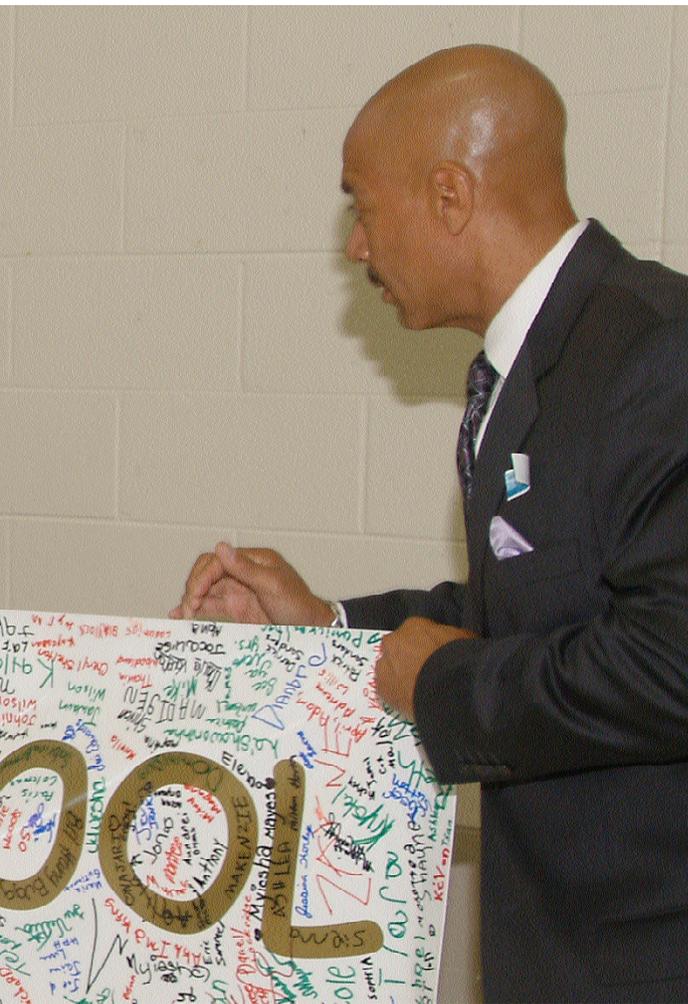


Photo Credit: Gary Laybys/City of Nashville (6)