



CITY SCHOOLS

HOW DISTRICTS AND COMMUNITIES
CAN CREATE SMART EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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The poem "Paul Robeson" by Gwendolyn Brooks on page 173 is reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions.

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INTRODUCTION

As the nation's unprecedented push to reform and improve education approaches the midpoint of its third decade, reformers can claim some success. Overall student achievement is up, particularly in mathematics. Thousands of new schools that provide a vast array of educational options have opened their doors. And an idea that represented the fondest aspiration of educators—that all children can learn—is now national policy.

Yet despite these advances, few would argue that education in the nation's cities remains a challenge. To be sure, urban schools have made substantial gains, and The Broad Foundation has recognized (with \$500,000 worth of scholarships) large cities that have shown improvement in student achievement and in closing achievement gaps. Boston; Norfolk, Virginia, and Long Beach, California, are among the winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education. Yet even these cities would acknowledge that they and their counterparts around the nation have a long way to go toward ensuring that every child receives an excellent education and develops the knowledge and skills needed for a fulfilling, productive future.

Indeed, some of the most dramatic reform efforts under way are aimed squarely at improving education in cities. In 2006, the mayor of the nation's second largest city, Los Angeles, won legislative approval to exert substantial authority over that city's schools, joining his counterparts in Boston, Chicago, and New York City. New York and other cities have been at the forefront of the effort to break down large high schools into more intimate units and in creating new small schools. In other cities, like Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C.,

charter schools have proliferated and now educate a substantial proportion of the city's youth.

Even some national policy concerns and initiatives have a particularly urban beat. The national concern over closing the achievement gap, to take a prominent example, addresses the fact that poor children and children of color achieve academically at levels far below those of their white and more affluent peers. Moreover, cities educate a far higher proportion of students at the low end of the achievement gap than do other geographical areas. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, some 30 percent of urban children live in poverty, compared with 22 percent in rural areas and 13 percent in the suburbs.

Attempts to address the needs of urban education and close the achievement gap have sparked considerable debate, however. On the one hand, some researchers contend that the economic and social barriers children in poverty face are so daunting that no amount of school reform can hope to eliminate achievement gaps. They argue that we can only hope to do so by addressing the health and well-being of children and eliminating widening economic inequalities.¹

On the other hand, another group of researchers has examined schools that have managed to beat the odds and show dramatic results in student achievement, despite the social and economic disadvantages of poverty. These authors maintain that schools that hold high expectations and address the educational needs of all of their students can overcome the barriers these children face outside of school and enable them to learn at high levels.²

No one would deny that the barriers faced by children who live in poverty are substantial and have profound effects on their educational opportunities and ability to learn well. For example, poor children are more likely than others to have health problems that affect their ability to learn, such as asthma, poor vision, or impairments associated with lead exposure. Poor children also tend to be mobile, and thus frequently find their schoolwork disrupted in the middle of a school year.³

Poor children also lack many of the advantages their more affluent peers have that can enhance achievement, such as books in the home, access to stimulating out-of-school activities, and exposure to well-educated adults who can socialize children into the world of school and hold high expectations for their future.

Yet the debate over whether in-school or out-of-school factors are more salient in children's learning—a debate that has raged at least since the 1966 publication of James Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity*—is in many respects a false one. Both factors are important and both must be addressed if the nation is to make good on its 60-year-old promise to guarantee equal educational opportunity and its more recent pledge to ensure that all students learn at high levels.

A number of reform initiatives over the past two decades have attempted to address both the in-school and out-of-school needs of children and youths, but they have not succeeded in ensuring high levels of learning and development for all children. The reasons they have not succeeded are instructive and point to a solution that might be more effective.

One such initiative was New Futures, an effort launched by The Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1988 to integrate health and social services and education in five cities. The initiative had some success in creating new relationships across sectors and a new willingness to address common concerns. But the cities involved had less success in developing meaningful changes that improved outcomes for their children.⁴

From the outset, the initiative faced the daunting challenge of asking large, entrenched bureaucracies to operate differently, all at the same time—an approach a foundation review of the effort called “the path of most resistance.”⁵ School districts faced particular challenges because they struggled with low achievement and graduation rates and often reacted defensively.

Other efforts started at the school level and attempted to graft health and social services onto other educational supports in schools. The Beacons in New York City offer a range of recreation, cultural, and family support and health services on school campuses at more than seventy-five locations around the city. An evaluation of the program found that the Beacons yielded positive outcomes for children and families, such as helping them avoid negative behaviors, but were less successful at linking the schools to noneducational services.⁶ As those involved in New Futures found, the Beacons had academic challenges that overwhelmed their ability to integrate services with other sectors. In addition, many of the services and supports the students and families needed were not well suited to being provided in school buildings.

What would a system look like that effectively supported children both in and outside of school? In 2000, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, known as School Communities that Work, began to address that question and come up with a vision for an effective system. The task force, and particularly its design group for developing family and community supports, recognized that such a system must include both a highly functioning and effective school district—which the task force called a “smart district”—and a comprehensive and accessible web of supports for children, youth, and families.⁷ We refer to such a system in this volume as a “smart education system.”

The task force also recognized that such a system did not exist in any city in the United States but that there might be two pathways for getting there. First,

districts could redesign themselves to become “smarter” and serve schools and students more effectively. The Annenberg Institute has developed a number of tools and frameworks to help districts do this and is working with several districts to implement their designs and make significant improvements.

Second, communities within cities could form a network of supports and services around a set of schools in a neighborhood or a focused area. They could work to influence the district and city agencies, helping them to become “smarter” and more effective, and to help create and nurture such networks throughout the city. Networks of this type, which Steve Jubb of the Bay Area Center for Equitable Schools has termed Local Education Support Networks (LESNs), are being developed in New York City, Sacramento, Oakland, and other cities.

This book lays out a vision for a smart education system and outlines its components. Using examples from a number of cities, the authors outline some of the approaches that might be effective in building such a system, and some of the challenges cities face in doing so.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into four sections. In Part I, we consider the challenge cities face in educating all students to high levels and the opportunities they offer to meet that challenge. In chapter 1, I consider the achievement gap and analyze the kinds of knowledge and skills all students should attain to become “proficient.” I suggest that the achievement gap in fact reflects the vastly different opportunities students have to develop proficiency, both in and out of school.

In chapter 2, Dennie Palmer Wolf and Heather A. Harding examine the opportunities for learning and youth development available in cities. Looking through the eyes of parents in Providence, Rhode Island, they find that many opportunities exist for children outside of schools, but that these opportunities are not available equitably. They suggest ways the city—and all cities—could build on their assets to create pathways for learning for all students.

Part II looks at schools and school districts in a smart education system. One of the reasons for the growing attention focused on school districts is the recognition that a school-by-school approach to improvement is not likely to be effective on a large enough scale to ensure that all students achieve at high levels. Nor does such an approach enable schools to connect to communities and city resources that would support them and their students. But a redesigned district—one focused on results, equity, and community—can in fact work for all children.

In chapter 3, Marla Ucelli, Ellen Foley, and Jacob Mishook lay out the case for “smart districts” that operate on the principles of results, equity, and community. They show what these principles mean in practice and provide examples of districts that are getting “smart” by providing appropriate and timely supports and interventions for schools; ensuring an equitable distribution of resources; using data wisely for accountability; and engaging with partners.

Deanna Burney and Kenneth Klau, in chapter 4, examine the way smart districts go about their primary mission: improving teaching and learning. Using data from Baltimore and Portland, Oregon, Burney and Klau consider the match between the “intended” curriculum and the “enacted” curriculum, and they address some issues that emerge as districts tackle the difficult problem of teaching all students to high levels. They also note that an element of what makes districts “smart” is the importance they place on community involvement in the examination of teaching and learning, and in providing appropriate supports to students and schools.

In chapter 5, Kenneth K. Wong and David Wishnick highlight the role of diverse service providers in operating schools. Looking at the experiences of Chicago and Philadelphia, the authors note that smart districts seek out community resources to augment their capacity to manage schools and to provide additional options that parents and families might seek. While such providers can offer a new options and some important innovations, the way the diverse provider model works depends in large part on the political environment and district culture.

Part III focuses on the community side of the equation. The involvement of community organizations and agencies gives students, parents, and community members a voice in how supports are selected and allocated. It connects students and schools with the environment outside the classroom and puts agency in the hands of grassroots organizations while holding the community accountable for their connection to the system. Smart education systems with strong community partnerships show the engagement of all constituents.

In chapter 6, Richard Gray and Lamson Lam show how grassroots organizations can break down the barriers that have traditionally kept schools and community members apart, and how partners such as universities and local organizations can support their efforts.

In chapter 7, Kavitha Mediratta, Amy Cohen, and Seema Shah examine the role of youth organizing in engaging a critical sector of the community. They show how engaged youth provide the necessary demand and support that lead to sustained improvements in education, and how youth organizing enhances young people’s sense of efficacy and engagement in school.

If communities are to address the educational needs of all children, particularly those who have been underserved, civic capacity is a necessary component. In chapter 8, Jeffrey R. Henig and Clarence N. Stone illustrate ways that low-income communities in California and Philadelphia have developed civic capacity and produced improvements.

How can cities engage communities and mobilize the resources necessary to support children and schools? Mayors play important roles, as Michael K. Grady and Audrey Hutchinson note in chapter 9. They draw on case studies from four cities to show how mayors, even those without formal authority over schools, have attracted resources and support for education in and out of school.

Part IV provides in-depth case studies of two cities that are building smart education systems. In chapter 10, Jesse B. Register describes the efforts the Chattanooga-Hamilton County, Tennessee, schools have made over the past decade to create a “smart district.” Following a merger of the city and county school systems that was viewed with skepticism by both communities, the newly created district crafted a common vision to support high levels of learning for all students and aligned its structure and services to support that vision. The district’s success has strengthened community support and enabled the district to attract partners and supporters who can provide additional resources for children and schools.

In chapter 11, Dennie Palmer Wolf and Jennifer Bransom show how arts and cultural institutions in the city of Dallas worked with the school district and city agencies to provide equitable and enhanced learning opportunities for children throughout the city. They also show how the strategic use of data has enabled these partners to strengthen teaching and learning in and out of school and produce better outcomes for all students.

In Part V, Warren Simmons lays out a vision of a “smart education system.” Citing the need for sustained support for high-quality educational opportunities, Simmons argues for a new kind of partnership among schools, community agencies, and local organizations that will provide the support for all children that affluent children currently enjoy. He concludes with steps that communities can take to begin to build the infrastructure for such a system.

Such efforts will not be easy, but with these and other steps, cities can begin to address the gaps in opportunities that have produced the achievement gap, and help ensure that all young people do, in fact, learn at high levels.

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