

INTRODUCTION

This book provides a unique opportunity to learn about five exemplary urban public school districts that have demonstrated higher performance and/or greater improvement than similar districts in their states. Despite facing the extreme challenges often found in urban districts, the districts discussed in this book stood out among one hundred other eligible urban districts for national recognition in student achievement and improvement scores. Each of the districts—Aldine Independent School District (Texas); Boston Public Schools (Massachusetts); Garden Grove Unified School District (California); Long Beach Unified School District (California); and Norfolk Public Schools (Virginia)—is a winner of the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education.¹

These five urban districts have demonstrated exceptional persistence in developing tightly integrated practices across their entire systems with the aim of raising student achievement and closing ethnic and income achievement gaps. The successes highlighted in this book do not represent one-year positive performance blips; these districts have shown evidence of sustainability over time. Aldine has been widely recognized and cited frequently by organizations such as The Education Trust for its high levels of performance since 2000—well over nine years; and the district was selected as a winner in 2009. Boston, a five-time finalist and a winner, provides a rare opportunity to learn about a successful decade-long reform path led by one of the nation's most respected urban superintendents. Garden

Grove shows strong performance in many areas compared with the state, particularly in building an entire K–12 pipeline that is addressing college readiness, despite its large English language learner (ELL) population and the sixty-eight languages spoken in the district. Long Beach caught the eye of many major newspapers and education journals for rising back to the top as a Prize finalist again after its win, and for the honor of having two high schools in the coveted *Newsweek* list of top-performing high schools in the nation. Norfolk, a predominantly African American urban district, improved its performance to the extent that families moved back from wealthy neighboring districts to enroll their children there.

Even those only vaguely familiar with The Broad Prize should appreciate the difficulty and rigor of the process. Every type of available data and every analysis that can be performed are presented to a sizeable, hand-picked selection jury of well-known educational and civic leaders, which scrutinizes eligible districts closely to select five finalist districts from among one hundred districts. The data include an analysis of math and reading proficiencies at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, both in comparison to the state and demographically similar districts; numerous ethnic and income gap analyses; three different graduation analyses using different methods; and numerous college-readiness measures such as SAT and ACT scores and success on AP exams. The five finalists undergo a thorough and rigorous three- to four-day site visit, during which additional documents are collected and interviews conducted at all system levels to detail district and school practices. The end result is a set of finalists and a winner that prove their success empirically, anecdotally (from their stakeholders), and over time.

The cases in this book are developed from years of Prize data and interviews and additional post-Prize interviews. Much of the information derives from firsthand observation, as I served as the Austin-based project director of The Broad Prize from 2003–2006. The cases are designed to guide practitioners and policymakers through the process of understanding how the districts changed each piece of their system to move from unacceptable to exceptional performance. This book does not provide a list

of best practice silver bullets that sound effective but cannot be applied outside a unique context. Rather, the book describes the paths these districts took over years of intentional, sustained, patient focus on improving teaching and learning that fully aligns instructional practices across all organizational levels of a school system—something that can be done in any district given the right knowledge and tools.

The importance of focus cannot be overstated; these districts all adopted a long-term view and resisted any temptation to veer off course or get pulled in too many directions. The end result is five districts that have clearly defined what students are to know and be able to do; teachers who feel supported and respected; and students who progress through seamless K–12 educational programs. Those three points may seem obvious, since we tend to assume that all schools operate with such clarity at all levels. However, the reality is that the educational program a given student experiences is often fragmented, usually as a result of undesirable district and school practices such as implementing too many separate reading programs, providing one-shot professional development that is unrelated to what teachers do in the classroom, or failing to review the K–12 curriculum holistically to ensure that each subject’s scope and sequence does not include skips or unnecessary repeats.

Although many case studies highlight schools that are beating the odds and doing great work within challenging circumstances, those cases are sporadic, and the schools are individual standouts rather than parts of well-aligned districts that serve all students well regardless of which school they attend. The districts featured in this book represent successes on a larger scale. They face the challenges typically found in urban districts—60 to 85 percent of their students are on the free- or reduced-price lunch program, and 54 to 80 percent are minorities. Yet their student achievement and improvement scores stood out among the hundred districts eligible for The Broad Prize.

Some education commentators voice skepticism about the ability of educational reforms to actually affect student achievement on a scalable level, as few large-scale reforms have had significant measurable effect on

student learning.² One theory posed by Richard Elmore for this lack of progress is failure to change the “instructional core” or “how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student’s role in learning” and how that understanding affects actual teaching practices.³ Elmore also refers to the importance of “organizational practices” that support student/teacher relationships, such as the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, stakeholder communications, and processes for assessing student learning. Using Elmore’s example, a high school can change its class schedule from traditional sixty-minute periods to ninety-minute instructional blocks. However, if teachers do not change their views on the construction of knowledge, they will still teach and interact with students in the same manner. The solution, Elmore says, is to understand (and create) the conditions in which teachers “seek new knowledge and actively use it to change fundamental processes of schooling.”⁴

Elmore posits that changing the instructional core to scale is difficult and seldom occurs beyond a few classrooms—much less in entire schools. Yet progress in changing the instructional core on a larger scale has been made, and we are learning more and more about how to effect such change across districts. The process has been slow and difficult, but the performance increases in these districts show that scalable reforms are possible.

One could say that the standards-based movement and the availability of more and better data created the need for new knowledge about school processes. Despite widespread opposition to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, many of us in education research have found that the availability of disaggregated student performance data and the heightened focus on curriculum standards and instructional alignment prompted by the act sparked a change in instructional approaches.⁵ With this additional data, educators began minutely unpacking their curricula to uncover unnecessary repeats and skips in their instructional sequences, gaining new knowledge that they had not realized was there to be gained. As a result, teachers became more aware of what was required of students, not only in their own grade assignments, but also in the grades preceding and following their own. When I asked principals and teachers in 2003 about some of

these changes—such as why teacher collaboration suddenly became a common practice—several explained that the standards resulting from NCLB provided a common language for teachers to use to discuss teaching and learning. From that year forward, I found in my fieldwork increasing evidence of opened classroom doors, with teachers sharing ideas and lessons and even reviewing data together to brainstorm instructional solutions.⁶

In addition to an increase in teacher collaboration, researchers have found instruction affected through improved use of data and data systems; more sophisticated teacher hiring, development, and retention practices; better program selection methods; and more structured interventions for students, teachers, and schools.⁷ By 2006, the term “data-based decision making” had become commonplace among educators.⁸ Also post-NCLB, my colleagues and I saw an increased focus on clearly defining educational goals and aligning the appropriate resources to support those goals.

While all those changes are positive, districts still find large-scale improvement to be difficult. One urban district leader recently put it well in a conversation with me: “We know what areas we need to focus on and that systemic alignment is important; we just don’t have the specifics on how to pull the pieces together to take reform to scale.” In other words, we know teacher collaboration is a good thing, but how does a district institutionalize it as a practice? Does it need to be mandated? How often should teachers meet? How can teacher meetings actually affect instruction and curriculum alignment? What other tools can a district and schools provide to enhance teacher collaboration?

Such details are important for making a scalable impact on student achievement. For this book, I used several years of Broad Prize interview data and documents to describe how five unique systems moved from having an overall dissatisfaction about their students’ performance to demonstrating higher performance and/or greater improvement than similar districts; the voices quoted throughout this book are from these studies and follow-up interviews. An additional “retro study” conducted in 2005 of past Broad Prize winners—Aldine, Garden Grove, Long Beach, and Norfolk—adds additional depth to these cases. The retro study provided important

information on how each system sustained performance after its win, what practices changed, and what practices remained the same. Finally, I conducted several follow-up interviews with leaders in the districts to gain perspective on their current performance and practices. It is important to keep in mind that while these practices formed much of their work, several of the districts have since made changes based on current system needs.

To make the large-scale changes necessary to markedly improve teaching and learning, the districts figured out how to operationalize a new vision of high expectations for students through clear goals, aligned curriculum, powerful instructional techniques, and accessible supports across the entire system. Their stories illustrate how they approached reform to scale to gain systemic alignment and improve student achievement districtwide.

This material has been reprinted with permission of the Harvard Education Press for personal use only. Any other use, print or electronic, will require written permission from the Press. For more information, please visit www.harvardeducationpress.org or call 1-888-437-1437.

From *Bringing School Reform to Scale: Five Award-Winning Urban Districts*, by Heather Zavadsky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009) pp. xix- xxiv.

Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

The Harvard Education Press is an imprint of the Harvard Education Publishing Group, publishers of the *Harvard Education Letter* and the *Harvard Educational Review*. HEPG's editorial offices are located at 8 Story Street, First Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138, tel. 617-495-3432, or email to hepg@harvard.edu.