

Hope, Strategy, and Change

“MAKING HOPE HAPPEN”

The sun was shining and the mood upbeat as over a thousand people funneled through the doors of Orange Pavilion in San Bernardino, California, on November 10, 2016. There were high schoolers garbed in brightly colored T-shirts depicting their chosen “pathway,” teachers chatting up parents, and administrators talking with community leaders. School board members, employers, and representatives from area colleges and universities held enthusiastic exchanges. Even the Mexican consul was there. By the time things settled down, every seat in the arena had been filled.

The occasion was the fifth annual Community Gathering for Excellence, in which San Bernardino leaders and residents come together to hear about the progress of their schools and to recommit themselves to a collective vision for the region. That vision, under the banner “Making Hope Happen,” is centered on every child graduating from high school with the knowledge and tools to succeed in life and in work.¹ Toward this goal, the community heard some good news on that November day: graduation rates for the district had risen again, surpassing those for both the state and the nation, with rates for Latino and African American students at or very near the districtwide average.² Moreover, the College Board had recently recognized the district with a Gaston Caperton Opportunity Award, given annually to 130 local systems across the nation that have shown exceptional progress in preparing traditionally underrepresented students for college. San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD), which had nearly tripled its readiness rate, was one of only two large urban districts to be so honored. Nor had the progress stopped at academics. Through instituting restorative practices and social

and emotional skill development, SBCUSD had also reduced suspensions by 72 percent and cut student citations in half since the previous year.

These results, and the outpouring of support and optimism from the community, would have been remarkable in almost any district in the nation. But they were even more so in this place and at this time. Once a thriving working- and middle-class community, San Bernardino had been hit hard by an economic downturn that began well before the Great Recession of 2008. In the mid-1990s, rail shops, the local steel plant, and then Norton Air Base had all closed, the latter taking with it over 12,500 jobs. Downtown businesses followed suit, and when the housing crisis hit in 2008, foreclosure rates in San Bernardino were 3.5 times the national average. By 2010, San Bernardino had become the second-poorest of the hundred largest cities in the US, next to Detroit, and thereafter both the city and the region continued to be among the slowest in the nation to recover.³ Indeed, in 2015, the *Los Angeles Times* had labeled San Bernardino a “broken city,” with 41 percent of the city’s residents and 44 percent of its children living below the poverty line and over 15 percent facing deep poverty (household incomes of less than half the poverty level). In 2016, the year of the community gathering, only 46 percent of the city’s working-age residents were employed and 54 percent required some form of public assistance.⁴

One would hardly expect these economic conditions to generate high levels of hope and engagement. The timing of the community gathering made such a response even less likely. Just eleven months earlier, the entire community had been rocked by a terrorist shooting and attempted bombing that killed fourteen people and seriously injured another twenty-two attending a work-related Christmas party. The city was also five years into bankruptcy, which had further cut services despite a clearly increasing need. Finally, November 16, 2016, was just two days after the end of the most vitriolic and divisive presidential campaign in memory. Yet even while the new federal administration was talking of immigration bans and border walls, condemning public schools for leaving “our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge,” and placing its hopes in free market forces, San Bernardino leaders and community members had banded together in a collective effort to strengthen the public schools and the city and region of which they are an integral part.

What has contributed to this faith in their schools and hope for the future? In his opening remarks, Superintendent Dale Marsden suggested that

“the journey starts and ends with leadership.” Reaching out to the assembled community, he urged: “Leadership matters at every level. From the boardroom to the classroom to our city council to our local, state and national governments, even to the seat you’re in today. Your leadership matters, your engagement matters. We want you to leave today with this city in your heart. We want to enroll you as a part of the actual, physical solution to what our city needs.”⁵ Certainly, Marsden’s leadership—in both words and actions—has made a difference in San Bernardino City schools.

But for hope to flourish, people also need to see concrete possibilities for change. For this, Marsden and the district have turned to neighboring school systems that despite their own challenges have made a significant impact on improving student outcomes and reducing opportunity gaps for traditionally underserved students. One such district is Long Beach, California, which has been on this journey for over two decades. In fact, Carl Cohn, who initiated systemic improvement in Long Beach, spoke at San Bernardino’s second community gathering in 2013, comparing SBCUSD to where Long Beach had been fifteen years earlier and encouraging the district to keep moving toward its vision. San Bernardino leaders also looked to Garden Grove, California, whose continuous improvement culture and comprehensive approach to supporting its teachers has produced remarkable gains over the past eighteen years. A little farther north was Sanger Unified School District, a high-poverty district in California’s Central Valley, which went from one of the worst-performing districts in the state to a national model of turnaround, whose 71 percent Latino and 22 percent English language learner (ELL) student body had surpassed state averages in achievement and attainment for all students. Inspiration has also come from other systems, both across the US and internationally.

Such examples ignited a spark of hope by demonstrating the possibility for change; in the past seven years, San Bernardino’s own progress has kindled that spark into a flame, one that the district’s growing group of partners continue to fan as they join the improvement effort.

WHY THIS BOOK?

For all intents and purposes, this book has been thirty years in the making, reflecting both the experiences of its authors and the evolution of educational

improvement strategies during this period. The need for such a volume has been dictated by the persistent deep disparities in opportunities and outcomes for so many of our nation's children. Its inspiration comes from the dedication and hard work of local educators like those in San Bernardino. And its roots lie in the emergence of the standards-based reform movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s and in our own long-standing collaboration and roles in that movement. Indeed, when we first met in 1987, education researchers and policy makers were just beginning to recognize the limitations of the policy responses to *A Nation at Risk*, which primarily intensified already-existing practice by adding graduation requirements and extending the school day and year. Meanwhile, purely school-based efforts, such as those carried out under the label of "restructuring," were leading to some more fundamental changes in instruction and school organizations but were proving difficult to scale or sustain.

What was needed, we surmised, was a combination of systemic policy changes at the top—to provide coherence and organizational support—with the bottom-up energy and innovation that come from the engagement and professional knowledge of local educators. In 1990, supported by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), we published a paper making this argument. The paper, titled "Systemic School Reform," drew on recent efforts of professional associations like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), on the statewide policy approaches in places like California and New York, and on new developments in the studies of organizational change in other sectors. It became widely used by various groups, including the congressionally mandated National Commission on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), of which Smith was a member. The Commission, which included key House and Senate members, two governors, and representatives of various educational organizations, concluded that education standards and assessments were both desirable and feasible. Three years later, we published a second paper that focused on how standards-based reforms might support equality in the nation's schools.

Then, in 1994, President Clinton signed into law two bills that instantiated academic standards and aligned assessments into federal programs. The first of these, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, provided support for the development of student standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. The second, the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Second-

ary Education Act (ESEA), required states receiving Title I dollars to adopt and use such standards for all public school students in the state. From there, supported by the work of many scholars, educators, and policy makers across the country, student content standards and aligned policies for curriculum, assessment, accountability, and (sometimes) teacher preservice preparation and professional development became part of the conventional wisdom and the espoused policy approach in most states.

Implementation, of course, was another matter. Over the past thirty years, we have both participated in and observed the evolution of standards-based approaches. Smith did so as the undersecretary and acting deputy secretary of education under Bill Clinton, the director of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's education program, and a senior counselor in the Obama administration. O'Day led evaluation and research studies on the implementation and impact of standards- and equity-related approaches at the federal, state, district, and school levels while also leading a network of thought leaders from California's most influential districts, state policy arenas, research, advocacy, and philanthropy to address pressing problems of practice in district-level reform. Thirteen years of this cross-jurisdiction, cross-role, collective problem-solving have convinced us of the power of bringing multiple perspectives to the table to inform and collaborate for educational improvement. And fourteen years of No Child Left Behind convinced us that the federal government and even the states cannot be the primary locus of change, although their impact on the conditions supporting or inhibiting improvement and equity can be great.

Indeed, the broader field of education research and practice has confirmed that while command-and-control bureaucratic approaches may induce compliance, they cannot produce the deep changes in instruction and relationships needed to generate more fundamental progress in student outcomes. For that goal to be realized, people—not just students, but also teachers, administrators, and whole systems—have to be engaged in a learning process. Fortunately, the research base on how and under what conditions humans learn best has greatly expanded in recent years. Educators have come to understand that social interaction, emotion, and language play key roles, a realization that has implications not only for schools and classrooms but also for the adults in our systems. Professional development has become more job-embedded, collaborative, and iterative (though there is still a long way to

go). Most recently, systemic processes of continuous improvement are being incorporated into the work of the adults in a growing subset of schools and school systems.

Yet progress has been far too slow, and the deep disparities in students' school experiences and outcomes remain, reflecting not only the growing inequalities outside school but also the abiding inequities embedded in the structures, processes, and cultures within our educational systems. Now, in 2018–2019, what progress there has been toward educational equity is being jeopardized by the attempted systematic dismantling of civil rights guarantees combined with an upsurge in race-based attacks on immigrants and people of color and the promotion of private market forces that hold little promise of improving opportunity for the vast majority of American children. Our hope is that in this book we can bring together some of what has been learned across multiple fields and the promising practical advancements that have been made in schools to suggest a way forward and some strategies for getting there.

“HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY”

We began this book with the example of San Bernardino not because it is typical of American school districts. Indeed, its challenges are far more extreme than those faced by the vast majority of communities and their schools. We chose it because its challenges, though extreme, are not fundamentally different from those in other districts. Poverty, inequality, and vestiges of bureaucratic dysfunction are common in many school systems, even in many suburban areas. Nor did we choose San Bernardino because it is a well-established high flier, a lighthouse of achievement and turnaround. In most respects, SBCUSD is still very much at the beginning of its journey. But the hope it has generated is a critical first step toward a more equitable and effective educational system. Hope is essential to progress, but hope is not enough.

As our good friend and 2011 AASA Superintendent of the Year Marcus Johnson reminds us, “Hope is not a strategy.” And this book is very much about strategy. Our goal is to present a vision of a realizable education system that supports both equity and excellence and to suggest a set of approaches for reaching that vision—approaches that would have applicability and

adaptability across system levels and geographies, take into account what we have learned from decades of reform efforts, and respond to the particularities of context, such as those in San Bernardino.

While our focus is on K–12 education, we do not suggest that schools can do this work alone. Underlying our framework is an analysis of the current state of US education that stresses the interplay of conditions inside and outside of schools. This analysis recognizes that the daily lives of students in persistently underperforming schools and school systems—those that have been targeted by education policy in recent decades—do not begin and end at the schoolhouse door. Deep differences in learning opportunities outside school separate the experiences of advantaged and disadvantaged students, but even more concerning and consequential are differences in their families' ability to meet their most basic needs (food, housing, and physical and psychological safety), which are central for readiness to learn at all ages. Not unrelatedly, race, class, and gender biases permeate the environment, undermining children's sense of self and constraining present and future possibilities.

These external disparities are mirrored in schools and school systems, often exacerbating and perpetuating inequality in educational outcomes. Poor students, students of color, and immigrants tend to be concentrated in higher-poverty sites with less qualified teachers, inadequate materials and facilities, and low expectations. Organizational dysfunction and bureaucracy have made it difficult to address these inequities, while also undermining quality and performance throughout the entire educational system and depressing opportunities for all children and the nation as a whole. This book is about these persistent patterns and what it might take to substantially change them.

Grounded in the struggle for equity, this book is also about improving the *quality* of education for *all* students so that all of our young people can be better prepared for college, career, civic participation, and a healthy and fulfilling life. Our overall argument comprises three central premises. The first and most fundamental of these is that quality and equality are inextricably linked and that neither will progress significantly without attention to the other. Second, we argue that to get beyond short-term fixes and magic bullets, which have failed so completely in the past, requires a systemic approach. Such an approach, we suggest, should incorporate a coherent standards-based policy foundation to ensure quality and overall improvement, targeted strategies to address predictable sources of inequality and school fail-

ure, and partnerships between schools and other child-serving agencies and community groups in order to respond to external conditions and address students' broader needs. Our third and final premise is that implementing such an approach at scale requires a theory of change and strategic action to leverage pressure and support for improvement in the policy, professional, and public arenas.

THE FRAMEWORK, CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

The chapters of this book are organized into three main parts, reflecting these three premises. This chapter and the next comprise part I. In chapter 2, we review the problems, the possibilities, and lessons from the past. We consider school systems that have systematically and systemically fostered both quality and equality.⁶ We then proffer three central lessons from the many equity-oriented reforms over the past sixty years.

Part II elaborates a vision of what a more equitable and effective education system might look like. Chapter 3 argues that a cornerstone of educational quality is coherence of purpose defined by agreed-upon standards for student learning, a coherent policy structure designed to support the achievement of those standards, and a governance system that combines this central direction with local discretion and innovation to respond to locally determined needs and conditions. We particularly highlight the need to incorporate students' social and emotional development into the goals of the educational enterprise, as this development is essential to academic learning as well as to later success in the workplace and in our diverse and complex democracy.

Chapter 4 addresses the *how* of high-quality teaching: How might teachers organize classroom instruction to support the realization of the standards by all students? We use two instructional frameworks to explore elements of challenging and equitable classrooms that can engage the broad range of diverse learners, promote social and emotional development, and result in deeper understanding of complex content. We then consider systemic approaches to ensuring that all teachers have the capacity and will to achieve the school or district's vision of high-quality, equitable instruction in every classroom.

Chapter 5 addresses the incorporation of processes, systems, and a culture of continuous improvement. This chapter presents continuous improvement as a fundamental condition for system quality and explores the challenges of

this approach while also providing examples of systems that have successfully incorporated an improvement culture and methodologies. We pay particular attention to how a quality improvement approach differs from the more punitive NCLB-type of accountability and how continuous improvement methods can more effectively identify and address opportunity and outcome gaps.

Building the overall quality of the system, however, is not sufficient for ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities and outcomes. To achieve equity also requires the use of strategies specifically targeted to this end. Chapter 6 explores four arenas in which predictable failures of the system adversely affect poor students, students of color, and other historically underserved students: (1) ensuring a safe and supportive school environment that fosters students' social and emotional development and well-being; (2) implementing a tiered approach to interventions to meet individual students' needs; (3) supporting students' language development, which is especially important for low-income students and ELLs; and (4) addressing key transition points in a student's schooling, when many students fall through the cracks. The chapter provides research evidence on the importance of each of these arenas for underserved students and examples of promising strategies within them.

Finally, chapter 7 acknowledges that because of the deep inequalities in students' circumstances outside of school, students need support that extends beyond the school walls, including physical and mental health services, enrichment and youth development, social services, and early childhood education. We argue that connections between school systems and other child-serving organizations and institutions are critical for ensuring that all students have the opportunity to grow and succeed in school and in later life; we then highlight a promising model of community schools and community school districts for coordinating these connections.

Having an idea of where you want to get to is important, and being able to point to systems that are already demonstrating various aspects of the vision is even better. But being able to actually get from here to there is no easy matter. In part III, we suggest that pressure and support from three key sources—governmental and administrative policy, the education profession, and an active and engaged stakeholder community—can help to provide the motivation and capacity to move US education in this direction at scale. Chapter

8 takes on the first of these sources, discussing both the promise and limitations of policy for engendering the necessary systemic changes. It argues for a combination of policy action and constraint and for greater emphasis on support relative to pressure than has been the case in the past. It also outlines policy-based strategies at the federal, state, and local levels.

Chapter 9 focuses on the education profession in the US, considering both the challenges and new opportunities for mobilizing the profession as a source for change in the direction of greater quality and equality. In particular, we point to the development of professional standards, networks, and communities of practice and to educators' growing attention to institutionalized forms of inequality and racism as promising developments that can help build the human and social capital needed to implement instructional improvement at scale.

The final source of pressure and support for change, an informed and engaged citizenry, is the focus of chapter 10. We argue that education is both a public and a private good and that the stakeholders in educational quality and equality are thus many and varied. We outline a range of approaches to engaging those stakeholders and suggest that locally generated public engagement efforts may have the greatest impact and sustainability over time.

In chapter 11, we return to the theme of hope by pointing to the existing and emerging opportunities for acting on the theory of change that we propose. We consider examples of local and state systems that have made significant headway through coherent and sustained effort and pay particular attention to how communities might begin similar improvement journeys. We note that the goals and strategies proposed in this book tap into broad areas of agreement among most Americans and therefore could generate bipartisan appeal if taken up in ways that capitalize on that agreement. All told, we believe that this book makes a compelling argument that a more equitable and effective education system in this country is both necessary and within our collective grasp.