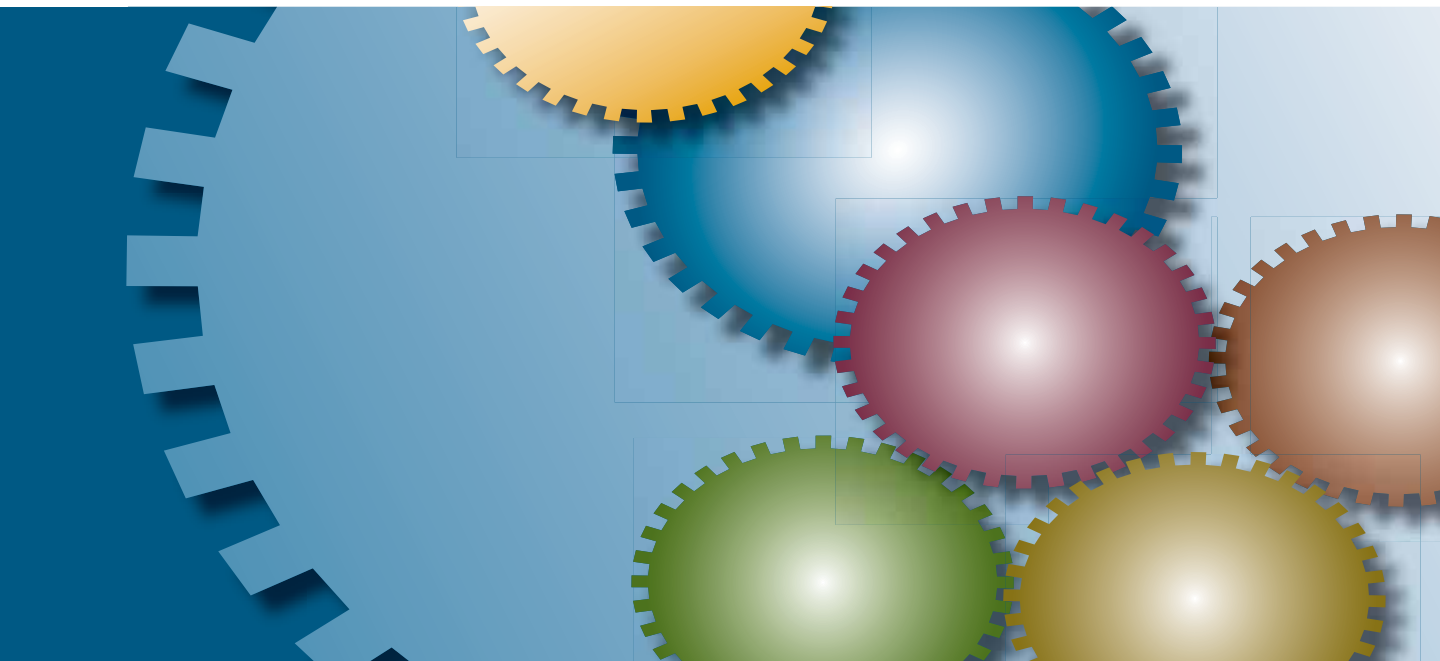


# A Framework for Success for All Students



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Collected Papers from the

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**Technical Support Team**

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for the

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**Schools for a New Society Initiative**

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and

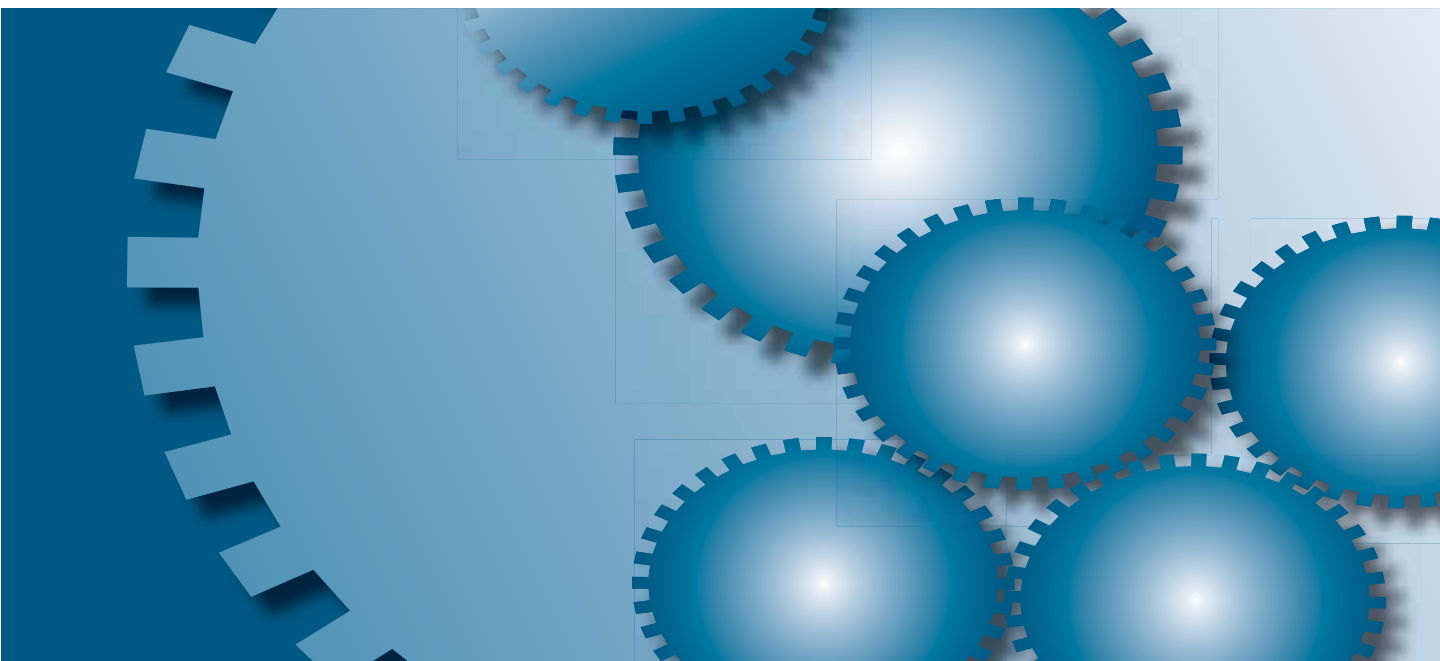
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**Carnegie Corporation of New York**

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# Foreword


Two things are clear about urban high school education. The first is the imperative for sweeping changes driven by the dramatic shifts in society over the past 40 years. America can no longer continue to graduate fewer than half its high school students, and to have so few graduates prepared for the demands of college and work. The second is the complexity of mounting and sustaining these changes, which are technical as well as political and cultural, so that the intended outcome—success for all students—is achieved.

This document outlines the conceptual framework for *Schools for a New Society*, Carnegie Corporation of New York's \$60 million initiative designed to reinvent American high school education. Launched in 2001, with additional support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the goal of *Schools for a New Society* is to transform the high school experience of more than 140,000 students in more than 100 schools. The seven cities that were chosen to participate in the initiative and that demonstrated the potential to justify their selection—Boston, MA; Hamilton County (Chattanooga, TN); Houston, TX; Providence, RI; Sacramento, CA; San Diego CA; and Worcester, MA—each committed to provide matching funds and to bring together a team of school and community stakeholders to design and implement their plans. At each site, a local organization committed to educational excellence for all students served as the school district's lead partner for the initiative.

Since the initiative's inception, these cities, along with others engaged in similar efforts elsewhere, have been hard at work in creating new schools and transforming existing schools. But as this document makes clear, the work of transforming high schools involves much more than adjusting the structure and operation of the schools themselves. It involves reforming the entire education system to ensure that the community and the system itself support redesigned high schools in ways that transform core teaching and learning practices at the classroom level.

Indeed, the framework outlined in this volume represents a theory for how a district can transform its high schools into a system that ensures that all young people have access to high-quality education that will prepare them for the future. According to the framework, the elements for redesigning education systems include:

- A portfolio of schools that offers a range of high-quality options to meet the diverse needs of all students
- A redesigned district to support the new array of schools and the teachers and leaders who work in them
- Engaged youth who are active in their own learning and also contribute to and support the redesign
- An engaged community to demand and support the redesign
- A working partnership with other organizations to enhance capacity and support sustainability



From the outset, the architects of *Schools for a New Society* recognized that implementing this framework and transforming high schools required systemic changes, and that districts needed considerable support to accomplish the task. To that end, beyond requiring working partnerships, the initiative formed a technical support team. The team is led and convened by the Academy for Educational Development, which has extensive expertise in school improvement through collaborative school and community partnerships. Other organizations that participate include the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, which has a wealth of experience in district redesign, and the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University, a leader in community engagement. The team now also includes Collaborative Communications Group, a leading resource for communications and public engagement.

Over the past five years, the technical support team has supported the seven *Schools for a New Society* sites in two ways. First, the team has worked with each site to implement the change framework. Team members have worked directly with districts and their partners at each site to help them understand and adapt the framework to their local and evolving context, and to design new structures to implement and monitor these changes. Second, the technical support team has convened regular cross-site meetings and learning opportunities to help the seven communities share promising practices and lessons emerging from their local work, as well as from research in the field.

In the process, a number of things have changed. First, Carnegie Corporation, the technical support team and the sites collectively developed the framework that this document outlines. Although the initiative's architects knew from the outset that redesigning high schools would require district redesign, community engagement and working partnerships, the work with the sites over the past five years fleshed out those concepts, making clear what they meant and what sites needed to do to implement the framework. In addition, the work over the past five years also underscored the importance of the interrelationships of the elements of system redesign. And while youth engagement and voice were always part of the design, the initiative architects came to realize that student involvement was central in the high school reform process—and was therefore integrated into the framework.

Another development that transformed the initiative was the formation of a learning community that included the technical support team, the foundation and the sites themselves. There is an impressive amount of knowledge and expertise resident in the sites, and this expertise has informed the work of *Schools for a New Society*, communities and sites elsewhere. That site knowledge is evident throughout this document.

The *Schools for a New Society* initiative is a work in progress. We hope this document will help the sites gain a deeper understanding of the framework we are working together to implement. We also hope this document offers a vision to other cities engaged in similar efforts.

We encourage readers to comment on the framework and offer suggestions for revisions. We are continuing to learn, and are committed to evolving and sharing our understanding of what it will take to transform education systems, so that all young people have opportunities to succeed.

# Preface

From the inception of *Schools for a New Society*, the initiative placed an emphasis on a “new society” in at least two ways. First, it recognized that American, and indeed global, society is far different from what it was when the comprehensive high schools that dominate American education were created. Fifty years ago, a high school education was sufficient to gain entry into the adult world. Most high school graduates could be confident that they would earn a good living in the industrialized workplace. A small minority of students went on to college, and that number was acceptable. A more substantial minority of students did not complete high school, and often these students were poor and of color or both. But even for many of them, employment opportunities still existed.

No longer. Increasingly, those who lack postsecondary education find their wages falling farther behind those who continued studying beyond high school. The new global, information-based economy places a premium on skills—like the ability to solve problems and work in teams—that only the college-bound students of the past were able to develop.

In addition to economic changes, social and demographic shifts have also created a “new society” that requires changes in education. Although cities have long been diverse places, immigration from new corners of the globe brings together cultures that at times conflict. Public discourse, dominated by competing commercial media, is complex and rapidly changing. Participation in civic life demands the ability to understand diverse cultures and engage in public life. In this new society, all students need the opportunities once reserved for only a few.

Today’s young people, like the generations before them, will create their own society. The new forms of technology and communications available to an incredibly wide segment of the population make it more imperative than ever that all young people have the capability to understand the world and their part in it. They also will need the skills and confidence to participate in the transformation of society, both as individuals and as members of their communities.

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## Changing Schools, Changing History

Creating a system of schools that will enable all students to build and succeed in a new society will require some dramatic, even radical, changes. The high schools that have existed in most cities for decades reflect deeply held beliefs about what education should do and how opportunities should be apportioned. These beliefs—which conflict with values appropriate to a 21st century democracy—have helped create the high schools most students now attend. Ironically, these outdated values have been ratified and reinforced by some of the subsequent efforts to reform them.

The American high school dates back to 1821, when the first public high school in the United States, Boston's English Classical School, opened its doors to students. But until the late 19th century, few high schools existed, and very few students attended school beyond the eighth grade. At that time, the rapidly burgeoning student population sparked a national debate about how to organize secondary education.

The Committee of Ten, a panel chaired by Charles Eliot, president of Harvard College, advocated a common and rigorous academic curriculum for all students. In its 1893 report, the Committee noted “a very general custom in American high schools and academies to make up separate courses of study for pupils of supposed different direction,” but argued that, instead, “every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil as long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be, or at what point his education is to cease.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, the members of the Committee were unanimous in their concern with improving the rigor of the education offered to students who were not college bound.<sup>2</sup>

While this extraordinarily democratic recommendation had some influence on high school instruction—enrollments in Latin increased sharply during the 1890s, for instance—a countermovement more committed to economic efficiency that proposed varied courses of study for students, depending on their interests and perceived abilities, ultimately held greater sway.

The idea of a differentiated curriculum had several origins and addressed several needs. First, it reflected the role of education in a rapidly growing industrial economy and answered the call from business for vocational training to prepare youth for the factories that were sprouting throughout America's cities. Second, it addressed the need for an efficient educational solution to the exploding school population as immigration expanded the population in the early 20th century, particularly in large cities. It is important to note that this countermovement also reflected the racial and economic biases of the larger society regarding which students would be the most likely and deserving beneficiaries of vocational rather than academic preparation.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in D. Ravitch (2000). *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Committee of Ten posted at [tmh.floonet.net/books/commoften/mainrpt.html](http://tmh.floonet.net/books/commoften/mainrpt.html)

The idea of differentiated instruction was bolstered by the nascent science of mental testing, which coincidentally emerged at the same time as the rapid growth in the secondary school population. By enabling the ranking of students according to supposed ability, test results channeled students into a course of study that was considered appropriate.

The notion of differentiation received its clearest expression and strongest boost with the publication of the *Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education*, the 1918 report of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. That report declared, "The work of the senior high school should be organized into differentiated curriculums [sic]....The basis of differentiation should be, in the broad sense of the term, vocational, thus justifying the names commonly given, such as agricultural, business, clerical, industrial, fine arts, and household-arts curriculums. Provisions should be made also for those having distinctively academic needs and interests."<sup>3</sup>

It is worth noting that the Commission argued that such a program would open opportunities for young people. The goal, the report stated, was to enable each individual "to find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends."<sup>4</sup> The idea that separating students according to predicted or perceived abilities would limit the opportunities of those deemed less able was not considered.

Later reform efforts only ratified and strengthened the belief that differentiating opportunities for young people was appropriate. For example, the National Defense Education Act, enacted in 1958 after the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik spurred the United States to redouble efforts to improve mathematics and science education, contained little-noticed provisions that required states to develop programs to test students for aptitude and ability, and to identify talented students and guidance programs to "advise students of courses of study best suited to their aptitude, abilities, and skills."<sup>5</sup>

Changing this ingrained structure and redefining what it means for students to succeed in high school is a monumental task because it entails a direct challenge to the values that have informed the development of our educational system. Yet change is absolutely essential if all young people are to grow up into competent and confident adults in the new society of the 21st century, and if our society is to deliver on its democratic promises.

Creating a system of schools that will enable all students to build and succeed in a new society will require some dramatic, even radical, changes.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. Mirel and D. Angus (1994). "High Standards for All? The Struggle for Equality in the American High School Curriculum, 1890-1990." *American Educator*, Summer.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in D. Ravitch (2000). *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> D. Gamson (2005). "From Progressivism to Federalism: The Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunity, 1915-1965." Paper presented at the Advanced Studies Fellowship Conference, Brown University, June 2005, pp. 26-27.





## Creating Schools for a New Society

The dramatic shift from a system in which high schools prepared a few students for postsecondary education to one in which all students achieve a broad definition of success requires dramatic changes in the ways that schools, school districts and communities do business. Much of the high school reform discussion, until very recently, appeared to focus almost exclusively on redesigning individual schools. While transforming our urban high schools is urgently needed, the work required is much broader and deeper, particularly in large cities, where a large proportion of the nation's poor students and students of color attend school.

With this in mind, the *Schools for a New Society* initiative challenged seven communities to reinvent all their high schools *and* to rethink and redesign the way their districts operate to support high schools. High schools thus are both a target of change and a lever to change the operation of the larger district. The initiative's funds are small in proportion to the districts' budgets, but they are intended to leverage critical conversations that change the way existing power relationships produce unequal opportunities to succeed.

Most people view urban school districts as dysfunctional, but the reality is that they are not uniformly so. The standard operating mechanisms of most urban districts—the constellation of board of education, superintendent, central office staff, school staff, unions and professional organizations—produce a situation where some schools enjoy the conditions they need to succeed while others schools struggle with conditions that undermine effective teaching and learning. This inequality is all the more troubling because those schools with the least favorable conditions are most often the ones charged with educating the students with the greatest academic challenges.

This should disturb but not surprise us. As an institution that often constitutes the largest municipal budget item and is the largest local employer and contractor, a school district is inherently a political institution and an institution that operates in a highly political context. Too often the needs of adults trump those of young people. Schools also are the target of competing political pressures, with more affluent and powerful parents exerting continuing pressure to assure that their children's schools receive the best the district has to offer. In multiple ways, these pressures lead to unequal standards and expectations for different groups of students and a pattern of resource allocation that turns these unequal expectations into corrosive realities.

Given the political nature of urban schools, the initiative also calls for developing stronger community demand and support for excellent high schools. This requirement is a response to the short tenure of most urban school superintendents and the resulting need for a strong community voice that can help reforms weather transitions in leadership.<sup>6</sup> But it also is a response to the intense political pressure on most urban school leaders to satisfy the demands of powerful constituencies in the allocation of attention and resources to individual schools.

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<sup>6</sup> Four years into implementation, the seven districts have already seen 15 superintendents, and two more announced retirement plans. Ironically, four of the districts' superintendents have had exceptionally long tenures, with two serving a full decade.

The fiscal structure of the *Schools for a New Society* initiative also reflects the complex challenge of working in an urban context to achieve dramatic change at the school, district and community levels. Instead of providing funds to the school district, Carnegie Corporation made its grants to significant community partners that had worked with the school district to achieve excellence for all students. While many of these core partner organizations had enjoyed long histories and strong relationships with the district, none had yet attempted so ambitious and complex a partnership as that called for by *Schools for a New Society*.

To help the local partnerships jointly forge a vision for change with the school district, map implementation strategies and help carry them out, and to hold the district accountable for achieving the vision, *Schools for a New Society* provides funding for intensive technical support.<sup>7</sup> Three organizations, all with extensive school reform experience and a deep commitment to the values of the initiative, were brought together to support the local intermediaries and school districts. The Academy for Educational Development leads the technical support team and provides school-level support and expertise; the Annenberg Institute for School Reform provides expertise and tools to support system-level change; and the Institute for Education and Social Policy works to increase community engagement and support for transforming high schools. Collectively, the team and Carnegie Corporation form a professional learning collaborative that meets regularly to review site progress and plan next steps, all the while exchanging and incorporating lessons learned in the process.

The fiscal structure of the *Schools for a New Society* initiative also reflects the complex challenge of working in an urban context to achieve dramatic change at the school, district and community levels.

### **The *Schools for a New Society* Framework for Action**

*Schools for a New Society* was designed based on extensive review of the research on effective school reform and clinical knowledge about what it would take to create schools that ensure success for all students. From the beginning, it was clear that reinventing high schools would need to be accompanied by efforts to alter the way urban school districts organize and deploy their resources to lead and support high schools, and to leverage the resources of the community in new ways that would enhance learning opportunities and strengthen the capacity of school systems. Carnegie Corporation and its partners did not develop a ready-made design or model that all cities should adopt, but instead crafted a conceptual framework that cities could use to transform high schools and school systems depending on local needs and circumstances, understanding that this would be an ongoing collaborative learning process—between the Corporation, the technical support team, and front-line professionals in the seven cities. The framework must be understood even now as a dynamic set of working hypotheses that will continue to be developed based on accumulated experience and counsel.

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<sup>7</sup> The initiative also provides funds for a national evaluation and for communication efforts.

*SCHOOLS FOR A NEW SOCIETY:*  
A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

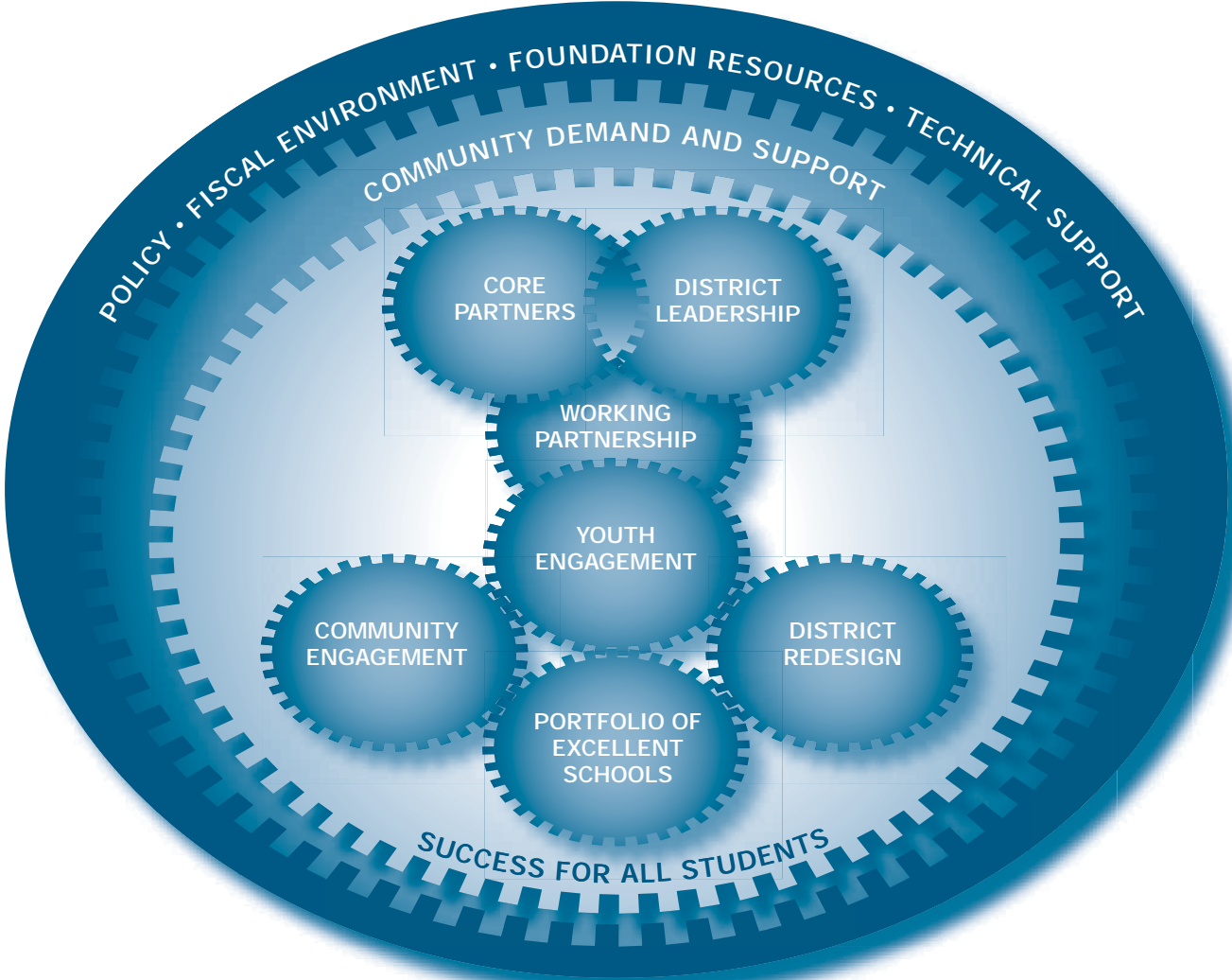


Figure 1

The “working gears” of the initiative (see Figure 1) represent and acknowledge what is required to build systems of high-quality schools.<sup>8</sup> The framework is aspirational, rather than descriptive, of the work going on in the seven cities. Importantly, since the *Schools for a New Society* initiative was launched, this graphic representation has evolved based on the combined experiences and reflections of foundation staff, technical support team members and the dedicated staff in the seven cities who have been a vital part of the learning process.

The framework suggests that success for all students requires that each city’s partnership:

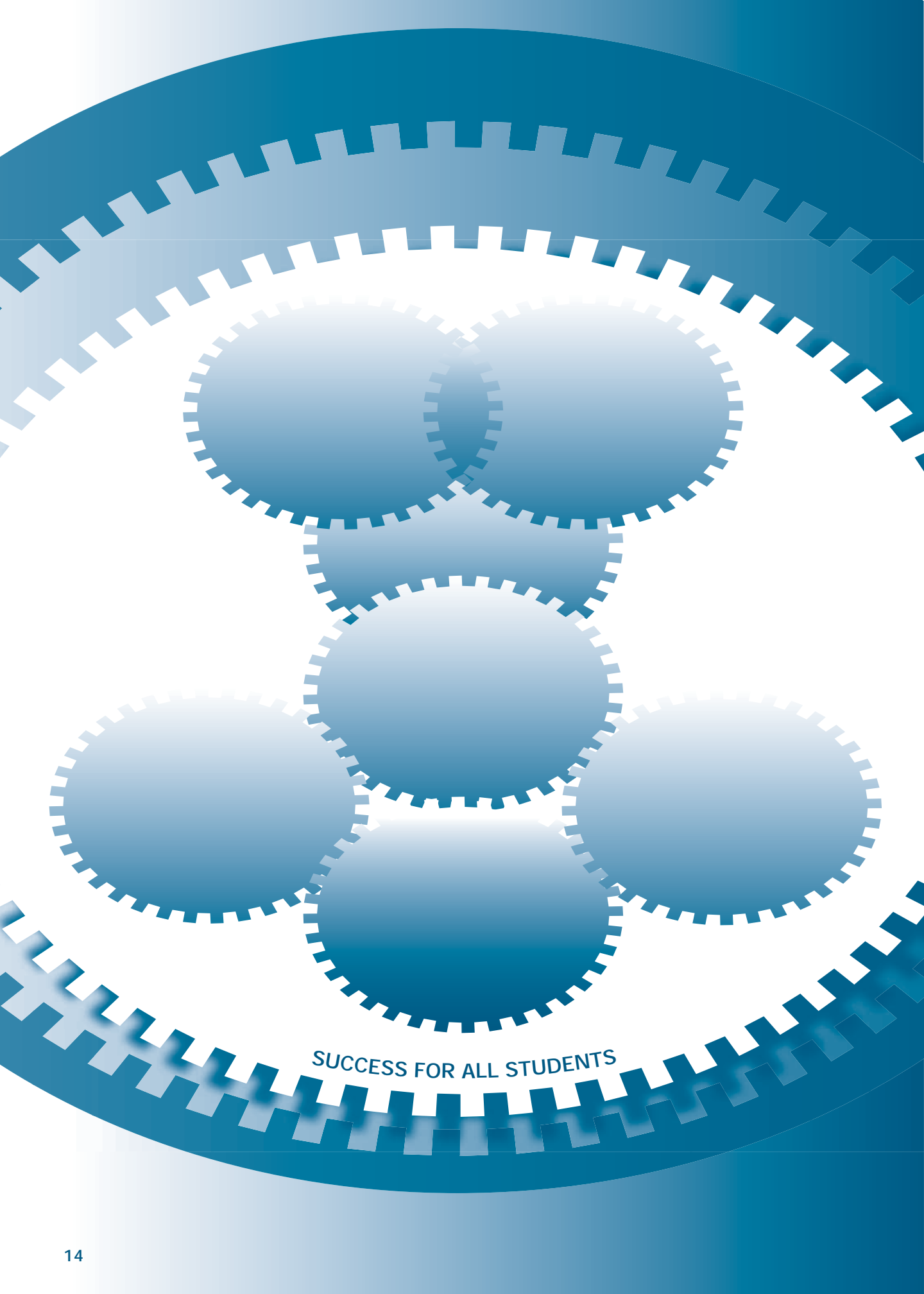
- Create a portfolio of excellent high schools
- Redesign the way the district operates to lead and support these schools
- Enlist the community in contributing to expanding learning opportunities for youth and in demanding educational excellence
- Engage youth both in school and in the reform effort

The framework also conveys the initiative’s beliefs that high schools cannot be transformed without districts rethinking the conditions they create at the school level and the support they provide to schools with varied needs. But school districts also need allies in this work—the external partners that form the core of a working partnership between the district and the larger public arena with its wide array of participants in the community. These core community partners work to leverage action within the school district and schools while also working to create engagement and to support changes in policy, practice, attitudes and behavior. Finally, youth—the final beneficiaries of the initiative—are essential to building support and ensuring that changes reflect the genuine needs of students and their families.

To make the gears of the initiative work simultaneously and in relationship with one another is an ambitious undertaking. The following chapters outline key elements of the initiative. They describe the rationale for each element, what the element might look like, and some principles that other districts can use in implementing the element. Each element, or “cog,” represents a dramatic shift from current practice, and successful implementation of all cogs would represent significant progress. Together, the cogs turn into a well-oiled machine that is our best chance of producing student success.

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<sup>8</sup> This graphic representation of *Schools for a New Society* has evolved since the initiative was launched, incorporating lessons learned by Carnegie Corporation, the technical support team and the seven sites.



SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

# Defining Student Success

What is student success in the new 21st century society? By traditional measures, many students are not succeeding. Nationwide, two-thirds of students graduate from high school, but in many cities, the graduation rate is much lower. For example, just 30 percent of Cleveland's 9th grade class of 2001 graduated from high school four years later; in New York City, 38 percent did so; and in Philadelphia, 42 percent of 2001's freshmen completed high school.<sup>9</sup> These urban school systems educate disproportionate numbers of students of color and those from low-income families.

Among students who remain in school, moreover, achievement levels are relatively low, and they have been generally stagnant over the past few decades. American 15-year-olds performed at about the average of 31 industrialized nations in reading, and below that average in mathematics and science.<sup>10</sup> Reading scores for 17-year-olds declined between 1994 and 2004, and are at the same level as in 1971, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Mathematics performance has also remained stable since 1994.<sup>11</sup>

As with graduation rates, academic achievement in large cities is lower than the national or state averages. A study by the Council of the Great City Schools found that 56 of the 65 member cities had lower scores in mathematics than state averages in half the grades tested; in reading, 45 cities performed lower than state averages in half the grades tested.<sup>12</sup>


We want young adults graduating from high school who are confident in their abilities, empowered to take on the challenges of the next stage in their lives, and ready to become active members and leaders of their communities, large and small.

<sup>9</sup> C.B. Swanson (2004). *The Truth About Graduation Rates: An Evidence-Based Commentary*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

<sup>10</sup> M. Lemke et al. (2004). *International Outcomes of Learning in Mathematics Literacy and Problem Solving: PISA 2003 Results from the U.S. Perspective*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2005). *Long-Term Trend Assessment*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Sciences.

<sup>12</sup> Council of the Great City Schools (2005). *Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*. Washington, DC: Author.



Yet while academic achievement and attainment are vitally important goals, our vision of *student success* encompasses much more than those two objectives. Yes, we want young people who can read well and understand mathematics and science, and we want them to persist in school. But in a larger sense, we also want young adults graduating from high school who are confident in their abilities, empowered to take on the challenges of the next stage in their lives, and ready to become active members and leaders of their communities, large and small. Some of today's graduates have these attributes, but the new society requires that all have them.

What does it mean to be competent and confident, and how will we know if our students attain those qualities?

**Competence.** Competence refers to academic knowledge and skills. As noted above, American high school students, particularly those in large cities, lag behind other nations in achievement. Yet the kind of abilities tests measure do not represent all that we want young people to know and be able to do. In the information age we want young people to be able to think independently, solve problems, work as members of teams and use a variety of technologies. These are the abilities businesses want their employees to possess, and they are remarkably similar to the abilities needed to succeed in higher education, and to be effective members of a democratic polity in the 21st century.<sup>13</sup>

For *Schools for a New Society*, college-ready means that students who graduate from high school are prepared to enter a two- or four-year college without requiring remediation, even if they do not intend to go on to college. Indeed, a student unable to get into college also is unlikely to have what it takes to qualify for an apprenticeship in most unions today. A recent poll commissioned by the American Diploma Project, a joint effort sponsored by Achieve, Inc., the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, suggests that high schools are failing to ensure that all students graduate fully competent. Among high school graduates, about four in 10 say they are not prepared for college or work in at least one crucial skill.<sup>14</sup>

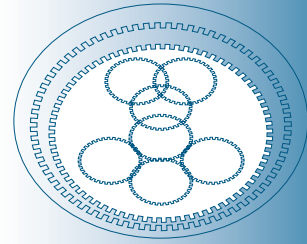
Such surveys are imperfect, because students' perceptions of their preparation do not indicate whether they are in fact prepared for college or work. On this score, the news from the postsecondary arena is discouraging; roughly one-third of students in four-year colleges and more than 40 percent of those in two-year colleges require remedial coursework.<sup>15</sup> A report from ACT and the Education Trust noted that while 75 percent of U.S. high school graduates go on to some kind of postsecondary education within a few years of completing high school, only 56 percent in this group matriculating to college have taken the proper set of core curriculum courses while in high school. These students are more likely to leave college without a degree, both because of frustration and the financial burden of taking courses that do not result in college credit accumulation.

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<sup>13</sup> Achieve, Inc. (2004). *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. Report of the American Diploma Project. Washington, DC: Author. See also R. Murnane and F. Levy (1996). *Teaching the New Basic Skills*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

<sup>14</sup> Achieve, Inc. (2005). *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* Available at [http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollreport/\\$file/pollreport.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/dstore.nsf/Lookup/pollreport/$file/pollreport.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2005). *Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000*. Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS), U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Available at [nces.ed.gov/surveys/peqis/publications/2004010/index.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/peqis/publications/2004010/index.asp). This data was collected before academic standards were tightened in many states, and should be considered a *minimum* estimate.



**Confidence.** When high school represented the end of a student’s academic career, as it did for most young people for much of the past century, a diploma signified that a student was ready to go on to the next stage of his or her life. In some ways, the goal of ensuring that high school students are confident about their knowledge and skills is a new one.

While the vast majority of affluent high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, low-income students are less likely to think they are college material, and to know the coursework required by postsecondary institutions and the procedures for applying to college. They will need confidence to make the choices and take the actions needed to continue their learning. They also are less likely to see themselves as potentially important actors in the lives of their communities.

What these young people need is a sense of agency, or the power to understand, act on, and effect positive change in one’s personal and social contexts. Agency also embodies the sense of hope and possibility (grounded in an understanding of social reality) that one can make a difference in one’s own life, family, school, and local community and in the broader national and global community.

At the core of student agency is the development of a positive cultural and social identity and an understanding of one’s own history and relationship to the broader society.<sup>16</sup>

The *Schools for a New Society* initiative believes that creating student “agency” requires the reinvention of high schools. Today’s high schools do little to address adolescents’ need to understand the relationship between current learning and their aspirations for the future, or the relationship between their own lives and that of the larger community. But an understanding of these relationships is essential if students are to be the central actors in their own learning process. Instead, students are treated as passive consumers of disconnected educational services, with no visible pathway to the lives that wait beyond high school. The isolation of most high schools from their communities further limits students’ understanding of the larger world they will enter upon graduation, leaving them with unclear expectations, little ability to negotiate these transitions, and a lack of confidence about taking the critical next steps in building their adult lives.

*Schools for a New Society* seeks to revitalize our 21st century democracy by giving youth the intellectual tools and the sense of agency that can help them succeed as adults, both as individuals and as actors in their communities and their country. Indeed, the future of the American middle class and our 21st century democracy depend on it.

<sup>16</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Promise of Urban Schools*. Providence, RI: Author.





**PORTFOLIO OF  
EXCELLENT  
SCHOOLS**

# Building a Portfolio of Schools


Constancia Warren and Mindy Hernandez  
Carnegie Corporation of New York

We all know individual high schools—large and small—that are successful in preparing most of their students for success. To be sure, many school districts already have several different types of high schools, including magnet schools and alternatives for students at risk of not completing high school. But if we are serious in our desire to create a just and equitable society, we must ask how to create in each of our communities entire systems of excellent high schools that prepare all students for postsecondary education and training, employment and citizenship. What will it take to create entire systems where excellence is the product of everyday practice?

Five years since its inception, *Schools for a New Society* has helped launch a nationwide high school reform movement. Today we see a powerful pattern emerging in the *Schools for a New Society* cities, as well as in other cities around the country. We see large high schools divided into small learning communities and small high schools; new small schools; charters for new schools; and contracts with community-based organizations to operate educational programs where out-of-school youth can complete high school.

The term we use to describe this diversification of organizational formats, educational approaches and governance systems is *portfolio of schools*. This term evokes investment management, with the portfolio seen as a way of organizing the investment of public funds in the education of our young people. But it is also a concept drawn from the arts, where the portfolio is an array of work that demonstrates, in different ways, the capacity of the creator—in this case, the school district and the community. A portfolio of schools is much more than a mix of schools from which students choose. It is a strategy for creating a system of excellent high schools that uses managed universal choice as a central lever in a district's process of change.

A portfolio of schools is much more than a mix of schools from which students choose. It is a strategy for creating a system of excellent high schools that uses managed universal choice as a central lever in a district's process of change.



We urgently need to transform high schools if we are to ensure that today's young people become capable and confident adults who can participate effectively in postsecondary education and training, secure economically stable and personally rewarding employment, and engage actively as democratic citizens. Schools and districts are one of our society's means of allocating opportunity, knowledge and power among students and their families. Creating systems of quality high schools that ensure success for *all* students is complex and daunting, but it is also necessary and possible if we confront the structural inequalities that lie at the center of our failing high schools. Replacing the traditional system of residentially zoned high schools with a managed portfolio of excellent schools is a promising way to mitigate the "opportunity gap" that fuels the stubborn gaps in achievement.

### **The Vision for a New System of Excellent High Schools**

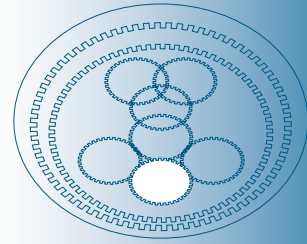
Although new schools will likely be added to the repertoire a district offers, an intentionally designed portfolio of schools entails more than creating new schools. Rather, it is a new way to organize districts and deploy the resources of the school district and the community. Most schools in the portfolio will be operated by districts, but our vision of the portfolio has more permeable boundaries. Charter schools, publicly funded but operated by external providers, can be part of the portfolio, as can schools that are operated by community-based organizations working under contract with the district.

Each high school in the portfolio, regardless of what entity operates it, shares two essential characteristics:

1. Each school has a clear focus that galvanizes teachers' and students' work. One school might have an applied concentration, like health sciences, while another might offer a specific approach to learning, such as experiential education.
2. Each school is driven by the same high expectations for students' learning. The school provides both a rigorous, standards-based college-preparatory curriculum and the academic and social supports to meet these high expectations. The portfolio provides multiple pathways to success organized around a common set of standards and instructional practices.

While "choice" is a central mechanism, the portfolio approach is not an unregulated free market, even within a set of largely publicly operated schools. Students choose from a range of high schools based on their own interests, needs and ambitions. Individual schools may be operated by different providers, but some degree of managed choice and careful accountability are critical elements of the portfolio strategy.

Despite this array of curricula and instructional methods, under no circumstances can the portfolio of schools become a new form of tracking that narrows rather than expands the opportunities available to students. A continual review of student and teacher assignment and student performance data is an essential component of maintaining a balanced and effective portfolio.



Most important, while the school district will still play a leadership role, the portfolio approach depends on a powerful partnership between the school system and the community in which it operates. A strong partnership can help overcome the inevitable political pressure to give preferential treatment to one segment of students over another. Instead, this partnership will ensure that all segments of the community are treated equitably.


## Core Values and Operational Commitments

Four values are central to our vision of a portfolio of schools: excellence, equity, diversity and choice. *Excellence* must be at the center for the portfolio to deliver the schools we need. Whatever their focus or format, every school in the portfolio must help students and schools meet rigorous academic standards, and prepare students for postsecondary education and/or professional training.

Every school should incorporate the following characteristics that research tells us distinguish excellent high schools:<sup>17</sup>

- Rigorous interdisciplinary curricula that integrate the development and use of literacy, mathematics, science and other core subjects
- Student inquiry and project-based learning employing themes that help students understand real-world applications of academic skills and knowledge
- Curriculum-embedded assessments (e.g., analyses of teacher assignments and student work, portfolios of student work, lesson study, work samples, etc.) that enable students and faculty to monitor progress and make ongoing adjustments to practice
- Common planning time that allows teachers to collaborate as members of professional learning communities
- Extended time for learning through block-scheduling, internships, and before- and after-school programs so students and faculty get the support they need to engage in challenging projects and tasks
- Enhanced opportunities for each student to be known well, including strategies such as “looping” and advisories that allow students to form meaningful relationships with faculty and their peers
- Partnerships with community-based organizations, municipal agencies, businesses and higher education institutions to extend learning opportunities for students and faculty and to create pathways for learning and development beyond secondary school
- Supports for English language learners, students performing well below expectations, and students with disabilities.

<sup>17</sup> T. Toch (2003). *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.



A portfolio of schools cannot provide excellent choices for all students without explicitly addressing *equity*. Urban school systems reflect deeply embedded inequities in the distribution of resources, teachers, students and attention that mirror the distribution of power and resources in the larger society. The portfolio's use of universal choice will disrupt some patterns of inequality, but because these patterns have a way of reappearing in new forms, portfolios must include strategies to reduce the impact of inequality and to keep these inequities from emerging in different ways.

At its core, the portfolio of schools embraces the *diversity* of individual aspirations, learning styles and cultural identities. Based on findings from cognitive psychology that individuals have varied learning styles,<sup>18</sup> as well as different interests, needs and aspirations, we know that we need different schools to provide a range of learning settings for students. This also is true for teachers: The portfolio capitalizes on the diversity of teachers' interests and talents, thereby helping ensure they feel more engaged in their work than they would within the traditional comprehensive high school model.

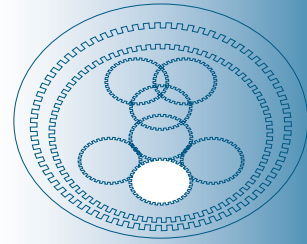
*Choice* has both intrinsic and instrumental value within a portfolio of schools. If students can choose schools that respond to their interests and aspirations, they are more likely to feel engaged by their school work, see its relevance to their future, participate in the school as a community and strive to achieve academically. A choice-based system responds to adolescents' developmental need to explore their emerging identity by choosing their school and experiencing the consequences of their choice. Young people and adults will work jointly to determine what kinds of schools to include in the portfolio and the supports students and their parents must have to make a choice. Schools that do not serve students' interests will need to improve or be closed.

Implementation of the portfolio is guided by the following set of principles that anchor the portfolio in city policy and community expectations. Included are ways that these principles are being carried out at SNS sites.”

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<sup>18</sup> cf. S. Messick (1976). *Individuality in Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; D.A. Kolb (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall; H. Gardner (1993). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (10th Anniversary Edition). New York, NY: Basic Books.



- **Creating, managing and sustaining a system of individually excellent public high schools and guaranteeing all students access to these schools.** In Sacramento, the district leadership divided large high schools into small learning communities, started four new small schools as independent charters, and granted an independent charter to a community-based organization to divide a large high school into six small schools.
- **Promoting diversity—of students and programs—within and between schools.** Each school includes a mix of students, providing all with academically challenging work and the supports needed to succeed. At the same time, the different schools in the portfolio offer options that address the full range of students' learning styles, interests, needs and aspirations. Providence has matched its school options to students' diverse interests and academic needs by creating small schools, including a newcomer academy and an ungraded school where students advance based on demonstrated mastery, a school focused on international studies, and another focused on health sciences and technology. In addition, Providence is working to divide its large high schools into small learning communities organized around curricular themes.
- **Serving a diverse constituency of students, from those who are able to accelerate learning to those who are disconnected from school.** Boston is considering a flexible promotion policy that would allow students to progress through high school as they complete course requirements, rather than moving from grade to grade. It also has created a small school for older adolescents who have not yet completed a high school diploma.
- **Applying universal standards of excellence across schools and providing supports that enable teachers and students to reach these standards.** Chattanooga is creating a "single path" to graduation; the school board adopted a policy that eliminates a two-track diploma and helps schools implement the change by expanding the use of literacy coaches to increase reading skills for all students.
- **Providing equitable choice.** Districts accommodate student choices by offering enough excellent options so that all students can find a place in at least one of their top choices. Districts work closely with community organizations and institutions to help guide students' and families' decisions. Ultimately they need to close schools that do not serve students well. At the same time, districts must eliminate the ways that advantaged families circumvent the student allocation process. In New York City, the district tries to accomplish these goals by assigning students to schools, taking into consideration students' choices and the schools' racial, ethnic, gender and academic compositions.
- **Engaging community groups and youth in developing and managing the portfolio of schools.** Worcester began its high school redesign by bringing together cultural groups, community-based organizations, youth-serving organizations and ethnic minority communities, along with businesses and higher education institutions. The community has maintained its involvement through a citizens' coalition, and each of the small learning communities in Worcester high schools has formed a community advisory committee to oversee a formal process for community engagement.



## Implementing a Portfolio of Schools

Transforming the current mixture of high schools to a portfolio of schools requires careful and purposeful management. The school district bears the primary responsibility for the portfolio's success or failure, but the development and sustainability of the portfolio requires long-term collaboration with community partners to design, assess and support the portfolio.

Together, districts and communities need to:

*Create a supply of excellent schools.* Real choice means that students and parents have an ample supply of high-quality schools from which to choose. The district plays the central role in leading the transformation of existing schools and sponsoring the creation of new schools, but the district and the larger community must jointly develop a vision for the portfolio.

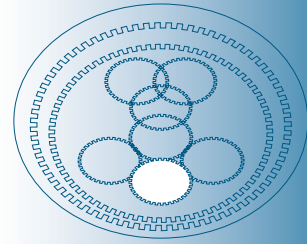
The district should determine the range of educational options in the portfolio only after vigorous public discussion of the community's high schools—and a periodic survey of community needs and preferences. The mix of schools must respond to local economic and social changes, the identified needs of students, and the success or failure of other schools in the portfolio.

The district may create new schools, but it should also consider charters and contract schools as elements of the larger portfolio. A successful portfolio also depends on leveraging partnerships with community organizations and institutions to provide support services to district schools, jointly create schools with district-employed educators, or operate publicly financed schools through contract or charter agreements with the district.

The portfolio is not a static array that remains fixed over the long term. After a start-up period, the district and its community partners must continually review the progress of individual schools and the functioning of the overall mix, making adjustments by restructuring schools not achieving high student performance, closing schools consistently failing to serve students well, and opening new schools to fill identified gaps in the portfolio.

The management function should include technical and fiscal supports for new school development; indeed, some districts have established offices of “New School Development.” Management should plan to use tools for transforming old schools or planning new schools, including frameworks, guidelines, workshops and technical assistance from both local and national providers. These guides will help ensure that all schools are of high quality and that networks or clusters of schools support a meaningful educational pathway. The development of visible budget procedures and effective contracting guidelines is also critical, particularly where different forms of partnerships with community organizations and institutions are involved.

*Design and manage the guidance and admissions process.* Fair access to the schools within the portfolio is essential, and the design and management of a portfolio of schools must pay close attention to admissions. First, for equitable distribution of knowledge about the choices, districts and communities must develop many ways of



informing students and families of their options. The district should widely distribute information about the different choices available, as well as guides that inform students and families about issues to consider when choosing. Community organizations and institutions also play a critical role in creating a broad foundation of knowledge to help youth and their families negotiate this process.

Second, as students reach middle school or junior high school, they and their families need personalized guidance in choosing high schools. This includes supports such as parent/student conferences; an explicit guidance curriculum; and professional development for teachers and counselors to help them better steer families through the options that best suit their student's learning style, interests, needs and aspirations. This guidance should include providing assistance in filling out school applications.


Third, the application process must use equity as a critical filter in allocating students among schools, with the aim of achieving academic diversity within the population of each school and a balanced distribution of diverse schools within the portfolio. The district's application process also needs to block the advantages well-connected parents use to get their children into more desirable schools at the expense of other children and, more generally, at the expense of an equitable school system. The distribution of talent and need under this choice-based student assignment process should be reviewed annually to protect the portfolio from the re-emergence of the patterns of inequity. Finally, for choice to be truly equitable, transportation must be available for all students to reach the high schools they choose, including those not operated by the district.

*Build schools' capacity to excel for all students.* A portfolio approach may create better conditions for teaching and learning, but does not directly improve instruction. To bolster student learning, schools need flexibility for professional development at the school level. Small class size, rigorous curricula, flexible scheduling and longer class periods must be coupled with common planning time for teachers, timely access to information on student performance, and adequate instructional resources to help teachers do their jobs well.

In addition to providing professional development resources and creating frameworks that stimulate school-level improvement, the district must ensure that schools are equipped with appropriate material and training supports so all students can achieve at high levels. This requires working closely with school leaders to determine the kinds of supports needed to serve the school's mix of students and to allocate support services for special student populations, including English learners, special education students, and students performing significantly below expectations.

Despite variations across schools, there are many ways that school districts can support the improvement of instruction throughout the portfolio. In Hamilton County/Chattanooga, for example, the district's policy framework required all high schools to develop 9th grade transition programs and literacy supports to reduce the high rate of student failure in the first year of high school. With staff from the school district and the local education foundation, principals from the county's high schools reviewed data on 9th graders' attendance, behavior and academic progress; implemented intensive literacy support strategies; and worked with teachers to pinpoint which students were in greatest danger.





Principals and teachers also need opportunities to learn from their peers in other schools. Districts can establish support networks by both discipline and theme, within or across schools, where principals and teachers can share promising practices and discuss challenges.

*Monitor and continuously improve schools in the portfolio.* Four kinds of accountability are important in assuring parents, the public and the district's governing board that the portfolio of schools actually provides excellent educational options for all students:

1. External or bureaucratic accountability between each school and higher levels of authority, such as the district or state, for students achieving standards
2. Internal or professional accountability among the staff within a school for the success of all students
3. Reciprocal accountability between the school and the district, where the district provides supports for schools to achieve results for which they are responsible
4. Community accountability between schools and the public, where the community has sufficient information in accessible form and language to understand the options and make effective choices

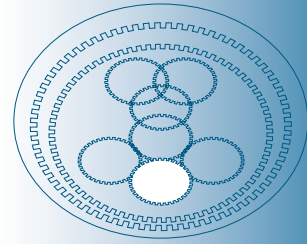
All four forms of accountability require readily available data in inquiry-friendly formats and participation from the district, school and community to foster an evidence-based discussion of educational progress. In addition, the district should design many ways to assess the academic and developmental improvement of students in different schools.

Given the racial and economic patterns of the larger society and the ways they are reinforced by educational policy and practice, it is imperative to regularly review a range of measures to monitor for re-emerging inequities. These measures include data on teacher assignment and movement among schools, student assignment policies, the outcomes of students' choices, the distribution of fiscal and personnel resources among the different schools and the distribution of high-need students.

## Emerging Lessons and Areas for Research

Designing and implementing a portfolio of schools may involve some difficult trade-offs, and we are still learning about the best ways to proceed. To learn as much as we can, we must discuss what we need to know so that we can strategically focus our research and attention.

For example, we know that teachers, administrators and mid-level district staff must buy into the reforms in real, collaborative ways. These are the people who either translate "big ideas" into action or into the oblivion of passing trends. We know that we need to draw on the enormous expertise of principals and teachers in the design and implementation of new reform policies and strategies. Research by the Cross City Campaign tells us that ambitious reforms often fail to lead to better instruction because



their tools and mandates were not informed by school-level expertise and were not accompanied by the support and capacity-building necessary to change instruction.<sup>19</sup> We know that involving all educators is crucial; what we do not yet know is how to do this well at a systemic level.

We also know that replacing one-size-fits-all policies with ones that can respond effectively to a diverse and dynamic mix of school formats and governance arrangements will likely require more complex operational supports. It may also create new opportunities for the application of political power to gain educational advantages.

And we know that equitable choice depends on an equal distribution of accurate information, but we recognize that information access is linked to power. The most needy families will likely have the most difficulty obtaining and using information to advocate for their children. Our challenge is to provide all students and families not only with an ample supply of good options but also with reliable information about these options and ways to help them to use that information. More research is needed to determine how most students and families are getting and using school-choice information, to identify the non-choosing families and to identify the constraints, priorities and sense of agency that limit or shape their choices.

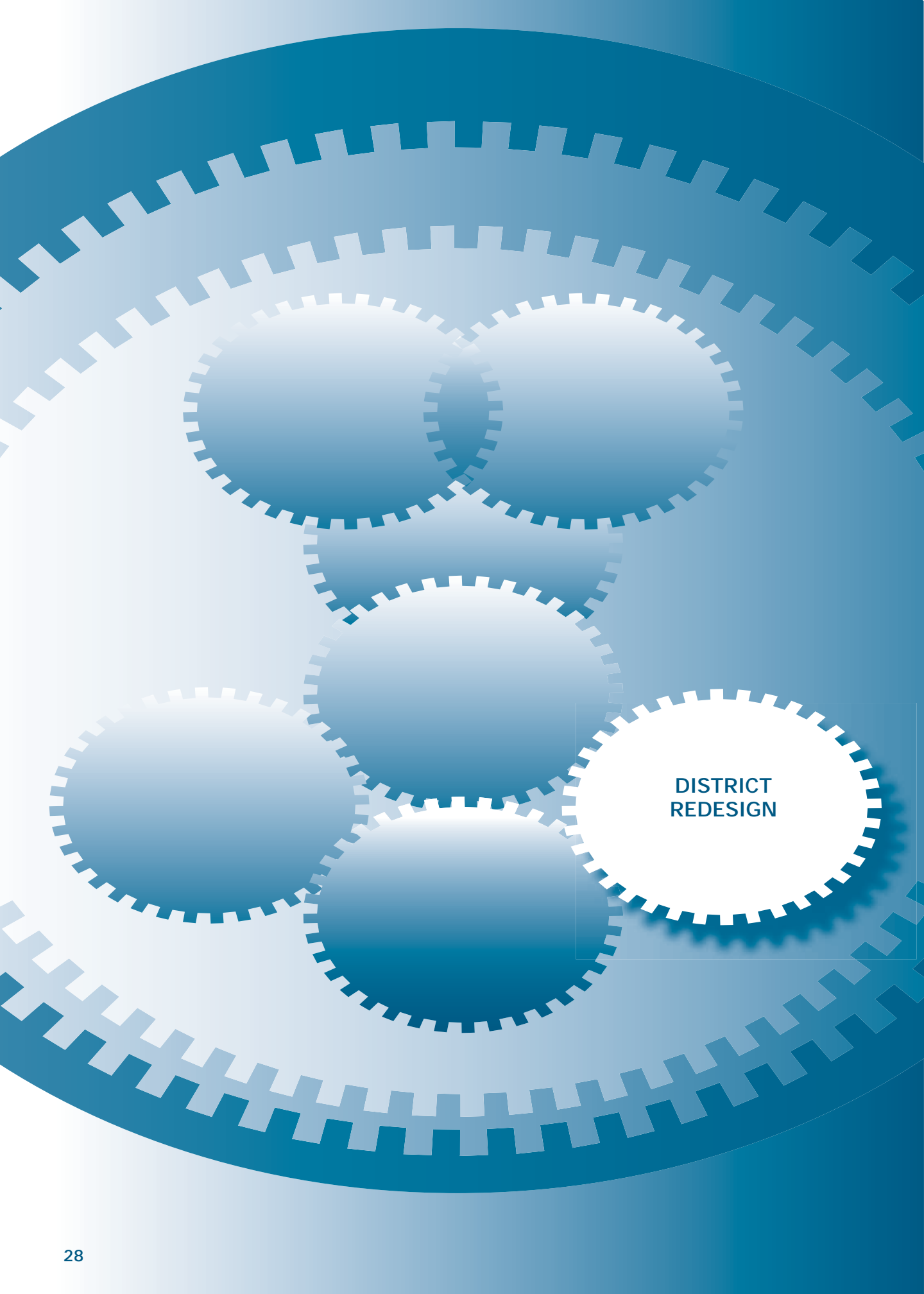
We also need to ensure that smaller, more personalized schools have adequate resources to offer all students the support and extended learning activities they need to thrive. If only some schools in the portfolio can respond to special needs, hidden tracking and segregation may arise. We need to know what kinds of supports smaller schools are currently able to provide, how small schools and small learning communities can work together to provide additional supports and how smaller learning environments can use community resources to offer additional activities and classes.

## Opportunities for All

Implementing a portfolio of schools requires careful management and continual use of data to ensure that inequities do not re-emerge. It also requires districts, working closely with community partners, to take on unfamiliar roles, some of which are outlined above.

We believe the portfolio approaches now emerging in urban school districts across the country offer benefits that outweigh their risks. Our best chance of reaping these benefits lies in continually measuring our efforts against our core values of excellence, equity, diversity and choice to ensure that the portfolios of schools provide our young people with the opportunities they deserve.

<sup>19</sup> Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005). *A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice*. Chicago, IL: Author.



**DISTRICT  
REDESIGN**

# Redesigning School Districts

Warren Simmons  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Unlike previous school reform initiatives implemented during the 1990s, *Schools for a New Society* recognized that high school transformations that would yield significant improvement in outcomes (academic and nonacademic) for all students would require bold reforms throughout entire school districts and in the broader community whose values and beliefs the district ought to reflect. This position represented a sharp departure from previous school reform efforts that either ignored the role of school districts or sought to shelter schools from their influence.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, rather than repeat the mythic and overly simplistic dichotomy between schools and districts, SNS defined the district as an organization incorporating the board of education, superintendent, central office staff, school staff, unions and professional organizations.

The foundation sponsors of SNS realized that high schools' long and successful resistance to change was rooted both in the design and operation of individual schools and in the policies and practices of the district. To achieve high school reform, then, SNS required communities to ferret out and alter policies, practices, beliefs and values that fostered the status quo throughout the interconnected layers (schools, regions, central offices, etc.) of the district.

Moreover, SNS's theory of action recognized that districts were intentionally designed to favor some students, professionals and communities over others. As a result, SNS anticipated that groups well-served by the current system would likely oppose school and district-wide change. To build the knowledge and support needed to counter and reduce opposition, SNS placed a premium on community engagement that would marshal the intellectual, social and political capital needed to initiate and sustain reform.

High school transformations that yield significant improvement in outcomes for all students will require bold reforms throughout entire school districts and in the broader community.

<sup>20</sup> cf. P.T. Hill, C. Campbell & J. Harvey (2000). *It Takes a City*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

M.R. Ucelli & E. L. Foley (2004). *Results, Equity and Community: The Smart District*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on Public School Reform*. Providence, RI: Author.



## Roots of the Traditional Urban School District

Redesigning high schools requires communities to confront values and assumptions that prevailed throughout much of the 20th century. The design of the large urban comprehensive high school and the traditional urban school district are closely intertwined and rooted in the views of the Administrative Progressives of the early 20th century.<sup>21</sup> These reformers sought to “professionalize” the governance and management of education and insulate it from patronage and politics by incorporating lessons from business. They succeeded by creating school districts led by expert superintendents and guided by corporate-style boards of directors. These “efficient” districts thereby created the bureaucratic structures that later reformers found have hampered efforts to redesign schools.

The Administrative Progressives were also guided by a view of student potential and success that influenced the design of districts and the implementation of virtually all district programs. This view was heavily influenced by theories of mental ability that treated intelligence as a general and immutable trait determined early in life. Armed with these theories, and with tests developed by pioneers such as Lewis Terman, the Administrative Progressives designed school districts to identify students’ potential and assign them to curricular tracks that would prepare them to be productive citizens. These beliefs provided the basis for district policies and practices that reserved the “best” teachers and instructional resources (curricular and extracurricular programs and materials) for the “best” students. The large comprehensive high school epitomized these policies and practices in their most advanced form.

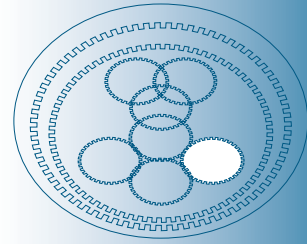
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In addition, the Administrative Progressives created a system that thwarted innovation almost by design. Districts set the rules and distributed resources. Schools lacked incentives or support for coming up with new ways of doing business that might benefit their student population.

Rather than replace the underlying “genetic code” of the system established by the Administrative Progressives, many successive efforts to reform K–12 education simply created additional layers of curricular programs (advanced mathematics and science programs, magnet schools, busing for school integration) and supports (guidance

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<sup>21</sup> D. Tyack (1974). *One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



counseling, multicultural education, equity programs to increase minority student access to advanced programs) to a system that was organized to sift, sort and select students and faculty into programs that delivered higher or lower standards of education, often with tragic results for students channeled into lower tracks. For example, magnet schools, which were established to promote school integration, often perpetuated this tracking by embedding an advanced mathematics, science or arts program in a school largely attended by poor African-American and Latino students. However, the enrollment criteria for the advanced program usually favored well-prepared students from other schools. As a result, a disproportionately large number of white students became the academic beneficiaries of programs designed to foster integration and address the negative academic and social consequences of segregation for African-Americans and Latinos.<sup>22</sup>

Standards-based reform is threatening to dismantle the century-old model that has governed the structure of high schools and districts and the relationships between them. Standards-based reform's most recent statutory incarnation, No Child Left Behind, transformed the philosophical foundation that has provided the basis for the organization of districts and secondary schools. By maintaining that all students should be held to the same high expectations, NCLB essentially annulled the organizing principle established by the Administrative Progressives—that expectations should vary with the aptitudes of students. Rather than use “flexibility” to accommodate individual differences in “aptitude,” NCLB encourages schools and districts to use “flexibility” to ensure that all students get the support they need to achieve high standards of performance.

Because standards-based reform reverses the century-old assumptions that have guided the organization of large comprehensive high schools and the school districts that govern and manage them, it will require an aligned set of policies and practices in the schools and central offices. At the same time, as small high schools go from being a boutique endeavor to a major approach, practitioners, advocates and policymakers must redesign district structures and policies so that small schools can flourish. These efforts are particularly imperative if districts and schools expect to educate new immigrant populations, to narrow stubborn achievement gaps and to meet the needs of growing numbers of English language learners and students with disabilities.

<sup>22</sup> W. Simmons (2004). “A Stranger in Two Worlds.” *Education Next* 4 (4), Fall, pp. 21-25.



## Smart District/Smart Systems

Until recently, the district's role in school reform went largely unexamined in research and policy on school improvement. Proponents of top-down (e.g., standards-based) and bottom-up (teacher- and school-centered) reforms shared a bias toward treating the individual schools as a primary unit of analysis and change. Top-down reforms often bypassed the district by creating accountability systems and reform designs that focused solely on school-level performance and improvement. In many urban districts, the movement to create small high schools grew outside the district structure. Often these schools began their lives as demonstration or pilot projects created using special waivers from district policies and contractual agreements. Waivers have often been required to give principals and faculty teams greater authority to choose school staff; design new curricula, assessments and professional development strategies; extend and restructure the school calendar; reallocate fiscal resources; redesign facilities; and create partnerships with external institutions and groups.

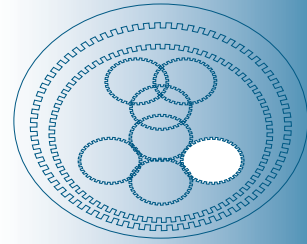
The active or passive avoidance of districts began to change in 2000, when School Communities That Work, the Annenberg Institute's Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, with funding from Carnegie Corporation, convened the first major dialogue on the future of urban school districts. SCTW produced a seminal set of findings, frameworks and tools that charted a course for the development of "smart districts or systems of schools" that has influenced how the district role is understood in SNS and other major urban school reform efforts.

SCTW found that districts enhance school improvement when they generate:

- High standards and expectations; a shared philosophy about learning; and the authority to make key decisions, including hiring staff who support the philosophy
- A pool of well-qualified teachers and administrators
- Ready access to, and incentives to participate in, high-quality professional development as well as on-site assistance to equip teachers and school leaders with the skills and knowledge to teach challenging content to a diverse student body
- Materials and curriculum support to help schools develop courses of study that are aligned with the standards
- Respectful and trusting relationships that connect school staff, students and parents—both on a person-to-person basis and through formal organizations like community-based groups and subject-matter networks
- A mechanism for comparing school progress in terms of equity, results and other student outcomes with schools serving similar populations
- Access to economies of scale for functions like data and technology management as well as transportation, food services, etc.
- Substantive parent and community involvement in schools and in the lives of students<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2002). *School Communities That Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts*. Providence, RI: Author.



Unfortunately, many urban school districts fail to continually provide this array of high-quality supports because of antiquated systems, fragmented and demoralized central office staff, chronic budget shortfalls, community politics that foster competition among various district constituencies for services and programs, and outmoded contract agreements with unions representing teachers, administrators and support staff. In response SCTW called for a radical redesign of urban school districts and/or the creation of alternative systems that serve three essential functions:

1. Provide schools, students and educators with needed supports and timely interventions
2. Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions
3. Make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practice

To perform those functions, districts must organize themselves differently. First, districts must collaborate with multiple agencies, groups and institutions to support the academic attainment and development of students. Districts can thereby augment their capacity in such key areas as data systems, fiscal management, community engagement, leadership development and curriculum supports.

In addition, districts must create and operate portfolios of schools that address students' diverse needs and interests while maintaining standards of excellence and promoting equity by providing supports for achieving those standards. The principles of a portfolio of schools are outlined earlier in this volume.


### Creating Smart Districts

How can school districts become “smart”? Building the capacity of school districts to support portfolios of excellent high schools requires approaches that are value-driven, evidence-based and supported by a wide group of stakeholders. The tools described below help districts address individual and institutional beliefs and values, alter entrenched cultural norms, improve their technical capacity and their understanding of how they use their resources, create ownership of their problems, and develop solutions that are widely supported and acted upon.

*Value-driven analyses.* Developing the kinds of districts we need to achieve reform will require large segments of the community to pinpoint those district policies and practices that support or impede school reform and the community's goals. Reform must stem from a community's beliefs and attitudes so that there will be consensus about the community's power to promote steps toward change.

For example, instituting standards-based reform assumes that most community members believe all students can reach high standards, given appropriate support. Determining the validity of this assumption is essential to garnering support for analyzing a system's effectiveness. SCTW used research to develop principles of adult and student learning





that communities can use to measure their stated educational goals against prevailing beliefs about learning and development in general and with regard to specific groups (e.g., race, gender, ethnic, income, etc.).<sup>24</sup> This society has a long and sad history of undervaluing, underestimating and undermining the contributions and achievement of groups based on race, religion, gender, country of origin and language. The values and beliefs that foster discrimination permeate the policies and practices of our institutions, including school districts, and must be brought to light before they can be challenged and changed.

*Evidence-based reviews.* District reviews must be evidence-based to ensure that solid and complete data, rather than power or tradition, informs debate and action. Too often schools and districts take action based on limited data gleaned from standardized test results or occurrences highlighted by the media and other constituencies. While this data represents an important starting point for discussion, it is too limited to inform policy and practice that might reshape an entire school district. For this reason, SCTW urged districts to develop “leading indicators” of school and district performance and practice to broaden planning and decision-making. These leading indicators would show whether a district is putting in place the kinds of policies and practices that would positively affect lagging indicators, such as measures of student performance.

For example, Broward County Public Schools has developed a warehouse to collect and analyze data to help educators and the broader community determine the efficacy of their instructional supports (e.g., curricular materials and programs), the human resource system (e.g., recruiting, assigning and developing teachers and principals), and budgeting practices.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Karen Hawley-Miles and her colleagues at the Educational Resource Center have helped numerous school systems analyze their use of professional development, curricular and fiscal resources. Hawley-Miles’s work with Marguerite Roza on district budgeting practices has been translated into an on-line tool that helps districts identify inequities in how they distribute money to schools.<sup>26</sup> These approaches enable districts to understand and act on the way they do business before outcome measures indicate problems.

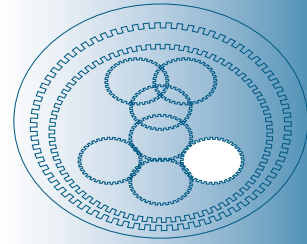
*Evidence-based community engagement.* In addition to analyzing the data themselves, districts also involve key constituents to gain community support for change. Broward County, for example, uses a quality-management tool known as the Sterling Process to organize and guide community planning and decision-making around school and district performance. Other organizations, including the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Stupski Foundation, the Broad Foundation, the Council of the Great City Schools and the National Quality Institute, have developed similar evidence-based district review processes. While these tools vary in their reliance on local versus national expertise and partners, they are important models for engaging teachers, parents, community leaders, principals, school board members and students in evidence-based conversations about district policies and practices that bridge race, income, language and ethnicity.

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<sup>24</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2002). *Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning*. Providence, RI: Author.

<sup>25</sup> F. Till (2004). “Working Toward a Data-Driven, People-Centered District.” *Voices in Urban Education*, No. 5, Fall, pp. 11-15.

<sup>26</sup> Available at: [www.schoolcommunities.org](http://www.schoolcommunities.org)



For instance, under SCTW, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform created the Central Office Review for Results and Equity, which has been used to assess central office efficacy in five communities, including two SNS sites (Chattanooga/Hamilton County and Sacramento). Using the CORRE process, a representative group of stakeholders from inside and outside of a district collects and analyzes qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of key central office functions.

Districts using CORRE have developed recommendations for improving their operations. But perhaps the most important function of CORRE and other district review processes is to make districts' core functions visible to the public. This builds broad ownership of districts' problems and creates an understanding of the need for change that will inform subsequent action. In many cases, districts remain unchanged because people are exposed to only a part of a district's operations. They are like the people in the fable who can experience only part of the elephant. As a result, some constituents call for wholesale change while others zealously guard certain programs or practices. Meanwhile, fundamental weaknesses in the larger system go ignored.

### A Dynamic Framework

Like other elements of *Schools for a New Society*, this framework for district redesign is intended to be just that—a framework. It is not a blueprint. The federalist system of education in the United States, combined with rapidly shifting demographic profiles, requires each community to create a system of schools that reflects local values and capacities, while recognizing national and international realities. Thus, while the form of each emerging district will differ, they will all be designed to ensure that all students and schools achieve higher standards to maintain a strong democracy and economy, and to build strong families and communities.

*Schools for a New Society* is committed to evidence-based practice, however. To that end, the foundations and organizations on the technical support team (Academy for Educational Development, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Institute for Education and Social Policy and Collaborative Communications Group) will continue to identify and share new resources and revise frameworks to advance each community's efforts to reform high schools for improved student learning and stronger families and communities.



YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT

# Committing to Youth Engagement

Francine Joselowsky  
Academy for Educational Development

In the *Schools for a New Society* initiative, creating a safe, engaging, supportive, meaningful and rigorous learning environment so that all students can and want to learn is at the heart of the work. It is also one of the biggest challenges educators face. Although many adults realize that engaging students—in their own education and in education reform—is key in individual and overall school success, we struggle to engage students in meaningful roles and to connect youth engagement to the larger reform agenda. Often students get pushed to the sidelines and relegated to roles as recipients of learning experiences rather than co-constructors of those experiences. Many educators feel that, because of limited resources, time and personnel, along with mandates to improve test scores and graduation rates, engaging youth is a luxury they cannot afford.


This view is shortsighted. According to Adena Klem and James Connell, student engagement improves performance in school, and a lack of engagement leads to negative outcomes, such as class disruption, absenteeism and dropping out. They write:

“Regardless of how engagement is defined, research indicates that higher levels of engagement are linked with improved performance in school. Student engagement has been found to be one of the most robust predictors of student achievement and behavior in schools, a conclusion that holds regardless of whether students come from families that are relatively advantaged or disadvantaged.”<sup>27</sup>

Learning and engagement happen when young people are challenged and when they find meaning and connection in their schools and communities. Our charge, then, is to develop schools and school systems that engage and support young people in all aspects

Learning and engagement happen when young people are challenged and when they find meaning and connection in their schools and communities.

<sup>27</sup> A. Klem and J. Connell (2004). *Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research and Reform in Education.



of their learning. Authentic engagement begins when all students can participate in the decisions that affect their lives (in school and out), and stands in sharp contrast to the notion of students as passive customers or consumers. Instead, authentic engagement empowers students to see themselves as producers and constructors of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Research tells us that student engagement is stimulated by a learning environment that is challenging, safe, supportive and well structured, in which expectations are high, clear and fair, and where learning is connected to students' lives.<sup>29</sup>

As the districts, schools and partners involved in *Schools for a New Society* begin rethinking the nature and structure of their high schools, they also must rethink the role of young people in the high school experience. Engaging students can greatly help schools meet the all-important bottom line—improving students' learning while increasing their likelihood of success in all spheres of life.

### Youth Engagement: What Is It? What Does It Look Like?

In discussions about students' roles in their schools, the terms “youth engagement” and “youth voice” are often used interchangeably. In SNS we choose to use the term “youth engagement” rather than “youth voice.” We see engagement as an active, operational state, whereas youth voice implies the expression of an opinion that may not be tied to action. If young people are to be engaged in improving their schools, fostering youth voice can be a valuable strategy, but there are many more steps to be taken if the opinions of young people are to be incorporated into practice and policy.

“Engagement” is defined in many ways. As discussed below, *Schools for a New Society* defines engagement as “the mobilization of constituencies and the bringing together of constituency groups into an active relationship around a common mission, goal or purpose.” Clearly students are one of the “constituency groups” that must be engaged in effective school reform efforts.

To authentically engage young people in improving their schools and learning outcomes, educators must use a well-thought-out set of strategies and actions to draw every student into learning, teaching and leading. Groups of youth and adults must be brought into an active relationship around shared and commonly defined goals.<sup>30</sup>

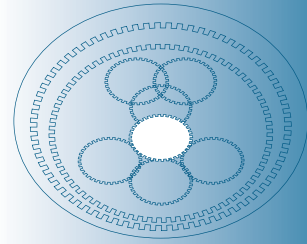
Traditionally, by “engaged students” we meant those in leadership positions, involved in school government or clubs, or participating in other school activities. These tended to be a handful of students (often the same students) who had good grades, regular attendance and few discipline problems. Given this narrow definition, opportunities for engagement are often inaccessible to most students and will not foster substantive change.

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<sup>28</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Promise of Urban Schools*. Providence, RI: Author.

<sup>29</sup> A. Klem and J. Connell (2004). *Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

<sup>30</sup> A. Fletcher (2003). *Meaningful Student Involvement: Guide to Inclusive School Change*. Olympia, WA: The Freechild Project. [www.soundout.org](http://www.soundout.org)



If we agree that engaging young people gives them the confidence to control their lives and take responsibility for their own learning, engagement cannot be disconnected activities for small groups of students. Instead, engagement strategies must vary and be accessible to all students. By mapping out strategies at the classroom, school and district level, we can begin to involve young people in efforts to improve all aspects of their learning environment.

### A Framework for Youth Engagement

The Forum for Youth Investment, in its work with the *Schools for a New Society* initiative, has developed a framework that represents the range of strategies for engaging young people in their educational experience. (See Figure 2.)

*Engaging youth in their own learning* requires a balance of challenging, relevant learning experiences that offer many avenues for student choice and responsibility through cooperative, project-based and active learning. This includes opportunities for students to select content, set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on their learning, practice communication and problem-solving skills, and assume leadership roles in the classroom. Classrooms are structured to encourage interaction among students and provide learning opportunities for students with varied learning styles.

*Engaging youth in their peers' learning* means creating opportunities for cooperative learning among students and empowering them to serve as positive role models, mentors, coaches and mediators. Such opportunities can include students' supporting struggling peers and assessing one another's work and progress. Adults must provide the support and development young people need to successfully assume these roles.

*Engaging youth in improving educational opportunities* means giving young people clear opportunities to share responsibility for school and community improvement aimed at increasing student achievement. This requires well-thought-out strategies at the school, district, community, state and national levels for youth to partner with adults as leaders in the process of change in their schools. Strategies can include youth representation in adult structures or youth-led structures and processes with well-defined roles for youth in creating, shaping and defining policies and practices.

*Engaging youth in community and civic life* connects school and community-based learning experiences, creating opportunities for students to link classroom learning to out-of-school experiences. Opportunities can include service learning, internships, community-action research projects and community organizing.

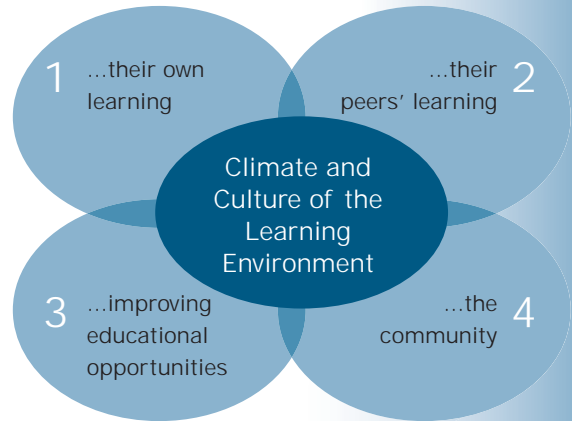



Figure 2. Strategies for Engaging Students



At the foundation of all four strategies is the learning environment and the values that shape it—the underlying beliefs, assumptions and expectations about young people: how they learn, what they think, what they need from schools and adults, what they believe in and what they are capable of. These values set the tone for how members of the school community interact with one another, both inside and outside the classroom. It is in the learning environment that the conditions for authentic youth engagement are encouraged or undermined.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, there are many opportunities to engage young people in the learning environment and educational reform process. In some contexts, youth engagement strategies may be strong enough to stand alone, but most singular efforts make little or no impact on the overall learning experience. To be most effective—in supporting young people’s development and in creating systemic growth and change—efforts to authentically engage young people in educational change and in their own learning must take place at many levels and across many strategies,<sup>32</sup> connecting the work young people are doing with larger issues in the school, district or community.

## Creating Conditions for Success

Effective youth engagement requires a combination of district, school, classroom and community efforts. Crucial to the success of any youth engagement strategy is the capacity for implementation. This begins with leadership buy-in and commitment—in terms of time and resources—at the school and district levels, with support from community partners. Without commitment at all levels, the effectiveness of the strategy is greatly diminished. However, endorsement alone does not guarantee depth or spread and therefore must be supported by policies and well-thought-out strategies in the school and the classroom.

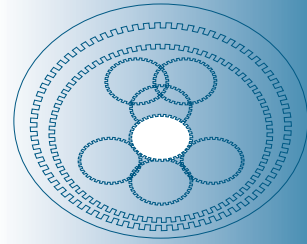
In sites showing progress in engaging youth, leadership at all levels ensures that student engagement efforts are tied to action. The superintendent, principals, teachers and community members are committed to putting the needs of young people at the center of the reform agenda by creating pathways for youth engagement, input and decision making. To ensure this degree of commitment, the school or district initiates and supports (in dollars and in staff time) student engagement, and oversees the structural reforms and policies to support a range of strategies.

But districts and schools cannot do this alone. External partners ensure depth, spread and ownership; they can also “push” in ways schools and districts traditionally cannot, often bringing to light equity and access issues. However, without formal structures to align and coordinate the work, tensions are likely to surface around difficult issues. To help partnerships work effectively, districts should sign formal contracts or develop memoranda of understanding that give external partners a role in designing, managing and implementing some of the tasks. The district must set clear expectations about the roles and responsibilities of each organization and its staff. The goal is to infuse youth engagement into the work of the district and its partners, at all levels.

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<sup>31</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment. (2005). *Youth Engagement in Education Change: Working Definitions and Lessons from the Field*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>32</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment (2005). *Youth Engagement in Education Change: Working Definitions and Lessons from the Field*. Washington, DC: Author.



## Common Challenges: From Theory to Practice

Authentic youth engagement has been one of the most difficult aspects of the SNS framework to put into operation. In interviews with site personnel about their youth engagement efforts, we found several common challenges. While most sites have made some commitment to involving young people as stakeholders in the reform processes—through focus groups, student-led research, district-wide student government or student representation on the school board—often students’ input is solicited but not acted on. The youth engagement work does not tend to carry an “urgency” stamp or lacks a clear link to the district-level work.

Additionally, engagement efforts are vulnerable to resistance from principals and teachers who don’t know how to authentically engage students—and do not have infrastructure support. Tensions arise when students move from being passive participants (naming the problems) to being active participants (wanting a role in solving the problems). Add to this the lack of awareness about the connection between youth engagement and academic improvement, and engagement efforts get pushed aside.

By viewing youth engagement as essential to effective teaching and learning, educators and community members can begin to develop common-sense practices toward youth engagement at the district, school, classroom and community levels.

Following are examples of district and school practices in several SNS sites where youth engagement is moving from theory to practice. All of these strategies are connected to and supported by broader systemic goals aimed at improving academic achievement and personalizing the learning environment.


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### District Practices

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- **The definition of student success is broad and includes a range of academic and nonacademic indicators.** For example, Providence’s official framework for student success notes that “instructional reform, while essential to the transformation of our district, cannot alone support student success. We intend to build a systematic asset-based approach to addressing the myriad of learning support needs of our students so that consistent engagement in learning for all students is possible.”
- **Students are members of the school board.** (Ideally students have voting rights). Sacramento, Boston and Chattanooga include students on the board.
- **District policies support student engagement and overall student success.** In Providence, a series of policies aligned with the framework for student success were adopted by the school board. These include policies on student conduct, discipline, bullying and harassment, and student rights.
- **Districts and partners create a position dedicated to youth development and student engagement.** In both Providence and Boston, a youth development/youth engagement staff position is supported and housed at the district office. In Chattanooga and Sacramento, the same position is housed at the core partner’s office.



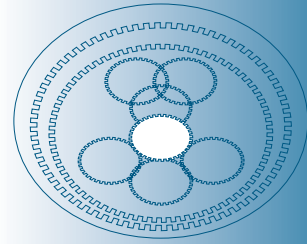
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- **District policies require students to assist in the development and promotion of new schools and school culture and climate.** In Providence and Chattanooga, a student must be a member of school improvement teams.
  - **A district-wide student government or some other representative student body meets regularly with the superintendent to share student concerns and ideas.** (Ideally a measure of accountability is built into this.) Providence created a district wide student government, a centrally organized, democratically elected student leadership body representing each high school, which meets regularly with the superintendent to share student concerns and ideas. In Sacramento, at the request of the district-wide student advisory council, one student from each high school in the Sacramento City Unified School District serves on the district's budget committee to ensure that students' voices are included in the decision-making process. In Boston, students on the district-wide Boston student advisory council worked closely with district administrators to consider policies on such issues as cell-phone use and attendance.
  - **Districts create advisories or other structures that personalize the learning environment and connect students to adults in the building.** All schools in Boston are required to develop school-based advisory systems.

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## School Practices

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- **Students and schools conduct surveys and research to gauge youth concerns.** The Boston Plan for Excellence brought together teachers and students of Brighton High School, university professors and community leaders to develop Research & Activism for Change, a two-year social studies elective that integrates participatory action research and concepts of critical theory and social justice. In San Diego, all students at the comprehensive high schools were surveyed about the types of small learning communities they were interested in. These surveys were used to determine the theme-based small learning communities the schools were divided into.
- **Structures are put in place to facilitate open communication between students and educators.** In fall 2005, a student group from Sacramento's Luther Burbank High School, known as Titan Voice, organized and held their first "teacher rally," a faculty meeting, student-style. The purpose of the rally was to promote the importance of teacher-student relationships on campus.
- **School-based student leadership structures reflect the diversity of the student body.** Members are chosen democratically from various academic, ethnic and linguistic elements of the student body. At Monument High School in Boston, with the support of external facilitators, the student council has moved from being an event-planning group to a policy-making group.
- **All students decide which school-wide issues student leadership should address.** Students at McClatchy High School in Sacramento implemented a peer court program to include student voice in the school's discipline decisions.




- **Students are engaged in designing and implementing small schools or small learning communities.** At Boston's West Roxbury and Hyde Park High Schools, young people were involved in choosing the designs for their schools' new small schools and in the hiring of the headmasters.
- **Students develop end-of-year portfolios to demonstrate core-content knowledge and mastery of skills.** At Boston Day and Evening Academy, all students complete a portfolio and assess their own proficiency using competency rubrics.
- **All students are required to have Individual Learning Plans.** At Boston Day and Evening Academy, teachers help students map out an ILP to improve and develop core academic skills. Students are then required to assess their progress and refine their ILPs accordingly.
- **Schools dedicate time for teacher professional development on engaging pedagogy and curriculum, ideally with student input.** At Dorchester and West Roxbury High Schools in Boston, before the school year began, community partners worked with teachers and administrators on engaging pedagogy and community building.

In addition to the above strategies, it is essential that youth engagement practices are embedded in classroom practice and supported by community efforts to connect youth and families to schools and other learning opportunities. This can include the following classroom strategies:

- Students manage their own ILPs, setting goals, developing benchmarks and tracking their own academic journey.
- Engaging pedagogy is incorporated into all classrooms. Lessons include inquiry-based and experiential learning models that support student choice, give students opportunities to work in groups and allow them to take responsibility for what they learn and how they learn.
- Students are given regular opportunities for voice, choice and contribution in the classroom and give regular feedback to teachers about teaching, learning and curricula.
- Community and business partnerships are integrated into the curriculum through career academies or content-specific classes in the form of internships, "job shadowing," service learning or visiting professionals.

### Moving Toward Authenticity

There are inherent tensions in the need to reform high schools and the desire to find authentic ways to engage key stakeholders in that process. For young people, there is a sense of urgency. They are in schools every day, struggling to find their way in institutions that often don't meet their needs as learners or individuals. But our schools and the systems that support them are rarely set up as democratic institutions with clear pathways from student needs to institutional decision making.



Youth engagement, while conceptually simple, is often difficult to pull off without intentional training for adults.<sup>33</sup> We need more inclusive and equitable models of youth-adult partnerships bridging the power gaps that typically exist in schools. We must learn how to give young people clear opportunities to share responsibility for their own learning and to participate in school reform processes designed to improve student achievement, climate and culture.<sup>34</sup>

This work cannot be done by young people alone. To authentically engage young people, adults must do more than listen; they must act on what students tell them. They must begin by examining their definition of youth engagement and challenging their assumptions about leadership and power.<sup>35</sup>

As the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's Senior Fellows in Urban Education write: "For students to demonstrate empowered behaviors, teachers and parents must act as change agents in schools. Teachers demonstrate agency when they take responsibility for the learning of every child and act as advocates for children against the pessimism that surrounds discussions of urban education. While teachers need to be held accountable by the communities they serve, for educators to work in the interest of children they also need the authority, in collaboration with families, to adapt curriculum and instruction to student's learning needs, cultural identities and strengths."<sup>36</sup>

Being a change agent involves recognizing the strengths, perspectives and experiences young people bring to the learning process and ensuring that these are integrated in the learning environment with the necessary policies, structure and practices. This requires an organizational commitment to program planning and reflection, providing training opportunities for adults, and implementing a process for authentic program assessment and evaluation.<sup>37</sup>

To authentically engage young people, adults must do more than listen; they must act on what students tell them.

## Ways to Engage Youth

How can schools and communities effectively engage youth?<sup>38</sup> The work of the Forum for Youth Investment suggests these strategies:

***Engage youth at many different levels and in many different roles.*** Youth can participate in a range of activities, from serving as participants in a focus group to coordinating a drive to change district policies. The goal is to be thoughtful in shaping roles for youth and in selecting a diverse range of young people for these roles.

***Train adults to partner effectively with youth.*** Youth engagement will likely not succeed without intentional training of adults.

<sup>33</sup> W.S. Lesko (2001). *Mega-Planner Toolkit*. Kensington, MD: Youth Activism Project.

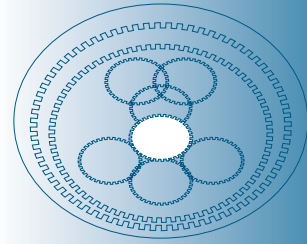
<sup>34</sup> Adapted from A. Fletcher (2002). *Youth-Adult Partnerships Tip Sheet*. Olympia, WA: Freechild Project. [freechild.org/YAPTtips.htm](http://freechild.org/YAPTtips.htm)

<sup>35</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Promise of Urban Schools*. Providence, RI: Author.

<sup>36</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Promise of Urban Schools*. Providence, RI: Author.

<sup>37</sup> Community Network for Youth Development (2001). *Youth Development Guide: Engaging Young People in After-School Programming*. San Francisco, CA: Author. [www.cnyd.org/trainingtools/media/YDGuide.pdf](http://www.cnyd.org/trainingtools/media/YDGuide.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment (2005). *Youth Engagement in Education Change*. Washington, DC: Author.



*Train youth to carry out their work effectively.* Adults must help young people transform their ideas about what needs to be done into programs, actions and policy recommendations.

*Begin engagement by focusing on youth's daily experiences.* For example, if funding is a problem but youth keep talking about the bathrooms being in disrepair, start by addressing the bathroom issue and then involve youth in broader concerns.

*Secure resources for youth engagement efforts.* Often youth need only a modest amount of money to support training, coordinate events or produce materials. Sometimes what's needed isn't money but other resources—meeting space, permission to conduct a survey or access to individuals.

*Link with outside groups.* Many organizations, such as nonprofit organizations that work with youth, have already developed tools and strategies for engaging young people.

## The Basis for Effective Schools

Schools and organizations must recognize that youth engagement is not just a feel-good activity designed to boost student morale. Rather, it is the basis for creating effective high schools that challenge, connect and prepare young people for their lives beyond school walls. Youth engagement must be regarded as a vital strategy to involve students in their own learning by creating engaging classrooms and schools that make students want to learn, take initiative and seek opportunities to grow.

Creating pathways for youth engagement while undergoing the complex process of high school transformation is a difficult charge. Moreover, both youth and adults must be engaged in this work. If the voices of youth are lost in the shuffle, reform initiatives may lack key agents and key indicators of success or failure.

As Beth Rubin and Elena Silva note: “The understandings to be reached through observing and soliciting the perspective of students as they move through daily life in schools are invaluable. These perspectives enrich both the theory and practice of education. They provide teachers with a valuable window into how their practices are experienced by students, as well as helping them to look beyond their own classrooms for the causes of and solutions for pressing inequities.”<sup>39</sup>

Educators must embrace youth engagement as both a way to improve high schools and a component of good pedagogy. A broadened understanding of youth engagement can help sites integrate the work at many levels, institutionalizing it as an integral facet of their agenda for reform and continuous improvement.

<sup>39</sup> B. Rubin and E. Silva, eds. (2003). *Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living Through Change*. New York and London: Routledge Falmer.



**COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT**


# Mobilizing Community Engagement

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The purpose of community engagement in public education is to build and mobilize constituencies to support their public schools. For systemic reform initiatives such as *Schools for a New Society*, public engagement fulfills a variety of critical needs. First, such engagement can help improve the design and implementation of the reform by tapping the ideas and expertise of parents, citizens and community constituencies committed to improving school and school system performance. Second, engagement can help build a permanent constituency for the reform, a critical asset in a fluid political terrain in which superintendents and school board members are often transient. Third, engagement can strengthen the legitimacy of the reform, as constituencies come to understand, believe in and support the reform efforts. Finally, building community engagement around specific reforms such as SNS also contributes to the broadening of community participation in public education, thereby strengthening the role public education can play in enhancing democratic action.

Because the terms *community* and *engagement* are used so often and have so many meanings, we will start by defining these terms. By “community” we mean the range of organized constituencies in any urban metropolitan area. Although community can mean everyone who lives in a defined urban (or rural) setting, we focus our definition on constituencies rather than individuals, and on those constituencies organized into groups and represented by group leadership. We define community as a continuum of organized constituencies including elite groupings, civic and cultural organizations, and grassroots groups. (See below for a further breakdown of these three constituency divisions.) Although the idea of community at its broadest involves more than organized groups, engaging individuals who are not part of such groups requires a variety of primary, face-to-face organizing strategies that may be beyond the scope of this framework. For this purpose, engagement as a strategy depends on the existence of organized groups.

Engagement can help improve the design and implementation of the reform by tapping the ideas and expertise of parents, citizens and community constituencies committed to improving school and school system performance.



We define “engagement” as the mobilization of constituencies and the bringing together of constituency groups into an active relationship around a common mission, goal or purpose. Effective engagement depends on both the articulation of a goal or purpose that a variety of constituency groupings can share, and the forging of relationships and structures that join those groups in the pursuit of a common purpose.

Community engagement in education is a component of the overarching issue of public will—the extent, depth and intensity of commitment to public education in a national, state or local jurisdiction. The nature of public will to support public education in any setting flows from a confluence of historical, economic, social and political factors that change slowly and with difficulty. Community engagement, conversely, is a smaller scale enterprise that seeks to mobilize local constituencies to support specific reform efforts—small schools, smaller class sizes, improved teacher quality—in specific urban settings. Both public-will campaigns and community engagement strategies, as the work of Clarence Stone and his colleagues indicates,<sup>40</sup> have been successful in mobilizing constituencies to support school and systemic change efforts in several U.S. urban school districts.

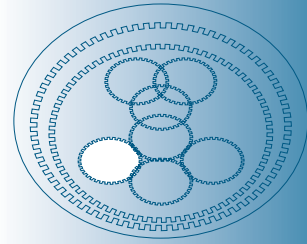
Community engagement strategies are usually a mix of demand and support components. The demand side involves a critique or indictment of a school district’s performance failures and policy shortcomings, a set of expectations or challenges that embody the idea that schools must do more for their students, and a set of proposals for how schools can meet those higher expectations that are bold, simple and strategically compelling.<sup>41</sup> The support side involves identifying, mobilizing and bringing into alliance the leadership of the constituencies whose backing is critical to reform, and who will support—with time, resources and political capital—the school system’s efforts to meet the challenge to produce better outcomes for the community’s children.

Community engagement in education is a component of the overarching issue of public will—the extent, depth and intensity of commitment to public education in a national, state or local jurisdiction.

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<sup>40</sup> C. Stone, J. R. Henig, B. D. Jones and C. Pierannunzi (2001). *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

<sup>41</sup> By strategically compelling, we mean that the solution embodies a persuasive theory of change based on the argument that if a campaign’s remedy is implemented, student achievement will significantly improve.



Employing community engagement strategies to build demand for education reform is problematic in foundation-sponsored initiatives when the foundation defines the specific demand (the reform effort to be implemented) before the engagement effort begins. Most community organizers would argue that, to be effective, specific solutions should develop from efforts to bring constituencies together around the need to improve public education's performance and the resulting student outcomes. Foundation reform initiatives that begin by defining the specific reform to be implemented imply community engagement efforts that attempt to persuade constituency groups to embrace a predetermined solution, a difficult undertaking. Yet foundation-defined solutions can be crafted as both specific and flexible, and can include broad community demands and expectations in particular reform programs. Given the urgency of improving public education's outcomes in urban areas, and that the need for reform is shared by foundations and urban constituencies alike, developing a shared reform agenda is not an insurmountable problem.

The first step in community engagement involves identifying the constituency leadership to bring into an alliance or a campaign. In SNS sites, the lead partner has been a local education fund, a service provider or a similar entity with closer links to the leadership of elite organizations than to the leadership of civic/cultural or grassroots groups. Thus, initial efforts to engage constituencies to build SNS support coalitions have often involved the leadership of elite organizations—members of the city's corporate sector (leading industries, banks, insurance companies, utilities and law firms), the city's dominant media (newspapers, TV and radio stations) and the city's nonprofit sector (universities, hospitals, and large-scale service organizations and voluntary providers). The work of Clarence Stone and his colleagues shows that such constituencies are a necessary component of sustained support for school reform. But Stone's findings also caution that restricting public engagement to such elites risks limiting the reform to the relatively narrow parameters those elites find acceptable. Moreover, elite-driven reform often masks or fails to address the critical issues of race, class and power that, not confronted, perpetuate undereducation of poor children of color.<sup>42</sup>


Engagement efforts that begin and end with the elite sector also are doomed to fail because of the critical roles that intermediary sectors such as the city's political leadership and its civic/cultural infrastructure can play. It is an especially serious mistake to ignore the city's grassroots groups, because they hold a latent political capacity to challenge traditional race, class and power relationships in many urban settings.

Why is the inclusion of grassroots groups so critical in community engagement efforts that define systemic school reform as their core mission? The goal of SNS is not only to improve the quality of high schools, particularly poorly performing schools serving low-income students of color, but also to build school and community cultures that can

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<sup>42</sup> C. Stone, J. R. Henig, B. D. Jones and C. Pierannunzi (2001). *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.





sustain the demand and support for quality high schools, and to manage a continuous cycle of improvement that transcends the life of the SNS initiative. The persistence of low-quality schooling in poor neighborhoods of color is intimately related to the limited social capital, and limited political power, of those communities. SNS's efforts to improve the quality of high schools, and sustain that improvement over time, require community engagement to improve the capacity of local school district leadership, strengthen the schools' contributions to youth and community social capital, and ultimately contribute to changing the power balance in communities inadequately served by their local schools. Given how deeply the SNS initiative seeks to transform traditional high school structures and relationships, mobilized grassroots constituencies, and the organizations that support those constituencies, may be the critical forces capable of sustaining the SNS reform. Thus, local groups with the experience and capacity to address racial and ethnic power imbalances in urban districts are necessary components of the SNS constituency mix.

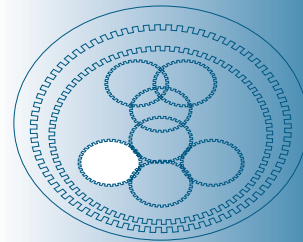
### Constituencies Needed to Support SNS

To build a stronger and more enduring base of SNS support, three broad constituencies need to be engaged: local political leadership, leading components of the civic/cultural infrastructure, and grassroots community groups. Teachers' unions and youth groups are also important constituencies.

*Political leadership.* The need to build support for SNS among local political leadership is obvious. Elected officials control the fiscal resources that fund school systems; they also dominate the legislative arenas that determine educational policy. (Note that elected officials include not only the members of state legislatures and city councils, but also the elected members of local school boards or committees, who determine the educational and fiscal policies of most school districts.)

*Civic/cultural infrastructure.* The need to engage leading elements of the city's civic and cultural infrastructure may seem less obvious. But civic, service and advocacy groups such as the League of Women Voters, the NAACP and the Urban League, ASPIRA and La Raza, the library association, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Clubs, city-wide volunteer organizations that provide services to children and youth, as well as arts groups, museums and other cultural organizations, are critical components of a successful engagement strategy. Their memberships often include leaders of the city's diverse constituencies, and their mission often includes improving equity of resources and outcomes for disadvantaged students. Moreover, such organizations provide important children and youth services that can support school reform goals.

To build a stronger and more enduring base of SNS support, three broad constituencies need to be engaged: local political leadership, leading components of the civic/cultural infrastructure, and grassroots community groups.



**Grassroots groups.** Involving grassroots groups is also a critical strategy for sustaining SNS reform. By grassroots groups we mean neighborhood-based housing and improvement associations, community development organizations, local service providers and community-based organizing groups.<sup>43</sup> We also mean neighborhood-based religious institutions such as churches, synagogues, mosques and others, along with their ancillary afterschool, tutoring and related adult and youth services.<sup>44</sup> We include school-based constituencies such as parent associations or other neighborhood groups predominantly organized at the school site, and often mobilized by local school administrative or teacher leadership. In many of this country's racially divided cities, grassroots groups represent critical constituencies of color whom school systems have served very poorly for decades. Families and communities in these settings have constantly insisted on effective education for their children. Therefore, the power that these constituencies can mobilize is an invaluable component of any community engagement strategy.

**Teacher Unions.** The role of teacher unions in efforts to build community engagement for school reform is a complex issue. In urban settings in which teacher unions are a strong political force, these unions can be part of the actual or shadow governance of the district, and union contracts often include provisions that directly set instructional, personnel or administrative policy. Unions are such key players in many districts' governance that their support becomes critical to successful school reform, and their opposition can truncate any reform effort. Therefore if teacher unions cannot be brought into alliance with the reform initiative, early efforts should attempt to ensure that the union will not oppose the reform. In urban districts in right-to-work states in which teacher unions have less power, it is still important to attempt to secure union support for the initiative because the district's teachers will play key roles in implementing it.

**Youth Organizations.** Finally, youth organizations are critical components. Youth groups that work exclusively within schools, as well as neighborhood-based and city-wide youth groups, are increasingly emerging as important actors struggling to improve youth capacity and potential.<sup>45</sup> In many urban settings, school systems are composed predominantly of white educators and administrators trying to provide an effective education to poor students of color, who make up most of the student body. In those settings, the voices, demands and organizations of young people are vital contributors to more effective public schooling because their experiences with the district's education, and how it is provided, are unique and irreplaceable.

<sup>43</sup> These local groups are often, but not always, affiliated with national organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing or the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

<sup>44</sup> We include religious organizations because their membership is usually local, relatively stable and often has experience with the quality of the city's high schools. Members of neighborhood groups and religious institutions are also likely to send their children to local schools.

<sup>45</sup> We identify youth as crucial to engagement efforts not only because their "voice" includes their direct experience of the strengths and limitations of each SNS site's high schools, but also for the power, authenticity and idealism at the core of their vision and their organizing efforts.



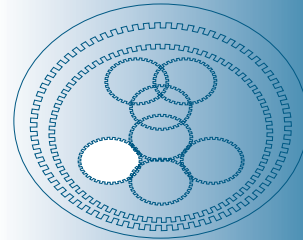
## Community Engagement in SNS Sites

Examples of early efforts at community engagement in several SNS sites illustrate the complexity involved in these efforts. In Boston, representatives of several of the city's community organizing and constituency groups participated in the initial round of SNS proposal development, but were subsequently marginalized. The Institute for Education and Social Policy encouraged those groups to express their interest in rejoining Boston SNS as players with a clear voice in project decision-making. To help bring that about, the groups, particularly the Boston Parent Organizing Network, decided that the Boston school system needed to create a cabinet-level position responsible for community engagement efforts. Once that position was created and effectively staffed, BPON and other community groups became more active in the SNS initiative, and began to play more important roles.

In Providence, the lead partner is a community-service organization initially perceived as representing the spectrum of community constituencies involved in school improvement and youth development. But the lead partner's definition of the role it needed to play in community representation evolved to maximize community power and avoid marginalizing community interests. Therefore, with the Institute's help, the lead partner mobilized previously excluded community groups and built a coalition that monitors the SNS effort and maintains a strong voice in the direction of the reform.

In Chattanooga, the political situation has been polarized. The superintendent and his highly supportive school board were pitted against a majority of the county commission, which for a long time refused to provide the fiscal increases that the school system desperately needed. To insert a citizen and community voice into this highly contentious and politicized conflict, the superintendent organized an advisory council of representatives from most of the county system's 85 schools. The council meets regularly, analyzes critical education and funding issues, takes clear stands about the need for increased funding and works to spread its viewpoints throughout the county. The county commission switched its position in 2005 and agreed to a revenue increase for the school district.

Successful community engagement coalitions depend on building mutual goals and reciprocity of interests to create the trust—the necessary glue—for effective engagement efforts.



Each of these efforts depended on building trust across individuals and constituencies with little prior relationship. Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider's *Trust in Schools*<sup>46</sup> demonstrates the crucial role that trust among school faculties plays in the effectiveness of schools' instructional practice. Building that trust is also a critical requirement of community engagement efforts. If the lead partner is charged with identifying, engaging and bringing into alliance the city's key constituencies, the lead partner must be frank about its own interests, and work carefully to identify the complementary interests of the constituency groups to be mobilized. Successful community engagement coalitions depend on building mutual goals and reciprocity of interests to create the trust—the necessary glue—for effective engagement efforts.

Engaging grassroots sectors in the SNS initiative is complex because much of the vision behind the initiative has already been established. Yet if the initiative includes enough space for differing grassroots perspectives, good-faith negotiation about goals, agendas and implementation processes can yield agreements that meet each group's needs. Then the functions that each organization can most appropriately carry out within the mobilization can be addressed.

### Specific Functions of Constituency Support


Within the SNS effort, the purpose of community engagement is to support and sustain local high school reform efforts. To make that engagement vital and enduring, or, as Cynthia Coburn has argued, to ensure the reform's spread, depth, ownership and sustainability,<sup>47</sup> building effective constituency support requires the creation and affirmation of a vision of effective high schools and the definition of the reform effort necessary to achieve that vision. Engaged constituencies must be actively involved in specific functions to make the coalition real. Only specific collaborative work can develop the trust and reciprocity necessary to build active support and effective mobilizations. Passive and symbolic constituency support disconnected from specific work too often becomes sporadic, unreliable and difficult to mobilize.

We identify three functional areas in which constituency support can be actively engaged in specific work, based on varieties of mutual and reciprocal interest:

- Partnerships that extend and intensify the work of the reform, thereby increasing spread, depth, ownership and sustainability
- Information dissemination and reciprocal communication activities that establish and extend the reform's accountability dimensions
- Participation in the actual governance of the reform

<sup>46</sup> A. S. Bryk and B. Schneider (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>47</sup> C. Coburn (2003). "Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change." *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 32, No. 6, pp.3-12, August/September.

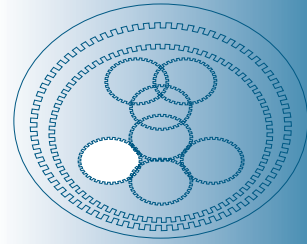


**Partnerships.** Many SNS sites have developed specific partnerships with local groups that enhance the capacity of the local district and extend the reform's work. These local partners join the work based on their mutual and reciprocal interests. But the school district, the lead organization and the local partner engage in an evolving learning experience as the work is carried out. Thus, new relationships between and across organizations, and even new communities of practice, can result from efforts to involve local groups in specific partnership efforts.

**Information dissemination and reciprocal communication.** Successful reform requires many different forms of information dissemination and communication that extend beyond the reach of local print and electronic media. As SNS sites create new forms of educational opportunities—9th grade summer transition programs, for example, or new afterschool tutoring programs, or ACT or SAT test preparation sessions, or new forms of college counseling—new communication channels are needed to spread the word about these opportunities to ensure appropriate access and use. Dissemination through neighborhood newsletters, local cable networks, church and PTA bulletins, notices in laundromats, beauty salons and supermarkets, as well as through informal networks of neighborhood and youth leaders, can communicate new educational opportunities to target audiences and potential users. Developing these dissemination channels means involving neighborhood groups that know how to establish these forms of communication, and can tap into the necessary networks.

If these new networks are used only for dissemination, though, communication remains a one-way transmission. Two-way communication can create feedback loops between the SNS reform and the intended beneficiaries—students, their families, their neighborhoods, as well as the city's political, civic/cultural and corporate sectors—that turn communication into accountability. Direct and honest feedback can mobilize demand and create dialogues that can keep the reform, and even the system, responsible. The SNS initiative can use local communication channels to create accountability forums, for example, at which school or district leadership report on SNS's goals, program design,

Dissemination through neighborhood newsletters, local cable networks, church and PTA bulletins, notices in laundromats, beauty salons and supermarkets, as well as through informal networks of neighborhood and youth leaders, can communicate new educational opportunities to target audiences and potential users.



implementation progress and resulting student achievement outcomes. From these same channels, the initiative can seek feedback, critiques and advice about how best to reconfigure the reform and move it forward. Such accountability forums can be held at schools, churches, civic associations or other local venues, and should involve a wide range of constituencies, including the city's elite sectors. The ultimate function of such reciprocal accountability mechanisms is to provide the feedback, critique and advice to continuously revise and improve the reform.

*Participation in governance.* The governance structures of SNS sites vary considerably. In some sites the lead partner and the school system implement the SNS initiative with no formal governance structure. In other sites formal governance structures define the participation of the lead partner and other key initiative members. Since foundation funding is allocated to the lead partner, these governance arrangements are also fiscal arrangements, and thus potentially contentious. But if community engagement is to be more than sporadic or symbolic, it must transcend dependence on segments of the city's elite sector, and develop governance structures that specify the roles and fiscal shares of all the key constituencies, especially the grassroots sector, and most especially in racially divided cities and school systems. To ensure that the SNS reform does not bog down in bureaucratic ritual or political maneuvering, the necessary governance structures should be spare, flexible and limited.

Community engagement must transcend dependence on segments of the city's elite sector, and develop governance structures that specify the roles and fiscal shares of all the key constituencies.

Many SNS sites have established an elite support coalition and then invited representatives of intermediary and grassroots sectors to participate, once the terms of participation in governance have been established. This is clearly a limited approach with obvious drawbacks. In several SNS sites, for example, grassroots coalitions comprising constituencies of color have challenged the governance and fiscal arrangements that the initiative has established, rather than take up their assigned roles as supporting players. Where elite support coalitions have already been established, it may prove necessary to rethink the governance and fiscal arrangements to create space for grassroots groups to enter on equitable terms. Because these grassroots organizations have long suffered the results of poorly performing schools, they have developed specific analyses of school problems and reform priorities. Engaging their concerns and demands can expand and improve the SNS initiative and build greater local investment in the reform.



## Assessing Community Engagement Efforts

Each of these functional areas—partnerships, communication and governance—can be assessed by a set of indicators to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of SNS community engagement efforts.

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### Partnership efforts can be assessed by examining:

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- The number of partnerships each SNS site has engaged
- The specific work of each partnership
- The relative length—short- or long-term—of each partnership relationship
- The relative depth and intensity of the change each partnership is attempting to implement
- The extent of partner buy-in and, eventually, ownership of the SNS initiative
- The extent of partnership commitment to overall school system improvement

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### Communication efforts can be assessed by examining:

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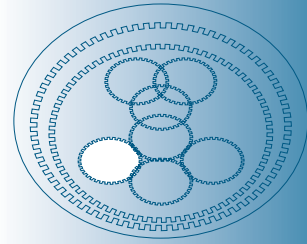
- The use of new communication channels to disseminate information about access to new educational opportunities the SNS initiative has developed
- How much control neighborhood groups and these new communication channels have over the content and style of communication
- The extent of reciprocity (two-way communication) within those new channels
- The extent to which those new channels are becoming the basis of SNS accountability forums and mechanisms
- How effectively the new accountability forums involve the range of constituencies in the SNS alliance
- The extent to which the new accountability forums provide effective reporting and feedback that critique, revise and improve the reform

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### Governance efforts can be assessed by examining:

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- The nature of each SNS site's formal or informal governance arrangements
- The extent to which those governance arrangements include elite, civic/ cultural and grassroots constituency leadership, and on what terms
- The extent to which fiscal allocations reflect these governance arrangements
- What kinds of initiative decisions the governance group is authorized to make
- How active and consistent a role each member of the governance group plays
- What kinds of overall program evaluation and review the governance group carries out



## Community Support for Sustained Reforms

The commitment to engage community constituencies to support the SNS effort is a critical part of the initiative's theory of action. But it has not, thus far, been a sufficiently dynamic component of most SNS sites' implementation efforts. By committing themselves to serious community engagement, and by measuring their progress according to the indicators listed above, sites can help ensure that their reforms develop the kind of support that will enable them to spread, acquire depth, gain ownership and be sustained—in short, to go to scale.





**WORKING  
PARTNERSHIP**

# Working With Core Partners

Rochelle Nichols-Solomon  
Academy for Educational Development


Unlike major school reform efforts initiated in the 1990s, Schools for a *New Society* recognizes that profound and systemic high school transformation requires bold reforms in the districts and in the broader community whose values the district reflects, and who will have to support and sustain the reform. As stated previously in the section on district redesign, this position is a sharp change from previous school reform efforts that either ignored the role of school districts or sought to shelter schools from their influence.<sup>48</sup> Instead, the SNS framers realized that high schools' resistance to change was rooted in the design of the district itself—specifically, its lack of visibility and accountability to the schools it managed and the community it served. Therefore, high school reform must involve changing district attitudes, policies and practices that have maintained the status quo.

Central to the reform process is the development of a dynamic working partnership between the district and the community that demands, supports and sustains the reform.

The SNS framework mandates the naming of a core partner organization that, with the district, shares responsibility for the management, implementation and sustainability of the reform effort. The working partnership is meant to forge a strong collaboration between the core partner and the district, and then to develop alliances with other stakeholders and constituencies in the community. These relationships should produce enlarged capacities, new accountabilities, greater levels of trust and stronger commitments to the welfare of the community's young people, all of which translate into greater achievement for all students.

Central to the reform process is the development of a dynamic working partnership between the district and the community that demands, supports and sustains the reform.

<sup>48</sup> cf. P.T. Hill, C. Campbell & J. Harvey (2000). *It Takes a City*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. M.R. Ucelli & E. L. Foley (2004). *Results, Equity and Community: The Smart District*. Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2000). *The Annenberg Challenge: Lessons and Reflections on Public School Reform*. Providence, RI: Author.



While often marginalized, school-community partnership is widely held as a critical component of successful education reform. Warren cites four ways a community helps improve schools: 1) improving the social context of education; 2) promoting increased parent and community participation in the work of schools; 3) supporting reform and holding districts accountable for reform; and 4) building a political constituency for excellence and a more equitable public education system.<sup>49</sup>

SNS framers believe that over time the engagement of strong community partners in the work of high school and district reform will “create and grow the conditions and the resources needed to obtain educational excellence and equity for all students.” These conditions and resources include a shared accountability for the quality of high schools, a larger number of creative resources to support the educational process, and the political will to sustain change in the face of the inevitable resistance that is part of major reform work.

This section examines the role of partnership in high school reform, beginning with the conditions required to develop effective district/core-partner collaboration and then discussing the notion of *working partnership* framed by the SNS theory of change.

Developing a system of high-quality and equitable high schools requires increased community expectations, contributions and accountability.

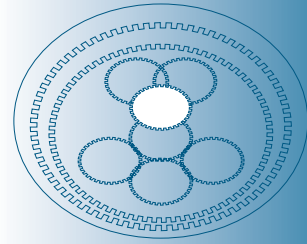
### Rationale: Working Assumptions

Four strategic assumptions framed the initial work of *Schools for a New Society*:

1. Changes to high school must be deep and widespread.
2. High school practice must be transformed, leading to the development of dynamic learning communities that support high expectations, inquiry and persistence for all students.
3. Districts, including central office, school boards, unions, etc., must examine and modify the way they operate in order to create and sustain large-scale reform.
4. Developing a system of high-quality and equitable high schools requires increased community expectations, contributions and accountability.

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<sup>49</sup> M.R. Warren (2005). “Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform.” *Harvard Education Review* 75 (2), Summer.



To accomplish this work, and as a condition of the grant, each community selected a *core partner* organization to co-lead the project with the school district.<sup>50</sup>

By involving partners in such a central role, the initiative recognized the value that organizations outside the school system can add to the reform, yet it also raised the potential for difficult issues between “insiders” and “outsiders.”

In the view of SNS, the purpose of such a partnership is to:

- Jointly forge or reinforce a common vision for district-wide high school reinvention and broadcast the vision beyond the alliance to refine it and build community demand and support for change
- Nurture community-wide demand and support for change, building on existing relationships and structures
- Put in place structures and processes for ongoing planning and development, including data collection and analysis, and for revising of plans
- Identify, contribute, generate and integrate resources
- Develop innovative leadership models for focused reinvention
- Develop an ethos of community accountability
- Develop a core district-and-community operating leadership team to manage the structure of the alliance so that all of the above tasks are accomplished

The partnership is designed to last beyond the initiative, developing an ongoing cycle of identifying and integrating resources. In this way, partnerships with individuals, agencies, groups and businesses will evolve over time in response to changing needs, members and resources in the community.


### Establishing the Working Partnership

At the start of SNS, the districts, with the funder, identified local organizations and institutions to serve as core partners. In selecting core partners, they sought credibility and “reach” into the broader community, as well as demonstrated capacities to co-lead and co-manage a major multiyear comprehensive educational change effort. Three sites (Boston, Hamilton County/Chattanooga, Houston) chose local education funds, affiliates of the national Public Education Network. One site (Sacramento) picked a regional education and work force development organization.<sup>51</sup> Two sites (San Diego and Worcester) selected local universities.<sup>52</sup> And one site (Providence) named a state-wide youth service organization committed to helping students enter and succeed in

<sup>50</sup> Boston began with three core partners and expanded to four. One organization serves as a lead core partner that, with the district, oversees fiscal management of the grant.

<sup>51</sup> This organization would later join the Public Education Network and become an official local education fund.

<sup>52</sup> San Diego changed its core partner in 2004 and selected a national reform organization.



college. These core partners, with their district counterparts, help shape the direction of the reform and carry out essential work including:

- Identifying needs and priorities
- Developing and providing strategic recommendations for change
- Monitoring results
- Analyzing reform needs and community capacities
- Asking provocative questions, and supporting the learning process
- Providing and interpreting data
- Providing dedicated staff time and resources
- Advocating for change within the broader community
- Supporting transitions and sustainability over time
- Connecting schools and districts to critical external (and sometimes internal) resources (human, material, knowledge and expertise)

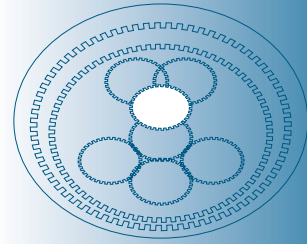
To achieve these enhanced roles and responsibilities in a capacity generally reserved for professional educators and district insiders, the core partners and district leaders have had to work together to craft new structures and processes. This work varied in each site and depended on several factors, including the nature of an existing relationship between the core partner and the district or lack thereof, the entry point of the core partner, and the capacity of the core partner to engage in this complex work.

Each of the seven partnerships varied in focus, relationships and connections, as well as the ability to deliver support for the site's implementation plans. The nature of the relationship depended on the core partner's capacity and entry point. Some partners had established reputations for organizing teacher professional development and bringing other kinds of resources to schools. Some groups had worked closely with district administrations, focusing on policy and governance issues. Other core partners entered this work through the civic arena, with ties to mayors and other political leaders, or collaborations with the corporate or work force development sectors.

The SNS core partnerships tended to fit into three types of groups:

- Alliances with local education funds typically focused on teacher professional development and establishing learning networks
- Collaborative partnerships with business and higher education emphasized standards, access and success in college and career
- Partnerships with community groups provided opportunities to connect with families, community organizations and service and advocacy groups, and helped galvanize support and resources for older youth

All the core partner organizations served as a critical friend to the district, helping to manage the initiative and create new levels of engagement in the schools. Each core partner, working within its sphere of influence, also increased legitimacy of the district and the reform effort, thereby encouraging the reform's sustainability.



## Defining Working Partnership

The working partnership is a formal relationship between the district and a selected organization that begins with, and builds on, mutual interests and stated commitments to achieving change. To be successful, working partnerships must be supported by these six elements:

1. **Action.** Partners agree to carry out an achievable plan. This plan has clear target populations, objectives, short and long-term activities and benchmarks for assessing progress.
2. **Visibility.** Key issues are defined using reliable data and information. Partners agree on the kinds information that will be openly and consistently shared among partners and the conditions for sharing that information. As Hal Smith writes: “There are no effective ways to negotiate disagreements without data. Failure to properly construct supporting processes and structures is the most likely cause of partnership breakdowns.”<sup>53</sup>
3. **Data driven.** Partners agree on a set of data-guided strategic actions to ensure coherence and effective use of limited resources.
4. **Mutual benefit.** Partners recognize the value of partnering, and are willing to grapple with the tensions of “inside-outside” and respect the roles, capacities and contributions of the different partners.
5. **Conditions.** Partners define a set of conditions for how they will work together, including methods of communication, how decisions will be made, expectations for deliverables, etc.
6. **Reciprocal accountability.** Partners agree to hold each other accountable for the implementation and the results of the reform efforts.

To achieve the ambitious goals of the SNS initiative, two other aspects of a working partnership must be recognized and nurtured over time. The first is trust, which is rooted in all facets of the collaboration, as described previously in the section on community engagement. Relational trust<sup>54</sup> allows the partners to keep the interests of students at the center of their shared work, to act with integrity, to take risks and to stay engaged in complicated work. Partners must be bound by shared commitment, which fosters concrete actions that test and deepen levels of trust and risk taking as the work evolves. Building trust is difficult work that takes time and cannot simply be mandated.

The second aspect is sensitivity to context. SNS community partners include educational, business and civic groups. Each partnership is shaped by the unique qualities the partner brings to the work, including the organization’s history, existing relationships and personalities, politics, culture, stability, etc. Within this context, partners, regardless of how they enter the work, must be able to adapt, adjust, spread and sustain the SNS work.

<sup>53</sup> H. Smith (2005). “Using Community Assets to Build an ‘Education System.’” *Voices in Urban Education*, Spring.

<sup>54</sup> C. Payne, M. Kaba (n.d.). *So Much Reform, So Little Change*; A. Bryk and B. Schneider (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation; and R. Putnam (2000). *Bowling Alone*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.



## Building the Working Partnership

Essential to the growth and sustainability of the working partnership is an agreement that outlines the roles and responsibilities of each of the core partners, and a structure that supports the ongoing work. To enable the partnership to function well, this agreement should spell out leadership functions and establish ways that partners can reflect on progress and develop new structures and programs when needed. The partnership should be supported by established patterns of communication that allow sharing of essential data for informed decision making.

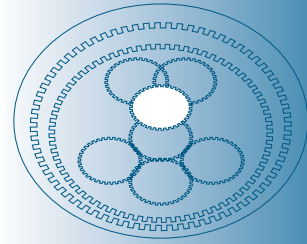
A major tension inherent in working partnerships, and a barrier to their effectiveness, is the pull between “doing the daily work” and “minding the partnership.” On both sides of these collaborations are powerful and driven people in demanding roles. Given the day-to-day challenges of running schools, it is easy for even the most enlightened leaders to push aside the tasks needed to develop the partnership.

## Conditions for Success

This way of doing business is rarely part of district’s organizational culture. The SNS technical support team works at the site and across the SNS network to help participants assess the health and functioning of the partnership by uncovering issues and motivations for decisions, promoting increased visibility and use of data, questioning actions and resolving open conflicts. The technical support team conducts site visits at least twice annually, holding individual and joint meetings with key partners. SNS Learning Institutes allow site partners to work directly with colleagues from other sites and partner organizations and to structure learning opportunities to build cross-network capacity. The technical support team helps foster, at both the site and cross-site level, a deeper understanding of the essential elements of effective partnership and how to create and sustain them.

The SNS technical support team emphasizes essential site-partnership concepts, including:

- Governance is structured in such a way that there is a clear, meaningful role for each partner
- Members must understand the motivations, incentives and commitments of each partner well enough to assume their point of view and advocate for their needs
- The alliance has built enough trust and skill to talk about internal process issues and conflicts when they arise, rather than sidestepping them
- Leadership in implementation and ongoing growth is just as important as in planning
- Partners must understand that the responsibility for the work and the accountability for success cannot be the responsibility of district staff alone



- The partnership creates regular opportunities to engage the community and policymakers in “owning” the goals, “feeling” the challenges and “seeing” the successes
- The partnership analyzes and condenses a variety of school and community information and uses it to measure and guide their work

## Working Partnership Challenges

Recent research raises questions about the utility of partnerships, citing a number of challenges: lack of time, insufficient resources, disparate missions, troublesome logistics, and ongoing and difficult conflicts.<sup>55</sup> These challenges are not unfamiliar to the SNS partnerships that are still young and constantly evolving.

The sites and their partners face three overlapping challenges:

- **Establishing the partnership.** This work aims to shift the collaboration from a foundation-mandated entity to a functioning enterprise with defined structures and processes to support bold high school and district transformation.
- **Technical issues.** The partners develop and run the partnership with policies, structures, commitments and a shared theory of change, and regularly adjust that theory to support better outcomes.
- **Political issues.** Rather than sidestep the politics of public education, SNS partners must acknowledge and respond to the political tensions embedded in SNS’s core values of equity and excellence for all. Doing so requires confronting policies and practices that produce high schools stratified by race, class and academic achievement. This work is fluid and may move back and forth based on changes in leadership or the local environment.

While school and community partnerships are not new, the unprecedented reach of SNS partnerships mirrors the initiative’s broad and systemic focus. The envisioned reforms require political support that is intense both in the open and behind the scenes. Internships for high school students must not only be high quality, but also must be available to large numbers of students at different levels of academic achievement. Funding for schools must not only be increased but also equitably distributed. In order to meet these demands, SNS partnerships push boundaries.

The effectiveness of the initial working partnership must acknowledge the multidimensionality of SNS and take into account a short- and a long-term view of this work. Lessons arising from the evolving SNS working partnerships show the complexities, promises and limitations of these arrangements.

<sup>55</sup> F. Ostrower (2005). “The Reality Underneath the Buzz of Partnerships.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring.





## Reality Checks: Emerging Lessons

The seven collaborative partnerships that have emerged out of SNS are complicated, fragile and continually evolving. Over time, district and core partner leaders have developed a better understanding of the benefits and challenges of a working partnership. Over the five years of the initiative, these partnership issues have emerged:

*Allowing room for growth.* Existing or former partnerships may support a quick start, but they may also keep partners from rethinking the parameters of their partnership. Partnerships that don't allow for external demands and accountabilities will falter in the face of conflict.

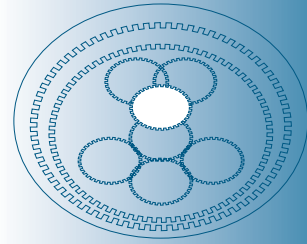
*The importance of uncertainty.* Clarity and coherence are important attributes, but confusion among the partners may necessarily reflect the complexity of the work. As the work progresses, unintended challenges will inevitably surface. The working partners should identify these emerging challenges and work to address them rather than ignoring them or abandoning their bold plans.

*The need to maintain boundaries.* If working partnerships evolve to an extent that boundaries blur and connections are intrinsic, it can become difficult to discern the “inside” from the “outside” of the district, delineate roles or give accountability for progress or failure. Sites need to develop their own theory of change. This plan can serve as a before-and-after road map, helping clarify and reaffirm roles and responsibilities over time.

*New conceptions of partnering and partnership.* Districts typically have many partnerships with external organizations and institutions. Most demand some level of cooperation, but they rarely require collaborative decision making and or shared accountability for outcomes. The core partner and district must devise creative new ways of working together that challenge old paradigms of partnership.

*Distance is vital.* Depending on local politics, a partner's status as a district insider can affect the partner's credibility with schools and in the community. The working partnership must build confidence beyond the leadership of the district and the core partner, and guard against the core partner being viewed as being a rubber stamp for the district. Partners must balance their shared work while maintaining their separateness.

*Some tension is inevitable.* The presence of tension inside the working partnership may be consistent with change. To maintain effectiveness, underlying issues must be addressed and how partners manage conflict must be examined.



*A partner's capacity sets limits.* SNS strives to transform system-wide policies and practices and to engage community and students in new and sustaining ways. The initiative assumes that the lead partner has the capacity to connect and draw in the wider community, which requires technical expertise as well as a strong commitment to this broad engagement. However, few core partners have been able to effectively carry out this work. The core partner alone simply cannot be all things. Instead, partners must bring others to the table and continually work to expand the partnership.

### **Final Thoughts: The Value of Partnerships**

The scope and scale of the working partnerships in each of the seven sites have evolved over the short life of this initiative and will continue to change as the work progresses. Core partners are not mere spectators in the reform. Rather, they are active working partners who not only provide a variety of ongoing critical supports but also advocate for district and high school reform. A successful working partnership between a core partner and the district expands, deepens and persists well beyond the life of the initiative. Over the long term, this work should contribute not only to improved schools, but also to enhancing urban communities' capacity to address all social concerns and needs.

# Toward *Schools for a New Society*

Over the past five years, the seven cities that are part of the *Schools for a New Society* initiative have made remarkable progress in transforming one of the most enduring institutions in American life. While none of the cities can claim complete success, and there is much work to do in all of them, each has made substantial strides toward achieving their vision for a transformed system of high schools that ensures success for all students.


A visitor to any of the seven cities could see obvious signs of change. There has been important progress in improving instruction in many cities. Schools are providing more rigorous, engaging classrooms, and students are indeed learning more. At the same time, many cities have strengthened policies to support their reinvented high schools. There is more coherence in secondary education policy than there was five years ago, when high schools were treated as individual geographic constituencies rather than as part of a larger system of schools.

There also is a much richer array of educational options for young people than ever before. Cities have created new schools, personalized existing schools by dividing them into smaller units and adding student advisory periods, and formed partnerships with other institutions to provide additional learning opportunities. These new and transformed schools address a wide range of student needs: from dual option schools for students who want to earn college credit while in high school to “second chance” schools for students who had not been well served by traditional high schools.

Some of the most significant changes are the least obvious. One of the most important is the increasingly sophisticated use of data. Before the initiative, educators and policy makers in SNS sites, like those in most cities, often chose policies and practices based on anecdotal information or a desire to please powerful constituency groups. Now, in the SNS sites, educators and policy makers are much more systematic about relying on high-quality data about student performance and program effectiveness. They examine data to determine student needs and examine information about what’s working and what is not. They can see the way actions in one high school affect conditions in other high schools and understand that the high schools constitute a system that must be addressed if individual schools within the system are to change. These shifts are improving policy and practice in each of the sites.

As Carnegie Corporation and its partners look to the future, we will work with all of the sites to consolidate and build on the progress they have made, and to accelerate progress and address the more challenging elements of reform. To be sure, all of the sites will continue to refine the organizational changes in schools they have already begun. Issues around conversions of large schools into smaller and more personalized units need to be addressed. And none of the cities has yet developed a true portfolio of the type outlined earlier in this volume.

All of the sites also need to continue to address instruction and policy coherence and to provide the supports schools need if they are to be held accountable for student success. And they need to do more to improve the quality of their data and become more skillful in using it more frequently.



The cities also need to continue the work to redesign their district central offices to support the development and operation of excellent high schools. As noted earlier, schools need support from central offices, and the new and redesigned schools are unlikely to thrive without such support. They also need to address the deeply embedded practices that lead to corrosive inequities in the allocation of resources and opportunities within the district. Doing so requires insight, courage and political will.

Community engagement is a critical need. As we've discussed, such engagement can create support for the dramatic changes in each cities' schools. Yet we have seen in the short life of this initiative that turnover in leadership and political dynamics can threaten those changes. Without broadening and deepening the demand and support for these changes, cities are far less likely to withstand such threats.

Few cities have yet engaged youth deeply enough. Too often the reforms are being done *to* students, rather than *with* them. This represents a lost opportunity. Students are important allies and critical friends.

There is now a tremendous amount of activity and attention being focused on high schools, and that is all to the good. The challenge for the cities, and for those of us who work with them, is ensuring that all of the reform efforts are aligned to strategically support one another so we are pulling the oars in the same direction. Without consistent focus, too many initiatives can veer in different directions, undermining progress and leading to "reform fatigue" both inside the system and in the larger community.

High school redesign was barely on the national agenda five years ago; now it is near the top. Some of the issues cities are now addressing were not even on the radar screen when we launched the initiative. While there is certainly work still to be done, each SNS city has made great progress in bridging the gap between the schools their young people had as the 21st century dawned and the schools they need to flourish in this new society.

# Acknowledgments

This publication is a product of the technical support team for the *Schools for a New Society* initiative. In our work with sites, the team operates collaboratively, in the belief that a learning community can work more effectively than any individual or single organization. This publication is a similarly collaborative enterprise.

The authors Edwina Branch-Smith, Richard Gray, Norman Fruchter, Mindy Hernandez, Francine Joselowsky, Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, Warren Simmons and Constanca Warren would like to acknowledge the learning community of the technical support team and its current and past members at the following institutions for their intellectual support in developing this framework over the years: the Academy for Educational Development—Jeneen Garcia, Michelle Feist, Patrick Montesano and Jean Thomases; the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University—Alethea Frazier Raynor, Debi King, Hal Smith and Dennie Palmer Wolf; the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University (IESP)—Lamson Lam; and Collaborative Communications Group—Kris Kurtenbach.

We also want to extend our thanks to the funders whose financial support made this work possible. We are particularly indebted to Michelle Cahill and Catherine Pino, formerly of Carnegie Corporation of New York, for launching the initiative, and to Kenneth Jones, formerly of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who worked closely with us during the early years.

Many other individuals supported the development of this volume's chapters. The authors of "Building a Portfolio of Schools" would like to thank Valerie Vitale. The author of "Redesigning School Districts" would like to thank Marla Ucelli, Ellen Foley and Robert Rothman for their contributions to the thinking in the chapter. The author of "Committing to Youth Engagement" would like to thank Jean Thomases and Jonny Skye Njie. The authors of "Mobilizing Community Engagement" would like to thank the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy's Community Involvement Program: Mili Bonilla, Amy Cohen, Barbara Gross, Nina Johnson, Sara McAlister, Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, Kelly Whitaker and Eric Zachary. We are particularly grateful to the participants in the SNS Building Coalitions for Student Success conference in Providence in January 2005, who reviewed an early draft and gave us very valuable feedback. The author of "Working With Core Partners" would like to thank Leslie Rennie-Hill and Mary Sylvia Harrison for their feedback, and all the SNS core partners and district leaders whose work greatly contributed to this chapter.

We also wish to extend our appreciation to Elayne Archer and Sandy Weinbaum at AED for their comments and help with editing, and to Robert Rothman, Bill Glover, Liz Worley and Ellen Parker at Collaborative Communications Group for their invaluable work in editing, designing, shepherding and producing the publication.

Finally the contributions of the district, school, community and youth leaders who are leading the work in the SNS sites have been especially valuable; the sites participating in the initiative include: Boston, MA; Hamilton County (Chattanooga, TN); Houston, TX; Providence, RI; Sacramento, CA; San Diego, CA; and Worcester, MA. The ideas behind these frameworks have evolved as a result of their efforts and close collaborations over the past five years.

