

Recognizing that they cannot do the work of education reform alone, districts increasingly are turning to private “intermediary” organizations to support their reform efforts.

‘Intermediary Organizations’ Help Bring Reform to Scale

Although New York City has long reigned as the cultural capital of the United States, by the early 1990s arts education in the city’s schools was in a crisis. The city’s budget problems in the 1970s had forced cutbacks in “nonessential” programs, and arts education suffered over the next two decades. Art teacher positions were eliminated, and many students—in the home of Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—received no instruction in art, music, theater, or dance. While some schools managed to maintain arts programs, such programs were generally limited in scope, varied in quality, and sporadic.

Today the situation is very different. The city government has provided some \$225 million over the past four years for arts education and has hired some 1,400 arts teachers. Arts education is once again an integral part of the curriculum.

What brought about this transformation? According to former mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the Center for Arts Education, a private organization, deserves a major share of the credit. Funded with a \$12-million grant as part of the Annenberg Challenge, the Center

raised an additional \$24 million and launched solid, educationally sound partnerships between schools and cultural organizations. The effort, in turn, raised the profile of arts education in the city. “We helped get everyone to pay attention to the fact that arts education was not equitably distributed and was woefully underfunded in the city,” says Hollis Headrick, the center’s director.

The Center for Arts Education represents the type of organization that is becoming increasingly prominent in education reform: the intermediary organization. Independent organizations that work closely with schools and school districts to support instructional and organizational improvement, these intermediaries play vital roles in education reform, according to district leaders. They extend the reach and capacity of districts by providing needed resources, including money and intellectual capital. They forge links between schools and a range of community partners. And they serve as goads to keep reforms on track.

As Merrill Vargo, the executive director of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), and Nicolette Toussaint,

BASRC’s director of communications, write in a recent piece in *Education Week*, intermediaries can be effective because they combine the public-spirited commitment of government agencies with the entrepreneurial freedom of the private sector. “The rise of a generation of ‘hybrid’ organizations may offer us a fresh way to get the work of our democracy done,” they write.

Intermediary organizations in education are not new. Nearly two decades ago, for example, the Ford Foundation provided seed money to launch the creation of local education funds, private organizations created to support public schools. Since then, nearly 77 local education funds have formed, serving more than 10.6 million students in 1,200 school districts.

In addition, private organizations have grown to support various reform projects, such as whole-school reform designs. Organizations such as Success for All and America’s Choice, among others, provide professional development, technical assistance, and other support for schools employing the designs.

by Robert Rothman

Intermediaries can be effective because they combine the public-spirited commitment of government agencies with the entrepreneurial freedom of the private sector.

Intermediary organizations were integral to the Annenberg Challenge. The Challenge provided funds to private organizations, rather than school districts, in order to channel the support from a wide range of community leaders. In several cases, such as with BASRC and the Center for Arts Education, the organizations outlasted the Annenberg Challenge and now provide ongoing support to schools in their communities.

Educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of these organizations. In order to succeed with all students, schools need support in a range of areas, such as professional development for teachers and school leaders, the development of curricula aligned with standards, and parent and community involvement.

While school districts can provide some of these supports, they may not be equipped to do it all. According to a report commissioned by School Communities that Work (Kronley & Handley 2000), the Annenberg Institute—created task force on the future of urban districts, many districts lack the capacity to support the broad-scale reform that is needed, and they need help. “Increasingly,” the report states, “they are reaching outside the confines of their systems to get it.”

“I don’t think we as a school district can get this work done by

ourselves,” says Timothy F. C. Knowles, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning of the Boston Public Schools.

Yet, as the School Communities that Work report notes, the organizations’ role is larger than just supporting a district. In many cases, the organizations help shape the reform and perform many functions in support of the transformation of the district and the schools. For that reason, the report calls them reform support organizations, or RSO rather than intermediaries.

Some of these entities are national or regional organizations, which districts seek out to provide specific expertise. Others are local organizations, with established roots in the community, that work hand in hand with a particular district. Vargo says that, for her organization, which works with 26 school districts in Northern California, the politics of negotiating with so many entities often makes it difficult to form relationships with schools. “The only thing that would make it even harder would be having one district,” she says. “It would be hard not to get caught up in the politics.”

But Ellen Guiney, the executive director of the Boston Plan for Excellence, which works exclusively with the Boston Public Schools, disagrees that the relationship causes problems, particularly because the district is relatively cohesive, with a supportive school board and mayor.

Intermediary organizations also differ in the type of support they provide. BASRC, for example, has specialized in engaging schools in what it calls “the cycle of inquiry,” in which schools

examine student outcomes and their relation to school practices, then choose a focused effort on one area of improvement. The Center for Arts Education, meanwhile, focuses on linking schools with community partners, such as artists or cultural organizations, to strengthen arts instruction in the schools.

One of the most significant functions intermediary organizations perform is providing assistance directly to schools. Although much of the school reform rhetoric suggests that schools can design their own instructional programs, a growing body of evidence shows that schools need help in improving the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders, among other areas. The outside organizations can augment the assistance districts provide by making available additional resources.



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In the San Francisco Bay Area, BASRC sees its role as that of a “gap filler,” providing assistance in areas that states and districts miss, according to Vargo. “We’ve noticed over the years that state policies and federal policies always do some things that schools need, but never manage to do everything,” she says. “What a flexible organization like ours can do is provide some glue and fill in the missing pieces.”

As an example, the collaborative has worked with schools to pull the various federal and state programs together into a coherent program. In that way, schools can maximize their resources by ensuring that they are all working in the same direction.

Vargo says the intermediary organizations can be effective in providing such assistance because they have a more concentrated focus than a school district. “Districts try to do everything,” she says. “We are able to say, what is important here is worrying about improving instruction, especially improving instruction for poor children and children of color.”

Such organizations are also more nimble than districts, which often take time to approve requests for funds or assistance. “Our response time is very quick,” says Linda Clarke, the executive director of the Houston Annenberg Challenge.

Intermediary organizations also can be effective by providing some assistance districts may not be able to provide. In Boston, for example, the Boston Plan for Excellence offers financial incentives for teachers and principals that the district may not be able to

Intermediary Organizations in Chicago: The Role of ‘External Partners’

Unlike other Annenberg Challenge sites, where the Challenge organization itself served as an intermediary organization working with the district and schools, the Chicago Annenberg Challenge supported schools by linking them with other external partners. The Challenge organized some 45 networks of 3 to 12 schools each and paired them with a university- or community-based partner to focus on topics such as literacy instruction, parent involvement, or leadership development.

In a 2000 report, researchers from the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research analyzed the work of the external partners in nine of the networks. The study found that the partners achieved some success in helping the schools develop what the researchers call the five essential supports for student learning: quality instruction; a professional community of teachers and staff; leadership; parent and community involvement; and a student-centered learning climate. The partners tended to focus on one or two of these supports, principally the first two.

The study also found that the partners employed four strategies that appear promising in helping schools improve. The partners provided professional development for teachers and school leaders. They helped the schools establish new structures and positions to improve instruction. They provided materials to assist instruction. And they helped schools organize themselves to assist teaching and learning by allowing teachers to work together and to create more productive relationships between teachers and students.

Despite these successes, however, the report concludes that the influence of the partners on the schools was limited, in part because of limited resources—financial and human—and because of conflicts with district goals, such as improvements in standardized test scores. The report also found that the partners’ efforts were often fragmented and did not provide coherent, systematic support for the schools.

The report concludes that the role of the external partners is essential, but it will only be effective if the partners themselves have the ability to provide effective support. “Over the long term, deep and meaningful improvements in student learning will occur only with continuing efforts to develop teachers’ knowledge and skills, as well as their capacity to work productively together,” the report states. “Chicago Challenge partners and networks have catalyzed important work in this direction, but in order to bring more widespread benefits across the school system, the capacity of the partners must be enhanced.”

afford, according to Ellen Guiney, the executive director. As an example, the organization recently

offered leading-edge teachers \$500 each in classroom library materials to form a network on instructional-

improvement. “We provide on-site support, which the district is also doing, but we sweeten things a bit,” she says.

The national connections intermediary organizations have developed also help schools by providing perspective on their efforts. The intermediaries can explain to schools that the struggles they face are typical of

reforming institutions, and they can show them the solutions other schools have tried. “We didn’t know the process,” says Debra Dettrick, the school improvement facilitator at Reagan High School in Houston. “Annenberg was extraordinarily important in helping us understand school reform.”

Similarly, the organizations can draw on their national connections and expertise to provide

examples of effective practices, wherever they may be. Margaret Stroud, deputy superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, says the Annenberg Challenge sponsored trips to schools around the country to examine literacy programs. And even if the participants could not find a program they could replicate in the district, the trips gave them ideas of aspects of programs they might not have known about, she says.

The organizations can also augment district support for schools by connecting them with other sources of support. In Houston, for example, the Houston Annenberg Challenge has formed networks of schools throughout the metropolitan area. “Prior to the Annenberg Challenge, people didn’t work across districts,” says Clarke. “One principal said to me, ‘I would have gone to New York before I would have gone to a school in a neighboring district.’”

The organization also links schools with intellectual resources that they might not have had access to. The Challenge has enabled teachers and principals to attend conferences and has provided them with research articles and other materials to broaden their thinking. “People like belonging to a network of people learning and growing together,” says Clarke. “One principal said, ‘I had not read a book in 30 years, until I joined Annenberg.’”

Because of their association with districts, intermediaries can also mediate between schools and central offices to smooth some trouble spots. In some cases, school efforts may bump up against district policies, and intermediary organizations can inter-

The following are excerpts from *Reforming Relationships*, a guide for school districts seeking to form and sustain relationships with reform-support organizations. The full guide is available from School Communities that Work, a National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, an initiative sponsored by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (www.schoolcommunities.org).

Before Engagement

- Do we have a comprehensive vision of reform?
- Have we articulated our goals?
- What kind of help do we need in reaching our goals?
- What do we know about the RSO? Does it have the capacity to work with us and to meet our needs?
- How well does the RSO’s approach or philosophy match the district’s goals and vision?
- What do we expect from our engagement with the RSO?
- What are the specific outcomes we are looking for and how will we monitor implementation and progress?
- What changes in district policies, practices, structures, and norms are necessary to engage the RSO and achieve the hoped-for outcomes?

Implementation, Progress, and Outcomes

- What are we learning about our progress?
- Is there evidence that the reform is taking hold and improving student achievement?
- Based on our continuing assessment of implementation and progress, what needs to change in the district/RSO relationship or the work itself? Do we need new indicators of progress as a result?

Sustaining the Reform

- Should the reform relationship between the district and the RSO continue? If so, how could it be improved?

vene to ensure that reforms stay on track. “An outside voice is needed in negotiating the process,” says Dettrick. “It could appear that schools are doing one thing, and the district is still in traditional mode. Having an outside source facilitates closing the gap.”

In addition to the support for schools, intermediary organizations have also provided needed support for districts. Just as the organizations bring their financial and intellectual resources to bear for the schools, they also provide expertise and assistance to district central offices, helping them improve the services they provide to schools.

In Houston, the Annenberg Challenge is working with the district to help train local district superintendents to strengthen their support for schools. The process will employ the same strategy the Challenge has used to support principals, says Stroud. “In a decentralized environment, it’s important for superintendents to know the same protocols principals know,” she says.

In Boston, meanwhile, the Boston Plan, in conjunction with the district, conducted an analysis of district spending on professional development, which found that the district programs were spread too thin and not focused on the district’s instructional priorities. In response, the district conducted a line-by-line analysis of its budget, according to Knowles. “In two weeks, we realigned \$3 million,” he says.

The Boston Plan also helped craft the district strategy of assigning coaches to lead professional development in schools. Although the district had developed the strategy and tried it out in a few

schools, the Boston Plan critiqued the pilot program and refined it before the district rolled it out districtwide, Knowles says. “They provoked the district towards a very different kind of coaching strategy,” he says.

Yet such actions can make the intermediary organizations targets of critics who do not like the strategies, notes Guiney of the Boston Plan. Although the coaching model was the superintendent’s initiative, critics like the Boston Teachers Union, which is wary of the plan, blame the Boston Plan for imposing it, she says. “It’s easy to make us the scapegoat,” Guiney says.

Despite such criticisms, educators rely on intermediaries as a source of stability in districts where leadership changes are frequent. “We’ve been working on the same thing for seven years,” says Vargo of BASRC. “Politically constituted agencies can’t say that. When there’s a new superintendent, there’s a new agenda.”

Similarly, the intermediaries can serve as the institutional memory for a district that has experienced rapid turnover in leadership. During the six years the Center for Arts Education has been in existence, for example, New York City has had three chancellors. “We can provide an arts focus from administration to administration, rather than have it sidetracked because a new administration came in,” says Headrick. “In a new administration, no one knows the history of arts education in New York.”

Another important function of intermediary organizations is linking schools with other community resources,

Intermediary organizations also provide needed support for districts, offering expertise and assistance to district central offices and helping them improve the services they provide to schools.

such as higher education and foundations. The Annenberg Challenge intended the local organizations to play this role when it required intermediary organizations to receive Challenge funds. By bringing together disparate sources of support for schools, the organization can leverage resources in ways that might not be possible without them.

Headrick says this role is critical for both the private organizations and the schools. In the past, he notes, private funders were reluctant to contribute to the New York City schools because they were concerned that the funds might not be used the way they were intended. But by enabling the funders to contribute to a private organization, which provided a means of tracking funds and evaluating their effectiveness, the Center provided a “comfort level” for donors, he says.

At the same time, the Center also enables schools to use the community resources more effectively. The ad hoc partnerships schools had formed—creating short-term artist-in-residence programs or museum visits—may not contribute to schools’ educational goals, Headrick notes. By contrast, the Center has sought to bring together schools and cultural partners to define goals and objectives

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collectively, so that the partnerships serve the schools’ needs. “School staffs haven’t learned about how to run partnerships effectively. They are not taught,” he says. “We show them ways to maximize their resources by aligning those resources with teaching and learning.”

School officials agree that this alignment is essential. In Boston, for example, the district has tried, through the Boston Plan, to mobilize community resources in support of its initiative to redesign high schools. “The Boston Public Schools can’t revolutionize high schools alone,” says Knowles. “We’ve got to bring together local educators, the community, and business aligned around the high school work strategically. That’s an intentional part of our theory of action. We’re organizing outside organizations in tight alignment.”

In taking on these roles, the intermediary organizations occupy an unusual “inside-outside” position. They are “inside” in the sense that they share the district’s goals and are committed to support the schools, but they maintain their independence and their willingness to challenge the district.

“The Boston Plan is a critical partner,” says Knowles. “They bring more resources to the table,

and intellectual capital to the table. As important, they serve as a provocateur, an exogenous force pressuring the district when things start to slow down.”

Guiney says the organization challenges the central office or key constituencies to maintain the pace of reform. As an example, she notes that, in a recent meeting on converting high schools into smaller learning communities, principals raised objections. Rather than accept those objections, her organization asked what the district could do to support them in making the changes. “‘Too difficult’ is not an acceptable answer,” Guiney says.

This independent view can also provide a perspective that insiders may miss. “When you are in a situation for any length of time, you may not see anything wrong with what you’re doing,” says Stroud. “They bring fresh eyes and new information.”

Intermediaries also serve as advocates to try to change policies they believe are misguided. In California, for example, BASRC has argued against the state policy of providing professional development through universities, rather than through the schools. “We’ve argued with policy makers, not just privately, but publicly,” says Vargo. “We absolutely say you are doing this wrong.”

Knowles says that the intermediaries have strong standing when they take advocacy positions, because of the credibility they have developed in working with the schools. That means their points of view are more likely to be heard by the policy makers they work with on an ongoing basis. “We can’t ignore the Boston Plan’s

needling,” he says. “They’re in the throes of reform. There are too many moments when the key leaders are together to duck responsibility when they are advocating.”

However, taking strong stands can backfire, at least temporarily. The Boston Plan discovered this when the organization released a report during negotiations over the most recent teachers’ contract, arguing for a change in teacher-assignment policies. The report contended that the existing policy, which enabled veteran teachers to “bump” those with less seniority, hampered the ability of schools to form cohesive staffs. Although the district and the union ultimately agreed on language to modify this policy, the Boston Plan’s report “was viewed as disrespectful,” Guiney acknowledges.

Since then, though, Knowles says, the organization has regained whatever standing it may have lost over the report through its solid work. “They took hits in the process, but they’ve gotten through it quite well,” he says. “There are very few teachers and principals who would suggest the Boston Plan is anything but quality professional development and quality thinking about how to improve the experiences of teachers and the experiences of kids. Their credibility is very high.”

In the end, credibility is the intermediary organization’s main currency. Only by demonstrating that they can help schools and districts achieve their goals can these organizations continue. Yet sustaining the relationship between school districts and the intermediary organizations takes work. As the report from

School Communities that Work states: “The relationship is fundamentally about human interactions—learning to listen, disagreeing respectfully, taking risks, developing trust, and forging solid alliances that lead to positive and sustainable change. The nature of the relationship is at the core of the shared reform enterprise that connects districts to external organizations.”

The report, which examined the work of reform support organizations in five districts, found that successful relationships are built on trust: districts need to trust the candid advice the organizations provide, and the organizations need to trust the districts to modify their services when the need arises. At the same time, the report found, the relationships worked when teachers and school leaders became convinced that district leaders remained committed to the reform and that the organizations would provide ongoing support to them. In that way, the reform became less of a “flavor of the month” and more the way of doing business.

The report also notes that engaging educators in the reform may not be enough. All stakeholders—the school board, the community, families, and unions—must be engaged continually for the district-intermediary relationship to thrive and the reforms to flourish.

But the organizations that have succeeded are receiving votes of confidence from the communities they support. In Houston, for example, the Annenberg Challenge held focus groups to ask education and other community leaders if they should continue as an organization after the Challenge wound

down. The leaders told them that they valued their work, because the Challenge and the schools shared the same goals, according to Clarke. “They come to us now, and ask us to support their work,” she says. “We’re an integral part of the city now.” CJ

Working with an “Imported” Organization

The intermediary organizations involved in the Annenberg Challenge are local organizations, with strong ties to the districts and communities in which they work. But often districts seek reform support from an “imported” organization, one that may work in many districts, either in the region or nationally.

Districts choose to work with these organizations for a variety of reasons. Imported organizations usually have a particular framework for reform, and districts may seek out an organization whose approach is consistent with their own vision. National organizations also tend to have well-developed expertise that makes them sought after; districts may need the knowledge and skills an organization provides.

In “Reforming Relationships,” a report commissioned by School Communities that Work, the Annenberg Institute-sponsored task force on the future of urban districts, Robert A. Kronley and Claire Handley state that the distinction between local and imported organizations “substantially shapes the relationship between a reform support organization and a district.”

Sometimes, the report suggests, local organizations may be perceived to be too close to the district, and a district may want a more independent perspective to help provide the big picture of reform. The imported view may suggest some major changes that the district or its local partners might not have considered.

To be sure, engaging imported organizations usually entails financial costs, and districts and the reform support organizations often have to secure additional financial resources from funders. The organizations also must convince the district and the funders that they are adding value to the district. At the same time, national organizations with a well-developed framework may need to be more flexible than they might choose to be if local conditions do not permit the organization to carry out its plans in full.

In the end, the report suggests, districts may want to consider finding ways for imported organizations and local intermediaries to work together to further reform. In that way, districts can combine the strengths of the two approaches and accelerate changes.

This is the final issue of the *Challenge Journal*, which is closing publication with the conclusion of the Challenge-funded projects. This and all previous issues are available at the Challenge Web site (www.annenbergchallenge.org).



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