

# Find, Deploy, Support, and Keep the Best Teachers and School Leaders

School Communities that Work:  
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts



*An Initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University*

## School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University to examine a feature of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

The following Task Force members contributed to the development of this article. Joseph DeStefano was the principal writer.

### Task Force Design Group on Organizing, Managing, and Governing Schools and Systems

#### CO-LEADERS

Paul Hill

*University of Washington*

Don McAdams

*Center for Reform of School Systems*

#### GROUP MEMBERS

Joseph DeStefano

*Learning Communities Network*

Karen Hawley Miles

*Education Resource Management Strategies*

Jay Ogilvy

*Global Business Network, Inc.*

Marion Orr

*Brown University*

Greg Richmond

*Chicago Public Schools/Board of Education*

Kenneth Wong

*Vanderbilt University*

#### GROUP ADVISOR

Carl Cohn

*Long Beach Unified School District*

#### EDITORS

Susan C. Fisher

Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

Support for this work was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

**S**CHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts is working to create, support, and sustain urban education systems with two characteristics:

- all schools in the system meet high academic performance standards; and
- none of the system's schools have significant differences in achievement based on race, ethnicity, or family income.

Unfortunately, what we have now are many urban school districts where parents are forced to rely on their own resourcefulness because the school system has failed to ensure quality education across the board. Some parents line up for hours to try and secure a place in what they perceive to be “the best” school or will lobby the principal in their assigned school to make sure that, next year, their child is placed with “the best” teacher.

While we can all applaud the level of involvement and concern of the parents who labor to secure the best placement for their children, shouldn't we also question why those efforts are necessary in the first place? Doesn't the idea that there is something to be gained by getting into the better school or having the better teacher also imply that there is something to be lost by not doing so? Why should it be acceptable that some children will win – and therefore some lose – this annual education lottery?

## Can All Schools Be Good?

SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK sees the assurance of quality learning opportunities for all children as the fundamental purpose of school districts. We want to see school districts where excellent teaching is the norm in all schools, rather than the rare prize that has to be fought over. A significant step toward that goal would be school districts where the central administration does a much

better job making quality principals and teachers available to schools and then supporting all schools in the creative and most effective use of their resources and talents.

### Teachers – A Key Ingredient of Quality

Research has shown that, all other things being equal, children with less qualified, less able teachers fare worse in school. Their learning gains are smaller compared to students with higher quality teachers and, over time, their ultimate success or failure in school is determined by the sequence of teachers to whom they are assigned.

As every informed parent knows – and certainly all the staff in any district know – there is great variation in the quality of teaching both within and across schools. And research has consistently shown that who gets access to the best quality teaching available within a district is not accidental. Studies repeatedly demonstrate that minority and low-income students get the least qualified teachers.

### Principals – The Front-Line Managers Needed to Make Schools Excel

The good school owes much of what makes it successful to the principal who leads it. The fact that there tend to be better teachers in schools with good principals is not a coincidence. As national Gallup surveys of employees have revealed, the managers that employees interact with on a day-to-day basis are more important than the company they work for. Simply put, people want to work for good managers.

In school districts, principals are not treated as such critical contributors to the system's success. In fact, the problem in large urban school districts is that the system does not encourage or support principals in assembling the best possible teams of teachers, nor does it help principals to put in place ideal work environments and conditions in their schools. Instead, union agreements and explicit as well as

implicit district policy erect barriers to the creation of the conditions that principals and teachers need to succeed. For example, seniority rights and the rules governing assignment mean that the least experienced principals and teachers tend to find themselves clustered in struggling schools. In contrast, the most experienced and savvy staff congregate in the best schools.

It is the absence of management freedom enjoyed by the private sector and the lack of a comprehensive system of human resources development and management in urban districts that produces these small pockets of quality at the expense of the large majority of schools and students.

## The Vital Role of Human Resources Management

Many educators, academics, and policy makers are presently working to rethink how education programs in universities prepare people to teach, how certification practices can assure quality, and just what kind of induction and professional develop-

ment can continuously improve the quality of teachers on the job. These are all important aspects of what needs to be addressed to make quality teaching the norm rather than the exception in many districts.

Likewise, groups all over the country are rethinking the role of the principal, starting principals' academies, reconsidering principals' certification requirements, and making principals more directly accountable for the success of their schools. Most school districts and education policy makers are also wondering where the next generation of top-quality principals is going to come from.

SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK has explored a less often examined dimension to the problem of teacher and principal quality. We contend that the rigid labor conditions and the resulting human resources practices of traditional school districts play just as important a role in creating the present inequities in the quality of teaching and school leadership as do the issues of preparation and certification. We further postulate that changes and improvements in those labor conditions and human resources practices are what is really necessary to

THE IMPACT OF HUMAN RESOURCES PRACTICES	
<p><b>HR policies and practices determine:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• who gets hired</li> </ul>	<p><b>Struggling school districts typically:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limit their sources of talent and fail to compete in the labor market</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what the terms of their employment are</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offer only one set of terms of employment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what expectations are set and managed to, and how they are set</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• do not systematically define, set, and manage to expectations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how performance is evaluated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limit the way they evaluate performance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what recognition and rewards exist, and what those rewards are based on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adhere to seniority-based salary advancement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what opportunities are available for professional growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• treat professional development as separate from human resources development</li> </ul>

Figure 1

rectify the present inequities in the availability of quality teaching and leadership.

We want to state clearly that we are not advocating the dismantling of unions nor seeking to diminish the valuable purposes they serve. We do, however, believe that districts and unions must change their contracts, relationships, and traditionally held practices to find ways to work better together to improve labor conditions and human resources practices.

Because education is inherently a labor-intensive endeavor, a district's human resources practices exert tremendous influence over each school's ability to succeed. Figure 1 highlights some of the basic organizational issues impacted by human resources policy and practice and shows the typical problems in each of those areas faced by struggling school districts.

The prevailing picture of how urban school districts and schools presently manage their human resources is one in which:

- hiring is constrained by limits – imposed by traditional practice, by joint agreements with unions, and by other restrictions – on the ways in which districts engage the labor market for professional staff and by the single set of terms and conditions of employment districts can offer;
- compensation and career advancement are by and large automatic and not tied in any appreciable way to a demonstrated contribution to outcomes for children;
- staffing decisions are for the most part highly centralized and governed by seniority rights and entrenched rules and management habits.

Unless we confront the prevailing ways school districts bring in, develop, and manage their essential human resources, we may be conceding what is probably the best hope for improving schooling for the substantial share of students enrolled in large urban districts. How people are assigned; the expecta-

tions and objectives they are working toward; the authority, responsibility, recognition, rewards, and accountability they face – these factors are what determine the management environment in which they are asked to perform their jobs. Therefore, these are the critical variables that need to be examined to determine how best to create work environments in school districts that can ensure that the best quality people are available, fully utilized, and obtaining the best outcomes for all children.

## Getting, Keeping, and Tapping the Talents of Quality Teachers and Principals

SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK has been examining how districts can create the conditions that attract quality teachers, principals, and leaders and how they can provide the space and support that principals and teachers need to be successful. As we began looking into how we could contribute to improvements in school districts' management of human resources, we asked ourselves, "Can poorly performing school districts move to good or even great performance – and sustain that performance over time?"

### Lessons from the Private Sector

To answer that question, we researched how companies and organizations in the private sector become "good" and "great." Research over the past several years suggests that organizations can, indeed, reshape themselves and improve their performance. We reviewed leading studies of top-performing organizations; in particular, those that improved dramatically and were able to sustain superior results over time. We also studied companies known for exceptional human resource practices.

Our research showed clearly that good organizations *can* become great organizations. They do so prima-

rily through their people and their human resource system practices. In fact, improvement was attributable primarily to an organizationwide effort at pursuing excellence while simultaneously valuing people – as evidenced by an organization’s philosophies and policies, the beliefs of its top people, and – importantly – through highly visible and recurring action.

Those actions communicate and make tangible to an entire organization that its employees are valued and supported and that nothing short of excellent performance is expected of everyone. These actions are what we refer to as human resources practices. It is what good leaders and managers do every day to create work environments that plan for and commit time and resources to getting and supporting the best possible people in every role.

### Applying the Lessons to Districts

After looking at the experience of highly successful organizations, it became apparent to us that, to be more successful, school districts need to do many things differently and do many other things they currently do not do. Of course, private businesses are very different institutions from public school districts. School districts don’t have the flexibility, for example, to manipulate hiring practices, target different customers, or move to a more hospitable location as many businesses have. Still, at SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK, we feel it is important to understand how lessons from the private sector might help inform urban school districts as they try to plan for, acquire, maintain, develop, retain, and evaluate their staffs.

## A Framework for Examining Human Resources Systems

To capture how great organizations pursue excellence and value people, we are developing a framework in which three things matter:

- creating a positive and motivational organizational context;
- getting the best possible people into roles suitable for them and for the organization;
- getting the most out of each and every person.

As shown in our framework (see Figure 2), these simple ideas have specific implications for leadership and management as well as for eight components of human resources practices in schools and districts. Research indicates that as organizations change their view of human resources – from a personnel department, primarily responsible for managing the paperwork and processes of hiring, to a strategic asset, where hiring and developing productive employees is the key function of management – they will have to change how they plan for, acquire, maintain, develop, retain, and evaluate employees.

### Creating a Positive and Motivational Organizational Context

To create a positive organizational context, districts need to understand whether their leaders and managers devote time to organizational development issues.

Leadership’s primary purpose is to define the organizational imperatives that will demand and sustain excellence. If they are going to demand excellence throughout the organization, then leaders must also commit to and deliver on the support all staff need to be successful every day. Rhetoric needs to be converted into action. Managers – principals and central office directors – need to assemble the best possible teams of people, define clear expectations for them, and create the conditions and provide the support they need every day.

Organizational Objectives	Elements of Human Resources Systems	Implications for Quality and Equity in School Systems
Create a positive organizational context	LEADING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide focus and define <i>quality</i> and <i>equity</i> as organizational imperatives.</li> <li>• Create and promote organizational culture dedicated to quality for all children.</li> <li>• Create and demand supportive environments for teachers and schools.</li> <li>• Establish overall staffing philosophy and hire great managers (central office and principals).</li> </ul>
	MANAGING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attract and hire talented teachers and staff.</li> <li>• Define and focus on results (success for students).</li> <li>• Motivate and develop teaching and other talents.</li> <li>• Create working environments that demand and support quality and equity.</li> </ul>
Get the best people into suitable roles	PLANNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forecast need to assure a steady stream of top-quality teachers and principals.</li> <li>• Define excellence in teaching and building management, identify characteristics of people who deliver excellence, identify sources of people who have those characteristics.</li> <li>• Compete in the marketplaces for teaching and managerial talent.</li> </ul>
	ACQUIRING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know where to compete for top teaching and managerial talent.</li> <li>• Get people who have the skills and talent you need as opposed to fielding warm bodies to fill vacancies.</li> <li>• Pick from the top of the barrel instead of the bottom.</li> </ul>
Get the most out of every person	MAINTAINING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Induct and orient new teacher hires.</li> <li>• Create work environments that support teachers and principals in what they need to focus on – quality instruction and well-run schools.</li> <li>• Find the right place for people so that they can be successful.</li> <li>• Promote supportive work environments and compatible teams.</li> </ul>
	DEVELOPING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and manage to career and performance plans.</li> <li>• Provide access to professional development that helps people succeed in their jobs (tied to challenges at hand).</li> <li>• Provide coaching.</li> <li>• Study and reward excellence.</li> </ul>
	RETAINING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure all staff have personal and performance goals and support those goals.</li> <li>• Ensure teachers and managers adequate compensation and appropriate responsibility, authority, and control.</li> <li>• Base career advancement on performance.</li> <li>• Reward, recognize, and celebrate accomplishments.</li> <li>• Hire people that employees want to work with.</li> </ul>
	EVALUATING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate based on performance.</li> <li>• Benchmark performance against internal examples of excellent teaching and management.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for peer evaluations.</li> <li>• Evaluate managers and service providers on whether they provide support.</li> </ul>

Figure 2 Framework for human resources systems

## Getting the Best Possible People into Roles Suitable for Them and for the Organization

To know how they can get the best-quality people into the right roles, school districts need to question how they hire teachers and principals, how staff are assigned to schools, and how schools use their staffs.

The supply and demand for teachers in most urban school districts is currently characterized by

- persistent shortages in certain fields;
- an abundance of people trained as teachers who never end up teaching;
- an unacceptably large percent of those who do enter the field leaving within three to five years;
- a whole variety of other people with skills and knowledge to offer who are not seen as a potential source of professional educators;
- a distribution of teaching resources that disfavors those who most need the most talented teachers.

Similarly, while there is no national shortage of principals, individual districts struggle to fill positions. For a number of reasons, too many districts – and in particular struggling urban districts – fail to compete in the labor markets for quality managers. Recognizing the nature of the marketplace for quality talent, understanding its dynamic, and positioning oneself to compete successfully are all things successful organizations do and do well. In the case of school districts, they need to do not only a better, but in most cases an entirely different, job of planning for, pursuing, and recruiting quality professionals.

Creating conditions that attract qualified professionals, offering distinct incentives to candidates for positions in shortage fields, offering incentives to people willing to work in the most difficult or challenging schools, are what school districts need to do, and do more systematically. Tapping people in the labor market who have left education and attracting and facilitating the entry into education of profes-

sionals working in other fields are areas of district-level human resources management for which we are identifying best-practice models.

## Getting the Most out of Each and Every Person

To understand whether they are getting the most out of principals and teachers, school districts need to examine several key features of what we would call their “human resources environment.”

In most traditionally structured school districts, seniority and rigid salary scales do more to shape people’s professional careers than any systematic application of a vision for human resources development. Certification and seniority are rewarded, not performance. The movement of individuals within the organization is not based on deliberate management decisions to form highly successful teams or to assign skills and talent where they are most needed. And managers themselves are not rewarded for developing talent, nor are they evaluated based on how well they support the work of principals or teachers. Districts need to examine what happens to people when they join the organization; how they are helped to develop; how they are rewarded, supported, or sanctioned if necessary; and how they grow in their levels of responsibility and authority.

## Management in an Era of Accountability

Around the country, schools are increasingly being held accountable for the results that their students obtain. Attempting to meet these demands while paying little or no attention to how the management environment supports accountability may prove to be a fundamental flaw in the current approach to this issue. The human resources environment, as we have seen from examining successful businesses and organizations, is what creates the organizational context for success, in school districts as much as in other public- or private-sector organizations.

Poor-performing urban school systems must struggle against unsystematic, nonstrategic human resources environments that can contribute to a dysfunctional organizational climate and culture. Changes in district policy and new agreements with professional unions are needed. Such changes might include

- pay scales differentiated by field of qualification;
- alternatives to seniority and additional years of education as criteria for moving up the pay scale;
- incentive-based pay tied to learning gains for students;
- expectations and incentives for outstanding individuals to take on the toughest assignments.

However, the extent to which these kinds of reforms actually lead to improvements in instruction and, more broadly, in learning opportunities for students will depend on the management environment of schools. And it will also depend on the capacity of school managers and staffs to create and operate within those kinds of environments.

## Putting Our Framework to the Test

Using the framework we have proposed here, SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK will be partnering with several urban school districts that are interested in systematically examining the various features of their human resource policies and practices. Using the three focal areas of the framework, we will help the districts look at the roles of leaders and managers and think critically about how they plan for, acquire, maintain, develop, retain, and evaluate the professionals needed to offer quality learning opportunities.

In the course of this work, we will help the districts adapt the framework to suit their needs, contexts, and purposes. We will also share with them best

practices from highly successful organizations. By joining those best practices with the unique circumstances of each urban district, we can jointly define a path to improved human resources policies and practices in districts where they will ultimately benefit children who need it the most.

## School Communities that Work Task Force Core Group

**Deanna Burney**

*Consortium for Policy Research in Education*

**Geoffrey Canada**

*Rheedlen Center for Children and Families*

**Thomas Corcoran**

*Consortium for Policy Research in Education*

**Roger Erskine**

*League of Education Voters (Seattle)*

**Norm Fruchter**

*New York University*

**Eugene Garcia**

*Arizona State University*

**Ellen Guiney**

*Boston Plan for Excellence*

**Antonia Hernandez**

*Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund*

**Paul Hill**

*University of Washington*

**Gregory Hodge**

*California Tomorrow*

**Diana Lam**

*New York City Department of Education*

**Don McAdams**

*Center for Reform of School Systems*

**Milbrey McLaughlin**

*Stanford University*

**Richard P. Mills**

*New York State Education Department and  
State University of New York*

**Hugh Price**

*National Urban League*

### FOUNDING CHAIRMAN

**Thomas G. Labrecque** (*deceased*)

### EX OFFICIO

**Vartan Gregorian**, President

*Carnegie Corporation of New York*

**Warren Simmons**, Executive Director

*Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

**Marla Ucelli**, Director

*School Communities that Work*

*Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

### FUNDER REPRESENTATIVES

**Michele Cahill**

*New York City Department of Education*

*(formerly of the Carnegie Corporation of New York)*

**Cyrus Driver**

*The Ford Foundation*

**Fred Frelow**

*The Rockefeller Foundation*

**Jennifer Lee**

*The Pew Charitable Trusts*

## School Communities that Work

is supported by generous funding from

Carnegie Corporation of New York

The Ford Foundation

The Pew Charitable Trusts

The Rockefeller Foundation



**SCHOOL  
COMMUNITIES  
THAT WORK**

*A National Task  
Force on the Future  
of Urban Districts*

895 Broadway  
5th Floor  
New York, NY 10003  
T 212 375-9627  
F 212 375-9427

Brown University  
Box 1985  
Providence, RI 02912  
T 401 863-1897  
F 401 863-1290

*[www.schoolcommunities.org](http://www.schoolcommunities.org)*