Engaging the Public in Education Reform:
What Mayors Can Do

> *"Civic capacity* concerns the extent to which different sectors of the community – business, parents, educators, state and local office-holders, nonprofits, and others – act in concert around a matter of community-wide impact."

The case studies in this volume show that municipal leaders can play key roles in engaging the public and building civic capacity around education reform. The mayors of these five cities made substantive contributions to school improvement in their communities by using the unique leverage of their office in strategic ways.

Successful Strategies: What Mayors Can Do

As the case studies show, mayors' roles vary widely, depending on local circumstances. Laws, political culture, and community support for schools differ among cities, and the precise approach one mayor takes may not work for another. Nevertheless, these stories offer important lessons in public engagement for municipal leaders. They suggest effective approaches for mayors, identify minefields to avoid, and share reflections on the challenges of sustaining engagement.

The ways that the municipal leaders featured in this report have engaged the public and built civic capacity to support schools can be grouped into four broad strategies:

- **Help forge a common vision for educational equity and excellence.** Mayor John Hickenlooper of Denver created a sense of urgency around the need to focus on Latino student achievement and convinced partner organizations that they could make a difference.

- **Form collaborative bodies to support and sustain the vision.** Mayors Ernie Kell and Beverly O'Neill of Long Beach built a civic partnership to ensure a "seamless" public education system from kindergarten through graduate teacher training.

- Expand services and supports for student learning and healthy development. Mayor Don Plusquellic of Akron spearheaded a successful initiative to rebuild all the city's schools as community learning centers by getting funding from Akron's voters and the state and then developing a partnership to implement the plan.

- Mobilize public and political will for quality schools. Mayor Bill Purcell of Nashville restored public confidence in the education system by involving the community in support and celebration of the city's schools. New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg established education as a high priority for the city, and community-based organizers formed a coalition to create and win widespread acceptance for an innovative lead teacher program.

Following is a more detailed description of the lessons learned about each of these high-yield strategies.

Help Forge a Common Vision for Educational Equity and Excellence

School systems in many cities were designed to be independent from city governments and other institutions – in part to shield schools from political wrangling. Yet, educators and policy-makers increasingly recognize that this independence has a price. Education reform requires the support and cooperation of a range of sectors within cities: *school-based constituencies*, consisting of parents, teachers, families, students, principals, and staff; *community-based constituencies*, such as public libraries, grassroots and faith-based organizations, social and human service agencies, neighborhood groups, and community residents, that provide extended learning opportunities, public goodwill, and other supports, often aimed at individual schools; and *civic constituencies*, consisting of groups and leaders that have a citywide influence and affect multiple schools, such as government agencies, higher-education institutions, reform support organizations, local bargaining units, local funders, and corporations and local businesses.

Schools have little authority or opportunity to tap the resources of some of these sectors. Moreover, in many cities there is mistrust and hostility among various sectors: businesses and higher-education institutions, for example, often blame schools for failing to produce higher-quality graduates, while schools lament that parents fail to provide the home support necessary for students to learn.

Mayors are uniquely suited to build bridges across sectors within cities, help develop a shared understanding around education issues, and forge coalitions that can create and support education reform. In Long Beach and Denver, mayors called meetings to bring together leaders from various communities, in many cases for the first time. In Akron, a mayor-led initiative to rebuild the city's schools linked the city government and the schools.

In New York, a mayoral initiative cleared away an obstacle to collaboration. The community school boards that had run local school districts had been perceived as hostile to partnerships, but Mayor Bloomberg's successful effort to abolish the local boards and centralize authority created the space for innovations like the cc9 collaborative to flourish.

Form Collaborative Bodies to Support and Sustain the Vision

As important as it is, getting people to the table is not enough. To be effective, collaborations must be genuine. In many cases, the forced marriages mayors arrange, as in Long Beach, begin with the finger-pointing that traditionally characterizes relations among various communities. But this collaboration has worked because the participants – the school district and the two public higher-education institutions – were able to shift toward a posture of mutual support. They recognized that the goal of collaboration they all shared – improving education for all young people – was far more important than their institutional differences.

A history of collaboration also helps change these attitudes. In Akron, for example, city and school officials had worked together closely on the campaign for Issue 10, the initiative to raise taxes to create community learning centers. So, when they got together to implement the plan, they were able to work through disagreements more easily.

In addition to agreeing to work together cooperatively, effective collaborations also need to sort out issues over authority. In Akron, school officials accustomed to making decisions about the use of school buildings realized they needed to yield to city concerns when the buildings were opened to community use with financial assistance from the city. In Nashville, it took an initial period of working out roles and responsibilities between the mayor and the school district before educators felt comfortable with the mayor's highly publicized visits to the schools and his model of shared leadership.

In these cities, the collaborations have proven effective because the groups have,

through informal or formal means, laid out clear lines of authority. The mayors of Akron, Nashville, and Denver made clear that they had no intention of taking over the schools. And, in Akron, a joint use agreement hammered out by city and school officials explicitly states the expectations for each side.

To make collaboration sustainable, cities have created new institutions that bring together representatives of various sectors on a regular basis. In Long Beach, the seamless education partnership has lasted for a decade because leaders from the education institutions meet monthly, with staff support funded by the local business community. In Denver, Mayor Hickenlooper promised a follow-up meeting 100 days after the initial summit on Latino academic achievement and reconvened the summit's planning team to organize it.

Yet, even with an institutional structure, a collaborative will only work if all parties remain committed to it, and mayoral support is critical to maintaining that commitment. Long Beach officials point to the fact that Mayor O'Neill, in her speeches, regularly highlights the city's seamless education system as a key reason for its continuation.

Expand Services and Supports for Student Learning and Healthy Development

The positive development of young people should be the focus of all practice, reform, and innovation in an education system. *Development*, as defined here, means not only the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills, but also healthy social, physical, and emotional development. The imperative is to educate each student successfully,

which may require different types and levels of support to ensure that all young people have equitable opportunities. Some of these learning opportunities and supports will be part of the formal school program; others will be provided by community and civic groups.

Currently, every community has the kinds of resources – museums, laboratories, hospitals, and other community-based settings – to provide this type of support, but not all youth have access to them. Furthermore, these resources are not always connected to schooling or organized into clear and coherent pathways to success for children and youth.

Mayors are in a unique position to link and help align different sectors of the community to support education. Mayor Plusquellic of Akron led the city in a bold initiative to convert all the city's schools into community learning centers (CLCs) that would bring the community and its assets into the schools and, at the same time, use the school facilities to serve the community's needs. He reached out to grassroots community organizations to support a hike in the local income tax to fund the CLCs, taking advantage of matching state funds. Following voters' approval of the funding, he engaged local community groups in a process of designing programs for each learning center.

Mobilize Public and Political Will for Quality Schools

Creating a community system of education is a challenge. Blame, rather than collective responsibility, often characterizes school-community relationships. Accountability focuses on test scores rather than wider

opportunities or outcomes. The legacies of race and class in shaping opportunities, individual and institutional power differentials based on gaps in status and access to resources, and preconceptions around appropriate roles and accountability all complicate partnering and the shared vision that makes a community education system possible.

The municipal leaders in the five case studies presented here have worked to ensure that *all* members of a community – not just the school personnel – have a stake in the success of students, a common vision, a sense of urgency, and a commitment to tackling critical challenges together.

Using Power, Influence, and Resources Strategically

Although the high-profile occasions on which mayors have taken control over local school systems have attracted national attention, in most cases mayors do not have direct authority over education systems in their cities. Nevertheless, mayors who have been successful in engaging the public around education reform have done so by using the power they have in creative ways.

Perhaps the most powerful tool in a municipal leader's toolbox is what Theodore Roosevelt called the "bully pulpit." When mayors talk, people listen. Not everyone may do what mayors say, but what they say does attract attention. When Mayor Hickenlooper of Denver called a summit on Latino academic achievement, the issue – which had attracted little public attention before – became a high priority for the city. Some of the most prominent leaders in Denver, such as former mayor Federico Peña, attended the event at Mayor Hickenlooper's invitation.

Similarly, when Mayor Purcell of Nashville launched the First Day celebration to call attention to the opening of school and encourage parents to accompany their children to class – and when he set the example by going to school with his daughter – he persuaded tens of thousands of Nashvillians to visit schools. As a result, a lot of the negative impressions city residents had about their schools melted away.

Mayors have also engaged the public by skillfully applying the legal authority they already possess. Even if they lack operational authority over schools, many mayors retain financial control over school budgets. Mayor Purcell, a strong supporter of education, was eager to increase the education budget but recognized that he could not gain backing for such an increase as long as city residents held schools in low esteem. Relying on his sense of timing, Mayor Purcell waited until after events such as First Day and the hiring of a new school director boosted public confidence in the system, then sought and won the budget increase.

Mayor Plusquellic of Akron went even further than seeking an increase in the school budget; he sought a *tax increase* for school improvements. Although his first attempt failed, his second won handily, in large part because he tailored the proposal to ensure maximum support. Rather than shy away from the issue, Mayor Plusquellic came right back after his first, failed attempt, seizing on a little-known provision in the state code that allowed him to use city income taxes for community learning centers.

Engaging Communities Authentically — Not Just "Selling"

Many leaders erroneously assume that engagement means *selling* – convincing other people to sign on to their ideas.

Leaders of effective engagement efforts know, though, that engagement needs to be *authentic*. It involves listening, as much as speaking, and understanding the perspectives and points of view of all members of the collaborative.

Denver's Latino Summit is a good example. Rather than present his ideas to the group, Mayor Hickenlooper invited a broad range of participants – including Latino community groups who had not had the ear of previous mayors – to make their own suggestions and come up with plans together.

The community groups in the CC9 collaborative, while they did present a formal proposal to the teachers union, were willing to consider the proposal as the *starting point* of the discussion – not a set of inflexible demands. The teachers, for their part, did not automatically reject elements they may have disagreed with but, rather, presented arguments and agreed to a pilot program.

Authentic engagement also involves enlisting influential people who will be listened to by others. In Long Beach, for example, one reason for the continuing success of the seamless education partnership is the sustained involvement of university presidents and the superintendent of schools. All of the institutions know that the partnership is a high priority.

Using Data

While engaging the public in education often involves appealing to people's beliefs in the importance of public education, data strengthens the case. Successful mayors have marshaled facts to bring people along to support schools.

At the Denver Latino Summit, for example, the organizers had compiled reports that

revealed to many people for the first time the size of the Latino school population and the challenges Latino students faced. At the same time, the meeting included presentations of successful examples that showed that improving Latino academic achievement was, indeed, possible. The CC9 collaborative in New York also prepared data to take to meetings, which helped make a convincing case for its Lead Teacher program.

Mayor Purcell's efforts to bring residents into Nashville schools was a shrewd use of data, showing people the positive aspects of schools that they may not have been aware of. Although the mayor did not shy away from the troubling statistics about achievement, these efforts provided the community with a more complete picture of the state of the schools. And, in 2005, five years after the launching of the community engagement campaign around First Day, data was used again – this time, to show significant student-achievement improvements at all grade levels in Nashville's schools, generating great pride within the community.

The Challenge Cities Face: Sustainability

Engaging the public is not a one-time event. All the cities highlighted in this publication, along with many other cities, face the continued challenge of maintaining and strengthening support for public education over time.

Denver's mayor recognized this challenge early on. He knew that a meeting like the Latino Summit could fire people up for a short time, but the momentum could wane if the city did not follow up on the plans. The follow-up meeting he held 100 days after the summit laid out action plans for all constituent groups. The goodwill generated at the two meetings will help ensure that the work continues.

Maintaining support is particularly challenging in a time of financial constraint. In Akron, lower enrollment projections from the state could force the city and district to scale back their plans for rebuilding schools as community learning centers, since funding is based on student enrollment. Leaders are hopeful that residents will continue to back the plan even if fewer schools are rebuilt.

Inevitable changes in leadership also make sustaining engagement a challenge. In Long Beach, Mayor O'Neill is scheduled to step down in 2006 after twelve years as the leading champion of the city's seamless education partnership. But officials note that the partnership is not an issue in the election campaign; all the leading candidates support it. The partnership is now the way the city government and its education institutions do business. Nashville's mayor Purcell has decided not to seek a third term; in 2007 a new mayor will be elected. The school board president is not worried, though. She believes that business leaders and the community would block an attempt to dismantle traditions that have built up around the first-day-of-school festivities.

Perhaps that is the best outcome for public engagement. When a community is so completely engaged in its schools that it cannot envision any other way, education – and the city – can only benefit. The five cities highlighted in this publication have shown some of the paths toward that goal.