

VUE

SPRING 2012

ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*

The Next Generation of Reformers

What Are Brown's Urban Education Policy Graduates Doing Now?



Preparing the Next Generation of Urban Education Policy Leaders

Michael Grady

Threads in the TAPAstry: Student Engagement at Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts

Elizabeth Richards

Walking the Tightrope between Research and Practice: Challenges of Transforming Data into Knowledge, Actionable Strategies, and Student Achievement

Havala Hanson

"First Responders" in D.C. Public Schools: The Critical Role of Operations in School Reform

Wayne Taliaferro

Keeping the Charter School Bargain: The Effective Management of Autonomy and Accountability

Bryant Jones

The Director's Perspective: Creating the Future Change Agents in Urban Education

Kenneth Wong

The Next Generation of Reformers
Number 33, Spring 2012

EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Philip Gloudemans

GUEST EDITOR
Michael Grady

MANAGING EDITOR
Margaret Balch-Gonzalez

ASSISTANT EDITOR
O'rya Hyde-Keller

PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION
Mary Arkins Decasse

DESIGN
Brown University Graphic Services

ILLUSTRATION
Robert Brinkerhoff

Voices in Urban Education (ISSN 1553-541X) is published quarterly at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Articles may be reproduced with appropriate credit to the Annenberg Institute. Single copies are \$12.50 each, including postage and handling. A discount is available on bulk orders. Call 401 863-2018 for further information.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established in 1993 at Brown University. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools attended by traditionally underserved children. For program information, contact:

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University, Box 1985
Providence, Rhode Island 02912
Tel: 401 863-7990
Fax: 401 863-1290
Web: www.annenberginstitute.org

Twitter: @AnnenbergInst

© 2012 Annenberg Institute for School Reform

VUE

The Next Generation of Reformers: What are Brown's Urban Education Policy Graduates Doing Now?

- Preparing the Next Generation of Urban Education Policy Leaders** 2
MICHAEL GRADY
- Threads in the TAPAstry: Student Engagement at Trinity Academy
for the Performing Arts** 7
ELIZABETH RICHARDS
At one urban charter school, an arts curriculum has addressed one
of today's most pressing education questions: How can schools keep
students engaged?
- Walking the Tightrope between Research and Practice: Challenges of
Transforming Data into Knowledge, Actionable Strategies, and Student
Achievement** 16
HAVALA HANSON
For data to be used effectively to inform decision making, it needs
to be accessible to the people who use it most: teachers.
- "First Responders" in D.C. Public Schools: The Critical Role of
Operations in School Reform** 24
WAYNE TALIAFERRO
School operations are often left out of the school reform conver-
sation, but ensuring that schools are resourced, supported, and
maintained efficiently is the foundation for effective change.
- Keeping the Charter School Bargain: The Effective Management of
Autonomy and Accountability** 31
BRYANT JONES
Charter schools and their performance are often in the spotlight, but
little attention is paid to the charter school authorizers that can make
the difference between a school that fails and one that succeeds.
- The Director's Perspective: Creating the Future Change Agents in
Urban Education** 41
KENNETH WONG
The director of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program
answers questions about how it is shaping and connecting the future
leaders of education reform.

Preparing the Next Generation of Urban Education Policy Leaders

MICHAEL GRADY

In 2004-2005, a group of professors from Brown University's Education Department and senior staff of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR), an affiliated center at Brown, came together to plan a new master's degree program in urban education policy. This alliance came at the urging of Brown President Ruth Simmons, who wished to see more a purposeful collaboration between the university's Education Department and affiliated education policy centers, all of which were doing important work in their own right, but largely independent of each other.

The product of this joint venture was the Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program, a three-semester master's degree program designed to prepare the next generation of policy leaders in urban education. Over the past five years, the university has conferred master of arts degrees on the first seventy-five graduates of the UEP Program. This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* conveys, in the words and actions of selected alumni, a sampling of the areas that graduates are working in, early indications of their impact on the field of urban education reform, and their guidance for the future of the program.

The faculty planning team faced a daunting challenge: to design a graduate program in education policy that's sufficiently distinctive from other established and high-quality programs in the Northeast and nationally. In their search for a niche, the planners identified three key elements they believed would set the UEP Program apart from other master's degree programs.

First, the program would focus exclusively on the challenges of urban education. Other high-quality graduate programs offered concentrations in urban education or were affiliated with urban policy centers, but only the UEP Program would feature a strong urban emphasis in every required course.

Second, the program would seek to build strong analytical skills in education research and policy analysis. Graduates would demonstrate competencies in quantitative and qualitative data analysis,

Michael Grady is the deputy director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and a clinical assistant professor of education at Brown University.

research and evaluation design, and analytical writing, along with strong content knowledge in educational governance, systems theory, and human development.

Finally, the program would take full advantage of the alliance between the Education Department and AISR: a unique venture between an academic department whose faculty includes some of the nation's leading scholars in the fields of political science, economics, developmental psychology, history, and applied statistics with an applied research and policy center working on a wide range of urban reform initiatives around the country. This alliance enables UEP Program students to apply their theoretical knowledge in urban policy settings.

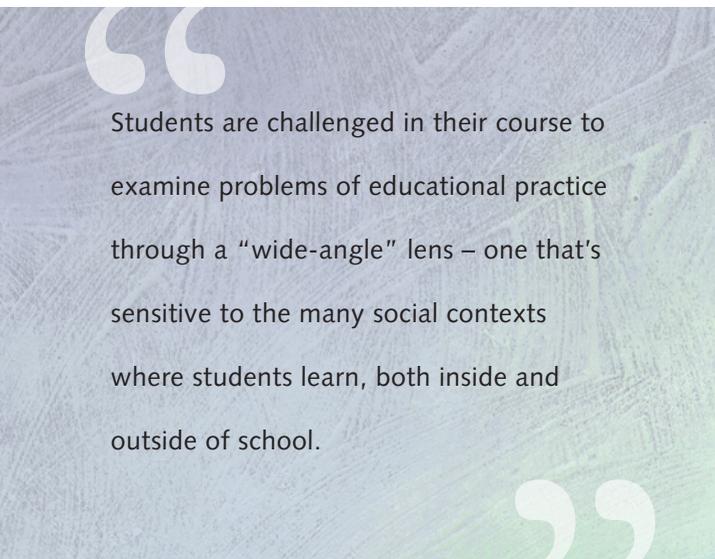
The following articles, in the words of our graduates, help illuminate some of the early outcomes of the program on our students' career paths, on the civic capacity of our city and state to pursue an ambitious reform agenda, and on the Education Department and AISR to sustain the UEP Program into its next life phase. Their writing also reflects some of the guiding principles of the program: policy decisions must be based on quality evidence and data; students learn in multiple social contexts both in and out of school; and schools' efforts to pursue teaching and learning goals must be backed up by strong community and district capacity.

sue teaching and learning goals must be backed up by strong community and district capacity.

The strong emphasis on developing students' analytic skills is one of the connecting threads running through this issue of *VUE*. Havala Hanson, a researcher at Harvard's respected Strategic Data Project, supports the efforts of SDP Fellows, who are building school district capacity across the country to generate and use high-quality data to inform educational decisions. As she relates in her essay, insights generated from data are intended to inform purposeful action by educational leaders. Bryant Jones, a charter school specialist in the Of-

ffice of School Transformation at the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, is part of a state agency team charged with designing a data-driven accountability mechanism for charter schools in the state. This is an assignment that places Bryant and his colleagues at the center of a charged policy debate over the purpose and effects of charter schools.

Students are challenged in their course to examine problems of educational practice through a "wide-angle" lens – one that's sensitive to the many social contexts where students learn, both inside and outside of school. Christian Caldarone's account of his efforts to bring quality housing options to the residents of Providence's Smith Hill neighborhood speaks to how an integrated, cross-sector approach to child and youth development can work. Alejandro Molina



Students are challenged in their course to examine problems of educational practice through a "wide-angle" lens – one that's sensitive to the many social contexts where students learn, both inside and outside of school.

writes on behalf of the Providence After School Alliance (PASA), one of the national beacons in the field of out-of-school-time learning and an avid sponsor of UEP Program research and interns over the years. And Jill Corsi writes about her experiences with Citizen Schools, which brings a “second shift” of educators, made up of local professionals and community members, into schools.

Accepting the premise that one size does not fit all, many urban districts are developing a “portfolio” of school options, one that offers a range of educational options to engage middle and high school students in particular, some of whom are beginning to question the value of the high school diploma. Elizabeth Richards writes in this issue of *VUE* about her work as Artistic Director at the Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts (TAPA),

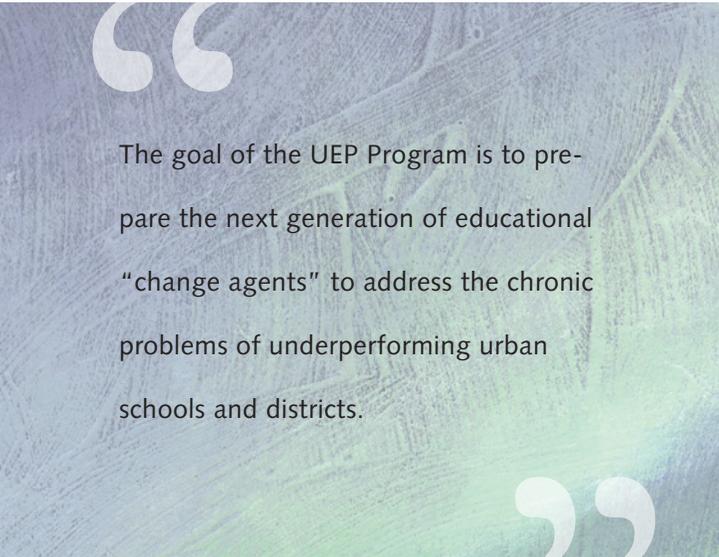
one of the bright new lights on the Providence charter school horizon. She notes the importance of creating educational experiences, both in and out of school, that can “reignite” a child’s natural passion for learning and engage them more deeply in their school and broader community.

Over a decade ago, AISR convened the National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts. One of the conclusions of that group was the need for central offices to provide timely and effective supports to schools. We continue to draw on that body of work in both the UEP Program coursework and field-based initiatives. Wayne Taliaferro’s new role as project coordinator on

the critical response team in the D.C. Public Schools underscores the importance of having “first responders” on call to field requests from school and community leaders to deal with administrative or policy barriers to their efforts to transform schools into places of high-quality teaching and learning.

As one of the original members of the UEP Program core faculty, it’s my privilege to observe the accomplishments of our graduates on both local and national stages during the first five years of the program. Serving as the guest editor of this volume of *VUE* affords me the opportunity to step back a bit to reflect on the achievements of the UEP Program, as well as propose how the program might adapt to the shifting demands of this dynamic field of practice.

UEP Program Director Kenneth Wong states in the interview in this issue that the goal of the UEP Program is to prepare the next generation of educational “change agents” to address the chronic problems of underperforming urban schools and districts. This vision seems to be affirmed by the experience of our first five cohorts of graduates. In fact, what has been a revelation to me is the rapid ascent of our graduates into positions of significant responsibility in school districts,



The goal of the UEP Program is to prepare the next generation of educational “change agents” to address the chronic problems of underperforming urban schools and districts.

state education administration, charter school leadership, research, and philanthropy. Many of our graduates have been asked to lead critical aspects of transformation at relatively early points in their careers.

Nor did I expect when we launched the UEP Program in 2006 that our graduates would have such a substantial impact on the overall capacity of our home city and state to support an ambitious education reform agenda. This has been hastened somewhat by a spate of new job opportunities from two Race to the Top awards and the increased involvement of public and private sectors in education policy. Increasingly in our local work, UEP Program faculty find ourselves working side-by-side with our former students in their new professional capacities.

One of the cornerstone goals of the UEP Program is to prepare students to engage in critical policy debates using the best available evidence and a sophisticated set of analytic tools. This theme is infused throughout the core curriculum, internships, and research experiences. The original hunch of faculty planners appears to have paid off as the UEP Program graduates have earned a reputation for rigorous analysis, mastery of a range of research literatures, and strong oral and written communication skills. This is evident in the recurring theme of data in the four main articles of this issue. And this year, a new partnership between the UEP Program and Teach for America (TFA) will enable practicing TFA teachers to bridge the gap between policy and instruction, as described by Heather Tow-Yick, executive director of TFA Rhode Island.

Education policy is among the most dynamic of social policy domains. All graduate training programs must adapt to the shifting policy landscape in ways that enable graduates to enter the workforce with the most immediately useful knowledge and skills. The UEP Program is no exception. In the reflections section following their essays, students recommend that the UEP Program provide students with opportunities to hone skills in financial and organizational management, as they quickly find themselves planning and implementing budgets in their new management roles. Given the time limitations of a three-semester program, the UEP Program faces a tough set of tradeoffs in what specific skill and knowledge domains to emphasize. That said, we should explore giving students more exposure to organizational management skills through either suitable elective courses or by structuring the internship so students have more hands-on experience in the area of organizational management.

Many changes are looming on the education policy horizon that will present opportunities for further learning by our future UEP Program cohorts. The introduction of the Common Core State Standards beginning in 2012 with associated assessments following in 2014 is a watershed development in national education policy. The UEP Program should help illuminate both the possibilities and challenges of standards implementation and their implications for student assessment and teacher evaluation systems. Likewise, state and national policy leaders have shown greater interest in the performance of U.S. students relative to other nations, so we should make space in our curriculum to examine the strengths and limitations of international benchmarking studies.

As this publication goes to press, Congressional staff are marking up drafts of the long-delayed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. While it's still impossible to predict how the federal role will evolve with the new legislative framework, early indications are that reauthorization will yield greater attention on and resources for the chronically lowest-performing schools. Therefore, it's imperative that our graduates have the knowledge and experience to engage productively in policy debates in the area of school transformation, especially at the high school level.

As faculty, we take great pride in the achievements of our graduates in their new professional roles and the important work of our current students as research assistants and interns. We attribute some of the impact of graduates to the rapid expansion of opportunities in the field of education with the emergence of large-scale reform programs at the federal and state levels. Likewise, part of the explanation is the growing reputation of the UEP Program as a rigorous program with a strong applied focus through the internships and field research. But mostly, we see the impressive impact of five cohorts as testament to the abiding commitment of these graduates to create better futures for students in our most underserved communities. It is therefore with great pride that with this volume we honor their current and future successes.



Threads in the TAPAstry: Student Engagement at Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts

ELIZABETH RICHARDS

At one urban charter school, an arts curriculum has addressed one of today's most pressing education questions: How can schools keep students engaged?

When I first met her, Maria (not her real name) was an overweight twelve-year-old who wanted nothing more than to disappear. The second-oldest child of a single mother, Maria's one pleasure was singing. She spoke of being miserable at school, disconnected from what she was learning, and shunned by her peers. Maria's testing data reflected her disengagement: she was reading at

a third-grade level. When she began at my school, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts (TAPA), Maria was given intensive remediation in phonics and comprehension.

That plan, on its own, should have brought her up to a fourth-grade level by the end of her seventh-grade year. Instead, in three months, Maria was reading at grade level. This was the result of more than just academic rigor; it was the result of Maria's deep and meaningful student engagement. Our school provided a place for Maria to thrive and to celebrate her vocal talent.

Elizabeth Richards is the artistic director of the Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts in Providence, Rhode Island, and a 2009 graduate of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program.

She sang for her peers regularly, earning standing ovations and hearing her name chanted and cheered. After receiving her improved test scores, Maria said, “TAPA showed me I was the kind of person who could sing and get cheered for, and if I can do that, I can do anything!”

TAPA, where Maria is now in the eighth grade, is a new public charter school that serves students in Providence, Rhode Island. We opened in the fall of 2010 with our first class of thirty-four seventh-grade students; we will grow to serve 204 students in grades seven through twelve when we are at capacity. Our student body is primarily Latino/a, and 91 percent qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch.

Like Maria, most of our students arrive at TAPA’s doors disenchanted with public education and disengaged from school. It is our first hurdle, with nearly every student, to re-stimulate their engagement, to encourage them to buy in to what TAPA represents, and to take charge of their own education. My work with the students at TAPA has led me to believe that true student-centered education is a rarity, and that student engagement – or rather the lack of true student engagement – is the most pressing challenge in urban education today.

THE TAPA STORY

The TAPA story begins three years before Maria and her classmates walked through our doors. TAPA was born from its South Side neighborhood: a diverse, low-income community known for its neglected triple-decker houses and excellent Latin American street food. In 2007, TAPA’s founders scraped together the funds to hold a series of community charrettes asking what the neighborhood needed. According to Joyce Stevos, TAPA’s founder and board president, the

group that met that day took it as their mission to break the cycle of “parents from economically distressed districts” who “just take what they can get or are given by the [school] system” rather than “feel empowered to demand the best educational preparation for their children, or to influence the depth, breadth, and variety of academic offerings within their children’s schools or classrooms” (Stevos 2008).

The idea for TAPA was ambitious: opening a new school with a focus on the arts in a community that had seen its neighborhood school shuttered. The plan was derided in some Rhode Island education circles. Without a heavy-lifting power player or substantial outside backing, how could this pie-in-the-sky community project get off the ground?

My work at TAPA began during this time, after the idea was formed but before there was much meat on the bones. At that time, I was a student in Brown University’s Urban Education Policy (UEP Program) master’s degree program. Neither an education insider, nor a community member, I was truly an outsider when I joined the TAPA team. There I was, a feisty, young, White New Yorker bursting into the midst of Providence’s most dedicated minority-community education reformers, declaring: “I want to run your school!” In spite of my unorthodox approach, they accepted me into their midst, perhaps because of my deep belief in their mission, or because the UEP Program had given me the data analysis and research tools to be useful to them, or simply because I was enthusiastic and working for free.

I volunteered at TAPA for more than a year before being hired as an employee, and now my role at TAPA as its artistic director is a hybrid one. I am a member of the administrative team, which focuses on academic-arts integration, securing and budgeting federal education funding, and collecting and

utilizing data, as well as working with day-to-day school operations. I also regularly teach a class or mop a floor; we are a start-up organization, after all.

As a start-up, we rely heavily on talent wherever we can find it, and we were fortunate to have L. Jonathan Modica, a member of the UEP Program class of 2011, intern with us during our inaugural year. In addition to singlehandedly establishing one of our testing and data-gathering methods, Jon conducted extensive qualitative and quantitative research. Jon's results point toward students and families being deeply engaged in the TAPA community and deeply con-

nected to our mission and vision. With thirty-four students, Jon's sample size was too small for him to draw conclusions as to whether our successes are significant and replicable. However, the data he gathered shows such positive results as to be a highly useful tool for us to measure engagement within our current student body and provides a benchmark for measuring the engagement of future classes.

REFLECTIONS ON THE UEP PROGRAM

What tools and knowledge from the UEP Program proved to be valuable in your post-grad role?

I volunteered at TAPA for more than a year before being hired as an employee, and for this I owe a debt to the UEP Program. The UEP Program gave me the work ethic and necessary skills to juggle a paying job and a full-time volunteer gig at TAPA, as well as the foundational belief that what we were doing was revolutionary and valuable. I came into the UEP Program as a driven-but-directionless urban educator with an interest in the arts; I left the UEP Program with the data, policy, and research knowledge that qualified me to now work alongside the head of school as TAPA's artistic director.

The UEP internship program was particularly helpful. The research that I conducted as a student intern in the UEP Program class of 2009 has translated directly into my work at TAPA. I interned as an action researcher for the Central Falls School District, focusing specifically on the importance of student engagement to the success (or failure) of school reform efforts. My focus on student engagement was a constant thread during my UEP Program experience, and this background ensured that a focus on student engagement is now deeply woven into the fabric of TAPA.

In what areas did you feel under-prepared?

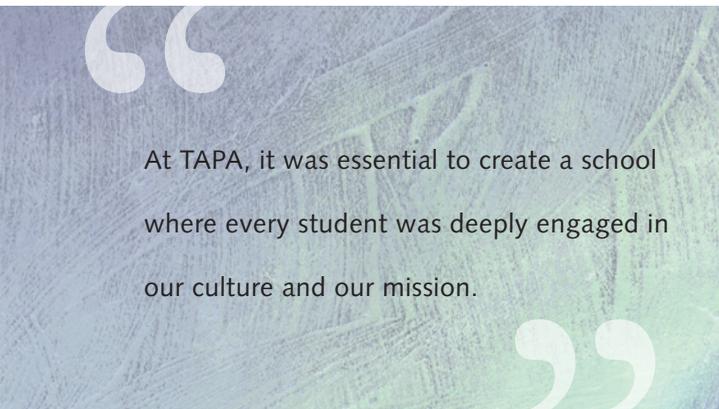
I do wish that the UEP Program had taught me more about business (balancing a school budget); nonprofit management (how to work with a board of directors); and how to transition from a card-carrying teachers union member to a charter school leader.

Based on your experiences in the UEP Program and in the field, what are your thoughts on graduate training in education and public policy in general?

I attribute much of my professional success to my time in the UEP Program. The connections to the faculty, as well as to my classmates, have anchored me among the leaders of the current school reform movement. This community of reformers has given me a pool of individuals to draw upon when I need ideas, support, information, or best practices. Moreover, my classmates are now working their way up in a variety of education reform entities, and the fact that I know them well enough to call them up to meet for a drink and chat has been crucial for professional networking. The knowledge and the research skills that I gained from the UEP Program have also been invaluable.

ADOLESCENT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN SCHOOL CREATION

For adolescents in urban public schools – like those who were selected by lottery to attend TAPA – academic failure is fundamentally linked to disengagement (Sebring et al. 1996). Engaged adolescents are “more likely to perform well academically” (CCSRI 2007, p.



At TAPA, it was essential to create a school where every student was deeply engaged in our culture and our mission.

1), “have fewer problems, are better skilled, and tend to be lifelong citizens” (Pittman et al. 2003, p. 6), and “learn more, retain more, and enjoy learning activities more” (Akey 2006, p. 3) than students who are not engaged.

Disengagement is a particularly pressing issue for students of color. As Theresa Akey (2006) writes:

Some studies have found that 40 to 60 percent of high school students are chronically disengaged, as exhibited by inattentiveness, lack of effort, inability or unwillingness to compete educational tasks and assignments, and self-reported levels of boredom. This figure takes into account only students who are still in school, not those who have dropped out.... The proportion of low-income, minority, urban students who report being disengaged is even higher. (pp. 3–4)

In 2010, only 34 percent of Providence seventh-graders scored at or above proficiency in reading, and just 24

percent scored at or above proficiency in math. While there are many factors that lead to poor educational outcomes, it is clear from the students who enter the doors of TAPA that disengagement is a substantial problem in our city. I encountered a student at TAPA who, in class after class, would protest when he was not allowed to give up on a test, saying, “It would be easier for you if you just let me fail. That’s what they did last year.” He was constantly flabbergasted that his teachers would choose the “harder” path of working to ensure his engagement and learning, rather than allowing him to give up.

At TAPA, it was essential to create a school where every student was deeply engaged in our culture and our mission. To this end, I led the TAPA planning team in a scan of current literature on national student engagement efforts, and the research revealed three overarching, interrelated trends. Schools that successfully engage youth:

- Consistently provide challenging academic and non-academic learning opportunities
- Are populated with invested adults who have high standards
- Provide young people with consistent encouragement, even in the face of academic failure

As we dreamed about and planned for our new school, these themes were central to our focus.

HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: ARTS INTEGRATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Engaged students are invested in their own learning, and this is fostered when schools create “a balance of challenging, relevant learning experiences that offer multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility through cooperative, project-based, and active

learning” (Joselowsky 2007, p. 268). When students seek – and find – meaningful learning opportunities, they can “wrestle with new concepts, explain their reasoning, defend their conclusions, or explore alternative strategies and solutions” (Akey 2006, p. 6). We at TAPA knew that we wanted to create these meaningful opportunities through the arts; thus our guiding question was: When drawing from a district that has substantially cut arts programming, how do you create a school where low-achieving, high-poverty urban students are both immersed in the arts and achieving academic proficiency on high-stakes tests?

For TAPA, the answer was building an arts-integrated curriculum from the ground up. In doing so, we were filling a hole in the local education landscape. The Providence Public School District had been cited in 2006 by the Rhode Island Department of Education for offering less than the mandated arts curriculum to students. Our arts-integrated curriculum, on the other hand, places the performing arts at the core of interdisciplinary learning, affirms the indispensability of the arts as a core curriculum subject, and views the arts as a catalyst to learn other subjects.

Most students who attend TAPA have some professed interest in the arts, although they generally arrive with little-to-no evident talent. Working with that student body, it became our aim to create a curriculum where self-professed creative kids could learn the traditional subjects through the arts. At TAPA, mastery of an academic subject does not just mean performing well on a test. Rather, mastery of an academic subject must also be demonstrated through mastery of one or more of the performing arts. In achieving dual mastery, students are demonstrating higher-level thinking skills and greater critical thinking as they apply their learned knowledge in many different settings. One indicator of the success of our arts-integrated curriculum

is found in Jon Modica’s 2011 UEP Program research, which found a high level of reported engagement among TAPA students.

In addition to creating an arts-integrated curriculum, TAPA is committed to creating artistic, academic, and community partnerships beyond the classroom to support students as they discover their strengths. Research shows that one way to achieve deep levels of student engagement is to provide students with the opportunity to “share responsibility for school and community reform and improvement” as well as to get students involved with civic tasks such as “service learning, internships, community action research projects, and community organizing” (Joselowsky 2007, p. 269). To this end, we have created partnerships with community groups, institutions of higher education, and numerous neighborhood nonprofits.

Particularly effective was the Students for Change: Using Social Entrepreneurship to Access Change in Our Communities Initiative, a collaborative outreach and education project funded through a federal Learn and Serve America grant. Students spent spring of 2011 working in conjunction with Johnson & Wales University studying issues of homelessness. We partnered with Amos House (a nonprofit agency that provides services to the homeless and poor of Rhode Island) to get a firsthand understanding of homelessness in the state. Students learned graphic design and marketing from Johnson & Wales students and staff and designed a water bottle that will be sold at Amos House and is expected to raise more than \$1,500 for the nonprofit.

This was a powerful project, particularly since many of our students and their families have been the recipients of Amos House’s services. By allowing our students to take a proactive leadership role in the acquisition of funds to provide for the homeless and hungry,

we addressed both a schoolwide and community-wide need. Students were able to understand the issues involved in homelessness, hunger, and poverty and felt empowered by raising funds and raising awareness about these issues within our community. One major barrier that confronts urban youth like the students at TAPA is the recapitulation of poverty: Students often do not know they have other choices that can be accessed through education. By providing them with the tools to enhance the community, we empowered them to take control and make changes.

THE PRESENCE OF ADULT MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS: ADVISORY AND ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE

Engaged students need more than just exciting classes and powerful community activities. In order for a student to feel truly connected to his or her school, the school must create “formal systems of support and . . . informal connections between adults and youth” including each student being connected to “at least one adult in a structured and personalized way” (Joselowsky 2007, p. 272) with adults interacting with students as a “mentor, friend, and confidant as well as instructor” (Newmann 1992, p. 93).

One of our formal methods of support is our advisory program. Advisory groups (one adult and eight students) serve as each student’s first line of affiliation to TAPA. Advisory ensures that each student is known well at school by at least one adult who is that child’s primary advocate. It also guarantees that every student belongs to a peer group and helps every student find ways of being successful and identifying their strengths within TAPA’s academic and social options. We deliberately built our advisory groups by personality types (forming them some weeks after school began so that we have a good handle on the students and their needs), creating

communities where students and their advisors can celebrate common bonds. TAPA advisors and advisees know one another outside of the academic and artistic structure of a normal school day, which ensures that each student has a mentor who sees the good in that student regardless of potential school-day missteps. Additionally, advisory time is sacred. It is an uninterrupted thirty minutes each day where every adult in the school is 100 percent committed to the students in his or her advisory. By structuring advisory as the central pillar of a TAPA day, we are showing students how much we value them and respect their communities.

In addition to having deep and meaningful relationships with their advisors, students also have the opportunity to develop relationships with practicing professional artists. At TAPA, art classes are taught by Rhode Island–based artists at the forefront of their disciplines. Each year, students work with numerous practicing artists, gaining different skills, insights, and perspectives on the arts and the viability of an arts career. This provides TAPA students with an understanding of what it means to be a practicing artist, as well as giving students a place and lineage in the Providence arts community.

These connections not only provide the chance to see artists in action but also lead to mentorships and professional opportunities for students. To ensure that our artists in residence have the support that they need in order to be teachers and mentors, TAPA’s academic teachers, artists in residence, and I meet for one hour daily to discuss student needs, plan lessons, and design a curriculum that is academically rigorous through its interdependence with the arts. These sessions ensure that teachers and artists are working cooperatively in an environment that promotes high-quality academic and artistic work. They also ensure complete integration of the arts into the academic curriculum and immediately address any barriers to student success.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT: STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF DATA

In addition to being advisors, role models, and mentors, adults in schools must provide consistent and challenging encouragement and support for students. These “high expectations and standards” (Pittman et al. 2003, p. 12) must be clearly stated and consistent, designed to support students’ self-confidence and their belief that they can and will succeed. The goals and standards that the school sets for adolescents must be genuinely achievable, “both challeng[ing] students and allow[ing] them to experience a sense of competence and accomplishment”(Akey 2006, p. 6) in their success and the knowledge that others believed in it.

In order to set high expectations and standards for every student at TAPA, we have a schoolwide focus on data-driven decision making and student ownership of data. We use student assessment data and relevant background information to plan and implement instructional strategies at all levels. TAPA uses the NWEA MAP (Northwest Evaluation Association Measure of Academic Progress) test to monitor student progress on grade-level expectations in reading and math. The MAP is untimed and individualized; it is taken online, and after each question it selects a follow-up question of appropriate difficulty. If the student answers correctly, the questions become more challenging; if the student answers incorrectly, the questions become simpler. This provides a picture of the skills and concepts that the student has mastered and those not yet learned, independent of grade level, age, or current classroom performance.

The result of the MAP is an itemized score in each subject area that is aligned to state benchmarks. These measurements allow us to chart each student’s academic growth in each

subject area from quarter to quarter and year to year. More importantly, TAPA students are given all of their own data and test results. In addition to receiving their own itemized scores, TAPA students are given the tools to evaluate their own progress and pave the way for their own growth. Individual student-level data is shared and analyzed in advisory – a facilitated and supportive small-group setting.

Once it is clear that students understand their own data and how to use it, they present it to their parent/guardian as part of their individual learning plan. The data is continually provided to students and then shared with parents to ensure a wraparound model of intervention. Research is clear that when students are explicitly made aware of learning goals and are a part of the analysis of assessment, learning is enhanced. It is also known that parental involvement is key to a student’s success. One indicator that ownership of data leads to student (and parent) engagement is the increase that we have seen in student attendance. Jon Modica’s research as part of his UEP Program coursework found that on average, TAPA students attended ten more days of school than they had in their previous school. Another indicator of the success of this program is the dramatic increase that we have seen in one year of student test scores: math proficiency levels have increased from 27 percent to 48 percent (an increase of nearly 78 percent), and reading proficiency levels have increased from 47 percent to 76 percent (an increase of nearly 62 percent).

MAKING OUR IDEAS A REALITY

There have, of course, been practical challenges in making these research-based ideas a reality. It’s one thing to say that students need time for community engagement, personal data analysis, and advisory and another to stretch the school day so those can be authentically implemented. To do this, in our inau-

gural year the TAPA day was nine hours long, which proved grueling to students and staff alike. This year, our day is eight hours long, which is still well above the 5.5-hour state minimum used by many districts. We also have an extended school year of 190 days, compared with the traditional 184.

We also must be cautious about stretching our students and families thin. While they love TAPA and have fully embraced our mission, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. At our most ambitious, we had to cancel or scale back some arts events as we realized that students cannot spend five days a week in school (and in afterschool), as well as attend a Friday night showcase and programming on both weekend days. It is testament to the engagement of our families that we always have some participation, but we have had to scale back to hit the sweet spot of not overwhelming the families we serve.

Another challenge has been finding the right adults to create TAPA's authentic and ambitious programming. Find-

ing artists in residence (who make up more than half of our staff each year), a community liaison, teachers, and other TAPA staff members who are both qualified educators and artists in their own right has proved challenging (but we do have a brilliant custodian who was hired in part for his musical prowess!). Moreover, to ensure that each student has a mentor, we stretch our budget as far as it will go, filling our building with as many passionate, mission-driven adults as we can afford.

Challenges aside, we do it. Like many charter schools, TAPA strives to shift the paradigm, to find a solid, replicable model of education that works to serve high-needs students. In an educational world where the extremes of the pendulum swing have “no excuses” charter schools at one apex and “unschooling” at the other, we at TAPA are trying to strike a balance. Between those extremes exists a model of education, built around student engagement and rigorous arts and academics, where success is reflected in both standardized and socio-emotional measures – and where students like Maria thrive.

REFERENCES

Akey, T. 2006. *School Context, Student Attitudes and Behavior, and Academic Achievement*. New York: MDRC.

Center For Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (CCSRI). 2007. “Using Positive Student Engagement to Increase Student Achievement,” *CCSRI Newsletter* (April). Washington DC: CCSRI.

Joselowsky, F. 2007. “Youth Engagement, High School Reform, and Improved Learning Outcomes: Building Systemic Approaches for Youth Engagement,” *NASSP Bulletin* 91, no. 3:257–276.

Newmann, F., ed. 1992. *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pittman, K., M. Irby, J. Tolman, N. Yohalem, and T. Ferber. 2003. *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement: Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?* Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment.

Sebring, P. B., A. S. Bryk, M. Roderick, E. Camburn, S. Luppescu, Y. M. Thum, B. Smith, and J. E. Kahne. 1996. *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Stevos, J. L. 2008. *Report on Public Arts Education Charrettes*. Unpublished report. Providence, RI: Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts.



ENGAGING STUDENTS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Alejandro Molina

Alejandro Molina is the deputy director of the Providence After School Alliance.

The Providence After School Alliance (PASA) successfully serves more than 1,600 Providence middle school youth each year through its AfterZone system, and roughly 300 Providence high school youth through its high school initiative, the Hub. Both the AfterZone and the Hub knit together a network of partners from the public and private sector including the city, school department, community providers, and local nonprofit and business organizations to build on the community's strengths and assets. By enlisting organizations and individuals who have a strong commitment to serving our city's youth, PASA coordinates a schedule of developmentally appropriate programming that maximizes opportunities for youth to explore their interests. PASA's vision is that all youth experience a range of quality after-school, summer, and other expanded learning opportunities that promote their intellectual, creative, and healthy development.

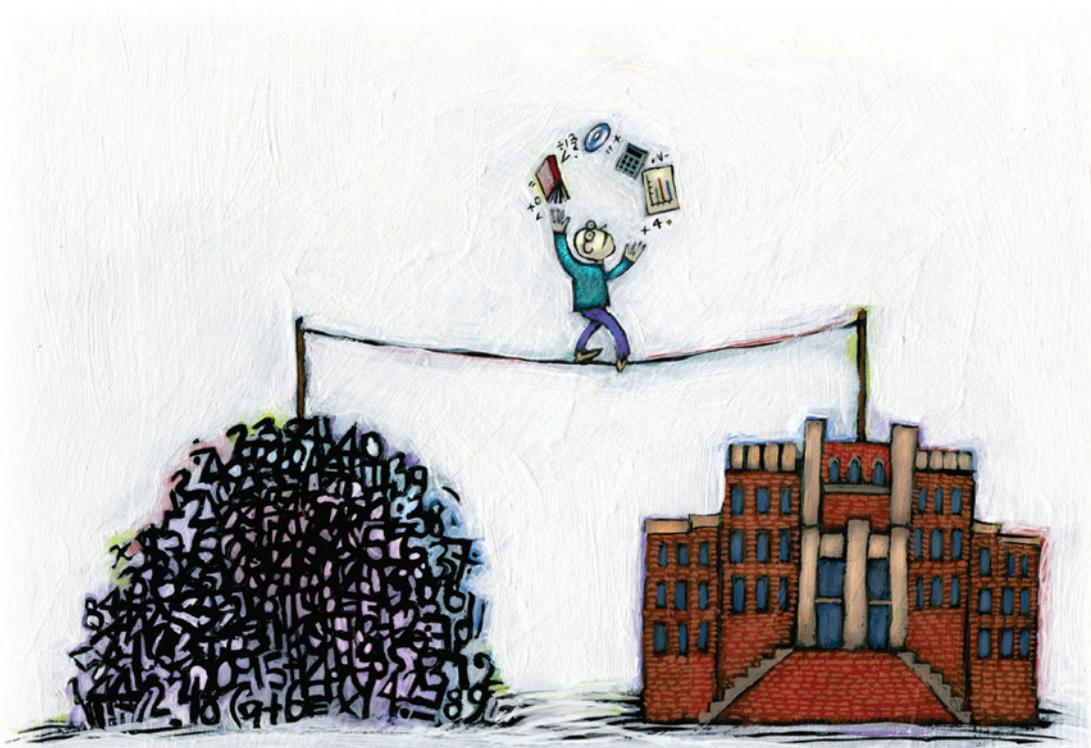
Interns from Brown University's Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program have been a key part of helping to advance PASA's mission. They invigorate PASA's strategies by infusing them with fresh ideas and knowledge of the latest tools and best practices. In today's landscape of economic distress, UEP Program interns are also crucial in helping small nonprofits like PASA maximize and expand resources and manpower.

This year, UEP Program interns played a critical role in a variety of new initiatives. They worked closely with PASA's director of high school initiatives and with the co-director of the AfterZone to create and implement a youth pathways program. Through this program, former AfterZone alumni who are now in ninth and tenth grade will be paired with community providers as interns. This strategy makes it possible for AfterZone graduates who are now coming to the Hub to receive training and guidance that will allow them to become counselors-in-training for middle school youth enrolled in the AfterZone. The pathways program also helps to create a more seamless, youth-led pipeline from middle school through a series of high school-related, out-of-school learning experiences that will lead to graduation and provide them with real world experiences that position them for college and careers.

UEP Program interns also helped us shape the ongoing discussion regarding an expanded learning opportunities credit policy and model of practice for high school youth. Beginning this year, ten community organizations and twenty to forty high school students are participating as pilot partners in this expanded learning opportunities credit-bearing program.

Finally, UEP Program interns worked with PASA and professors from Rhode Island College around grounding PASA's collaborative teaching models in a shared experiential educational framework. Through this framework, educators will gain knowledge of basic education theory that supports such methodologies, creating a reflective practice model and common language that formal and informal educators could share, understand, support, and deliver.

UEP Program interns are invaluable to our work, and moving forward we would love to continue to give them the opportunity to apply the theories they learn in the classroom in the field. They bring important fresh perspectives and an eagerness to learn and do that energizes our work and inspires innovation.



Walking the Tightrope between Research and Practice: Challenges of Transforming Data into Knowledge, Actionable Strategies, and Student Achievement

HAVALA HANSON

For data to be used effectively to inform decision making, it needs to be accessible to the people who use it most: teachers.

Silos populate the education topography. Working independently, teachers, policymakers, government education agencies, and researchers shape unique and sometimes conflicting visions of how to improve our educational system. Instead of toppling these well-es-

tablished storehouses of knowledge to build a new system from the ground up, the use of research to inspire more effective and efficient practices can link at least two of these silos: teachers and researchers.

Nevertheless, the task presents formidable challenges. Teachers have limited access to data that make sense to incorporate into their daily practice, while researchers have limited presence in schools to impact changes

Havala Hanson is a researcher at the Strategic Data Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a 2010 graduate of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program.

in practice and policy. Bits of disconnected data lie scattered across school districts, hang between districts and state agencies, and trickle down from the federal government, making it difficult to piece together the story the information tells. In order to empower the potential of data to improve student achievement, we must, like high-wire walkers, traverse the tightrope we stretch between data and action, carefully balancing the needs and contributions of teachers and researchers.

In my work as an English and Spanish teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools, as well as during my graduate work in the Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program at Brown University, and now as a researcher at the Strategic Data Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I have worked on both sides of this gap. In this article, I discuss each group's challenges in more detail and highlight some steps to close the gap between data and action.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING: AN OPPORTUNITY AND A CHALLENGE

Data-driven decision making (DDDM), the mantra of the education community for the past decade, continues to inspire policy and reform – from its roots in the escalating federal accountability measures established with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act to NCLB's recent policy companions, the Race to the Top (RTTT) Fund and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). Broadly, the dream of data-driven campaigns is to use data and research to guide program and policy directives from the school level – impacting the choice of curriculum and classroom strategies – all the way to the federal department of education, adding weight to policy decisions such as how to measure teacher quality,

implementing the best strategies to improve failing schools, and choosing between scaffolding struggling public schools or opening an educational market of government-subsidized private and charter schools.

Unlike other fields – professional sports, marketing, and the media, to name a few – the use of data has been slow to play any substantive role in improving education outcomes. The notion of DDDM relies on the assumption that school districts and education agencies can rebuild the education industry on the foundations of data use. In reality, few are equipped with the financial and human capital to achieve an integrated DDDM strategy with rigorous analysis and program evaluation, much less garner full support of the school board and the superintendent alongside teachers, principals, and guidance counselors on the front lines of classrooms and school offices.

There are two fundamental barriers to addressing these issues: extracting practical knowledge out of an overabundance of information and finding a common language between practitioners on the stage and researchers behind the scenes. To begin, data do not naturally translate into actionable insights. In fact, the expression “actionable data” implies understanding of data that can be applied to do or change something. Unfortunately, it is particularly difficult to untangle the “actionable” part of the data that avalanche out of schools (i.e., state test data, discipline incidents, absences, teacher evaluations, and guidance counselor caseloads). Sifting through and merging complex and sometimes irrelevant data into actionable knowledge is a heavy lift for education agencies already taxed with mandatory compliance tasks.

What steps must we take, then, to turn data into knowledge and actions that have a positive impact for students?

Can we create systems that are easy for nontechnical audiences to use, while making their work more efficient?

There are multiple answers to these questions but also ample space for miscommunication and misunderstandings that impede progress among a diverse group of stakeholders.

Two of these groups – teachers and researchers – are key to creating the connections that make effective data use in education a reality. Yet they are arguably the most distant from each other and share the least common ground. Teachers face challenges in accessing, understanding, and putting data into action. Meanwhile, researchers – both internal and external to education agencies – encounter barriers in producing, delivering, and packaging data and analysis that teachers and school leaders can and want to use.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

A few years ago, when I was teaching in Milwaukee, I complained to a guest speaker that we could not follow the logic of promoting an intervention on the basis that it had decent “effect sizes.” At the time, in the urgency of a failing school, we were more concerned about whether our students would eat that day or have a place to stay when school let out. We worried about breaking up fights, what students were smoking in the stairwells, and how to accommodate the needs of pregnant teens.

Putting out these fires leaves little room to teach oneself how to interpret data, let alone employ findings from research that inspire fundamental shifts in instructional strategies and interactions with students. Therefore, although data use in classrooms has been a compelling force in education policy, many teachers continue to feel uncomfortable using it. Further, like many interventions and new programs, data-driven instruction can encounter resistance from teachers

who are unwilling to change anything about their current practice. Many are convinced that they already do all that is necessary to raise student achievement. In fact, sometimes this is true. Resistance to change is compounded by poor communication and failing to involve teachers and principals when developing or changing policies that concern the use of data. This intensifies the fear that data will be used against them, as happened with the *Los Angeles Times*’s release of individual teacher value-added scores in 2010.

To aggravate the problem, many of our teacher pipelines – my own included – are slow to incorporate methods of effective data use, much less impart its value to future teachers. This particularly handicaps teachers for whom high-stakes decisions about salaries and contract renewals depend on how they interpret and respond to standardized assessment data. Even so, test scores do not capture the universe of a teacher’s work, and more achievement data is not the magic bullet for everyone. Indeed, we can inundate teachers with data, but without connections to practical methods for affecting student achievement, few will make decisions based on that data.

Essentially, reaching a critical mass of teachers and school leaders that understand and use data to inform their practice is a critical step across our tightrope over the gap between research and practice. But even if we assume that teachers have preparation and an eagerness to implement DDDM strategies, educators will still need mechanisms to access data in a way that effectively and easily translates into classroom strategies.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCHERS

There is also a great divide between the raw numbers on a researcher’s desk and actions based on their collection.

This is true for researchers within and independent of education agencies. In my work across the nation with researchers in school districts and state agencies, I observe an epic struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified researchers, especially since the economic downturn in 2008. Lingering budget cuts have forced many districts to reduce staff and capacity at all levels, especially those without a direct impact on student achievement and without jobs protected by contractual or tenure policies. In the case of the School District of Philadelphia, its proposed 2011-2012 budget called for the elimination of 3,820 positions, or 16 percent of the school district's workforce, including 50 percent of central office staff – among them data analysts and researchers (School District of Philadelphia 2011).

In addition to recruiting and retaining highly qualified analysts, district-level staff often have limited access to advanced statistical software or professional development to boost programming and analytic skills. As previously mentioned, these departments are inundated with compliance projects such as school progress reports, test administration, scoring, and reporting data to state or federal education offices. While analysts are busy with compliance, opportunities for investigations into potential root causes for achievement results disappear. In the meantime, costly programs that could be ineffective maintain district funding.

More importantly, data and accountability staff must be able to interpret and communicate results of analysis to non-technical audiences including teachers, parents, and board members. Lacking time to advocate for research-based recommendations further limits their ability to overcome resistance to data-based transformations of practice, policies, and programs.

Beyond district accountability offices, the larger milieu of grant-funded and academic researchers struggle with some of the same issues. On the one hand, they are more likely to employ highly qualified quantitative and qualitative researchers, as well as state-of-the-art statistical analysis tools. However, their location outside the walls where data is kept and interactions with students occur presents major roadblocks on the path to actionable data.

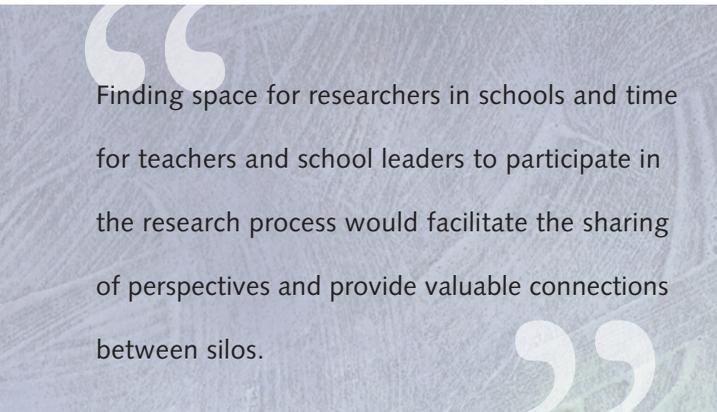
SPANNING THE DIVIDE: THE STRATEGIC DATA PROJECT

One pathway to impact for external researchers is to provide policymakers – within both school systems and government agencies – with data-backed recommendations, feedback that school-based research departments may not have the opportunity to give. For instance, the Consortium on Chicago School Research works with Chicago Public Schools to develop strategic plans for better student outcomes based on a continuous loop of research, evaluation, feedback, and policy adaptations.

The danger, however, is that education agency leaders and legislators usually do not have the time or resources to pressure-test the research they use to inform their decisions in their own contexts before acting upon the results. Even when high-quality research is available, policymakers may not take into account the context and potential consequences of a large-scale intervention. For example, the Tennessee STAR randomized study of class sizes in early grades, often lauded as a well-done research experiment, showed statistically significant gains for students in smaller classes. However, when California required smaller classes for early elementary grades based on the results of the STAR study, the considerably costly effort failed to raise achievement, most

likely because the state needed to dig deeper into a labor pool of teachers who were less effective and not hired when teaching positions were more competitive.

One solution that aims to circumvent these hazards is the forging of effective partnerships between those who research and those who practice. At the Strategic Data Project (SDP), we aim to create such partnerships, providing districts and states with rigorous research using existing and accessible data. SDP builds research capacity by recruiting and placing strong quantitative research fellows in school districts, state educa-



Finding space for researchers in schools and time for teachers and school leaders to participate in the research process would facilitate the sharing of perspectives and provide valuable connections between silos.

tion agencies, and charter management organizations while providing training for internal staff alongside the recruited fellows. Fellows use robust analysis as a lever for policy change and effective, better-informed decision making. The exchange of access to data for university-based researchers and analysis for school districts can lead to interventions that improve student outcomes. For instance, several SDP fellows have piloted and evaluated programs to address “summer melt,” the phenomenon of students reporting acceptance into universities and not showing up as enrolled in the fall after graduation. Their interventions provided summer counseling to help students make the leap between high school graduation and college matriculation.

In my role as a research analyst at SDP, I conduct a set of analyses for school districts around two central foci: student trajectories through secondary and postsecondary education and teacher career pathways (recruitment, placement, and retention). Like doctors studying symptoms or mechanics examining engines, my colleagues and I reveal patterns and trends across educational systems with diagnostic analyses that provide examples of analyses that can be performed with the data districts have on hand, platforms for deeper investigations, and evidence that district and school leaders can employ to support interventions and reforms.

Drawing upon my experience as a teacher, I strive to repackage our complex analyses into narratives that are easy for audiences without advanced statistical training to understand and translate to further investigations and targeted interventions. When I talk to district audiences about my work, I keep in mind my former resistance to ideas presented with “effect sizes” and honor the intelligence of district-based audiences who could just as easily confuse me with the specialized terminology of their fields. The statistical analysis we do can feel arcane and intimidating, but when we break it into digestible bites and connect it to examples that make sense to a superintendent, a principal, or a teacher, our research increases its potential to convince others to think or act differently in response to new information. For example, I often recount a veteran teacher in Milwaukee who told me that “teaching is a profession that eats its own young” when explaining that the students with whom novice and early career teachers are placed have, on average, lower prior test scores from the previous year than students in more experienced teachers’ classrooms. Ultimately, finding space for researchers in schools and time for teachers and school leaders to participate

in the research process would facilitate the sharing of perspectives and provide valuable connections between silos. SDP opens avenues to make this sharing possible.

THE FUTURE OF DDDM

Challenges persist. It is easy for consultants and outside researchers to misunderstand the kaleidoscope of contexts and political climates in which educational agencies operate and far too convenient to blame an outside agency when findings and actions based on them do not turn out as planned. This results in hesitancy to help leaders develop coherent, strategic plans for incorporating research into

the decision-making process. A clear process to bridge the gap between research and action is imperative for researchers and practitioners to work together.

From my perspective as both a researcher and a former teacher, a comprehensive plan toward positive impact through data-driven decisions must include the following elements:

- Leaders in policy and education agencies at the state and district level who can identify methodologically sound analyses, understand them within their own context, and, most importantly, have the courage to make data-driven policy changes within the milieu of the status quo.

REFLECTIONS ON THE UEP PROGRAM PROGRAM

What tools and knowledge from the UEP Program proved to be valuable in your post-grad role?

My time in the UEP Program set the stage for the work I do today in two principal ways: experience employing quantitative analysis in the research process and communication with education policy and research leaders, as well as stakeholders like parents, teachers, principals, and community members. Unlike many other graduate programs in education policy and research, the UEP Program broke through the barrier of cleaned “classroom datasets” by providing opportunities to collect my own data and work with large national and international datasets. As a student, I participated in action research to identify patterns of parent engagement at Providence Full Service Community Schools, developed research-based recommendations to Rhode Island Commissioner Deborah Gist regarding state education finance, and analyzed the relationship between autonomy, accountability, choice, and student achievement among thirty countries using data from the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) assessment. My research assistantship with Ken Wong built my analytic muscles, and the hands-on practice in research design that I began learning at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and continued throughout the program informed my ability to manage research projects and construct analytic models. I leaned heavily on these experiences during my first months at SDP.

Based on your experiences in the UEP Program and in the field, what are your thoughts on graduate training in education and public policy in general?

Broadly, the thirst for education research across the sector creates a demand for people who not only know how to conduct and interpret data but also understand the context of education practice and policy and employ research to make changes that drive successful reforms. It is critical that graduate training in education and public policy provide a foundation from which students can grow into candidates that meet this demand.

- A vehicle that makes research and data accessible and useful to stakeholders with direct impact on students.
- A clear process for integrating data use for effective improvement in schools. Once data are accessible, a way to identify and select next steps will connect it to actions.
- Trust and relationships with people who will need to respond to data and carry out interventions. Incorporating stakeholders (teachers, parents, etc.) in the process of education reform is a good first step. Like Apple and Google do for their products, developing ongoing feedback loops to improve initiatives and interventions can improve morale and system-wide efficiency and effectiveness.
- A manageable number of simultaneous interventions. It's easy for schools and districts to become overwhelmed with interventions. Each one requires

an investment of resources and human capital to maintain. Initiatives to improve the use of data should be targeted carefully and evaluated for their effectiveness and usefulness so that those that do not meet the mark can be taken off the plate.

Together, with room for good communication and enough people willing to cross over to a different perspective, we can tie a more easily crossed lattice of ropes between silos. Most importantly, strong local leadership is essential to manage the flow of data into action by engaging teachers, researchers, fellow leaders, and a community of individuals and organizations invested in education reform to address these elements and engineer new ways to bridge the gap between research and practice.

REFERENCE

School District of Philadelphia. 2011. *FY 2011-12 Consolidated Budget*. Presented to the School Reform Commission on May 4. Philadelphia, PA: School District of Philadelphia.



BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN TEACHERS AND POLICY

Heather Tow-Yick

Heather Tow-Yick is the executive director of Teach for America Rhode Island.

Recently, Teach for America Rhode Island and Brown University's Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program launched a partnership that will enable participating Teach For America teachers to deepen their impact in the classroom. Seven of our teachers, also known as corps members, are currently enrolled part time in the program while teaching full time in Rhode Island traditional and charter public schools.

An important part of Teach for America's mission is to cultivate committed leaders in education who, inspired and informed by their classroom experience, will advocate for educational excellence from all sectors. The UEP Program's rigorous curriculum in policy analysis, planning, and development is an important complement to the instructional leadership experience corps members gain in the classroom. Completing both their corps commitment and this course of study will allow corps members to truly connect policy and instruction, using what works in the classroom to inform policy and leveraging knowledge of broader issues in education to enhance their efficacy in the classroom.

Accelerating leadership in urban education and policy and focusing on the direct connection between classroom teaching and policy decisions is crucial to making the systemwide change necessary for our state's students. Too often there is a significant disconnect between the agenda of policymakers and what's happening in the classroom. This partnership presents an opportunity for our corps members to bridge that gap. They will bring learnings from one classroom to another – both from their K–12 classrooms to Brown and in the opposite direction. As full-time teachers they have an important understanding of what accelerates student learning and what stalls it, what enables teachers to do their best work and what keeps them from it. They can bring this knowledge to their UEP Program class discussions and to future work in the policy arena.

Similarly, corps members will benefit as teachers from the broader context their UEP Program coursework provides, empowered to advocate from the classroom. In addition, the UEP Program curriculum's focus on statistical analysis of macro-level data will help corps members better interpret the classroom-level data they use on a daily basis to track student progress toward class learning goals.

One of our corps members enrolled in the UEP Program worked on a project this fall proposing a system by which teachers could apply to write their own curriculum instead of using the district's scripted curriculum in return for increased accountability for student achievement. This project is an excellent example of the innovative thinking that our partnership with the UEP Program is designed to encourage. I look forward to seeing corps members accelerate their leadership, drawing from their first-hand experience as instructional leaders and the skill set gained from their UEP Program coursework. Their work has incredible potential to speed change and, most importantly, raise student achievement in Rhode Island.



“First Responders” in D.C. Public Schools: The Critical Role of Operations in School Reform

WAYNE TALIAFERRO

School operations are often left out of the school reform conversation, but ensuring that schools are resourced, supported, and maintained efficiently is the foundation for effective change.

As a recent graduate of the Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program at Brown University, I constantly reflect on my experiences and training while in the program as it relates to my current work in urban public education. Since graduating, I have relocated to Washington, D.C., where I work within the central office of D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). It is

always interesting to be working in a school district that has attracted the eyes of the nation as, arguably, the epicenter of education reform. However, it is even more interesting to work within this district on a team that does not necessarily receive that same heightened attention but whose role is just as significant and instrumental in moving the district toward its reform goals.

My role as a project coordinator for the critical response team within the DCPS Office of the Chief of Staff – an office that largely oversees school operations and compliance – was created

Wayne Taliaferro is project coordinator for the critical response team in the Washington, D.C., Public Schools Office of the Chief of Staff and a 2011 graduate of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program.

in 2007 as an accountability reform effort to fill the information void and communication challenges with our internal and external stakeholders. Ensuring efficiency and maintaining compliance standards ranging from the most basic to the most sophisticated areas of school operations requires a staff of liaisons that can both effectively communicate on these areas to stakeholders and quickly respond to project assignments.

COMMUNICATING TO ENSURE DAILY EFFICIENCY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN DCPS

As our Chief often reminds us in staff meetings, we are not the glamorous team that you hear about in local and national education discussions. We don't oversee curriculum and instruction, we don't handle assessments, and we have very little to do with human capital decisions – to name a few of the hot topics on the radar of urban education reform. However, our team's work serves as a foundation for any school reform by making sure that schools are properly and efficiently resourced, supported, and maintained without waste, to a standard of quality that our district is held accountable for – and that ultimately affects the performance outcomes of our students and school-based staff.

Along with meeting the responsibilities of school operations, there is also a large responsibility to communicate and collaborate on each area of school operations to ensure daily efficiency. As a coordinator with the critical response team, I often find myself working in tandem with the Office of Human Resources, the Office of the Chief Operating Officer, and the offices of our Instructional Superintendents (to name a few) to quickly resolve issues that arise on a daily basis that may interrupt that efficiency. From issues of over-enrollment and enrollment

projections to school discipline protocols to staffing and maintenance emergencies, I am responsible for acting as a first responder when I receive calls on these and many other issues that are raised by internal and external stakeholders.

For example, I partnered with a principal, a youth engagement intervention specialist, and an instructional superintendent to address a complex enrollment issue: What was the best course of action for an incoming over-aged and under-credited eighth-grade student, zoned for a less developmentally appropriate PS-8 (pre-school through eighth grade) education campus, with an unfinished discipline sentence from an independent school and possible special education needs? While issues like these do not represent the norm, they reflect the diversity of challenges our team faces. Not to mention the bulk of smaller issues that we handle, which ultimately amount to a large burden relief for principals and school-based staff who were once faced with these challenges without our support.

Furthermore, there is an accountability aspect to my role that I must respond to every day. When asked to follow up on these matters, which can involve any number of people from parents to internal departments to school leadership, I have to make sure I can communicate how I collaborated and moved toward a resolution on each case, both as a measure of accountability and as an effort to strengthen communication and transparency within our district and city.

LESSONS GAINED AS A PRACTITIONER

As I continue to grow in my new role, I am gaining a better understanding of not only what it means to be an education practitioner, but also what it takes to be one. Likewise, my short time as a practitioner has shaped my outlook on

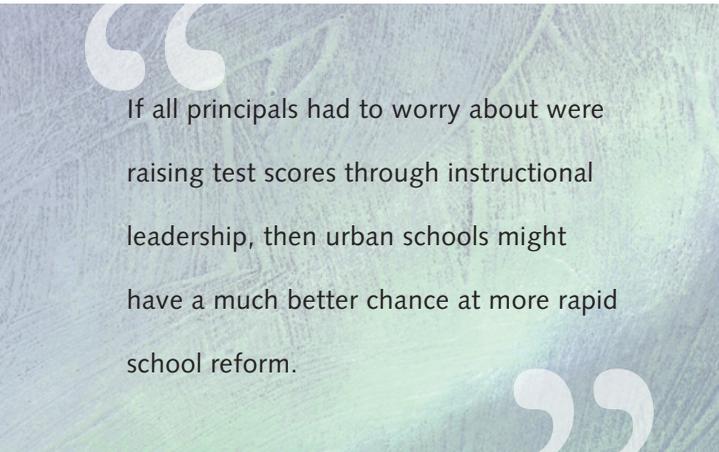
the reform needs within public education on a much more localized scale. As all-encompassing a topic as school reform is, I am now more compelled to consider reform issues from an administrative lens – one from which I was less inclined to consider prior to my current work. In this section, I describe some critical insights I’ve gained in my months on the ground since leaving graduate school.

Operational Support for Schools: A Key Reform Component

As I mentioned before, the work of my team does not necessarily fit within the glamorous school reform image that often characterizes discussions on urban public education. However, my experience has taught me to wholeheartedly recognize the importance of maintain-

different needs without air conditioning or adequate supplies. Try leaving operational decisions regarding threats to resources, facility work orders, or safety and security interventions on the shoulders of principals with no recourse for support. Or even worse, try finding that support in a district as large and as bureaucratic as DCPS without any communication mechanism in place for getting a response. There is no doubt that school operations and communications support have a critical place in any conversation about education reform.

Now, visualize these scenarios more concretely from the lens of a school principal. If all principals had to worry about were raising test scores through instructional leadership, then urban schools might have a much better chance at more rapid school reform. Now, visualize these scenarios from the lens of school operations and communications. While principals are given decision-making authority over their individual schools, they are also faced with challenges that may require further administrative collaboration, which can be hard to navigate from a school building with its own routine of daily operations. On any given day I may receive calls from principals and other school-based administrators faced with accommodating incoming students who have been displaced, transferred, or frequently relocated for any number of reasons but find themselves with limited capacity for supporting these students. I might even receive a call from a school administrator looking for direction on appropriately handling the sudden loss of a student from an operational standpoint, or even to facilitate the appropriate administrative staff response to a school suffering damages from inclement weather. There are no two days that look alike in the Office of the Chief of Staff, and my job is to make sure our response is critical, timely, and appropriate in each case I take on.



If all principals had to worry about were raising test scores through instructional leadership, then urban schools might have a much better chance at more rapid school reform.

ing efficiency in school operations, as schools will ultimately not function without it. This is not to downplay the hard work and innovative efforts of schools and other departments, but there are basic principles and accommodations that must be met operationally before we can have some of the more conceptual and innovative conversations about school reform – and not just in Washington. If you do not believe me, try teaching a third-grader in a class of more than thirty-five students with

It is easy to see how these kinds of decisions can be overwhelming beyond what can be immediately managed by a principal. Once I am looped in on these issues, I become the person who brings together the appropriate offices to make sure that we are best meeting the needs of our students, especially those in more extreme circumstances. These interoffice collaborations may include intervention specialists from our youth engagement team, instructional superintendents from our chief academic team, and, many times, operations specialists from our own school operations team, to name a few. Imagine what school reform would like if principals and schools did not have this type of support.

Finding Common Ground between Schools and Central Office

Many of the challenges my colleagues and I face can be found in different contexts in urban school districts around the country. But working on the administrative side of education brings its own negative connotations, which have been embedded in school districts for years as the result of a historically tension-filled relationship between school-based staff and administration. As accountability standards continue to rise for everyone, so does this challenge.

I consider the challenge to be based more on perceptions than substantive tensions in many cases, since both school-based staff and administrative staff, for the most part, want the same positive outcomes for our district – just on different terms.

From my perspective, schools want greater autonomy with a focus on processes to achieve higher performance, while administration wants to see the same high achievement but with stricter adherence to data and best practices. Trying to find the commonality among

these different approaches to the inputs of successful schools and classrooms can make education reform difficult.

Nonetheless, our district has made strides by increasing school and central office collaboration, such as offering schools autonomy based on certain expectations set by schools and administration. However, challenges still remain, especially when trying to undo issues and tensions that have become so deep and nuanced over time.

The Importance of Engaging Communities in Decision Making

In addition to the internal struggles that I have encountered, it is also important that communities are on board with school and administrative decisions. While in some cases, trying to align all three sides can be a hindrance, the aftermath of not doing so or attempting to do so can leave districts in a worse predicament. Yes, there is a great need to ensure that central offices are “smart” and effective at leading and supporting schools with administrative competency. And yes, in order to do this, it is important to overcome the challenge of aligning the work of schools and central offices. However, just as importantly, the challenge of engaging communities must be met in reform efforts both in policy and in practice.

For example, in Washington it is a local policy that community engagement forums are hosted before each year’s budget development cycle based on the idea (which I agree with) that without community buy-in, reform efforts remain one-sided: operationally, instructionally, and organizationally. However, what has been done as a result of these forums has sometimes been an unpopular decision that appeared to be less of a compromise and more like a one-sided approach (school closings, consolidation of elementary and

REFLECTIONS ON THE UEP PROGRAM

What tools and knowledge from the UEP Program proved to be valuable in your post-grad role?

I certainly do not use every skill that I gained from the UEP Program, and I would go so far as to say that very few graduates do. However, the foundation and exposure that the program gave me into urban education was invaluable. The hands-on experience of having a practicum and an internship in the field, specifically in an urban public school district, helped to arm me with a strong and well-rounded skill set. The content and contextual knowledge of policies and policy issues from courses such as Urban Politics and School Governance has helped give me leverage on certain issues and discussions in my current position.

In what areas did you feel underprepared?

One year limits the time available to hone your craft in a program like the UEP Program and a setting like Brown University and Providence. In that regard, certain technical and administrative skills that affect the public administration side of public education were not addressed as frequently as I might have expected from a practitioner-based policy program. Consequently, I am less inclined to offer input on certain operational matters concerning contracting, budgeting, and other financial decisions that involve the Office of the Chief of Staff to some degree. Having even a basic background on some of these matters would have added to my skill set and marketability, since school districts ultimately function as large, structured organizations that require these types of key managerial functions.

Based on your experiences in the UEP Program and in the field, what are your thoughts on graduate training in education and public policy in general?

A graduate education in these fields is highly relevant, since the systems and structures of public sector organizations can be very complex. The knowledge and skills gained from these programs are invaluable, very applicable, and a great foundation for a career in public service. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that certain skills can only be gained from experience, as I am learning as a fresh face in a highly politicized organization.

middle schools into K–8 campuses, closing of parent resource centers, etc.). While ideally these decisions are made with the best of intentions, the outcomes have spawned backlash, with consequences that have sometimes hindered families in our most disadvantaged communities from accessing some of our district's more desirable programs, due to further limiting resources that will accommodate students.

Ensuring Equity

Given the general challenges I described that can cloud urban school districts, the specific challenges that affect school operations move the conversation to the topic of equity. This is especially true in a city like Washington, D.C., where communities are very vocal but intra-district disparities are, unfortunately, very wide (Lyons & Walsh 2010). However, in an effort by our district to maintain compliance in the midst of expansive needs that can be difficult to quantify, given uncertain enrollment trends that ultimately drive funding decisions, the integrity

of district operations can be questioned when each school does not receive the same level of services.

What this really translates to in my role is helping to decrease discretion in certain general areas of school operations – more specifically, in the areas of school operations related to enrollment issues, as the budget implications can create high stakes. While I am by no means an auditor, I do work closely with our enrollment team in the Office of the Chief Operating Officer to make sure that our policies regarding our out-of-boundary and early childhood lotteries, two of our district’s mechanisms for instilling school choice options for parents and students, are followed properly in practice by our schools. These policies range from preparation assistance for internal communications to school-based staff, to briefings with internal department stakeholders, to hosting community forums to update families on our enrollment policies and practices and help them make informed decisions for their child’s education.

Unfortunately, the equity challenge related to enrollment occurs when information gaps and capacity limits marginalize some of our district’s families, which results in an intra-district disparity. Nonetheless, I am bound by compliance when I find myself on the receiving end of calls from council members to family members who want to know why their constituent or cousin or brother or child does not have access to the same educational options in their neighborhood compared to another neighborhood. It is a tough message to relay, but it is part of the job and unfortunately part of the reality of intra-district disparities. Nonetheless, consistent improvements to our district’s offerings and strategic planning and reform are most certainly moving our district in the right direction.

Policy Concepts vs. Political Realities

The work of my office and my role within it specifically lends grounded insight around education policy issues. I now recognize that the need for efficient school operations, coupled with the need for transparency within the compliance and communications of those operations, speaks more to the politics of public education rather than the larger conceptually based policies of public education.

My most profound, yet in some ways simple, realization in my role so far is that possessing the content knowledge that it takes to effect school reform is not going to move reform very far without understanding the politics that it takes to get the job done. It takes negotiation, the proper buy-in, and effective leadership capabilities paired with having the appropriate content knowledge. While a classroom education may be able to teach the latter, only experience coupled with establishing powerful stakeholder relationships can teach the rest.

MOVING FORWARD IN URBAN EDUCATION REFORM

It is hard to take a position on what the most promising and innovative areas of school reform will be, or even where they will take urban districts in the upcoming years. In Washington, D.C., alone, reform ideas are incubating every day. However, the mobilization of those concepts can be slow to manifest as policy, practice, and community stakeholders often operate within different contexts. Nonetheless I will say that in my short time in the field, I honestly foresee the most productive efforts going toward human capital turnarounds, designing curriculums that reflect the needs of a globalized economy, and enhancing facility and technology improvements, with a particular focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Even from an operations and compliance standpoint, I see organizational changes (though incremental) that are beginning to support these reforms.

More importantly, I foresee the use of data to inform all these decisions growing into a more respectable and substantial component of school reform. As data use becomes increasingly more sophisticated and hopefully more comprehensive, I hope to see data-based decisions more closely linked to funding and operations decisions to achieve the best outcomes for our children with the greatest needs.

It is also my hope that the funding streams for these efforts will parallel spending efforts in other areas of social reform. Until this parallel is addressed more effectively on an institutional level, no amount of education reform solely, or the “be all end all” of standardized assessments used to hold them accountable, will be enough to overcome the pervasive achievement gap that is fueled by social and economic

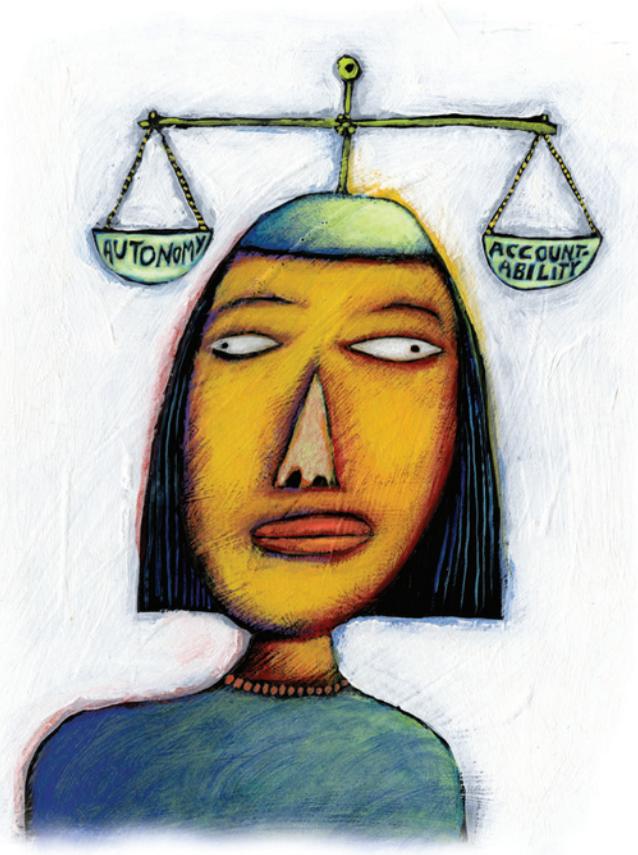
disparity. As Diane Ravitch (2010) noted, school reform must work in tandem with social reform.

Today’s political and social turbulence, fueled by trying economic times, makes it a critical time for educators to make some key decisions on the future of public education, given the impact of these circumstances on our nation’s urban communities. While my views are much more informed by the directions that I see being taken locally, I am still hopeful about the future of urban education reform for our students in urban districts across the country – both those who are excelling, and those with the greatest challenges. That being said, I hope that reformers at the forefront of urban school reform work from a position of consciousness about the students, families, and communities that they serve, recognizing that all communities and their children deserve access to a quality education and the right to be involved in the decisions that affect them.

REFERENCES

Lyons, S., and N. Walsh. 2010. *Money Well Spent: How Positive Social Investments Will Reduce Incarceration Rates, Improve Public Safety, and Promote the Well-Being of Communities*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.

Ravitch, D. 2010. *Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York: Basic Books.



Keeping the Charter School Bargain: The Effective Management of Autonomy and Accountability

BRYANT JONES

Charter schools and their performance are often in the spotlight, but little attention is paid to the charter school authorizers that can make the difference between a school that fails and one that succeeds.

At MATCH Charter Public School, a high-poverty middle school in Boston, the days are highly structured, from 7:00 a.m. when students arrive until 4:30 p.m. when they leave. In a classic, “no excuses” charter school environment, all aspects of teaching and learning at MATCH are purposeful, continuously improved

upon, and thoughtfully aligned to the school’s mission: helping each student achieve success in college and beyond. The school has been ranked as one of *U.S. News & World Report*’s top 100 high schools, and it has had some of the consistently highest standardized test scores in the state of Massachusetts.

Before coming to Brown University’s Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program, I wondered: What is it about being a charter school that allows a school like MATCH to outperform traditional public district schools?

Bryant Jones is the charter school specialist in the Office of Transformation at the Rhode Island Department of Education and a 2010 graduate of Brown University’s Urban Education Policy Program.

Answering this question became my focus when I eventually enrolled in the UEP Program.

While at Brown, I spent much of my time exploring the origins of the charter movement and trying to really understand how charters work. I discovered that for many in this very diverse movement, the core of the charter concept is a crucial bargain: trading autonomy for increased accountability. If implemented with fidelity to this deal, a state’s charter law should confer to a founding group the authority to operate a public school free from all but the most essential rules that ensure that public funds are well spent and that student’s civil rights are protected. In exchange, charters are held accountable for what matters most – academic and operational performance outcomes.

In theory, the advantages of this arrangement for children can be tremendous. Free from the constraints of overly stringent certification requirements, poorly designed procurement policy, divisive politics, and collective bargaining agreements, advocates argue, school leaders can nimbly make difficult decisions to achieve the best possible results for their students. If such decisions aren’t being made – and results suffer because of it – school staff risk their livelihoods.

Supporting the growth of autonomous, accountable schools eventually became my career focus. I am currently the charter school specialist in the Office of Transformation at the Rhode Island Department of Education, which oversees Rhode Island’s sixteen charter schools.

CHARTER SCHOOLS: RETHINKING SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Charter reform was and continues to be radical. It calls on policymakers to rethink the systems that define public education in this country. “Existing institutions,” argue political scientists Chubb and Moe (1990) in their well-

known polemic, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, “cannot solve the problem, because they are the problem” (p. 3). Throughout the twentieth century, various elements of our public school systems arose to solve particular abuses and fit certain circumstances. School boards, for instance, and the professional bureaucracies they oversee called school districts, were created in many of our nation’s cities during the Progressive Era to “keep politics out of education.” Professional bureaucracies overseen by disinterested citizens would rid urban schools of the corruption and patronage associated with mayors, alderman, and other city officials. They would also rationalize and make coherent and more efficient previously decentralized schools using Frederick Taylor’s scientific management techniques (Hess 2011, p. 104).

Teacher certification and teacher tenure laws also began to become enshrined in state law during this era, and they too were responses to the messy politics and unprofessionalism of pre-Progressive Era schools (Hess 2011, p. 140). These are only a few – but important – structures that are hardwired into public school systems across our country. School years of 180 days, kindergarten through twelfth grade configurations, and self-contained classrooms with one teacher, too, are all a part of the “grammar of schooling” that is ubiquitous in so many public schools.

Atop that uniform foundation are a number of disparate rules, some enacted by state legislatures, some by Congress, and most by school boards. Major education reforms must go through these rulemaking bodies. Typically, these efforts are based on the best practices of pilot sites and then scaled up across a district, state, or even the entire country via new rules. At the core of these efforts is a belief that we can mandate our way to excellent schools, that, in Hess’s (2010) words,

“the right mix of remedies is known – or will soon be identified – and that the challenge is primarily a technical one of program design, professional development, and implementation” (p. 5). What if there is tremendous diversity within a city, state, or across the country? What if central office staff in a large district or policy-makers can’t with certainty identify the particular constraints that directly impact student achievement in every school? What if our research methods are too blunt or too slow for that? What if entrepreneurial school-level personnel can more quickly discern the issues that affect their students than bureaucrats or researchers? What if – like in many other sectors – leaders simply need to make difficult decisions with limited evidence to achieve ambitious goals? What if our governance structures and the myriad rules that affect schools prevent school leaders from making these gut calls quickly?

Advocates of systemic or institutional school reform argue that our existing systems prevent dramatic performance gains in our worst schools. The barriers in traditional systems, they argue, restrict entrepreneurial educators from attempting radical changes and taking advantage of opportunities to implement new, unproven strategies in pursuit of extraordinary results (Smith & Petersen 2011, p. 13; Hill 1995, p. 1).

Such flexibility allowed for big changes at MATCH in its early years. For example, a teacher who didn’t fully buy into the school’s approach to instruction was replaced, and the behavioral system was overhauled abruptly. Such efforts required the buy-in of all stakeholders and required an enormous investment of staff time and energy to implement. While such changes are not impossible for any school in a traditional school district, swift implementation would be very difficult and would most likely require altering a collective bargaining agreement and other legal hurdles.

These kinds of about-faces were not uncommon in MATCH’s history. The acronym MATCH originally stood for “Media and Technology Charter High.” In its early years, it was a demonstrably good school. On state standardized math and reading assessments, MATCH was the highest-performing open admission high school and the highest-performing predominantly African American high school in the state.

But, for school leadership, this was a low bar. Compared with schools in the suburbs – where students routinely matriculated and graduated from college – the school’s proficiency levels were low. In the school’s third year, its high-tech focus was abandoned. In its place, the school created a full-time tutor corps that worked with students individually or in small groups for a few periods a day on basic skills in addition to their normal class load. One-on-one tutoring had been their most effective intervention, so school leadership doubled down by reorganizing the school to support an unprecedented degree of tutoring (Frumkin, Manno & Edgington 2011, p. 52). The idea worked well for MATCH, as its high test scores and college-going rates show.

Several charter schools around the country with a dizzying array of different school models have taken risks and leveraged the autonomy-for-accountability arrangement with great results. Methodologically strong studies have shown sizeable effects for multiple charter schools in particular cities and states. In New York City, two studies using different, but very strong, hard-to-argue-with methodologies uncovered similar positive effects for each year students attended charter schools (Hoxby, Murarka & Kang 2009; Raymond 2010). In Boston, researchers found positive, significant effects of attending a charter school in English language arts, math, and writing assessments in both middle and high schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009). A

REFLECTIONS ON THE UEP PROGRAM

What tools and knowledge from the UEP Program proved to be valuable in your post-grad role?

The program evaluation and school governance UEP Program coursework were invaluable for me. Essentially, my job is to manage an annual mixed-methods research study for every charter school in Rhode Island. I would not be able to do my job without the deep knowledge of qualitative and quantitative program evaluation methods that we learned in the UEP Program.

The governance coursework was very helpful as well. When people discuss charter schools, they typically discuss politics or the school models that a few very popular, successful charter operators have developed. Lost in the conversation is an idea far simpler and more revolutionary – chartering schools is a smarter way to govern schools. I was able to explore why and how the charter concept was being implemented across the country in Dr. Kenneth Wong's school governance course. That research allowed me to bring a lot of best thinking in this work from around the country on day one of my job.

In what areas did you feel under-prepared?

No matter what field you're in, leading complex projects requires a general management skill set. Specifically, it helps to understand the basics of strategy, budgeting, and people, performance, and project management. Before coming to the UEP Program, I was lucky enough to work in an organization with a strong performance culture, so much of the professional development I received for that job was to expose me to the rudiments of these areas. It would have been nice, however, to have a UEP Program course that deepened my knowledge in these areas. I ended up (very stressfully) picking these skills up on the fly.

Based on your experiences in the UEP Program and in the field, what are your thoughts on graduate training in education and public policy in general?

As I mentioned in my last answer, the UEP Program didn't spend much time developing our general management skill set. This is not uncommon in public education training programs. Most principals, for instance, aren't allowed to manage their budgets or many other operational tasks because they were never trained to do this work. Similarly, plucked from the teaching and school leadership ranks, many district and state department of education personnel are never given the same preparation in management that is commonplace for general managers in many other fields.

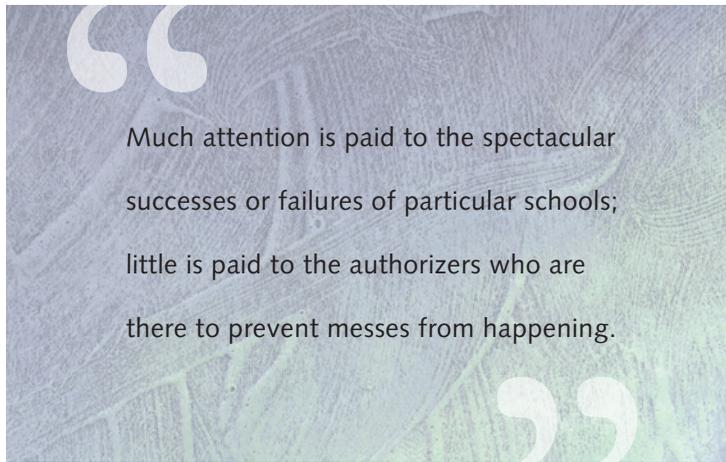
This is unfortunate because having leaders with that skill set is crucial (but not sufficient) to implementing the very complex projects that are required to reform our school systems. The more time I spend in this field, the more I am convinced that many of the issues public education faces don't stem from lack of great ideas about how to dramatically improve student achievement. From educator evaluation systems to wraparound services, we have several excellent strategies that can do great things for children. A big part of the problem, however, is that at all levels, we lack the people with the training to execute these ideas well at scale. Until our schools of education start teaching Drucker alongside Dewey, I believe that many of our education reforms will not live up to their promise.

national Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study found that charters in five states – Arkansas, Colorado (Denver), Illinois (Chicago), Louisiana, and Missouri – produced significant, positive effects on reading and math assessments for their students (CREDO 2009).

But chartering a school is no guarantee of success. The same CREDO national study found that only 17 percent of the schools in their sixteen-state sample were outperforming traditional public schools on math and reading standardized test scores; 46 percent of charters did no better, and 37 percent performed worse. These sobering findings make clear that simply giving a school autonomy is not enough to make it a great school. Charter leaders have an opportunity to do things more nimbly and differently than their traditional public school brethren.

THE KEY ROLE OF CHARTER AUTHORIZERS

Beyond poor results, some charter leaders have abused this opportunity. From financial scandals to “cream-ing” students (i.e., the use of selection criteria to ensure that better performing students attend a school), some charters have violated the public trust. In order to prevent such activities, charter schools have central authorities overseeing them. In theory, these authorities, which are called charter school authorizers, are supposed to regulate charter schools to ensure that they are high performing and use public funds appropriately. Unfortunately, across the country there are only a handful of great authorizers (almost every city and state mentioned above with strong results has a great authorizer). This crucial piece of charter schooling is highly under-discussed. Much attention is paid to the spectacular successes or failures of particular schools; little is paid to the authorizers who are there to prevent messes from happening.



Much attention is paid to the spectacular successes or failures of particular schools; little is paid to the authorizers who are there to prevent messes from happening.

The best authorizers maintain high standards throughout a charter’s life cycle. Holding a charter should be a privilege, and quality authorizers send this strong message from day one. The best use extensive processes that involve an in-person interview with the founding group and multiple rounds of paper applications. These applications – which often are hundreds of pages – ask applicants to detail their plans for a range of topics, including curriculum, instruction, governance, management, and serving students with special needs. Trained review teams evaluate each area using extensive rubrics. If the founding group has opened schools previously, great authorizers conduct intensive due diligence. Not unlike a venture capital firm, the financial viability of the school is scrutinized and site visits are conducted. More importantly, student achievement results and other relevant data are analyzed to determine whether the school’s educational program works as advertised.

Once applicants make it through the door, quality authorizers provide clear expectations about what it will take to gain charter renewal and then systematically collect evidence about a school’s progress towards those expectations. In practice, this means annual updates on school’s academic and fiscal outcomes and annual or semi-annual multi-day site visits. At the best authorizers, these visits cover

an extensive scope, including fiscal management, human resource strategy, curriculum, instruction, governance, leadership, and compliance with key laws. While the primary purpose of these visits is to document performance, the information they produce can also be diagnostic for schools. This gives schools a chance to correct course if their vision of a great school is not panning out as planned.

It must be noted that throughout a charter term, great authorizers work hard not to diminish school autonomy. This is a key difference between typical district central offices and charter school authorizers. District central offices typically mandate that their schools implement certain policies or practices – curriculum, instructional strategies, etc. – and hold them accountable for doing so. Charter authorizers, on the other hand, monitor performance and take great pains not to tell schools what to do (unless it involves illegal actions). When charters come up for renewal, quality authorizers – no matter the politics – make appropriate evidence-based decisions about a school’s continued operation. If such decisions require transitions for families, this process is managed closely with a goal of ensuring that all students end up in the school that best serves their needs.

I am currently working at an authorizer that is trying to become great. After finishing Brown’s UEP Program Program, I began my work as the charter school specialist in the Office of Transformation at the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). RIDE’s strategy for charter schools is to increase the number of high-performing schools while improving outcomes in existing charter schools. Its hope is that district schools will emulate our best charter schools by gradually adopting some of their best practices. To support this work, the Office of Transformation is building

a number of systems to ensure that districts have several excellent models to emulate.

Over the past year, the charter application process has been overhauled to make it much more difficult to obtain a charter. Applicants will now go through a two-stage vetting, and the second stage now includes an in-person interview for the founding group. This will allow applicants more time to flesh out their ideas and for us to get to know them better. This latter aspect is crucial, according to all the leading authorizers that RIDE consulted with. At best, a well-written charter application gives you a deep sense of what applicants know. It doesn’t give you the intangibles of knowing how well the group works together or if all the stakeholders in the founding group are actually involved in the proposal. This is the type of information that will give a sense of whether they can actually pull off their plans.

After applicants are approved, they will have to plan for an additional year. Previously, applicants had only a few months between getting their applications approved and opening their school doors. This is an intense period for most charter schools. Lights need to be turned on, desks need to be purchased, countless numbers of inspections need to occur, staff need to be hired, and so on. All of our existing school leaders requested that we extend this process for new school leaders. Rather than bombarding school leaders with operational issues, they argued that school leaders should have more time so that they could focus on writing curriculum and building the educational foundations of their schools.

A rigorous accountability system has also been built to ensure that our schools are high performing. Our charters are subject to high-stakes reviews every five years, and benchmarks were developed over the last year that they

must meet in order to gain charter renewal. These benchmarks span the gamut of school performance – from test scores, graduation rates, and the quality of a school’s curriculum to how well they manage their finances and comply with relevant state and federal laws. Districts lose funding for every student that leaves a charter school, and this accountability work will ensure that investments in charter schools provide the most value for taxpayers.

DISSEMINATING GREAT IDEAS AND PRACTICES MORE WIDELY

Besides these key quality control mechanisms, we are also thinking through how to most effectively get our charter school’s best work back into traditional public schools. Rhode Island’s charter sector will probably never have the scale of New Orleans or Washington, D.C., for instance, where charters account for over a third of schools. We want to make sure that the great ideas that come from our charters eventually touch as many students as possible through traditional public schools.

At the moment, I see RIDE’s approach to this work as if it were attempting to create a market. For markets to work, you need consumers to buy products, suppliers to supply products, and third-party organizations to provide high-quality information about products so that consumers make the right choices. The approach to making this market functional is three-pronged. First, large grants will be offered to charters that want to disseminate their best practices to traditional public schools – this gives them the access to capital necessary to become effective suppliers of professional development and implementation consulting. A large grant was recently awarded to the Learning Community Charter School to support their literacy partnership with the Central Falls School District and expand this work to East

Providence School District (for more information on this partnership, see Wiltshire, Gallo & Connolly 2010).

Second, the information generated from the accountability system will be easily accessible to the consumers: districts. And this information will go well beyond whether or not the school has high test scores; it will drill a level deeper and communicate how those results are generated. Districts will know, for instance, that there’s an excellent reading program or a very thoughtful approach to developing staff that might be driving strong results. Finally, to push districts to be active customers, the Rhode Island General Assembly has mandated that money (except for facilities funding) follow the student in the state. This will hopefully push districts to try new approaches to maintain revenue.

This latter piece is very crucial: the majority of school districts in our cities are not as entrepreneurial as they could be. Urban education suffers because not all school systems offer the key conditions – autonomy and accountability – to help entrepreneurship thrive responsibly. All school leaders need to be able to make the bold moves that MATCH’s leadership made in its early years. If these experiments fail, then our leaders need to try dramatically new approaches to meet the needs of students. The core conditions available to charter school leaders – the ability to hire and fire, change schedules, and oversee budgets – are not available to the overwhelming majority of traditional public school leaders in many of our nation’s cities. The core conditions available to authorizers – the ability to seek out and replace partners to best meet the needs of students – are not implemented in many school districts. While such conditions are not a guarantee of success, too often transformative change can’t even be attempted in traditional school systems; too many stakeholders have veto power.

A typical district principal, for instance, is subject to a plethora of rules, which her superintendent sets under the direction of a school board that is either democratically elected or appointed by someone who is democratically elected. And this is just local-level governance – state and federal levels involve a similarly dense layer of politically motivated players with real power. Bold, unilateral, timely action – the kind needed to make dramatic changes in chronically underperforming organizations – is nearly impossible. At every level, there is the potential for tense public discussion led by individuals who are accountable to the friends and families members of the employees who could lose their jobs or have their pay cut.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Charter schools offer a promising but incomplete solution for healing this broken governance system. They concentrate decision-making authority in the hands of those who are closest to the work of educating children, and they create the conditions and

incentives for success. As good as the best charter schools can be, there simply won't be enough of them any time soon to fix what ails our public schools. This is, in part, by design: As currently conceived in most charter laws, these operators were not designed to be the dominant educational providers. They were intended as R&D labs where entrepreneurial educators could prove what's possible. That's happened in quite a few places around the country.

Let's hope that districts are taking notice and learning where appropriate. And, as they do, my personal hope is that they focus not just on the effective school-level practices that come from the best charter schools but on the conditions that helped those entrepreneurs create great schools in the first place. Moving forward, the biggest lesson from charter schooling might be to change how we approach school reform. Instead of finding great ideas and mandating that everyone in diverse systems do them, perhaps we can start our reform efforts by asking: How do we create the right conditions to allow educators to solve problems?

REFERENCES

- Abdulkadiroglu, A., J. Angrist, S. Cohodes, S. Dynarski, J. Fullerton, T. Kane, and P. Pathak. 2009. *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot, and Traditional Schools*. Boston, MA: Boston Foundation.
- Chubb, J. E., and T. M. Moe. 1990. *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- CREDO. 2009. *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*. Palo Alto, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes.
- Frumkin, P., B. Manno, and N. Edgington. 2011. *The Strategic Management of Charter Schools: Frameworks and Tools for Educational Entrepreneurs*. Cambridge: Harvard Educational Press.
- Hess, F. 2010. *Education Unbound*. Alexandria, VA: ACSD.
- Hess, F. 2011. *The Same Thing Over and Over*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hill, P. 1995. *Reinventing Public Education*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Hoxby, C., S. Murarka, and J. Kang. 2009. *How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement*, August 2009 Report. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project.
- Raymond, M. 2010. *Charter School Performance in New York City*. Palo Alto, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes.
- Smith, K., and J. Petersen. 2011. *Pull and Push: Strengthening Demand for Innovation in Education*. Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners.
- Wiltshire, C., F. Gallo, and K. Connolly. 2010. "A Pioneering Collaboration to Improve Reading in Central Falls," *Voices in Urban Education* 27 (Spring), pp. 46–57. Available online at www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/VUE27_gallo.



IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: A COMMUNITY'S RESPONSIBILITY

Jill Corsi

Jill Corsi is special assistant to the president and vice president at Citizen Schools' national headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts, and a 2010 graduate of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program.

In the education reform world, there are differing perspectives on how to bring lasting change to failing schools in this country. There is, nevertheless, a shared understanding that opportunities provided to students who attend these failing schools are starkly different when compared to those available to their peers who attend thriving schools. In my work, I am driven by this point: It is the responsibility of education reform to ensure that the severe opportunity gap that exists in this country is eliminated.

In Brown University's Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program, I learned the fundamentals of change efforts and successes and challenges within our current system. Upon graduating, I was drawn to Citizen Schools, a nonprofit organization that, I believe, understands a key reality of underperforming traditional public schools: They lack the capacity necessary to authentically engage the community in the educational opportunities of their students. Citizen Schools adds this capacity to the schools it partners with by engaging and leveraging a second shift of educators made up of recent college graduates, community volunteers, and local professionals to impact student's educational opportunities in an expanded learning day. Citizen Schools recognizes that our traditional education delivery system doesn't always allow for authentic interaction with schools. It offers schools a mechanism to change the equation and open their doors to additional resources and shared responsibility to improve the opportunities they provide their students.

My knowledge and understanding gained during the UEP Program on the role of different stakeholders in education reform has served me very well in my role at Citizen Schools. I understand the challenges that accompany individual school and district reform, but more specifically, through my internship work with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's community organizing and engagement efforts, I recognize that lasting change is accompanied only through authentic engagement of the community where change is happening. Bringing this perspective to my role gives me the opportunity to contribute to, manage, and coordinate key strategic projects that face a scaling national nonprofit organization. An example includes analyzing what schools and districts are a good fit for a partnership with Citizen Schools. In a tight budgetary environment, this means examining public funding streams and state policies that allow individual schools, districts, or communities to use dollars in a sustainable way to offer their students an expanded learning day led by Citizen Schools.

While bringing change to schools is hard work, especially through a partnership-led model, I am excited to be part of an organization that truly recognizes not only the importance, but the true added value of the community in delivering educational opportunities.



The Director's Perspective: Creating the Future Change Agents in Urban Education

KENNETH WONG

The director of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program answers questions about how it is shaping and connecting the future leaders of education reform.

Dr. Kenneth Wong directs the Urban Education Policy (UEP) Program at Brown University. He holds a joint appointment with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) and Brown University's Education Department. He is the first Walter and Leonore Annenberg Chair for Education Policy and is currently the chair of the Education Department. Dr. Wong teaches the UEP Program core course on urban school governance and politics. His current research focuses on mayoral accountability, school funding, charter schools, and federal policy.

Q WHAT ARE THE MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION TODAY THAT YOU WOULD LIKE THE UEP PROGRAM TO PREPARE NEW POLICYMAKERS TO ADDRESS?

A Large urban school systems are complex organizations that are in need of significant systemic improvement. First, there is the challenge of scale. The largest 500 urban school districts enroll nearly half of our public school students. Many of the students in these systems are eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch and have limited English proficiency, and some are identified as in need of an individual education plan (IEP). Further, many urban schools are located in communities with high concentrated poverty. These challenges are in need of systemic response.

Unfortunately, many urban school systems have a governance system that is fragmented, maintain rigid jurisdictional boundary in isolation from other municipal service sectors, and lack the human capital capacity to initiate and sustain meaningful improvement initiatives. Our UEP Program aims to fill the capacity gap by supplying the next generation of systemic change agents and policy analysts at both the system and the school levels.

Q WHAT FIELDS HAVE UEP PROGRAM GRADUATES GONE INTO?

A We have graduated five UEP Program classes so far and we are in the process of recruiting for our seventh class that matriculates in June 2012. Our graduates have high job placement successes. Many of them are working for state departments of education and central offices in urban districts. For example, five UEP Program graduates are working at the Rhode Island Department of Education, supporting its Race to the Top initiatives, including performance management in charter schools and educator accountability and development. We have UEP Program alums working in leadership recruitment in New York City, teacher accountability in Boston, and performance management in Chicago, among others. Further, our UEP Program graduates support education innovations, such as charter schools (e.g., Trinity Academy for Performing Arts, the Rhode Island Mayoral Academy, and The Learning Community), after-school initiatives (e.g., CVS Highlander in Providence), and the alternative teacher pipeline. Yet another group of UEP Program graduates focuses on program evaluation, both in governmental agencies (such as the New York State Department of Education) and policy organizations (such as The Education Trust in Washington, D.C., and Providence Plan). Finally, many of our UEP Program graduates continue to pursue their passion for community engagement and college access.

Q IS THEIR APPROACH DIFFERENT FROM OTHER EDUCATION REFORMERS? IF SO, HOW?

A Our graduates have gone through a rigorously coherent training during a twelve-month period.

First, they benefit from the program's integration of theory and practice. The former includes multiple courses that draw on social science approach, methods, and knowledge. The latter is strengthened by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's deep field-based knowledge and practice. Our multidisciplinary and clinical faculty members contribute to an unusual network of change agents and policy analysts that offers the best learning opportunities for our students. In addition, a core requirement is a nine-month internship, culminating in a substantial deliverable that addresses an urban district challenge.

Finally, all our UEP Program students are exposed to both quantitative and qualitative research methods. They are trained as "consumers" of good research designs and reliable evidence. In other words, our more comprehensive approach to understand and act upon the systemic challenge in urban districts has prepared our students well for their career.

Q WHERE DO YOU MOST SEE UEP PROGRAM GRADUATES AS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MOST PROMISING AREAS OF INNOVATION?

A UEP Program graduates are forming the analytical and policy backbone of functioning urban school districts, as well as supporting initiatives that challenge the urban districts to perform even better. Within the system, our UEP Program graduates are skillful in leveraging diverse stakeholders and resources, not only within the district, but more importantly, outside of the district to support systemwide improvement. They have been active in supporting Rhode Island to successfully compete for the \$75 million Race to the Top grant. They are also supportive of the Rhode

Island Governor’s Urban Education Task Force and the new Rhode Island school funding formula. Outside of the system, our UEP Program graduates are highly active in the charter school sector, and they have formed their own network to share ideas and support one another’s work.

Q WHAT KIND OF IMPACT HAVE YOU SEEN FROM THEIR WORK IN THE FIELD?

A Since we’ve only graduated five classes, we are following their work and plan to document in greater details their impact in the near future. Even at this early stage of the program, though, we can say that UEP Program graduates and alums have contributed to the successful competition of the Rhode Island Race to the Top grant, the launching of the new Rhode Island school funding formula, the implementation of a new performance system on charter school accountability, and the broadening of community engagement across several urban districts.

Q WHAT LESSONS DO YOU THINK APPLY TO GRADUATE TRAINING IN EDUCATION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN GENERAL?

A Our UEP Program has a strong cohort model – all the students take the same class and develop their skills and knowledge together in a well-defined curriculum – and that has created the foundation for a strong sense of community. With about twenty to twenty-two students in each class, the UEP Program has created not only its own professional network, but also a strong social network. In ten years, we will have almost 200 UEP Program alumni sharing ideas and supporting one another’s exciting work, as well as challenging one another’s perspective, across many urban districts – and these change agents of Brown’s UEP Program will have made a collective impact in systemic improvement in our urban districts.



THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Christian Caldarone

Christian Caldarone is the director of property and community development at the Smith Hill Community Development Corporation in Providence, Rhode Island, and a 2007 graduate of Brown University's Urban Education Policy Program.

I believe that safe and healthy homes and communities are necessary for educational success at any appreciable scale. Therefore, since graduation I have been engaged in what I consider a supporting role of educational reform. So, while there is currently no formal connection between my community development work and local school reform efforts, I have contributed to the rebuilding of more than sixty lead-safe, affordable homes in a highly concentrated area and have helped stabilize my community in the face of the terrible foreclosure crisis. All my work is guided by several points of emphasis that I've taken from the UEP Program. Particularly, I seek to cultivate a strategic vision that includes a high degree of collaboration and the nurturing of an expanding network of meaningful partners.

Community work is complicated, unpredictable, and often focused on the immediate needs of any given situation. Despite the often reactive nature of the work, I pay close attention to natural areas of intersection in all my endeavors in order to seek lasting partnerships. Rec Night, a successful four-year-old gang intervention/prevention program started on Smith Hill, is the result of this type of creative partnership. What began as an informal collaboration between Smith Hill Community Development Corporation, Providence College, and the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence has grown stronger along with Rec Night's success and is set to take a significant step forward, as Providence College is opening its first off-campus "Annex." Dedicated to community learning and outreach, the Annex space is located next to my organization's new office and will include a common community room. This unique relationship will allow our respective organizations to have a greater impact on our community, leverage our partnership for increased grant-funding opportunities, and produce collaborative efforts beyond the scope of what we are each currently able to accomplish.

Another aspect of my community work has brought me into more direct contact with educational reform efforts. As a board member of the Providence Community Library (PCL), I have been involved with efforts to support literacy through a growing partner-

ship between the PCL and the Providence Public School District (PPSD). Over the last year, both organizations have collaborated on the creation of systemwide, grade-level summer reading lists. In addition, our librarians will soon have access to the curriculum for each grade level, which will allow them to directly support the literacy goals and benchmarks of the PPSD. This formalized partnership is a major step forward in the relationship between the school department and Providence's community libraries and represents an excellent chance for cross-system reform in support of common educational goals.

There will surely be a reduction in the number of nonprofit affordable housing developers in Rhode Island over the next two years. Many organizations in related fields across the nation face the same bleak outlook as competition for funding has degenerated into virtual fistfights for diminishing resources at all levels of government. In this difficult environment, creativity and the forging of critical partnerships are necessary for survival. I believe that my UEP Program studies, by focusing on strategic vision, partnerships and innovative thinking, have prepared me well for today's challenges and opportunities.



Annenberg Institute for School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University, Box 1985
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

Web: www.annenberginstitute.org

Twitter: @AnnenbergInst

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Providence, RI
Permit #202



This book is printed on Environment® Paper. This 100 percent recycled paper reduces solid waste disposal and lessens landfill dependency. By utilizing this paper,

- 4.14 trees were preserved for the future.
- 2,979,128 BTUs of energy were conserved.
- 12.4 pounds of solid waste were not generated.
- 1,787 gallons of wastewater flow were saved.
- 389 pounds of greenhouse gases were prevented from forming.

