

# Our Urban Schools

Leaders are shaped in part by the context in which they lead. By *context* I mean the different environments and settings wherein leaders engage with others. Successful leaders are often able to effect changes in context, which are prerequisites for altering what is and creating the conditions for what could be. Whether results are positive or negative depends on many factors. Leaders may be able to control some factors; others defy their influence. Followers will often disagree with leaders as to what should be sustained and what should be changed, why change is necessary, what the pace of change should be, or whether change should occur at all. Understanding context is essential to principals' and superintendents' ability to develop strategies for leading change and improvement in urban schools and school districts.

The focus of this book is leadership in America's urban schools and school districts, particularly the principals and superintendents who, with teachers and other staff, educate millions of children in elementary, middle, and high schools across America. The quality of instruction in classrooms and the effectiveness of leadership in schools and school districts are the most important variables that schools can influence to improve student achievement. I believe that there are both generic characteristics of effective leadership and particular characteristics that are defined by the purposes of the organizations or institutions leaders lead, and by the contexts in which these organizations function. I will use both my general experience with leadership and my own work and experience serving as a superintendent in five school districts—Springfield Township, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Oklahoma

City; San Diego; and, most recently, Boston—to convey to aspiring and current school and school district leaders the importance of this work, the challenges they face in doing it, and how it is possible to make a positive difference in the lives of the students they serve.

## **The Challenge of Urban Scale**

The United States has about fourteen thousand public school districts, ninety-five thousand public schools, and three million teachers serving fifty million students. There are still one-room schools serving students of various ages in some rural areas, and there are megaplex buildings serving thousands of students in some cities. Between those two extremes, there are many variations in the organization and structure of public schools; and within larger county and urban school districts, it is not unusual to find schools that are organized with a variety of structures defined by grade levels. With the emergence of public charter schools in recent years, the debate about optimal school size and how best to organize and structure schools has new energy. In states with many small school districts, the call for consolidation to increase efficiency and reduce costs still creates significant political risks for elected officials who are challenging the value of local control, which most communities in America embrace. Local school boards and district leaders face similar tough decisions to close or consolidate schools, particularly where enrollment is declining and budget cuts are endemic.

Conversely, in many urban school districts, particularly at the high school level, there is a trend toward breaking up large comprehensive high schools and creating small schools or small learning communities within them, or starting new small schools housed in a variety of facilities and locations. Educators continue to struggle to honor the logic of creating space for schools to serve their educational purpose. However, the availability of existing

space or the cost of new space and resources available to secure it usually become the controlling variables. How to provide sufficient space in schools and classrooms to educate all children is a fundamental systemic challenge and requires strategies that will produce solutions at scale.

New pressures affect urban school districts that are experiencing declining enrollment in addition to the added challenge of making the severe budget cuts that resulted from the recession that began in 2007 and continued through 2010 with no clear end in sight. Many states have had to cut funding to local school districts. Most school districts allocate 80 percent or more of their budgets for salaries and benefits. Many had no choice but to increase class size and cut central office and teaching positions. Those with declining enrollment were forced to consolidate or close schools, even though the politics of doing so were difficult.

The goal of graduating all students with high school diplomas that certify they are ready without remediation to continue their education and prepare for careers creates high expectations for urban district and school leaders who are addressing the additional challenges of doing more with fewer resources. Classrooms must have capable teachers whose instruction will inspire and support each student to meet the high standards that only some students were expected to meet in the past. In many urban school districts, 50 percent of new teachers leave during the first five years of their employment. Retaining effective teachers is essential. Principals must ensure that the teachers in every classroom provide high-quality instruction for each student and receive the support they need to continue to improve their skills. Staff who guide from the middle levels of the central office must understand and execute their support roles as they help school leaders develop their instructional leadership and management skills, as well as hold them accountable for the steady increase in student achievement. The superintendent must set the leadership expectations for all and model the leadership behavior expected of central office and

school leaders. Achieving these outcomes also requires systemic strategies that shape the work for improving student achievement throughout the school district. Leaders must meet these challenges to take best practices to scale in school districts and schools.

No longer is success in urban schools defined by a few more students in a classroom achieving at high levels, by a few more classrooms in a school meeting higher standards, or by a few more good schools in a school district. A good school system is not the same as a good system of schools. A good urban school system may have some or even many good schools and aggregate data that suggest

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it is beating the odds and educating most students well. However, the details embedded in the aggregate data can shine a spotlight on gaps in achievement among different groups of students, which educators must understand and address to ensure that all students are learning and meeting high standards.

The standards-based framework for school reform was created in the late 1980s and began to gain traction in the early 1990s. It was a radical idea: the expectation was for all students to be educated to high standards that would provide them with access to opportunity beyond high school. The framework had four clear components: standards in each subject for what students should know and be able to do; access for both teachers and learners to a rigorous curriculum aligned with the standards; support for teachers to engage in continuous improvement of their instruction; and data from both formative and summative assessments of student achievement, with the expectation that some data would be used for accountability purposes, and other data would be used by teachers to determine when it was necessary to modify the curriculum or their teaching strategies during the school year and

to differentiate instruction. From the outset, the framework was designed with the intent of creating alignment among the components, and coherence for school leaders, teachers, and students.

However, with a commitment to standards-based reform, the goal of having a good school system usually falls short of the mark of ensuring that all children achieve at high levels. It takes time to convince school and district staff that steady growth and improvement for all students are possible. Evidence is essential, and good school systems showcase schools and classrooms where student achievement is improving and achievement gaps are narrowing. Compelling data are more effective in changing beliefs than is emotional rhetoric. The difference in a good system of schools is its effectiveness in taking improvement to scale. In a good system of schools, the commitment is to improve all schools in the system, consistent with the expectation that school leaders and teachers will improve instruction for all students in all classrooms. The goal for the superintendent is to lead a system of schools with a commitment to improve all schools and not have a legacy marked by the improvement of only a few schools. The goal for central office people should be the same whether leadership touches only a few schools where they have responsibilities or serves all schools in the system.

The challenges of reaching the goals of having all children meet rigorous curriculum standards and achieve at high levels and of closing the achievement gaps defined by race, class, disabilities, gender, and native language exist for all leaders with diversity among their students, regardless of the size of school or school district, its location or demographics. However, the challenges for urban district and school leaders and increasingly for leaders in the urban-suburban fringe areas with rapidly changing demographics are unique because of the complexity and scale of the districts and schools they lead.

Most urban school districts have some outstanding schools that serve most students very well. They have the achievement

results to demonstrate their success, and if there are opportunities for parent choice in their districts, these schools can point to the number of parents on their waiting lists as validation of their success. What about the other schools and all the other children? The leadership challenge is to take the strategies for improvement within classrooms and within schools to scale: to ensure that all students stay in school, receive quality teaching, learn at high levels, and have what is necessary to access opportunity when they graduate.

In the following sections, I explore further the major issues facing urban district and school leaders, what they need to know and be able to do, and how they can effectively help those they lead ensure that all students will learn and succeed.

## **Globalization and Technology**

Trying to decide whether globalization preceded dramatic advances in technology or the rapid development of technology led to globalization is a debate about the chicken and the egg. It is reasonably clear that one will not succeed without the other, and leaders in all sectors must understand the impact of both. President Obama and Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, have set a goal of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2010. If passed, the new legislation would replace the controversial No Child Left Behind Act that preceded it. One of the expectations in the administration's proposal is that states would be required to develop more rigorous standards that students will be expected to meet to graduate from high school ready for college. The proposed goal is for all students to reach this target by 2020.

Although the debate about the wide variation in the rigor of standards in the fifty states has become more transparent, there is little support for the federal government's creating national standards. In 2010, forty-eight states took the unprecedented step to

work together to develop common standards in English language arts and mathematics. There is increasing recognition that the standards developed independently by each of the fifty states in the past and the new common standards that may be adopted by many will not be nearly as rigorous as the international standards set by many of the industrialized nations in the world with whom the United States competes.

America has relied for many years on its creativity and commitment to innovation to maintain its leadership position in world trade. But it is no longer alone. Many countries are competing successfully in the international markets for new ideas, services, and products. Ironically, most American colleges and universities are educating international students in undergraduate and graduate programs that develop their skills and enable them to return to their own countries with new insights about creativity and innovation that will help their countries become more entrepreneurial and successful in a flat, competitive, globalized world.

Another dynamic of globalization in recent years has been guest worker programs and offshore worker programs. Many countries bring in workers from other countries to fill jobs requiring low skills and paying low wages, which their own workers will not do. Others bring in workers to fill jobs demanding higher-level skills. During the last few decades, U.S. corporations have been going offshore to find highly educated workers who will perform well in jobs requiring sophisticated skills, at lower wages than highly skilled American workers demand. Globalization has also resulted in a decline in manufacturing in the United States because products manufactured in other nations can be produced at lower cost. The dramatic advances in technology have changed how work is done, and the continuing advances in technology have created a world where competition still exists, but the distribution of intellectual capital is an important driver of interdependence. Globalization and the dramatic advances in technology are beginning to have an impact on how we in America think about teaching and learning,

but we are still struggling to embrace new approaches and let go of some of our traditional and outdated ones.

Globalization is flattening the world, reducing isolation, and creating opportunities for both competition and collaboration that demand a willingness to reach beyond our borders and cross international boundaries. Most large U.S. cities have new immigrants arriving from all parts of the world, and as was the case in previous periods in America's history, the public schools are the institutions educating the newcomers. Urban public schools have a unique opportunity to become the setting where both newcomers and those students who are third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Americans learn to respect and embrace diversity, work independently and in groups, acquire a second language, engage in lifelong learning, and become creative and innovative to succeed in the twenty-first century.

Advances in technology have loosened restrictions on where work is done. Location is no longer a primary factor for many jobs, and distance learning offers virtual educational settings. America's strengths still are grounded in the creativity and innovations well-educated people can produce, yet we are slow to change our ways of organizing opportunities for learning in most school districts and schools. We must ratchet up our expectations for what students need to know and be able to do, shake off a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning, and acknowledge that the students in America's elementary and secondary schools are the first generation to be born into a digital world.

When I began my work as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) in fall 1995, the mayor, Thomas Menino, was beginning to think about what the city would need to do to improve its infrastructure and how technology would be an important component of the plan. He made the commitment to work with the district to capture federal E-rate funding and other sources to fund the wiring of all 125 schools; ours was the first large urban public school district in the nation to do so. (I remember being in a meeting where someone said that in the

future there would be wireless systems and that perhaps we should wait before making the big investment required to provide all schools with access to computers.) Initially the computers were clustered in labs, and later they migrated to classrooms. The professional development challenges were significant, and one of the incentives to attract motivated teachers to become leaders in their schools was to provide them with laptop computers once they successfully completed extensive training. Few educators could imagine the rapidity of the change that would occur in the next ten years and how quickly the “digital natives” who appeared in their classrooms were more savvy than many of the adults in adapting to ways to access information.

International competition and the globalization that spawns it are much more transparent in the high-tech era, bolstered by technology that has exponentially increased access to information and data and has enabled leaders to make decisions in real time. Knowing what to do when you don't know is one of the skills that well-educated people and leaders develop as they think, explore options, and solve problems. Watching students who are digital natives troubleshoot a glitch in their computer, video game, cell phone, or iPod seems to confirm that their thinking and problem-solving skills can be more intuitive and multidimensional than those of previous generations. But these students also become frustrated when quick solutions are not easily accessible. They must not only learn that mental agility, flexibility, the passion for continuous learning, and the passion to discover, innovate, and create are important but also develop the patience to stay focused, persistent, and realistic about the time and effort required to demonstrate high-quality and lasting results—in a culture where expectations of instant gratification are reinforced through easy Internet access and other advances in technology. Moreover, as leaders in education, we must not ignore the lessons of history, which

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demonstrate that discovery resulting in innovation and positive change rarely occurs quickly or by chance. Rather it is the product of continuous effort, a disciplined work ethic, and an acceptance of deferred gratification.

## Equity and Ambiguity

*Equity* is a word that is often misunderstood. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines it as “the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair” or as “something that is just, impartial, and fair.” Justice, impartiality, and fairness are subject to wide interpretation. Equity is rarely achieved if all we do is simply provide everyone with the same—that is, equal—resources. It is not just, impartial, or fair when some children arrive at kindergarten without the benefit of a high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool education and with vocabularies half the size (or less) of those who have spent their first four years of life with widespread exposure to thousands of words and good books. In these situations, the achievement gap develops early and can quickly widen once children are in school without the additional support necessary to narrow the gap. It is likely that additional resources will be required to meet the equity standard, and when they are scarce, the reallocation of resources may be necessary; tensions will arise because many both inside and outside of schools see “equal” as what defines just, impartial, or fair. It is not.

Leaders in school districts and schools must be skilled in leading courageous conversations with adults and students about race, class, and equity, and what it will take to create opportunities for all students to graduate from high school ready without remediation for postsecondary education of some kind. Effective leaders are clear and transparent about their beliefs and core values and about what they expect those whom they lead to do to ensure that equitable decisions are made in school district offices, schools, and classrooms. Leaders who attempt to hold others to

higher standards than they are prepared to reach will not be credible. Effective leaders model the behavior they expect of others and are consistent in aligning what they say and what they do.

In America, the gaps between the “haves” and “have nots” continue to widen. In 2007 the minimum wage was raised for the first time in ten years. Between 2007 and 2010 it has been raised twice. The dramatic shift in the economy that began in 2007 and created the “Great Recession” resulted in hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, homes foreclosed, bailouts for Wall Street firms, and billions of dollars in stimulus funds provided by the federal government to stem the losses and provide relief to states where tax revenues were shrinking. Cities and towns that rely on state funding were also seeing local revenue shrink because of declining property values, business closures, and job losses. By late spring 2010, the key economic indicators showed that there were some states where the recession was ending and new jobs were being created. However, many school districts, cities, and towns that used one-time stimulus money to mitigate the loss of some jobs and services were hoping not to have two to three more years of budget cuts. Some were more cautious in how they spent their stimulus money, knowing that it is dangerous to use one-time funding for continuing costs. This is an unprecedented climate in which superintendents and principals, particularly in urban and rural areas, must lead school districts and schools populated by students from families struggling to find jobs, affordable places to live, and money to provide for their children. These conditions create additional challenges for district and school leaders as they struggle to distribute shrinking resources equitably.

Is there equal opportunity for children in urban public school districts and schools? Is there equity? Is there adequacy? The glib answer to these questions is no, not in many cities compared to neighboring suburban public schools and other communities with additional resources. It is clear that the challenges presented by these realities cannot be addressed and resolved by cities and

schools alone. Also critical are affordable housing, adult education, jobs, universal preschool education, health services, and better aligned federal, state, and local funding streams to support them.

It is clear that federal, state, and local governments have roles and responsibilities for public education, which include setting policy, allocating resources, and holding school districts and schools accountable for results. Then why is there ambiguity? The 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights movement of the 1960s placed the issues of equal opportunity and equity on the doorsteps of the public schools, first in the South and then by the 1970s in the North. The progression of expectations set by the courts began with *Brown's* reversal of the doctrine of "separate but equal" and continued with court decisions in the 1970s and 1980s that required equality of opportunity, and with legislation in the late 1980s and 1990s that set the standard for equality of outcomes defined by student achievement. Although the expectations of the courts were clear, fifty different states were responsible for setting public education policy and choosing their own timelines for establishing and funding their policies. The disparities in the amount of money states provide to school districts and how it is allocated within states have resulted in lawsuits filed in many states asking courts to address the issue of the adequacy of funding necessary to provide an equitable education for all students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed in 1965 by the House and Senate and signed by President Johnson, did provide incentives and funding for school districts with high concentrations of low-income students to address the issue of equity.

There was no ambiguity about the targeting of the federal dollars. Differentiated student needs required differentiated allocation of resources to meet the goal of participating on a level playing field. With prodding from the courts, the federal government has also provided resources for students with disabilities and English language learners. However, the initial commitment

to provide funds to support these students has not come close to meeting the targets included in the federal policies. Annually there is uncertainty, which leads to ambiguity as states and school districts struggle to prepare their budgets and meet timelines for their adoption without a clear understanding of what federal allocations will be. The federal government has addressed this problem to some extent by making forward funding decisions that are better aligned with state and school district schedules for budget adoption.

We cannot forget that public education exists to serve the common good in a democracy; however, those who resist paying taxes to support their local public schools seem to have done so. A democracy cannot thrive unless all of its children are educated to a standard that enables them to reach their full potential, access opportunity, and become responsible citizens. Achieving equity for all students is a unique challenge for urban school districts and schools. These schools must narrow and close achievement gaps. No one can ignore issues of race and class, and leaders must become skilled in initiating the difficult conversations about the inequalities, convincing those they lead that the schools can address them and make a positive difference in the lives of all children. Examples of best practices at schools where achievement gaps are being narrowed will be addressed in Chapters Three and Five.

## **Competition, Choice, and Public Perception of Schools**

In most school districts in America, the school a student attends is determined by where he or she resides. Attendance boundaries are drawn to include the projected number of students who live in the geographic area, and children are expected to attend the school located there. The challenge is to draw the boundaries so that the number of seats in the school will equal not only the number of students who live in the area when the boundaries are

set but also the number that will be in the area in the years ahead as demographics change and families with or without children move in and out of the neighborhood. Among the most challenging decisions that school boards face are those with regard to changing attendance boundaries, closing schools, and acquiring sites for new schools. District and school leaders can expect to be caught up in the controversies that surround these decisions.

There is a reciprocal relationship between schools and neighborhoods, which is manifested in different ways. New schools are built when new housing is built and new neighborhoods are developed. When new homes and new schools are opened, there is excitement about the opportunity to begin anew. The newness creates a sense of optimism that it will be a good school. In time its reputation will be shaped and judged by the educators, students, families, and community members who are engaged with the school. The opportunities for success are enormous. With family and community support, the school leaders, teachers, and staff can set high expectations for all students attending the school to achieve at high levels and for families and community members to become partners in the effort.

For decades, which public school a child went to was usually determined by where the family lived, and those with the means often chose where they lived based on the local school's reputation. In the 1960s, court-ordered desegregation began to change that pattern. Students were assigned and bussed to schools outside their neighborhoods, and parents had no say in the matter. Although home address still defines school assignment in most school districts in America, more urban and some other school districts have chosen plans that give parents the opportunity to select schools other than their neighborhood school.

The results of desegregation were mixed. In some schools, caring school leaders, teachers, parents, and community people worked together to knock down the barriers of race and class and create a healthy, productive school climate. Elsewhere, less effort

was made. For some students and their families, the opportunities provided by better schools outweighed the difficulties. For many, however, the cold and even hostile reception they received shattered their hopes.

In the 1970s, the magnet school became one of the more popular strategies to bring students of different races together. The idea was that schools would attract black and white families equally, by virtue of each school's special curriculum or program focus, resulting in voluntary integration. Innovative school district and school leaders saw these schools as a proactive, positive way to embrace diversity, bring students from different neighborhoods together, and use the carrot of a quality education in an integrated setting as a way to market the schools and advance integration. This was a significant departure and offered a positive alternative that became one of the anchors for the choice options that have since emerged.

During the 1990s, the charter school movement began to gain traction, drawing on some of the characteristics and attraction of the magnet schools. Parents who are dissatisfied with their district schools have eagerly embraced the charter school option. The big difference between magnet and charter schools is the autonomy they are granted. Charter policy in some states requires the state to issue the charter. Other states grant local school boards authority to approve in-district charter schools. Typically the charters are granted for four to five years. Many use a lottery system to select students. Most charter schools are located in urban areas. The demographics in most align pretty well with those of the urban school districts. However, often the percentage of special education students and English language learners in charter schools falls below that of the local school district.

By 2010, districts have had ten or more years of experience with charter schools. Some schools have failed and been closed. Others have been very successful and continue to have long waiting lists of applicants. And the academic performance of students

in many charter schools mirrors the range of student achievement in local school districts. The local newspapers publish the results of the state tests in English language arts and mathematics for all districts in the state and all charter schools.

Federal, state, and local school district policies focused on accountability for results and increasing interest in school choice have increased the demand for data and their use in decision making. Parents and the general public expect transparency and want information about how their public schools are doing and how they compare with others. It is clear that district and school leaders must be knowledgeable about data—they must embrace them and use them to understand what is and is not working. With a smile on my face, I say to those who fear data that data are our

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friends. We must know what parents, staff, students, and the general public think about their school districts and schools. The annual national public opinion poll sponsored by the *Phi Delta Kappan* provides information

on what Americans think about public schools and how they grade them. Grades reflecting satisfaction with the classroom were highest; grades for the school, school district, state, and nation followed in descending order. Similar polls designed to measure the public's view of other institutions produce similar results; for example, respondents express lower levels of satisfaction with Congress, yet tend to say "My representative or senator is fine," which may explain why so many incumbents are returned to office for another term. In my experience as superintendent in urban districts where there is school choice, parents tend to rate their schools more highly than parents in those districts without school choice.

For example, BPS has a comprehensive choice system. The school district is divided into three geographic zones, each with about thirty-five elementary, K–8, and middle schools. There

are three 7–12 schools, which serve students citywide who meet entrance requirements. Parents have citywide choice for all other high schools. Parents also have a choice of charter schools that are approved by the state and located in Boston. (During my ten years as superintendent in Boston, forty-two hundred students left the school district to enroll in charter schools. However, each year a hundred or more students who left BPS to enroll in charters returned to the district.) An agreement reached in 1994 between the Boston Teachers Union and BPS led to the creation of pilot schools that have many of the autonomies that the state-approved charter schools have. The first three pilot schools opened in the 1995–96 school year, my first year as superintendent. They have created competition with the charter schools and have made a positive difference in keeping families in the school district who would otherwise consider charter schools or other options for their children. The number of pilot schools had expanded to twenty-two in Boston by the 2009–10 school year, and several school districts in other regions of the United States have started pilot schools. Boston parents also have an additional choice to consider, Metco, a forty-year-old program that serves three thousand Boston students in two dozen suburban school districts.

Most of the public school districts in America do not have as expansive a choice system as Boston and some other urban school districts. The norm is for only those children who reside within the attendance area to be served by the particular school. If intra-district transfers are allowed, they are an exception. Some states allow choice through interdistrict transfers, but space constraints in the sending or receiving school districts (or both) tend to limit participation.

Socioeconomic status has a powerful impact on what choices and access families have and the public's perception of urban schools. Families who do not have a choice because they live within a geographic boundary that defines who attends the school

may still be satisfied if they believe their neighborhood school is good. Families who do not have options and perceive their neighborhood schools as lacking are, appropriately, dissatisfied and demand options for their children to attend better schools in other neighborhoods.

The public perception of school districts and schools is not shaped solely by parents, who have immediate concerns about what schools their children will attend. During my career as an educator, which spans more than forty years, I have witnessed the rapid growth of advocacy groups with special interests. They exist in both public and private sectors to affect federal, state, and local policy and allocation of resources to align with the interests of their members. They have come to be known as stakeholders. They are present in Washington DC, in state capitals, at school board meetings in public school districts, and at school site council meetings in public schools, advocating for policies their members champion and for the resources they need to support their causes. Many of these groups have become quite sophisticated at shaping public opinion.

School boards, superintendents, and principals must be advocates for all children and are challenged by the advocates demand-

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ing that the programs they support be given priority for funding. In my experience, there has never been enough money to support all the programs that advocates would like school dis-

tricts and schools to provide. Often the school district and schools are judged on the basis of whether or not the advocates are successful in convincing school leadership to agree. School boards tend to try to satisfy every advocacy group, but there are rarely sufficient resources to do so. The costs of programs to serve special education students, English language learners, and gifted and talented students, or that offer world languages, art, music, and physical education, continue to increase; the core subjects of English

language arts and mathematics require more time and attention to meet federal and state accountability requirements. Science and social studies are also important core subjects. Narrowing the curriculum is a poor idea and not acceptable as a strategy for yielding dramatic increases in high school graduation rates.

The leadership challenge for district and school leaders is to understand the importance of clarifying priorities. Every program is a top priority for its supporters, and public opinion often is shaped by the desires of those who do not have school-age children. Often they are reflecting on their own school experience from many years ago and believe that the basic subjects are essential but others less so, and that the annual requests for increases in funding to support the public schools are excessive and unsustainable. For leaders the choices are difficult, particularly when constituents expect equal treatment in allocation of resources and do not understand that the equitable allocation of resources must be the standard, based on what is best for students and not what may be desired by adults who have a variety of special interests. In this age of accountability, it is also important to understand that if school districts and schools attempt to implement too many programs, covering too much in a superficial way, they may lose sight of the importance of going deep to ensure students' understanding of curriculum content and how to apply what is learned. Building the capacity for principals and teachers to go deep with quality instruction in a manageable number of priority areas will be necessary to reach the goal of graduating all students from high school prepared for some postsecondary education. This is what it will take to change the perception of the American public about its schools: demonstrating that they are capable of delivering on the promise of educating all students—not just a select few—to high standards.

The public's perception is that too many urban schools are dysfunctional and incapable of teaching all students the necessary skills. All too often this perception undermines efforts to

enhance the public's understanding that public education exists to serve the common good and that all citizens have responsibility for supporting public schools in their towns and cities. This view can be changed as urban superintendents and principals build the capacity in their districts and schools to support all students and provide opportunities for them to achieve at the high levels necessary to access opportunity beyond high school. American cities will not prosper in the twenty-first century unless their schools graduate students prepared for postsecondary education and able to meet the challenging international benchmarks that high school graduates in other countries are reaching.

The twenty-first century began with the courts still involved with student assignment plans and deciding whether race could be used as a factor in determining how the plans were designed and carried out. The charter school movement developed traction, making their impact felt as they recruited students, leaving empty seats behind and taking money with them. Urban district and school leaders who take for granted that the districts and schools they lead will be unaffected by competition from an increasing number of educational choices and options will not be leaders for long. There are choice plans in increasing numbers of urban school districts that enable students to go to schools outside their neighborhoods. They are no longer limited by the boundaries of their neighborhood attendance areas, but issues of equity may create new limits if parents are expected to provide transportation for their children to attend their schools of choice but cannot afford to do so.

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The challenge for urban district and school leaders is to understand how to create and lead in an environment where competition is valued and not feared, families and students have more not fewer options, the markets determine which schools are

over- or underchosen, the entrepreneurial spirit is embraced rather than rejected, and issues of equity are resolved and do not create barriers that limit access.

## Human Capital

Perhaps it sounds glib to say so, but in school districts and schools, people are the most valuable resource. In school districts, 80 percent or more of the annual budget is allocated to salaries and benefits for educators and support staff. In schools, it usually is 95 percent. Clearly, success in reaching the goal of educating all students to high standards depends on school districts' and schools' developing and carrying out policies that result in getting the best people to do the work and supporting them in improving what they do. Simply opening the schoolhouse door and expecting qualified applicants for teaching, leadership, and other staff positions to walk in is not realistic. School districts and schools must develop and execute comprehensive plans to recruit, hire, assign, induct, support, and retain the best-qualified people to lead and teach in urban districts and schools.

The landscape for attracting good people to the education profession has changed dramatically during the past fifty years in the following ways:

- Prior to the 1960s, women and minorities had few options for professional careers in business, law, engineering, medicine, and other higher-status professions. Teaching, nursing, and social work were the major career options for women. Leadership positions—superintendents and senior staff in school districts, and principals in schools—generally belonged to males.
- In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the barriers of gender and race began to crumble, albeit slowly at first and more rapidly as steady increases in the number of school-age children

raised demand for more schools and teachers. Salaries and benefits in many districts improved, driven in part by collective bargaining contracts in states with public employee collective bargaining legislation. Many colleges and universities were expanding teacher training programs.

Simultaneously, changes were occurring in U.S. public schools. The student population was increasingly diverse, court orders for integrating schools in Boston and some other cities set goals for hiring teachers of color, and new waves of immigration presented new teaching challenges. America's urban public schools had always been the institutions that accepted the responsibility for educating immigrant children, and it was difficult to anticipate how rapidly the patterns of immigration would change after the Vietnam War and continue through the early years of the twenty-first century.

- The number of racial and ethnic groups continues to increase even more rapidly in the twenty-first century in cities and their urban ring areas, and the increasing diversity in language and culture within racial and ethnic groups is also significant. For example, Boston, a midsize urban school district, has experienced dramatic growth in the number of students who must be taught English; currently, more than eighty different native languages are represented.

The increasing diversity of students in urban districts and schools requires leaders to think differently about their human capital strategies and plan for diversifying their staffs in a competitive climate where the demand exceeds the supply. One strategy is for large urban school districts to develop their own programs for teachers and school leaders.

- American public schools since the 1970s have been required to serve most students with disabilities. As recently as the 1950s

and 1960s, only those students with what are now considered mild disabilities were served in public schools, but they were often not in special education programs. When I taught history at a junior high school in Tacoma, Washington, in the early 1960s, I spent my last class period every day with twenty-five students with mild or moderate disabilities. No special education certification was required, and I had no training or experience working with students with special needs. I am sure I learned more from that experience than my students with special needs learned from me. I learned the importance of understanding the needs of each student and of not only teaching the subject content but also teaching each student as an individual. In those days, there was much less attention paid to specialization in teacher training, although there are still too many teachers, particularly in secondary schools, who are teaching one or more courses outside their content areas.

As a superintendent in Oklahoma City in 1979, I was required to take a special education course at a local university to qualify for my certification credential. It was soon after the U.S. Congress passed the first major legislation that set forth the requirements for serving students with disabilities in local school districts and schools. I was more familiar with the legislation than the person teaching the certification course. Through the years, the teacher training programs for special education teachers have improved significantly. But in many areas the demand still exceeds the supply.

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, students with special needs made up 12 percent of the school population. That percentage has remained constant through the years and still is the national average. It was difficult to recruit certified special education teachers at the outset, but the state college and university systems did respond to growing demand by creating programs that met increasingly challenging state certification requirements. New federal legislation set higher standards for ensuring that the rights of students with disabilities were met by states and school districts.

- When I began my work as superintendent in Boston in 1995, I was surprised to learn that 22 percent of the students were in special education programs (the national average was 12 percent), and that close to 22 percent of the school district budget was allocated for special education. Many other larger urban school districts were spending much less on special education because they had a smaller percentage of students with disabilities. I also learned that more than nine hundred special education students were in private day or residential schools with per-pupil costs ranging from \$25,000 to \$80,000 per student, depending on the severity of the disability. I hired a talented new director of special education, who suggested that we open new day programs in our Boston schools that would better meet the needs of many of the students who had been placed in private day schools. There was resistance from some parents, but we were able to prove that the quality of the school district programs was better than that of what was offered in the private schools, and over several years we cut the number of students in private placements by almost half and saved the school district millions of dollars.

It took federal legislation and court cases to eliminate the inequities that existed in too many school districts and to ensure that all students with special needs would receive the services and supports to which they were entitled. Advances in research have produced new knowledge about disabilities and how to meet the needs of children with disabilities, many of whom are capable of meeting the same high standards that all other children are expected to meet.

The demand for special education teachers continues to be greater than the supply and is one of the major human capital issues facing urban districts and schools.

- Science and mathematics are also areas where the demand for public school teachers exceeds supply. Advances in technology have increased demand for employees with strong backgrounds in

math and science. Some school districts have created incentive programs with differentiated compensation packages to enhance their recruitment of teachers in these hard-to-fill fields.

- When benchmarked against practices in other industrialized nations that are competing with America in the global economy, entry-level salaries for teachers in other nations often compare more favorably with those in other professions than they do in the United States. Teachers in many of these countries are in the top third of the classes graduating with university degrees. Teachers are highly respected and have higher status as professionals in these countries. In America, many public school teachers come from the middle and bottom third of college and university graduates. However, programs such as the New Teacher Project, residency programs, and Teach for America are recruiting high-achieving college graduates to their teacher preparation programs.

In March 2010, the U.S. secretary of education released a blueprint setting forth the major policy issues to be addressed in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Obama administration is very interested in promoting innovation, change, and improvement in America's schools. Competitive federal grants with substantial funding will be awarded to those who present the most compelling and practical proposals. The blueprint also proposes funding for leadership training and development of teachers and principals, recognizing the need to develop incentives to attract candidates to teaching and leadership positions in public school districts and schools. The administration is also supporting the continuation of funding for competitive grants to school districts that are willing to design and implement performance pay systems.

What can urban school districts and schools do to address their unique human capital challenges? How and by whom should teachers be trained? What should the rewards and incentives be? What must change in the way urban school districts and schools are

organized to attract top candidates to the profession? How do urban school districts make sure they have their most successful teachers in the schools where children have the greatest needs? What kinds of career ladders can be created for teachers and other educators? What will it take to recruit, hire, assign, induct, support, and retain a talented, diverse, and dedicated group of educators? These are the unique human capital challenges for school district and school leaders that will be addressed in the following chapters.

## School and District Reform

The history of school reform movements in the United States goes back to at least the early twentieth century. At that time, it was primarily educators spearheading the efforts, but more recently the courts; federal, state, and local governments; businesspeople; educators; and members of the general public have also become drivers of school reform. For example, the Obama administration is submitting its 2010 proposals for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act based on the goal of having all students graduate from high school ready for college or careers. Whatever changes are made in the legislation will affect state and local school board policy and set expectations for change and improvement in school districts and schools. The expectation is that these changes will build on the standards-based reform movement that has been gaining traction during the last twenty years.

The starting point in the late 1980s was not so different from what has occurred periodically in America among educators, policymakers, and citizens at the local community level—that is, a review of what students in public schools should know and be able to do in each subject area and at each grade level. What was different was the expanding role of the federal government in requiring states to define the standards for what students should learn and to develop annual assessments to determine student achievement outcomes.

The catalyst for change was the recognition that a high school diploma was not sufficient to prepare students for employment that would yield compensation necessary for a middle-class standard of living. Projections for lifetime earnings confirmed that earning potential increased significantly with each year of education completed. Job opportunities for high school dropouts have been declining except in sectors with low-skill, low-wage jobs.

Educators and the public are recognizing the increasing necessity of ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready for some postsecondary education. Anything less will narrow or eliminate the opportunity for meeting the standards required in high-skill, high-wage jobs. This is not the first time in our history that tracking practices (college bound, general education, vocational education) have been questioned and debated. The report *A Nation at Risk*, issued in 1983, raised questions about the “rising tide of mediocrity,” high school graduation requirements, and the necessity to make them more rigorous if American students were going to compete with other high school graduates around the world.

The standards-based movement might not have gained traction had American education policymakers framed the discussion about high school graduation requirements in the traditional way—determining the number of courses in each subject required for a high school diploma, using measures of time spent to determine eligibility for course credits, and tracking students into leveled courses on the basis of measures of intelligence. Traditionally these practices left wide discretion to local school districts, schools, and classroom teachers to determine what content was included in courses and what requirements students had to meet to pass the course and earn a unit of credit toward graduation.

For example, Massachusetts and two other states have been recognized as having the most rigorous standards among the fifty states. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)—the state’s end-of-year tests in English language arts,

mathematics, and science—has been recognized as the most rigorous state assessment with the smallest gap of any state (5 percent) between the proficiency standard on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the state assessment. The MCAS has about 40 percent open response items on the tests, including a long essay based on a prompt, answers to reading comprehension questions, and explanations of how the student solves mathematics problems.

This chapter has addressed the context for developing effective leadership in urban schools and school districts. It introduced the challenges leaders face in urban schools and the opportunities they have to make a positive difference in the education of all students. Innovation and change are the precursors for improvement in student achievement and narrowing achievement gaps. The quality of instruction in every classroom and leadership in each school are the most critical levers for improving student performance. Standards-based reform provides the framework for teaching and learning and sets a high bar for all students to meet high standards.