Urban superintendents generally agree that the national goal of having every child attain at least an academic level of proficiency by 2014 is both ambitious and appropriate. While we agree with this goal, however, we are also concerned with the reality of reaching it under the current circumstances facing our urban schools. There are many issues and obstacles for urban schools to address, but the primary factor in providing a high-quality education for every child will be the quality of teachers in the classrooms.

Many urban superintendents, including me, firmly believe that we cannot continue to select, prepare, develop, and maintain teachers in the same ways we have done historically if we truly intend to meet the needs of every student. This is especially true for those students in our urban schools. The selection and training of new teachers and the support and development of current teachers will be keys in improving classroom success for all students. As urban superintendents, we are all looking for ways to address these needs.

Based on my experience, study, and conversations with other urban superintendents, here are some of my reflections about and issue related to providing a highly qualified teacher in every classroom.

Teacher Support and Development

The support and staff development provided to our urban classroom teachers will be the most important factor in providing a highly qualified teacher for every student. In my school district, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools, we realized that we had to find time and resources to provide ongoing, relevant, focused, classroom based staff development for all of our teachers if we were truly going to affect change in teaching and learning.

Research has shown that the usual program of 5-10 of staff development days scattered throughout the year with teachers sitting and listening and with no follow up is not effective. Districts need to ensure that staff development is focused on the teachers’ and students’ needs and on strategies and methods that are proven by research and practice to be successful. Many districts have found ways to provide additional time to allow teachers to have at least weekly learning time centered on teaching and learning and the progress of every student. In my district, we dismissed students two hours early each Wednesday, and this has been a major factor in improving our academic results.

Most of us have also found that teachers need a support mechanism to assist them in continuous development of classroom practices. Instructional coaches can be a highly effective method to deliver ongoing, high-quality staff development to every classroom teacher. Many districts now provide these. My district provided at least one to every school. This infusion of highly effective and trained teacher coaches who can work on a daily basis elbow to elbow with teachers has proven to be very beneficial to both teachers
and principals. Many superintendents report ongoing efforts to provide these coaches to their teachers. That said, providing instructional coaches is costly, and many districts cannot find the funds for mentors.

Research related to successful classroom practices that have positive impact on the academic progress of urban students needs to be strengthened and ongoing. Most of us readily admit that we don’t have enough information and strategies to help all of our students be successful. Districts are searching eagerly for research on practices that are proving successful with urban students. My district has been involved in a number of research studies over the past eight years, and the findings have had an impact on our teachers and our students. But with the finding of this research comes the need to provide the information to our teachers in a timely, informative, and interesting way. And the information presented must be relevant and content based to meet teacher and student needs.

**Support in Social Issues**

Often a child’s lack of success in school can be directly related to events in his/her personal life outside of school. In many cases, these issues have to be addressed for students to have classroom success, and teachers can’t be expected to do it all themselves. We have found that support in meeting the physical and emotional needs of some students will determine the success the student will have in academics. This support might be delivered through school staff such as counselors, social workers, and nurses, but in many instances schools and community services must join forces to serve the child. Many districts are now reaching out to community-service agencies, health agencies, the faith community, and others to assist in helping students and their families.

**Low Expectations**

The reality of many urban classrooms is that while teachers care deeply for their students, they often do not believe that their students can do rigorous academic work. Much of this belief comes from the disconnect between the teachers’ backgrounds, economic conditions, and home location as compared to their students. In many urban districts, the teachers are not of the same race as their students and do not live in the same communities. In my district, 70 percent of our teachers do not live in our community, and while 80 percent of our students are minority, 75 percent of our teachers are white. This disparity can often cause issues that impede academic progress. Focused staff development centered on poverty, race, and ethnic diversity can help eliminate much of the effects of this disconnect.

**Developing Relationships**

Much research shows that most disenfranchised students will not make academic progress without a strong relationship with at least one adult, usually a teacher, in the school and that the relationship should extend to the student’s parent or caregiver. Schools must develop programs and time to allow these relationships to grow. This
requires focused training and resources for staff. In my district, we did not see significant academic gains by many of our students until we focused on building relationships between and among students, teachers, and caregivers. In Kansas City, Kansas, we have structured all of our schools into small learning communities and all of our teachers “loop” with their students for 2-4 years.

Mentoring

Every new teacher should be provided with a highly qualified mentor for at least the first two years of teaching. Mentors must be carefully selected, highly trained, and compensated. Many urban districts are attempting to find the resources to provide these mentors to new teachers. In our district, we provide mentors to all first year teachers, who report the program to be very effective in helping them through the difficult first year.

Preparation of New Teachers

Most, if not all, urban superintendents report difficulty in employing teachers to fill every classroom. This is particularly true in math, the sciences, special education and English as a Second Language programs. Many districts are turning to alternative preparation programs and “grow-your-own” programs to help fill these needs.

My district has used both methods successfully, but they must be established in such a way as to insure quality teachers are produced carefully. For instance, we found that alternative licensure programs can be effective, but only if there is a method for providing strong instructional skills to the candidates. Having a high level of content knowledge was not sufficient to be a highly qualified teacher. Also, all teacher preparation programs must provide content and exposure to issues of poverty and race. Teachers cannot be successful with many urban students without being able to address the social issues as well as academic ones.

Universities and colleges throughout the country need to examine their teacher preparation programs to determine if they are truly preparing teachers to go into all of our nation’s classrooms, including those in urban communities. Superintendents report, and I have found, that this is not the case in most of the teacher preparation programs they see.

Maintaining Highly Qualified Teachers

The turnover in teachers during their first five years of teaching is disturbing. This is particularly true in our urban classrooms. Several factors lead to this high number of teachers who leave the classroom. While low salaries are always a primary issue, salary is not the only reason. A survey we did in my district showed that low salary and student behavior were both given as the main cause for leaving our district and often teaching entirely. Other reasons mentioned were lack of support from administration, lack of respect, lack of necessary materials and supplies, lack of parent support, lack of relevant and helpful staff development, highly burdensome and time consuming reports
(especially among special education teachers), and the numbers of hours that are required for the job.

One particularly troublesome issue for urban districts is the hiring of teachers away from urban schools by their suburban counterparts who generally can pay higher salaries and offer better working conditions and newer facilities and technology. This is a universal comment from urban superintendents. I have been personally very frustrated to watch my district train teachers to be effective in raising student achievement only to see many of them leave after two or three years to teach in much wealthier suburban districts that are closer to their homes.