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Smart Districts
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Results, Equity, and Community: The Smart District

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To succeed in educating each student, districts must take on new roles and perform others far more effectively. This new kind of district focuses on three themes – results, equity, and community – which serve to streamline and modernize its structure and functions.

Audio Clips:

Listen to each audio clip and read transcripts of Marla Ucelli, Annenberg Institute for School Reform on:

* What is a "smart district"? [ seconds]
* What challenges do districts face in transforming themselves in this way? [1 minute, 14 seconds]

Despite the central role of school districts in our education system, nearly two decades of school reform have virtually ignored the part districts can play in promoting or hindering school change.

In the late 1990s, national and state education reform discussions paid little attention to the role of school districts, except for their potential to do harm. Reformers had justifiable reasons for ignoring or bypassing school districts. Although districts successfully serve some societal functions (such as employment for adults, contracts with businesses and service industries, and vehicles for local democratic participation), most large districts are not adequate educational institutions, especially for poor and minority students in our urban centers. Because so many districts are failing in this paramount function, they are easy targets for critics who contend that their isolation from schools and communities and their outdated and ineffective structure impede,
rather than enable, improvement.

While these challenges have not evaporated, researchers, practitioners, funders, and policy-makers (notably School Communities that Work, a national task force established by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform) have now shifted their attention to the role of districts in reform. Research findings from such credible sources as the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas-Austin, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Richard Elmore of Harvard University, and MDRC have bolstered the idea that districts can positively influence school performance. The focus of key policies, especially the No Child Left Behind Act, and large philanthropic initiatives such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Schools for a New Society Initiative, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's small schools efforts, and the MacArthur Foundation's Learning Partnership increasingly target not individual schools, but whole school systems. And city leaders, such as mayors Michael Bloomberg of New York City and Richard Daley of Chicago, are staking their political reputations and futures on making progress in improving whole school systems.

From School District to Smart District

Urban school districts are now seen as much a part of the solution as they are a part of the problem. But most are struggling to meet the growing demands on them. In many respects, this struggle is a predictable result of their design. In the first decades of the last century, an earlier breed of reformers – known as administrative progressives – sought a remedy for the patronage and provincialism of the highly localized school governance system of the nineteenth century.

Taking their cue from the growing manufacturing economy, they tried to create the "one best system" (Tyack 1974) that would produce assimilated, productive citizens as efficiently as Ford's factories produced cars. Their intent was to separate schooling from politics through corporate-style "scientific management," led by an expert superintendent and his board of directors. Like corporate managers, these professionals were to make and enforce policies that would be carried out by the "workers" in the schools. Standardization – of inputs, not outputs – was the goal.

A century later, this structure is an anachronism. By rewarding compliance over professional judgment and separating the schools from the community, the administrative progressives of the early twentieth century created a system that almost guarantees that innovation will be thwarted. Results are abysmal, inequities abound, and communities have little say in the education of their children. Good instruction and good schools are idiosyncratic rather than pervasive, and lessons from successful schools and districts are not widely learned or heeded.

To succeed in educating each student, whatever his or her background, districts must take on new roles and perform others far more effectively. This new kind of district, what we like to call a "smart district," focuses on three themes – results, equity, and community – which serve to streamline and modernize its structure and functions.

Results

The current imperative to improve results – to raise achievement for all students and close achievement gaps – requires high-quality data on student and school performance. Districts collect a wealth of data, but the information is often inadequate, and data gathered about youth relies heavily on narrow measures like test scores and school graduation and promotion rates. These indicators, while important, do not tell the whole story. They do not provide information about other aspects of youth development, such as health or well-being, or of a community's supports for children and families; they seldom show student growth over time; and they do not say much about what schools and their partners need to do to improve results.

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In addition, test scores and other indicators typically collected usually arrive too late to help individual children or schools who are struggling. For example, we already know that most urban schools do not meet state or district performance standards. These measures do not tell us whether schools or districts are investing in the types of instructional changes or providing the kinds of supports that will lead to higher performance down the road.

While standardized-test scores remain an important feature for assessing performance, smart districts increase the kinds of data available, make it more accessible through technology tools like data warehousing, and, most importantly, use it to inform plans for student, teacher, school, and district progress. By focusing on results, smart districts monitor performance, make decisions, and hold themselves accountable with data. Smart districts integrate not only the collection of data, but also the serious and regular examination of data, into the normal operating procedures for schools and districts.

Appraising results regularly and leveraging data that already exist can also help the partners involved in smart districts to hold each other accountable for improved service delivery. Smart districts share information widely and work with community partners to help ensure distributed responsibility and accountability for results. Reliable, shared data can be used for planning and evaluation, understanding trends, mapping service availability, and catalyzing wide civic involvement in and advocacy for child and family issues.

Equity

Educators and policy-makers increasingly recognize that results and equity are not mutually exclusive; they go hand in hand. The goal of ensuring that all students reach proficiency recognizes the interrelatedness of results and equity. Yet achieving equitable results requires a different approach to supporting schools than districts typically employ.

School districts have long provided instructional supports to schools, such as curriculum guides and professional development. Too often, though, these supports have been one-size-fits-all. Research on school-by-school reform efforts provides abundant evidence that schools need better supports and stronger incentives to improve, particularly if they are already low performing. The challenge is that each school, based on the resources of its students, faculty, and community, needs different kinds and combinations of supports to succeed.

Human resources, such as teachers and principals, and fiscal resources are also usually centrally distributed by school districts, without regard to the specific needs or composition of the school. As a result, in many districts, schools vary widely in their budgets and teacher experience and quality. And the schools serving the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised families tend to end up with the least support.

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resources, authority, and supports tailored to their specific needs and capacities. District staff work closely with school-based staff to identify needs. They meet those needs by working interdepartmentally and collaborating with teachers unions to alter districtwide policies about budgeting, curriculum and instruction, and teacher hiring. Smart districts also strategically vary how all these resources are distributed to schools. Variations that are the result of politics, inertia, or happenstance are minimized.

Smart districts also intervene in a timely manner if schools do not make progress. It is important to emphasize the word *timely*: reviews of efforts to intervene once schools have failed show that such rescue attempts are grueling, unpredictable, and expensive. Early intervention and support have been shown to produce huge rewards in the case of students; the same kind of monitoring, diagnosis, and support might make sense when dealing with schools in "turn-around" conditions. Again, these interventions must be calibrated to the unique needs of each school. The remedy should be appropriate to the situation – not based on a one-size-fits-all policy prescription – and should be accompanied by the support necessary to produce results.

**Community**

The professionalization of school districts established by the administrative progressives has frequently led to a fissure between the districts and the communities they serve. Individual schools often have some kind of community involvement – parent organizations, volunteer programs, etc. – but most districts lack the capacity and sometimes the desire for serious partnerships with civic and community-based organizations. This not only limits opportunities for parents, students, and community members to influence district policies; it also leaves districts out of the distribution of other community resources that might support education. These resources – parks, youth-serving organizations, after-school homework clubs, internships, and many other nonschool activities – are often distributed just as inequitably as district funds and human resources.

By focusing on community, smart districts expand the notion of who is a district leader. Many different individuals and organizations – including schools, parents and families, civic groups, research groups, unions, community- and faith-based organizations, private-sector companies, and city agencies – already work together to support and sustain the healthy learning and development of children and youth. But a smart district deepens the level of connection with the community and engages the community – not only in support and advocacy, but also to help lead and critique the district and hold it accountable.

Accountability among these partners ought to be distributed; that is, each partner is accountable for its part in improving results, in proportion to its responsibility, and the partners share their unique strengths to bring about better results. In other words, districts and their communities need to work together to create a "smart district."

**The Challenges of Scale**

Becoming a smart district requires a simultaneous focus on results, equity, and community. The three themes are inextricably linked; neglecting even one jeopardizes reaching the goal of creating a system that works for each student. As Coburn (2003) has described, creating a whole system of successful schools (or bringing reform "to scale") is much more complex than a set of technical challenges. It requires depth and spread, sustainability and ownership – concepts that hinge on normative changes at all levels of the system, not just alterations in policy, techniques, and materials. However, in practice, efforts to change whole systems of schools are often reduced to the technical. How many communitywide planning processes or education summits have begun with lofty goals but resulted in, if anything, a small, "boutique" effort that has virtually no impact on the system as a whole?
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Fortunately, there are several communities, a few of which are highlighted in this volume, that are taking on the challenges of scale. They have combined concrete strategies and technical fixes with efforts to engage allies, create demand, and change hearts and minds. Their work demonstrates the power of pursuing results, equity, and community to force fundamental changes in the structure, culture, and practice of school districts and schools. These communities also highlight the capacities needed by districts and their partners in these efforts: brainpower to design steps carefully, political will to overcome the inevitable resistance to change, and skills and constructive relationships to implement them effectively. Clearly, making results, equity, and community the overriding purposes for school districts has major implications for urban (indeed, all) district design and for the very definition of what a district is.

The danger is that the current policy environment emphasizes a narrowly defined view of results over all the other pieces of the equation. Superintendents, school committees, editorial boards, community leaders, and political representatives must resist the temptation to reduce school reform to standardized-test scores and accountability. Without an equal focus on equity – providing schools, students, and teachers the supports they need to succeed – and community, reform efforts will fail to result in the kinds of deep changes we envision – and desperately need.

Unlike most school districts today, smart districts would provide high-quality, equitable educational opportunities to all children in all schools. They would help children, educators, and schools achieve results by holding them to the same high expectations but also by offering different support strategies based on the unique needs of the children, educators, and schools. The system would itself encompass a broad range of partners who would take joint responsibility for results. Furthermore, the structural and managerial arrangements by which these smart districts function would be driven by what it takes to achieve those results – not by history, convention, or convenience.

No district has yet put all these pieces together. Altering the structure, functions, and norms of a system that has its roots in a century-old vision is an enormous challenge. It might be tempting to pursue the "one best system," as the administrative progressives did. But focusing on the three themes of results, equity, and community is the key to districtwide improvement; it allows each school district-community partnership to forge its own path and create supports, partnerships, and goals that are right for its context and its needs. And once those supports, partnerships, and goals are in place, we will see that the equation is commutative: Not only do results, equity, and community add up to smart districts, but smart districts will lead to results, equity, and community.

Footnotes

1 For summaries of this work and others, see "School Districts and Educational Improvement: An Annotated bibliography of Research, 1988 to present" available at http://www.schoolcommunities.org/resources/bibliography.html

References


> Description, ordering information