HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS:
Combining Pressure, Support, Alignment, and Choice

BILL & MELINDA GATES foundation

JUNE 2005
Executive Summary

Ten years after most states adopted educational standards, there are few if any districts of any size that enable all of their students to reach those standards. However, there are signs of progress. For example, early leader states such as North Carolina and Texas are using state standards, aligned curricula, and disaggregated achievement data with much success. District 2 in New York City has provided a sophisticated understanding of the role of instructional leadership, leading dozens of other urban districts to create “managed instruction” strategies—a common curriculum with aligned assessments, a district-wide conception of quality instruction, principals as instructional leaders, instructional coaches, job-embedded professional development for teachers, and the use of achievement data to drive continuous improvement—resulting in moderately strong improvement in elementary literacy.

At the secondary level, there are fewer signs of progress. A handful of districts have improved achievement and college preparation rates while others have increased overall graduation rates, but few, if any, have done both. For example, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools is one of the few districts to have improved both achievement and attainment (i.e., promotion, graduation, postsecondary enrollment) with a district-wide approach to secondary school redesign. Another positive development at the secondary level has been the development of charter schools throughout the nation over the past decade, which has provided a laboratory in which a handful of successful and occasionally innovative school designs have been produced. The rise of charter schools has also provided some evidence that the demand for quality options is high.

In light of the work of the last decade, we can draw four important conclusions:

• A well-executed and sustained strategy of “managed instruction” can produce moderately strong improvement in achievement and can serve most K–8 students well.

• It’s very difficult to make dramatic improvements in struggling secondary schools, but reform models that incorporate rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and strong student supports can produce promising results with sustained district support.

• It’s easier to start a good new school than fix a bad one, but there are obviously political, financial, and logistical limits to this strategy.

• School choice appears to be of interest to many teachers, parents, and students, particularly as teens become aware of their strengths, interests, and career direction.

These conclusions represent potentially conflicting choices: a managed system of schools or a system of public school choice; school improvement or replacement; internal or external capacity? The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s investments in New York; Chicago; Boston; Baltimore; Oakland, Calif.; Sacramento, Calif.; San Diego; Milwaukee; and Indianapolis, among others, leads us to believe that these ideas not only can, but must be harmonized in a portfolio of high-performing schools that builds on the benefits of an
aligned system of managed instruction while taking advantage of the benefits of school choice, particularly at the secondary level.

The common challenge, from the classroom to the state house, is to build a much more productive educational system—an environment of high challenge and high support. This paper identifies the four components that define the challenge, and the four components that build the capacity for success. These eight components are tailored to a portfolio strategy—a theory of action that reflects a community’s needs, interests, and strengths. At the heart of this strategy is the goal of ensuring that every student has access to high-performing schools that prepare them for further learning, work, and citizenship.

Blending accountability, alignment, and choice requires a new compact between the district and its stakeholders—a culture that values flexibility, competition, measurement, incentives, efficiency, and innovation.

There are frustratingly few people studying what is certainly one of America’s most pressing challenges—educational success at scale. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is one of the few centers devoted to creating what it calls, “smart districts.” The Center for Reinventing Public Education is a thought leader in “doing school choice right.” And Michael Fullan has devoted the last decade to studying leadership within educational systems. In this paper, we attempt to build on their work and, where possible, be more specific about how to combine accountability and capacity; alignment and choice; and secondary school improvement and new school development. It is our hope that the ideas presented here benefit the districts with which we work, most of which are in urban centers, and others as well.

Creating a High-Performing System

The goal of ensuring all students achieve at high levels set by the national report, A Nation at Risk, is now decades old. While the nation has made slow but steady progress in improving elementary literacy, secondary achievement levels, graduation rates, and college completion rates remain largely stagnant. While there are hundreds of high schools around the country that are helping most of their students achieve at high levels, they remain largely random examples of innovation and heroic leadership. Few, if any, public school districts have achieved uniformly high performance and attainment levels, particularly in the upper grades.
Now, the pressing question before us is how we as a nation can effectively meet the goal of graduating all students prepared for college and work. Case studies of successful organizational change and performance improvements in the private and public sectors both in the United States and internationally offer the beginnings of a promising roadmap.

To date, we have relied on strategies that expect too little of our communities, our education professionals, and our students. In some cases, we have expected too much but with too little support. Michael Barber, a key education advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair of the U.K., and Michael Fullan have both suggested that an effective district reform strategy is one that balances “high challenge with high support.” (See Figure 1.) Maintaining a delicate balance between challenge and support is central to effective classroom, school, and district leadership. Barber and Fullan summarize it as the need to “integrate accountability and capacity building, and do it systemically.”

Most states have focused their reform efforts on increasing the level of challenge—standards, assessment, and accountability—without a commensurate focus on capacity building. The emerging best practices culled from outcomes of the foundation’s education grantmaking since 2001 appear to reflect a similar approach. The most promising districts have begun to build a high-challenge environment while also building “high support” capacity to ensure students, teachers, and district leaders can meet expectations. (See Appendix 1.)

However, if a district is truly going to achieve strong systemwide results, this framework must be coupled with a deliberate theory of action. (See Figure 2.) The most promising theory of action is one that effectively combines the benefits of an aligned system with quality options—in other words, a portfolio strategy that combines managed instruction and school choice.

I. High Challenge

More than anything else, real people in real companies want to be part of a winning team. They want to contribute to producing real results. They want to feel the excitement and the satisfaction of being part of something that just flat-out works. When people begin to feel the magic of momentum—when they begin to see tangible results and can

---

1 For a more complete description of the skills required by high school graduates, whether they are attending college or directly entering the workforce, see the work of the American Diploma Project, especially Achieve, Inc. (2004) “Ready or Not.” DC: Achieve, Inc. at www.achieve.org.
feel the flywheel start to build speed—that’s when they line up, throw their shoulders to the wheel, and push.

-- Jim Collins, From Good to Great

Studies have consistently shown that, whether in a business or a classroom setting, consistently high expectations yield higher levels of engagement and better results. Consequently, a critical component of a high-performing school district is the creation of a high-challenge environment that sets a high-performance bar across the system for students, teachers, and district leadership. As a district begins to establish its high-challenge environment, it should focus on four elements:

1. College-ready mission. Every community should express its aspirations for its young people in some fashion, creating what Michael Fullan calls a “moral purpose” for its schools. Over the last century, our school systems, particularly our high schools, have operated with multiple missions—preparing some students for elite universities and some for skilled labor. Students who fail to graduate migrate to the unskilled, low-income labor force. As Achieve, Anthony Carnevale, Richard J. Murnane, Frank Levey, and others have pointed out, we have reached a point where knowledge and skill requirements for further education, work, and citizenship have converged.

While the need to educate nearly all students to high levels is the foundational assumption of the 15-year-old standards movement, most states and districts have high school exit requirements that leave graduates with skills closer to the ninth grade level than the college-ready level. Districts that want to adopt a college- and work-ready mission must institute the following three practices:

- **Standards and assessments:** High school standards for math, reading, and writing must be high enough so that students are prepared to pass a community college placement exam. These standards may include ongoing diagnostic assessments that allow for personalization of teaching and learning; student competence and performance assessments that hold students to high standards while allowing multiple ways to demonstrate mastery; and school accountability and state-level tests to audit school quality and ultimately hold adults in the system accountable for school performance.

---

o Curriculum and graduation requirements: A college-ready curriculum should be the default course of study to ensure that every student has access to college-preparatory courses.

o Waiver process: A waiver process must be created for schools with an alternative curriculum or a competency-based approach.

Optimally, states and local school districts will adopt similar college-ready policies, but districts should not wait for states to lift their expectations. Instead, districts should begin holding community conversations to gain consensus around the mission of public schools in an effort to build a publicly supported curriculum and graduation policies that support a vision of all students being college ready.

2. Effective governance. A high-challenge environment requires a stable and effective governance structure that is accountable to its citizens and the students it serves. This should include a clear set of roles and responsibilities for each of the key actors in the system:

o School boards should focus on systemwide policy and results rather than operations. Their responsibilities should include setting a clear vision and mission for the district, hiring a chief executive, adopting improvement goals and policies in support of the mission, monitoring student and school performance relative to the goals, and providing financial oversight. Strategies and actions should set the tone for a culture of data-driven decision making.  

o District leaders should work in close coordination with the school board and/or mayor to fulfill the district’s mission. This includes joint development of a theory of action, oversight of schools and contractors, and building effective data and reporting systems that provide the board and community with up-to-date and accurate information about school and student performance. District leaders must also have the power to improve struggling schools, replace failing schools, and develop the organizational capacity to execute this charge effectively and equitably.

o School teachers and leaders should have primary responsibility for improving overall student achievement and attainment. In support of this goal, principals should have responsibility for hiring and evaluating school staff and overseeing school and budget management functions.  

o Employee groups are major actors in district governance, since about 80 percent of expenditures go to salaries and benefits. In the last decade, ratcheting accountability and budget pressure have increased the antagonistic relationship between many urban school boards and local unions. To break out of the current

---


5 This will vary by type of school—district, contract or charter—and in some cases, particularly in the case of low performance, this responsibility may reside with a network leader.
cycle, boards and unions should craft productivity partnerships that outline conditions, culture, and contracts while promoting adult learning, student achievement, efficiency, and community responsiveness.

3. **Strong accountability.** Most state and district accountability systems have held students accountable for learning without holding schools and staff members accountable for performance. To improve the fundamental effectiveness, fairness, and legal defensibility of their accountability system, districts must strive to implement an aligned system that holds schools and staff members accountable for performance. This includes three essential components:

- **An assessment policy** that systematically gauges school and student performance, including the development of (1) a core set of formative, curriculum-embedded, and summative assessments; (2) other demonstrations of student learning (at least at gateway grades such as sixth, eighth, 10th, and 12th), including standardized tests, projects, and research papers to measure student progress and make standards tangible to students and teachers; and (3) measures of attainment, including grade-to-grade promotion, cohort graduation rates, and postsecondary enrollment.

- **School report cards** that measure absolute student performance and year-to-year improvement; attendance, promotion, and graduation rates; and safety and satisfaction measures.

- **A differentiated management system** based on performance cited in the annual report cards, such as more autonomy for high-performing schools, targeted assistance for schools with particular challenges, prescriptive assistance for low-performing schools, and a redesign or closure strategy for chronically low-performing and low-capacity schools.

4. **Community engagement.** In most communities, adopting a high-challenge environment that includes a college-ready mission will be made possible through extended dialogue with and engagement of the community. Business, civic, and higher education leaders should be enlisted to help make the case for all students ready for college, work, and citizenship to parents, students, and teachers. The development...
of a deliberate strategy should increase opportunities for community engagement and support. However, controversial elements of the plan, including school closure or replacement, the uneven pace of improvement, and new school development, will create short-term winners and losers, leading to dissatisfaction and controversy. System leaders will need to make a compelling case for change and frequently communicate the systemwide vision and plan so that it’s clear that all students will benefit. For sustainability, system leaders will need to make a commitment to building capacity for informed community accountability by giving communities an opportunity to learn how to evaluate schools and what the appropriate interventions are at each level of performance.

II. Theory of Action: A Portfolio Strategy Combining an Aligned System with Quality Options

A theory of action for school districts is a collection of strategies that reflect a conscious choice about the type and quality of schools needed in a community. Most superintendents lead their districts through some kind of periodic planning process that identifies improvement strategies and tactics given a set of inherited circumstances. Often, though, these plans are not part of a deliberate theory of action. Instead, they evolve in a nonsystematic way, usually from the urgent daily realities of leading a school district, which tends to create pockets of success that are not part of a larger system that serves all students well. For example, in many of the nation’s urban districts, options are being developed that are not part of a larger strategy, and ultimately serve to weaken rather than strengthen the district as a whole.

Our recommended theory of action—a portfolio strategy that combines an aligned system with options—has been shaped by diverse inputs: improvement at the elementary level driven by aligned systems of managed instruction, the high levels of achievement and attainment of some charter schools, and the design of new charter management organizations (schools and systems designed from scratch).

Many district leaders believe managed instruction and school choice to be mutually exclusive. Our experience

Philadelphia: A managed instruction strategy leads to significant gains

Beginning in 2002, the leadership of Philadelphia’s public schools has led the district through a set of critical reform strategies, including the establishment of a data-driven managed instruction program, tough new accountability measures, and a public/private partnership model that places some of the city’s lowest-performing schools under the management of nonprofit and for-profit organizations. In addition, the district has standardized its curriculum across the system in an effort to reduce the impact of a high student mobility rate and ensure consistently high-quality academic programs across all of its schools.

Early results appear promising. Gains in student test scores in grades five and eight have outpaced statewide results in both reading and math. The number of schools meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements of the Federal No Child Left Behind law increased from 22 (2002) to 160 (2004).

Sources: Philadelphia Public Schools, Council of Great City Schools,
suggests that, in fact, the two can be highly complementary. Alone, both have definite drawbacks: decentralization without accountability, class size and school size reduction without an instructional strategy, accountability without capacity. Combined, the strengths of two seemingly contradictory approaches comprise a powerful theory of action for any school district:

1. **Aligned system of managed instruction in district-operated schools.** With the introduction of state standards, instructional supervision became a priority in many districts, and a system of managed instruction emerged. The most frequently cited versions are Tony Alvarado’s work in District 2 in New York City and the San Diego Unified School District. A system of managed instruction consists of four core aligned components:

   - Common curriculum and instructional materials
   - Instructional leaders and coaches reinforcing a shared pedagogy
   - Assessments identifying students in need of more time and additional assistance
   - Aligned and expanded professional development

Implemented in some fashion in the majority of big urban districts, this focus on curriculum and quality instruction resulted in a broader range of elementary-age students learning at high levels, with less remarkable results among secondary school students.

An aligned system of managed instruction requires a district to adopt a default school design at each level along with an internal management structure to serve a large percentage of students. The strategy should incorporate standards, curriculum, assessments, size and configuration, personalization and support strategies, staffing, and professional development plans. A large system may want to identify options in some of these categories, but the intent is to create a fully aligned system of managed instruction that incorporates most of the K–8 schools and many of the high schools.

---

6 See “The THEMES of The Best Practice Framework” from the The National Center for Educational Accountability in Appendix 2.
9 There have been smaller gains at the secondary level that are likely a function of political and technical difficulty (there are few district-wide examples of rigorous, coherent 9-12 core curricula) and effectiveness (a single approach is less likely to work with all adolescents and young adults who are forming opinions, have varying degrees of preparation, are recognizing unique gifts and needs, and are setting life directions).
10 Most medium-large urban districts should be able to serve 70 percent to 80 percent of K-8 students and 50 percent to 60 percent of high school students in district-operated schools, depending on current performance levels and capacity for improvement. The remaining students should be served in schools providing other models and/or operated by others (See “2. Quality options, particularly at the secondary level, for students, teachers and parents”)
11 Many urban districts are eliminating middle schools by converting them to K-8 or 6-12 schools. To the extent that large struggling middle schools exist, they will need to be redesigned or replaced as well.
2. Quality options, particularly at the secondary level, for students, teachers, and parents. Adopting a strategy that supports high-quality options requires a district to develop a diverse set of schools that, in the aggregate, are better able to meet the needs of the community’s young people. Within this approach, schools have different emphases, teaching approaches, and philosophies. No single school fits every student, but every student fits at least one school. All schools expect every student to graduate prepared for college, engage all students in challenging work that is relevant to their lives, and should be small so that students get personal attention in a safe and respectful environment.

The type and mix of high-quality schools should be constructed to match the needs and interests of students, families, educators, and the broader community through a mix of analyses, including:

- Student performance data and existing research to provide a baseline perspective on the types of learning options that should be available to students
- Student and teacher surveys and analysis of current program participation (or attempted participation) to understand the kinds of options that should be made available
- Global, national, and local economic and job trend information; emerging industry clusters; and community assets to refine the types and priority of options to be made available

There is a great variety of schools with high graduation and college attendance rates. To determine the appropriate mix of schools for a particular district, school types can be grouped into general categories to foster discussion about the range of school choices that should be available to all students: traditional academic schools organized around disciplines; schools rich with projects and experiences related to a theme; and highly supportive, student-centered schools that match the strengths, needs, and interests of their students.12

---

12 The district operated default school model is likely to be in the traditional discipline centered approach, but it may include occupationally themed academies. District schools can be augmented with interesting thematic charters that leverage community assets and provide rich applied learning environments. Even if these two content-centric approaches are widely available, there will still be at least 5 percent to 15 percent of students who require a more student-centered and supportive school environment.
Despite the promise of introducing expanded options to parents, students, and teachers, there are significant risks to this approach. Experience to date suggests that it is difficult to scale a single, high-performing school into a network of high-performing schools. In addition, equity issues also loom large, including ensuring equal access to information about options, creating a fair admissions system, and providing transportation to those students who need it.

These challenges can be addressed through the implementation of a set of well-thought-out district policies. For example, to address equity concerns, districts should focus on expanding options through new school development that targets underserved neighborhoods or groups and/or replacing low-capacity and low-performance schools.

Effective scaling strategies require larger cities to develop schools that are part of likeminded networks—either franchise or managed networks. A franchise network replicates a specific school model and provides strong support systems (e.g., KIPP, The Big Picture Company, New Tech High). A managed network (e.g., Aspire, Green Dot) operates schools. Strong networks and systems of schools bring additional management capacity and expertise, as well as proven programs, professional development, and additional human and financial resources. The second approach is a

---

13 The worst example of school choice may be the American comprehensive high school—a $9,000 voucher given to 10 million teenagers who, with few limitations and little guidance, take whatever courses they want, are free to choose from varying degrees of difficulty, and fail to get the education they need and deserve two-thirds of the time.
In addition to multiple models, districts and states should provide multiple pathways to and through higher education. All students should have the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school through Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, or dual enrollment. Early college high schools are designed to create the opportunity for high school students to graduate with up to two years of college credit and come in traditional, thematic, and student-centered variations.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately, a portfolio strategy should be tailored to academic needs and community preferences. Districts may adopt a mixed strategy with common elementary schools and schools of choice at the high school level. Some districts will group schools using a differentiated management system based on school performance (see “Strong Accountability” p. 7) to drive grouping strategies. Other districts will find it beneficial to create managed feeder patterns augmented by a variety of elementary and secondary options.

III. High Support

It is often far more dangerous to do something incorrectly than to omit it. If you omit it, there’s a chance you may notice the omission and correct it. If you do it incorrectly, but believe you are doing it right, there’s little chance you’ll scrutinize what you do.

-- Donald Reinertsen, Managing the Design Factory

Creating a portfolio strategy that includes an aligned system of managed instruction and expanded access to high-quality options constitutes a substantial change for the typical district. The standards are higher, the agenda is complex, the leadership roles are challenging, accountability is sharper and more transparent, and engagement is more focused. Equally important to framing the challenge is creating the support systems that ensure the success of each student, teacher, and school. This section provides an overview of the support infrastructure required to execute a portfolio strategy, beginning with core learning supports, and then moving to the school, teachers, and students.

1. Curriculum Supports. Ten years ago, curriculum support in many states and school districts consisted of textbook adoption. Emerging best practices in district learning infrastructure include:

---

14 Denmark is a mature example of a portfolio of upper secondary options. Neighborhood P-9 schools share a national curriculum. Upper secondary choices include traditional schools, applied learning schools that focus on math/science or business/finance, vocational programs that prepare students for work and further education, and alternative schools.
Standards-based resources: Many states, educational service districts, and private organizations (for-profit and nonprofit) are building curriculum resources linked to state standards that include:

- Grade-level expectations with examples of quality work
- Diagnostic assessments, sample problems, and writing prompts
- Sample lessons and instructional strategies
- Adopted and supplementary instructional materials and standards-based digital content
- Professional development activities
- Remediation/acceleration strategies and special needs strategies

Regardless of the development strategy and partnerships selected, districts should set clear priorities (i.e., literacy), set clear targets (i.e., what do students need to know and be able to do), set clear goals (i.e., 90 percent of students reading at basic level in third grade), borrow first and develop second, and align district support and Web-based resources.

Information systems and analytical supports: Teachers should be able to monitor growth over time through a mix of classroom-based and standardized assessments, and tailor instruction to individual needs. Providing this data to teachers requires:

- Assessment data (formative and summative) with analytic tools that disaggregate skill sets and student groups. (These are increasingly available online, making results available much more quickly and less expensively.)
- A student information system with statewide, unique student identifier and common data fields so that student records can be shared from grade to grade and school to school when a student moves
- Instructional management systems to help teachers bring assessment data, standards, and lesson resources together in a manageable way

In addition to access to a student’s academic record and assessment data, schools and teachers should have access to analytical support to help interpret data and use it to improve practices.

While many of these curriculum support activities have traditionally been housed in school districts, the emergence of state-based standards combined with the
level of investment needed to ensure high-quality support should serve as a strong set of incentives to encourage districts and states to work together to develop an approach that leverages economies of scale. A district-state partnership may include anything from state-sponsored technical assistance to guide districts as they adopt these supports, to states investing in state-level curriculum supports and data systems.

2. School supports. We’ve observed that good schools exhibit a high degree of coherence—everything works together for teacher and student success. Districts can support school coherence by adopting three essential school supports:

   o **Learning networks:** There are thousands of high-performing, autonomous, and independent schools, and most have benefited from sustained, often idiosyncratic, school leadership. However, most schools benefit from participation in a learning and support network, either as part of a school district, a replication network, or a charter management organization. These networks should be designed to help ensure that every lesson taught by every teacher is part of a coherent school, and all support systems are aligned to help them achieve that goal.

   Most new schools should be part of a replication or managed network that shares a common school model and support system. With the introduction of multiple school models and a system of progressive intervention (see below), the district may want to consider school-grouping strategies other than location. Some contract and charter schools may participate in support networks external to the district. Larger districts with numerous schools in need of significant improvement may want to group schools according to performance level to ensure that all those that require prescriptive assistance are receiving consistent levels of support.

   o **School intervention strategy:** As a district continues to monitor the performance of its schools, it will be critical that it develops an approach for efficiently diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, and then tailoring an appropriate intervention strategy for each school community. Strategies may include instructional coaching, leadership coaching, or, for large comprehensive schools, sponsoring significant redesign efforts, including replacement in cases of chronic failure.

   Nearly all urban systems will need to build their internal school improvement capacity and utilize an external partner—either a model provider like IRRE, Talent Development, and High Schools That Work, or a technical assistance provider that supports a district-developed school model. The amount of outside help needed will likely be a function of the size of the district, the performance distribution of the schools, and the efficiency and expertise of central office staff.

---

15 In an analysis of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s new schools grantees, schools that were part of tightly designed and supported networks performed more consistently at higher levels than their counterparts.
Flexible and adequate budgets: A high-performing district requires a financing scheme that: (1) recognizes each school needs funding that reflects the challenges of its student population, and (2) aligns with the system’s accountability system requiring differentiated management depending on school performance (i.e., high-performing schools get more autonomy and the discretion to expend funds as they deem educationally appropriate).  

Implementation of such a financing scheme implies a fundamental change in the relationship between schools and districts. Rather than the district making most spending decisions on behalf of schools and students, much of the responsibility will be left to the schools (or in some cases networks), which will decide what district services it makes sense to purchase. Effective transfer of this responsibility from the district to the school requires extensive capacity building, including a mix of well-designed professional development opportunities centered on budgeting and financial management for school leaders and appropriate district oversight and support of the process.

3. Teacher supports. Teaching quality is the key variable in student achievement. To promote quality instruction, teachers should expect deliberate support from their districts in three areas:

- **Instructional leadership:** School and district leaders should facilitate the development of a shared conception of quality instruction and provide aligned feedback and professional development. Improving student achievement through effective instructional practices should be the central focus of district and school meetings. Teacher leaders should provide frequent feedback on the quality of instruction, which may be augmented by non-evaluative coaching. Good instructional leadership makes teaching a public performance and makes improvement a team sport.

- **Professional learning community:** An effective professional learning community will promote horizontal accountability—teachers who work together to improve each other’s practice. To accomplish this, teachers need time each

---

16 Districts should migrate to actual cost budgeting rather than distributing FTEs because it tends to exacerbate inequity between schools. Distributing dollars rather than headcount should be accompanied by a transition to a compensation system that more accurately reflects contribution (i.e., pay based on knowledge/skill, performance, and responsibility).

17 Districts should provide high-quality core services to managed schools, including curriculum, assessment, student information systems, recruiting, finance and payroll, facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation, along with additional services available for purchase. Contract and charter schools that do not receive district services should receive at least 95 percent of per-pupil revenue and a facility. With a full budget allocation, contract and charter schools should have the opportunity to purchase core services from the district or other providers.

week to work together to meet shared challenges and improve their skills. They need the opportunity to work with a group of teachers that share responsibility for the success of a group of students. They need time to work together with teachers that teach the same subject. They need ongoing, job-embedded professional development. An instructional coach who has the opportunity to observe their practice, model successful practices, and provide performance feedback may provide this support.

- **Professional culture and compensation:** The professional culture of a school and district—set in part by employment agreements—should reflect the values of flexibility, measurement, incentives, efficiency, and innovation. More specifically, teachers should be given the opportunity to be:
  
  - Hired by schools or networks with an appropriate match of skills and supports, which requires incentives for teachers to take on challenging assignments and mentors for new teachers
  - Compensated in a way that adequately reflects their knowledge and skills, responsibilities, and student performance
  - Provided with career development opportunities and relevant educational experiences
  - Supported by employment contracts that reflect goals, job responsibilities, and due process rights, and also offer enough flexibility to allow for school-based innovations

4. **Student and family supports.** The ultimate customers of any school district’s offerings are the students. To ensure a diverse set of students are positioned to meet the overarching district goal of “every student graduates ready for college, work, and citizenship,” a district must put in place a range of student supports appropriately tailored to the specific needs of their student population, including:

- **College awareness and guidance:** Students and their parents must be made aware of life options after high school and the effect their decisions—academic and personal—will have on their lives.

- **Academic support:** Students need a clear understanding of what is expected of them. Schools should use a variety of strategies to make standards come alive, including providing feedback from aligned assessments, displaying work that reflects expectations, and creating standards-based report cards and portfolios. Students with specific learning needs, whether due to language or learning barriers, should have the opportunity during the school day and after to receive assistance in core subjects.

---

19. See New Leaders for New Schools and New York City’s Leadership Academy as important examples of how organizations recruit, shape, and support effective school leaders.

An Ideal State Policy Set

While much of the work to create a high-performing school district will rest with district and school leaders, staff, and communities, states will also play an important role in advancing policies that create the conditions required to raise graduation rates for all students. These include:

- **Standards**: Adopt college-ready standards in reading, writing, and math; promote college awareness; encourage the use of multiple assessments to ensure system and student performance
- **Accountability**: Create an accessible, data-driven system that provides appropriate supports and intervention to struggling schools and districts
- **Choices**: Create incentives and remove barriers to creating new schools that prepare all students for college
- **Finance**: Link funding to the costs of meeting educational standards; create a transparent, equitable, and stable system that reflects actual costs

**Student and family supports**: Districts should work with other community- and state-based organizations to align services for high-needs children and families. These may include before- and after-school care, health care, and mental health care, and temporary housing. Secondary students should have access to one or more alternative school options that offer an individualized approach in a highly supportive environment.

**Implications for Implementation**

"Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs."
--Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Districts will not be able to transform themselves into high-performing systems based on the will of the superintendent or a handful of school board members, teachers, or community leaders. Effective transformation requires key stakeholders to take an active role in the planning, execution, and oversight of the strategy. Districts will have to recognize the critical roles and responsibilities of stakeholders across the system and should design a clear, predictable process that guides the community through the transformation.

**Roles and responsibilities**. Because transitions are complex, contentious, and long term, stable and effective governance, community participation, and state support are critical to success. There are implications and required actions for actors and institutions across the system.

- **District leadership**: Transformation will require critical policy changes. For example, weighted student budgeting and purchased services require a new approach to budgeting or a new financial system, and a substantial improvement of school-based financial decision-making skills. School boards and/or mayors and superintendents should be prepared to address a range of key issues, including governance structures, standards, curriculum and instruction policies, community relations and school choice policies, and financial and central services policies. These changes are likely to result in dislocation and job loss, so the environment will be contentious. Outside assistance in making these changes is advisable.
Central office: To effectively execute critical components of the strategy, district leadership will have to determine how to redesign the central office to better support schools. For example, with a system of progressive intervention, the district requires substantial capacity for school improvement. Most districts will need to improve and expand their internal capacity to manage and improve schools (e.g., adding literacy coaches and school improvement coaches for prescriptive assistance requiring a change in the use of Title 1 funds, another contentious budget shift).

Educators: Teachers and school leaders will need access to information about school models and networks in order to ensure that they are part of a school or network that best reflects their pedagogical style, education philosophy, and beliefs about teaching and learning. This will require some changes in district policies and most collective bargaining agreements, and, more importantly, a significant culture change for the educators and the system.

Parents: Parents will need to be informed consumers of school choice. Some will need to help their children take advantage of supplemental services, be more involved in their children’s school choices, and work to help students reach college-ready standards.

Civic and business leaders: Community leaders must be vocal supporters of high standards and guardians of effective governance. They should help identify desirable choice options and provide relevance opportunities for students.

State leaders: States should adopt college-ready standards, graduation requirements, and assessments—most likely phased in over several years. States can accelerate the development of high-quality options for urban students with strong intervention strategies, strong charter school laws, and adequate and flexible student-based finance and budgeting systems and processes. (See sidebar.)

Transformation Process: While transformation planning will be highly contextual to each district, there are four basic phases to the process:

1. Diagnostic and Market Mapping: Districts should deliberately develop community beliefs around the theory of education, organization, and change. The community context can be understood through mapping, surveying community and student opinions, and determining the assets and needs of each sub-community. Results can then be used to draft a strategy that outlines a theory of action, including the preferred portfolio of school types.

2. Detailed Planning: The detailed planning phase considers governance and organization, district-managed school improvement, new school development, shared services, resource allocation, and community engagement. The assistance
of a consulting firm experienced in large-scale organizational change can be helpful in these first two phases.

3. **Managed Schools Triage/Portfolio and Central Support Triage:** Planning should be executed with the implementation of key policy (standards, accountability, choice, resources) and organizational changes. In addition, school closures/replacements and redesign efforts should be initiated, and new school development should be launched with a combination of imported model providers and local development efforts.

4. **Managed Schools Improvement/Portfolio and Central Support Development:** In this phase, districts should begin to improve efforts in upper quartile schools, expand new school development, and complete full redesign of central office and policy changes.

Ultimately, the transformation will require a reallocation of internal resources and investment of external resources. A variety of funding strategies will be required over the course of a decade to fully make the transformation.

**Conclusion**

...[our political processes have trouble] dealing effectively with issues that involve technical complexities, shorter-term cost to achieve longer-term gain, incomplete information and uncertain outcomes, opportunities for political advantage, and inadequate public understanding. Unfortunately, many of the most important economic, geopolitical, and environmental challenges of today's complicated world fit this profile, raising the question of how effectively our political system will be able to deal with them.

-Robert Rubin, An Uncertain World

Robert Rubin was describing the difficulty of responding to the 1995 Mexican debt crisis, but his words ring true when applied to the challenge of creating systems of schools, particularly urban systems that work for all students. It's an enormous technical, educational, and political challenge. And yet, our democracy demands that we take it on.

Based on the successes of multiple countries, school districts, and other complex sectors, a compelling path forward has emerged. It requires educators and communities to demand that students, teachers, and communities are appropriately challenged; articulate a theory of action that is equitable, scalable, and ultimately practical; and design a system of operations that supports high performance.
The high-performing district strategy laid out here draws on the best of what works. It is a hypothesis based on the apparent necessity to combine alignment and choice, accountability and capacity building. As leading urban districts are demonstrating, we can and must combine the benefits of aligned systems of managed instruction with the obvious benefits of and demand for school choice. We’re also suggesting that states and districts need help to meet the challenge, and that they could take advantage of the growing number of high-quality school developers, school operators, and technical assistance providers. Together, through public/private partnerships, we can meet the challenge of creating high-performing districts that prepare all students for college, work, and citizenship.
Appendix 1: Emerging Best Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Typical Observation</th>
<th>Emerging Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational mission</strong></td>
<td>Multiple missions, resulting in low-income/minority students trapped in low-expectation tracks</td>
<td>Common standards that prepare all students for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Governance</strong></td>
<td>Dysfunction often stems from complex structures involving multiple entities with overlapping responsibilities, bureaucracy, legacy contracts, and interest group control</td>
<td>Stable, effective local governance focused on results and equity,(^{21}) empowering improvement with transparency, measurement, responsiveness; aligned with state goals and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accountability framework</strong></td>
<td>Some student accountability; de minimus staff, school, or system accountability; limited/lagging indicators of performance</td>
<td>Transparent performance management system with steps of progressive intervention that provide support for all—students, staff, school and system—relevant to the challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community engagement</strong></td>
<td>No real community support networks, resulting in disenfranchisement, learned helplessness, white flight</td>
<td>Proactive strategies to engage parents and citizens, business, and civic leaders, resulting in an informed community that makes quality education a priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School portfolio</strong></td>
<td>Large attendance area schools, comprehensive secondary schools that track students by perceived ability</td>
<td>Parents, students, and teachers choose from several quality school options designed to engage all students effectively; location, transportation, enrollment policies, hiring practices, and outreach efforts ensure equitable choice; outside assistance providers and operators augment capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum support</strong></td>
<td>Textbook adoptions are the curriculum, primary student outcomes are test scores, instructional focus is test preparation</td>
<td>Learning expectations provide a spine for instructional materials, diagnostic assessments, ramp-up supports for students, and teacher development activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School support</strong></td>
<td>Operational compliance is a priority, isolation is standard; budgets are centralized and compartmentalized; standardized services are low quality, unresponsive, and unaligned with school needs</td>
<td>Schools participate in learning and support networks; dollars, not headcount, follow students and reflect student needs, creating budgets that allow school-based decision making; effective core services are provided, optional purchased services are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher support</strong></td>
<td>Late centralized recruiting, placement by seniority, common pay scale, work in isolation with large student loads, no induction, random workshops, self-identified leaders</td>
<td>Instructional leaders are identified and developed; district recruits but hiring is school/network-based; three-year induction with ongoing job-embedded development in a professional learning community; compensation reflects ability, performance, and responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student support</strong></td>
<td>Students are anonymous, limited academic support or guidance, no connection to community services; class grades don’t reflect standards, classroom work not aligned to standardized tests</td>
<td>Each student has an advocate that ensures appropriate guidance, academic support, and connection to family services as needed; student receives regular feedback against clear expectations defined in an individual education plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{21}\) School Communities that Work, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2002
Appendix 2:

The THEMES of The Best Practice Framework
from the National Center for Educational Accountability
(http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/theme_explanation.cfm?sub=framework)

Curriculum and Academic Goals
"What is Taught and Learned"
This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? It is a great surprise to many that the explicit, agreed-upon academic goals of our school systems have ranged from fuzzy to nonexistent. High-performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through 12th grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for all students and are non-negotiable.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"
This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers must be selected and developed to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
"The Right Stuff-Time and Tools"
This theme focuses on the "things" that high-performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"
After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject, and ensuring that schools are equipped with the staff and the tools needed to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question, "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment
"Ensuring All Children Learn"
The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: "What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?" High-performing school systems have pyramids of intervention that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

*Various school improvement organizations and studies provide different organizational schema for describing school system practices. NCEA uses the five themes that were consistently identified in high-performing schools across the nation as the primary areas that differentiate school performance.