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AUTHOR Bryk, Anthony S.; Hill, Paul; Shipps, Dorothy  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper helps community partners envision a system of community schools and understand the changes needed to make it a reality. Information in the paper is adapted from a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago and the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. The study examined efforts to decentralize school systems in six major cities nationwide. Part 1 of this paper describes the basis for recent education reforms aimed at decentralizing authority and strengthening school and community connections. It also explains the contexts that shape community-linked school systems. Part 2 presents important features shared by various models for increasing school-level autonomy and school-community linkages. It describes the early experiences of six cities that adopted decentralized school systems. Part 3 shares lessons learned about the scope, depth, and characteristics of school reforms that build school-level responsibility for education. It also presents strategies for connecting schools with parents and communities and describes conflicts that can surface during efforts to create community schools. Part 4 explores challenges and implications for moving from an understanding of community schools to action. Part 5 identifies sources of more information. Contains 11 references. (SM)

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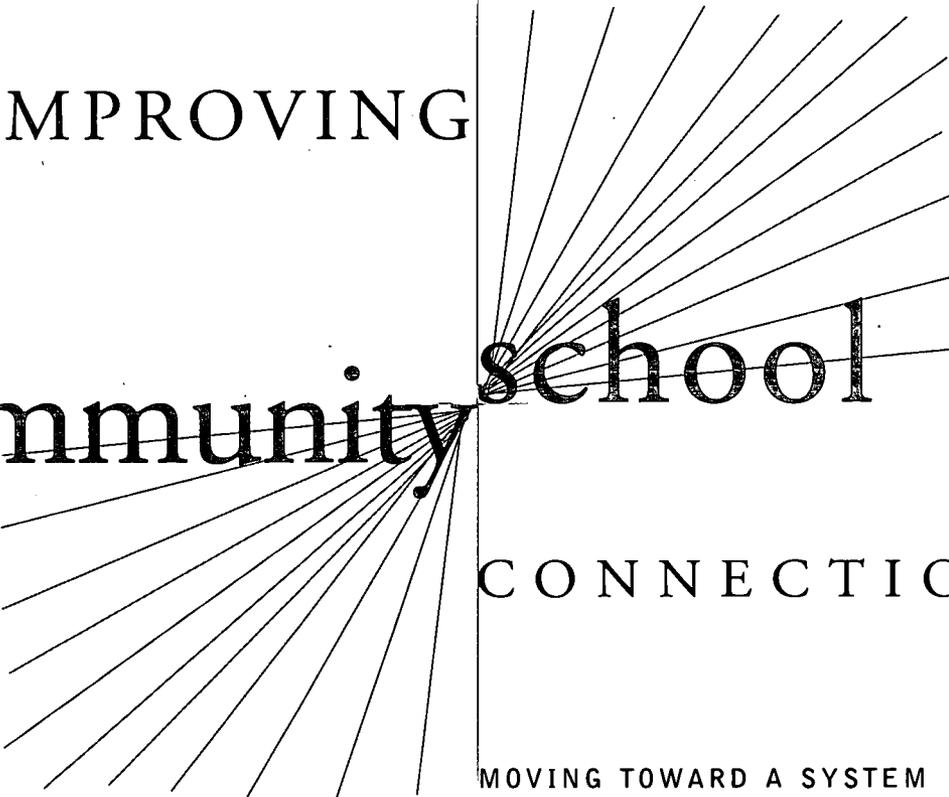
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*Written by  
Anthony S. Bryk, Paul Hill,  
and Dorothy Shipps in association  
with Michael J. Murphy,  
David Menefee-Libey, and  
Albert L. Bennett*

*Editorial assistance provided by  
Leila Fiester*

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## Foreword

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has been working to improve the well being of disadvantaged kids for the last 50 years. Today, this mission includes a focus on building better futures for millions of American's poor children who are experiencing poor educational outcomes, especially those youngsters in urban areas.

For sure, there are today in many large cities some exceptionally effective public schools where youngsters are learning and being adequately prepared for the worlds of work, family, and citizenship. But in many urban areas—despite the best intentions of educators and others in the community—the outcomes for most students are abysmal. A large number of these schools are, in the words of U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, places that “should never be called schools at all.”

Who are the young people attending urban public schools? One out of four U.S. school children—11 million youngsters—attend them. Thirty-five percent of those children are from poor families; 43 percent are from minority groups.

What are these young people learning? In a massive survey of urban education, *Education Week* concluded that “most 4th graders who live in U.S. cities can't read and understand a simple children's book, and most 8th graders can't use arithmetic to solve a practical problem.” Slightly more than half of big-city students don't graduate from high school in four years.

On the urban school governance front, a desire to shake up the status quo has spurred some state and local officials to undertake seemingly drastic actions. These initiatives include district-led reconstitutions of failed schools (e.g., San Francisco); state takeovers of troubled districts (e.g., Cleveland, Newark, Patterson, Jersey City); placing school systems under the control of specially created boards (e.g., District of Columbia, Baltimore) or under the control of mayors (e.g., Cleveland, Chicago); and hiring non-educators to manage the school system (e.g., Seattle).

Other strategies rely on changing the system through market-based principles of competition and choice. These include charter schools—-independent, self-governing public schools of choice that are freed from many bureaucratic requirements in exchange for being held accountable for their results; contracting with for-profit and non-profit providers to offer different school and after-school services, including such well-known firms as Chris Whittle's Edison Project; and public and private vouchers (or scholarship) programs—the most controversial of these reform efforts.

This publication—originally prepared as a report to the Casey Foundation on *Decentralization in Practice: Toward a System of Schools* by Anthony Bryk, Paul Hill, Dorothy Shipps and their colleagues—examines many of the policy issues underlying the effort to create more effective schools for our most disadvantaged youngsters, especially those in urban areas. It is the view of the Casey Foundation that a key element of this effort should include transforming our schools into “family-strengthening” institutions that draw upon a variety of community resources to support and nurture the work of the school.

Creating “family-strengthening” schools is consistent with a set of strategies that the Casey Foundation is supporting and that is directed to meeting the challenges facing families in tough neighborhoods—an initiative called Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development. This initiative is based on the conviction that it is possible to improve outcomes for children—including educational outcomes—by strengthening their families.

It is our hope that the issues discussed in this publication will challenge policymakers at all levels to rethink their assumptions, views, and practices about the relationships between district offices, schools, communities, and families. We also hope that it will help policymakers begin to imagine what an alternative system of decentralized public schools that strengthens families might look like.

Bruno V. Manno  
Senior Fellow in Education  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
July, 1999

## Introduction: Strong Schools, Families, and Communities Create Strong Children

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A child shouldn't have to be a hero just to succeed in life. But it often does take heroic effort for children in our most vulnerable communities to beat the odds. Many urban neighborhoods have lost the businesses, social institutions, health and human services, education opportunities, and recreational facilities that can help children thrive. In these neighborhoods, poverty and lack of opportunity isolate families from vital resources, relationships, and aspirations.

Without strong neighborhoods to bolster them—neighborhoods that offer education, a sense of community, social networks, accessible services and supports, and economic opportunities—families falter in their pursuit of the American dream. And without strong families to draw on, children face an uphill struggle to become healthy, happy, well-educated, and productive citizens.

It is possible to improve children's chances by strengthening their families and neighborhoods, and schools play a crucial role in this transformation. Given the right opportunities and support, schools can forge strong ties with parents and neighborhood partners, establish site-based decision making and accountability, and develop leadership and professional skills among teachers and community members. These actions prepare everyone to help children reach their greatest potential.

Approaches for linking schools with neighborhoods include the community schools model, charter schools, and contract schools. These and other models represent a move away from education controlled by school boards and central offices toward greater influence (and responsibility) by parents and school-based educators. These approaches can be thought of as "systems of community schools"—systems in which each school has its own staff, mission, and

approach to instruction but all are working to improve education and other outcomes for children, parents, and neighborhoods.

This paper helps community partners envision a system of community schools and understand the changes needed to make it a reality. It is written for a broad audience of policy makers and practitioners, including community leaders, directors of nonprofit organizations, local grant makers, directors of school accountability, principals and teachers who serve as instructional leaders, mayors and council members, and business partners involved in education. It can be used in sections or in its entirety—to stimulate discussions about change, to focus strategic planning, or to explore issues—depending on the needs and circumstances of each community.

The information in this paper is adapted from a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago and the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. The study, conducted for the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1993-96 and completed in 1998, examined efforts to decentralize school systems in six major cities: Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

Decentralization is a very specific education reform that extends far beyond linking schools with communities. However, decentralization's emphasis on school-level autonomy for operations and finances, accountability for results, and site-based leadership and governance has important lessons for other attempts to unite schools, families, and communities around improving children's chances.

Part 1 of this paper describes the basis for recent education reforms aimed at decentralizing authority and strengthening school and

community connections. It also explains the contexts that shape community-linked school systems. Part 2 presents some important features shared by various models for increasing school-level autonomy and school-community linkages. It describes the early experiences of six cities that adopted decentralized school systems. Part 3 shares lessons learned about the scope, depth, and characteristics of school reforms that build school-level responsibility for education. It also presents strategies for connecting schools with parents and communities and describes conflicts that can surface during efforts to create community schools. Part 4 explores challenges and implications for moving from an understanding of community schools to action. Part 5 identifies sources of more information, including publications by Anthony Bryk and Paul Hill that provide detailed information on the research used to develop this paper.

# Why Now?

## The Context for Linking Schools with Families and Communities

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### Current Education Reform Emphasizes School-Level Authority and Responsibility

An urge to transform public education spread across the United States in the 1980s as parents and community leaders lost confidence in their school systems. Despite decades of efforts to improve learning opportunities, especially for poor and minority students, results had fallen far short of goals. High expectations for students were undermined by low school performance, administrative waste, and fiscal or labor crises. Parents were disillusioned with the solutions that school districts had tried and suspected that educators couldn't—or wouldn't—improve school performance. Communities were frustrated when the centralized bureaucracies that controlled schools did not seem to respect or respond to unique neighborhood concerns.

Education reformers reasoned that individual schools needed more authority and responsibility in order to become effective agents for students, parents, and neighborhoods. Efforts to decentralize school systems—to shift authority from district bureaucracies to the school level and to make schools more responsive to the families and communities they serve, among other changes—were based on three beliefs:

- Effective schools are not standardized, driven by regulation, or micromanaged by a bureaucracy. Educators in these schools take action because it will help students learn, not merely to comply with regulations or contract provisions.
- The future of urban education depends on finding different ways to organize, govern, motivate, and support schools to make them effective and efficient in their

### Terms Used in This Paper

**Decentralization:** The process of shifting control of public education from a centralized bureaucracy to the school level. Key elements include:

- ❖ New roles for central office staff, principals, teachers, superintendents, school boards, and other players
- ❖ School-level control of staffing, curriculum development, professional training, and resource allocation
- ❖ School accountability for results
- ❖ Family and community participation in school decisions; school responsiveness to family and community needs

**Community schools:** Schools that encompass and serve a community. A community may be a collection of like-minded individuals, a group of people who live in a specific neighborhood, or people who share consensus on education priorities.

**A decentralized system of community schools:** A district-wide education system in which each school has primary authority for its own mission, governance, staffing, and approach to instruction but all schools are working to improve education and other outcomes for children, parents, and neighborhoods. In such a system, the central office's primary function is to hold schools accountable for advancing student achievement and to provide the resources and assistance needed to improve student learning.

use of resources; responsive and caring to students, parents, and communities; and publicly accountable.

- Weak public schools contribute to worsening social conditions and represent lost opportunities for community development. Increasing school-level authority for education re-engages civic and business leaders in shaping this essential resource.

Decentralization alone cannot transform teaching and learning. District and state agencies still have a role in helping to develop overall standards for education, comprehensive plans for district-wide improvement, and support systems that enable schools to meet these goals. But, increasingly, individual schools have taken charge of setting their own goals and governing efforts to reach them.

In the process, many of these schools are becoming “community schools”—schools that encompass and serve a community. A community may be a collection of like-minded individuals, a group of people who happen to live in a specific neighborhood, or people who have reached consensus on education priorities. (This paper shares the concept of community schools proposed by Paul Hill and Christine Campbell in their *Resource Guide for Community-Based Schools*, prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation in April 1999, which suggests that no form of community necessarily provides a better basis for a school than any other form.)

Although community schools are intended to serve whole neighborhoods, some residents may not share the goals of a particular community school. A system that gives several schools the authority and capacity to serve a neighborhood, and allows students to choose among these schools, does the best job of serving families and communities.

## Social and Political Contexts Shape School Improvement

Public school systems were targets of criticism long before the movement to create systems of decentralized schools. Urban students learned too little, on average; standards for performance were too low; and American students knew less than their peers in other countries. School systems seemed to be remote, bureaucratic agencies that had lost their connections to families and communities.

People criticized their school systems as top-heavy, unduly expensive, and dominated by political concerns. Many administrators and union leaders seemed more concerned with preserving adults’ jobs than with raising student achievement or preparing students for a competitive job market. Long-standing approaches to school administration, collective bargaining, state oversight, and funding seemed to embody problems so severe that they jeopardized the future of public education.

At the same time, growing proportions of black, Latino, immigrant, and poor students began to fill urban schools. The new mix of students strained districts’ capacity to fund and implement compensatory programs designed to help these students compete with their more advantaged peers, including bilingual instruction, supplementary education, affirmative action hiring, and busing to achieve integration.

The demand for compensatory services from rapidly expanding minority groups made urban education increasingly expensive. But by the late 1980s, a time when tax reduction was a political priority, critics were challenging the logic of providing these programs. The services did not appear to curb bigotry—in fact, racial and ethnic discrimination showed signs of renewed vitality in some cities. Economic disparities grew instead of diminishing, as middle-class families fled to the suburbs and cities lost a portion of the tax base that paid for education.

These social and political factors created an environment ripe for changes that would make schools more self-sufficient, more responsive to families and communities, and better able to meet student needs and improve performance. Some cities reduced the size of their central education office; by reducing the number of people authorized to direct schools from above, they stimulated school-level responsibility for decisions. Cities also gave school councils partial authority over budgets, spending, and hiring and gave teachers' unions greater responsibility for teacher training and performance improvement. In some cities, superintendents negotiated performance goals, school district assistance, and school freedoms with principals and replaced principals who could not fulfill their agreements.

**What Prompts School Systems  
to Decentralize?**

The combination of three factors tipped the scales for districts in the six-city study: (1) a substantial fiscal or labor crisis; (2) costly and seemingly intractable performance problems, in a system operating on discredited solutions; and (3) a new conception of urban public education, promoted by powerful local players in the public and corporate sectors.

For example, in Denver, Chicago, and Los Angeles, a strike or strike threat was preceded or followed by a financial shortfall. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Cincinnati, and Seattle, a revenue deficit was caused by voters' unwillingness to increase school taxes.

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## What Are the Characteristics of Decentralized, Community-linked School Systems? Six Examples

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A system of community schools can encompass many different education goals and strategies. This section highlights some important features shared by various models for increasing school-level autonomy. It also describes the early experiences of six cities that adopted decentralized school systems and began to connect schools with communities, drawn from a three-year study of decentralization in practice.

### Typical Features of Models for Increasing School-Level Autonomy

There is no single model for converting a centralized school administration into a system of autonomous, community-linked schools.

Typically, reform plans start simply and grow more complex over time, as collaborators learn from experience and as new options become available. The fundamental elements of these new systems may include:

- **Waivers** that exempt schools from certain regulations in exchange for increased accountability
- **Downsizing** of the school system's central office
- **Redefined roles** for central office staff and principals
- **Mandatory site councils** that have decision-making authority for school personnel and budgeting
- **A plan to improve instruction and classroom performance**, although this focus may not be included in the initial stages of school and system transformation
- **Provisions for privately funded training** and services to address the challenges of implementing a new system and to sustain momentum for

reform among educators, policy makers, business partners, and grant makers

### How Does School-Level Autonomy Improve Schools?

By shifting authority and responsibility to the school level, education reformers hope to provide new resources and incentives that will unite the efforts of all adults in a school community around improving school operations, teaching, and learning. Ultimately, people expect these changes to improve students' academic experiences and achievement.

The researchers who studied decentralization in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle identified four implicit theories about how the changes might improve schools. Each theory assumes that individual schools need (1) authority for action and responsibility for consequences and (2) external help to develop new ways of teaching and to coordinate the efforts of all partners. However, there is no evidence that any of the theories *alone* is successful in linking decentralization efforts with broad-based school improvement. The theories can be described as follows:

1. *Providing high-quality professional development and removing regulatory burdens will enable teachers to set and maintain high standards of performance.*

According to this theory, teachers and principals have or can develop the knowledge, skills, judgment, and motivation required to develop innovative methods of instruction if they receive training and mentoring and are relieved of constraints.

The focus on improving teachers' skills recognizes the importance of "teaching for understanding"—not merely helping students attain basic levels of mastery but helping them reach more challenging standards. To do this, teachers need to develop a deep knowledge of subject matter, an awareness of individual learning styles, and sensitivity to the family and community contexts in which students live.

School systems that adopt this theory make major commitments to teacher development, including pre-service training, induction programs, and continuing professional development. They also must make working conditions attractive to school professionals by switching from a system based on controlling staff to one that builds teacher commitment. In this environment, teachers are viewed as problem-solving professionals rather than simply laborers who are accountable to their superiors.

2. *Schools need site-level governance procedures to ensure that reforms are coordinated and connected with family and community needs.*

Placing school oversight and resource allocation in the hands of diverse, school-level governance boards can: (1) make schools more responsive to family and neighborhood concerns and create links with parents and community resources; (2) increase local investment in the education and welfare of children; and (3) foster trust between parents and teachers, making their collaboration on behalf of students more effective.

### School-Level Governance In Action

❖ In Chicago, the creation of Local School Councils (LSCs) fostered interaction between neighborhood residents and school leaders. The councils gave parents a chance to see whether principals appeared concerned about their community and children—an important observation, since the LSCs have authority to hire and fire principals. As principals began turning to the community and to school staff for guidance and approval, they spent more time engaging residents in school improvement and expanding connections to other neighborhood institutions. Parents and local professionals now collaborate actively on school improvement in about one-third of Chicago elementary schools.

❖ In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, parent satisfaction surveys are part of the annual accountability system for evaluating principals. This process was intended to redirect principals' attention to local concerns and the needs of parents. Because the superintendent retains the power to hire and fire principals, however, the extent of parent and community influence remains unknown.

3. *Clarifying standards-based goals, and rewarding results, will help schools and educators focus on achieving outcomes rather than on merely monitoring the education process or enforcing regulations.*

When education systems spell out expectations for students and for learning environments as high-quality standards, and hold schools accountable for meeting the standards, educators and community members are more likely to pursue school improvement aggressively. And when schools have extra flexibility in choosing strategies for organizing and delivering

instruction, teachers and principals are motivated to collaborate on effective teaching and learning.

4. *Stimulating market-style competition among schools and the providers they use, and allowing families to choose among schools, creates incentives to improve teaching and learning and makes schools more responsive to the neighborhoods they serve.*

This theory relies on parent and educator preferences, rather than external standards, to guide teaching and learning. It suggests that allowing schools to choose the providers of instructional approaches that best meet their needs, rather than imposing a single program, will let schools tailor education to the students they serve. If parents can choose among schools, schools will have an incentive to improve their performance. Successful schools will attract more students, and other schools will want to adopt their strategies.

#### **Which Theory is Most Effective?**

In the six-city study, most decentralization efforts became hybrids of the four theories over time. Seattle's early reforms relied on high-quality professional development and the removal of regulatory burdens for teachers, but they grew to include elements of standards-based accountability, school-level external governance, and market-style competition. Chicago began to embrace external performance standards for each school and stepped up outsourcing and the privatization of school services. The enactment of charter school laws in California, Colorado, Ohio, and Illinois introduced elements of market-style competition to the cities in those states.

#### **Who is Involved in Creating School-Level Authority for Education?**

Key players in education reforms that promote school-level authority and link schools with communities include:

- Business leaders
- Political leaders
- Local foundations
- Policy experts
- Community groups
- Educators
- Teachers' unions and professional development providers

*Business leaders introduce education systems to economic models for organizing services and corporate standards for performance.*

Business groups and other economic leaders frequently help initiate efforts to decentralize school systems. In fact, in four of the six cities in the decentralization study, the business community had more influence over reform and more resources to invest than any other collaborator.

Business leaders who view education as an engine for economic development have a self-interest in improving learning. They also have access to important resources, including:

- First-hand experience with the activities that accompany reform, including restructuring, downsizing, and rebuilding workplace cultures
- An understanding of concepts such as marketplace competition, customer satisfaction, quality management, and relationships between front-line workers

and managers—concepts that help define standards for efficiency, productivity, and performance

- Access to state and local political leaders, which enables them to attract top-level support
- Access to corporate wealth
- Links with other organizations, which can help focus public attention on the connection between education and economic development

*Political leaders can promote school improvement as a means of revitalizing cities and neighborhoods.*

Although many politicians fear the political risks of becoming involved in school affairs, some believe that the danger of a flawed school system outweigh the danger of losing an election. Politicians, like business leaders, envision high-quality schools as an essential piece of their effort to foster stable, middle-class communities and attract corporate investment.

*Local foundations provide support for strategic planning, advocacy, training, progress monitoring, and organizations that facilitate change.* For example:

- In Denver, the Piton Foundation helped establish Citizens for Quality Schools (CQS), a group with participants from the public and private sectors. Members included the governor's and mayor's education aides, two members of the City Council, business leaders, and university representatives.
- In Cincinnati, a grant from the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation established the Mayerson Human Resource Development Academy to foster new skills in educators.

### **How do Business Leaders Become Involved in Creating Community School Systems?**

Some business groups that advocate school-level authority have historical and institutional connections to city hall and to the public schools; school policy is a natural extension of their civic interests. In Chicago, close ties between the highly centralized city government and the well-organized business community encouraged mayors Harold Washington and Richard Daley to take up the issue of school reform. In other cities, business groups, such as the Seattle Alliance, were created specifically to tackle school system redesign. In Denver, Gov. Roy Romer engaged local businesses in school reform by arguing that high-quality education was essential to a healthy economy.

### **What Role do Business Leaders Play In Transforming School Systems?**

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Los Angeles, the movement to shift authority to schools and communities began when corporate leaders voiced concerns about education. The business community in Cincinnati helped develop a reform plan and remained active by supporting pro-reform candidates for school board elections, raising schools' awareness about the plan, and funding teacher training. Although the business community did not initiate school improvement in Denver and Seattle, business leaders in these cities became involved as soon as system-wide reform was on the local policy agenda.

- Corporate foundations in Los Angeles were deeply involved in designing a district-wide plan for school-level autonomy, incentives for accountability, and training for staff to take on new roles. The Los Angeles Educational Partnership, an operating foundation,

played a pivotal role in supporting a variety of school reform initiatives.

- The Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, and other local foundations promoted reform in Chicago by funding education advocacy groups, which developed alternative governance ideas and organized school council elections. The foundations also helped monitor the progress of school improvement and invigorated reformers by sharing new ideas.

***Policy advisors help collaborators develop solutions and devise strategies for gaining public support.***

Education policy experts—staff advisors to politicians and officials, community advocates, independent consultants, university faculty, and leaders of local business and civic organizations—shape school improvement through the advice they dispense and the legislation they write. When community groups and other critics identify flaws in a school system, policy advisors can promote specific solutions to business and political leaders and in the news media.

***Community groups contribute expertise on special topics and represent diverse constituents.***

Community groups typically have fewer resources than business, foundation, and political leaders, so they focus their efforts on specific issues that affect their constituents. They may seek representation for special-interest groups on school councils or within the new school system, and they often participate in the summits, rallies, public hearings, and other forums that precede school improvement plans.

***Teachers' unions promote the role of teachers as decision makers and emphasize the importance of professional development in supporting school improvement.***

### **School-Level Authority Can Complement the Union Agenda**

Teachers' unions seek to improve teachers' professional status, capacities, and influence over decision making—goals that can be facilitated by school- and community-based responsibility for education. For example:

❖ The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers joined with the Cincinnati Business Committee to promote professionalization of teachers.

❖ United Teachers of Los Angeles joined business and community activists in the LEARN coalition, which called for incentives for good teachers, remediation of weak teachers, and an academy to develop teachers' skills.

❖ In 1995, the Seattle Education Association was considered central enough to the reform movement that its director was a leading candidate for superintendent.

Typically, teachers' unions broaden the reform agenda by including teacher involvement and professional development in plans for change. By engaging teachers in reforms such as site-based management, induction programs for new teachers, or peer review processes, union leaders help move decentralization reforms into classrooms. They also ensure that teachers' representatives will be at the policy table for later reforms.

However, teachers' unions also face obstacles. Because they depend on long-standing bargaining arrangements for their power, union leaders may resist changes that alter those arrangements. Even when union leaders embrace reforms, teachers may not follow their lead.

*Educators, school administrators, and traditional school governance entities may not be deeply involved in establishing school-level authority for education.*

A decentralized education system reduces the power of school boards and bureaucracies, so it isn't surprising that these types of school reforms are more likely to engage partners at city hall and the state capitol than within the traditional school governance structure.

The six-city study of decentralization found that school administrators participated hesitantly and sporadically—if at all—in the early stages of school reform. Superintendents and district officials often treated the effort as just another project that could coexist with long-standing procedures. Some viewed the changes as a threat to reward structures that had served them well, while others doubted that “outsiders” could have a sustained impact. Those superintendents who embraced school change did so because they were hired expressly to implement a reform mandate after it had been established in state law, contract language, or board policy.

To some extent, principals were caught between the management responsibilities traditionally imposed on them and their roles as school leaders. In addition, some principals' associations resisted the structural changes that school leaders would have to accommodate—especially because decentralization often meant giving new responsibilities to principals without granting all of the resources and authority needed to meet them. Teachers were generally ambivalent about the changes.

## Six Examples of Decentralized, Community-Linked School Systems

In a three-year study funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, researchers<sup>1</sup> examined school decentralization in six cities: Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Their goals were to understand and explain how these cities initiated, developed, supported, and sustained their school reform strategies, and how the reforms affected teachers, principals, school administrators, parents, and community residents. This section outlines the characteristics and highlights of each city's plan for improving its education system.

The researchers examined decentralization from several angles. They investigated whether it could: strengthen connections between schools, families, and communities; improve the knowledge and working conditions of teachers and other staff; promote teacher commitment and collective responsibility for student learning; and strengthen leadership and management at the school level.

Much has changed in the six cities since the study ended, although the researchers' conclusions about decentralization remain the same. Not one superintendent who was in office when the study began remains in place; in some cities, the superintendent has changed two or three times. All of the cities have moved beyond the stage of reform described in this paper. The examples included here are intended to describe the foundations of the reforms that exist today—not to provide comprehensive profiles of current activities.

When the study began, each school district was either contemplating decentralization as a strategy for system-wide reform or had started to

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony S. Bryk, Paul Hill, and Dorothy Shipps, in association with Michael J. Murphy, David Menefee-Libey, and Albert L. Bennett

shift authority and responsibility to the school level. The reforms were driven by three forces:

- Community advocates and other critics of bureaucratic school systems, who envisioned a new system in which schools are more responsive to the needs of their communities and more active in building community resources and capacity
- Union leaders and other reformers, who called for a system in which the educators with primary responsibility for teaching and learning also have a significant role in governing schools
- Corporate executives and political leaders, who advocated a school system that supports economic development by building “human capital” and infrastructure

The shape of reform in each city depended on each city’s political and civic stakeholders, resources, and circumstances. Most system improvement started with a focus on increasing school autonomy but with only vague ideas about how this would cause schools to improve. Downsized central offices tried to perform all of their old regulatory functions, creating administrative bottlenecks. Schools had to sort through the array of commercially available programs, materials, and training alternatives to find their own sources of assistance.

As the reforms matured, their leaders discovered that greater school autonomy creates new roles and responsibilities for individuals and new professional norms. Leaders also learned that school authority for resources and decision making creates opportunities for change but does not guarantee that instruction and learning will improve. School improvement also requires strong leadership, supportive ties to parents and the community, teacher knowledge and cooperation, and access to new ideas and expertise outside the school environment.

**Example 1:**  
**Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, consensus grew in Charlotte-Mecklenburg that the schools needed major improvements. Business leaders viewed the low-quality education system as a threat to economic development. The school board wanted to decrease mandatory busing for desegregation. Residents were dissatisfied with student performance—especially the gap in achievement between black and white students.

In 1991, the school board chose a new superintendent, John Murphy, with the understanding that he would radically change the district. Murphy, who had successfully addressed similar concerns in Prince George’s County, Maryland, began by gathering support for reform. He invited 10 prominent national education leaders to Charlotte-Mecklenburg three times over six months to help design a better school system. He also held public forums with these experts and school staff, community members, and business and civic leaders.

***Explicit roles and goals helped define expectations.***

The core of Murphy’s plan was a set of performance standards for each grade level. The standards were benchmarked against the state’s mandated end-of-grade exams for elementary students and its end-of-course exams for high school students. Criterion-referenced tests helped teachers determine student progress toward these benchmark goals.

The plan included goals for the district, for every school, and for every grade level within each school. The district identified nine broad outcome goals, including readiness for the next grade, decreased absences, improved performance on state subject tests, decreased dropout rates, and increased enrollment in high-level courses. Each goal had corresponding annual and long-term targets.

School- and grade-level goals corresponded to the district goals. Central office staff established goals for individual grade levels annually, based on the previous year's test results in each school. The district set separate goals for white and black students in an attempt to reduce the performance gap between these groups. Schools that met most of their annual goals received cash bonuses.

***New governance procedures improved school leadership.***

The plan gave principals more control over their schools, including increased authority for budget and staffing decisions. Although some principals established site councils, they were not mandatory.

Principals began reporting directly to the superintendent. The superintendent evaluated each principal annually, based on (1) school achievement and/or progress toward goals; (2) surveys of teachers, parents, and students; and (3) reports on facility operations and management. The district pooled its state-mandated pay raises for principals and used the funds to give principals who received good evaluations salary increases of up to 10 percent. By mid-1995, when principal tenure ended, 75 percent of principals had been replaced or reassigned.

***The central office's role changed to better support school accountability.***

In exchange for greater school-level authority for education—and greater responsibility for results—the central office relinquished other oversight activities. The central office's role became to help schools reach their goals, and schools were allowed to decide how they could best accomplish this. The central office made funds available to schools that selected assistance providers to help them meet specific needs, but it did not provide centralized curriculum or professional development. The school board retained authority over setting standards and judging school performance.

***Making information on school performance public, and allowing parents to choose their children's schools, connected schools with families and neighborhoods.***

During the early years of the reform, the *Charlotte Observer* annually published performance measures for each school and listed schools that met their goals. This helped community members learn about their schools. Parents who were dissatisfied with a neighborhood school could send their child to one of the district's magnet schools—an option that became easier when reform leaders increased the number of magnet schools rather than continuing forced busing.

***The new accountability and incentive system, combined with increased school-level budget and staffing discretion, pushed teachers to improve instruction and learning in the classroom.***

Some pressure came from principals who were eager to win high marks for their schools—and higher pay raises—under the new accountability system. Teachers also put pressure on each other, driven by the knowledge that high-performing schools would receive cash bonuses and low-performing ones public scrutiny. Principals also had the power to remove teachers who resisted school improvement.

***Charlotte-Mecklenburg's emphasis on achieving measurable outcomes produced results.***

In the 1994-95 school year, the majority of schools achieved most of their benchmark goals—a substantial increase over base year 1992-93. The district exceeded some of its long-term goals but missed others by significant margins. For example, the gap between black and non-black student achievement shrank, but not as much as reformers wanted. The election of a new school board in 1995 raised concerns that the school system was again becoming segregated, suggesting the need for greater scrutiny of performance gaps in the future.

Murphy left Charlotte-Mecklenburg in the middle of the 1995-96 school year, after voters rejected a school tax levy he supported and elected a school board that showed less support for his leadership. Although much of Murphy's plan remains in place, some has changed under his successor, Eric Smith.

**Example 2:**  
**Chicago, Illinois**

The crisis in the Chicago school system began in 1979, when bankers from the Commercial Club of Chicago agreed to bail out the system in exchange for financial oversight authority. The next decade brought little improvement:

- The *Chicago Tribune* described the Chicago public school system as organized for failure. Students, parents, and neighborhood schools were portrayed as victims of self-interested career bureaucrats in the central office, politicians in the city council and state legislature, and a teachers' union focused on protecting the jobs and benefits of its aging membership.
- The Chicago Panel on School Policy found that school-level staffing had increased only 2 percent between 1981 and 1988—compared with a 29 percent buildup of administrative staff.
- The panel found that nearly half of the children who entered the city's 18 most economically disadvantaged high schools in 1984 dropped out before graduation. Among those who did graduate, more than half read below a ninth-grade level.

Broad-based community and school reform began in 1987, following a contentious teachers' strike. Mayor Harold Washington gathered business leaders and 50 representatives of community organizations and charged them with reforming the entire school system. The

collaborators eventually formed a coalition that lobbied for a new Chicago school law, which was enacted in December 1988.

***Limited central office authority placed responsibility for improving student achievement in the hands of parents, community members, and educators.***

Chicago reform leaders believed that giving parents and community members some responsibility for governing their schools would renew school-community ties and unite the strengths of all who care about children's education.

The new law mandated that every school elect Local School Councils (LSCs) consisting of six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal. The councils had the power to hire or fire the principal, approve an annual school improvement plan, and allocate the largest proportion of state anti-poverty funds, which by 1994 averaged about \$500,000 per elementary school and \$800,000 per high school. Teachers were expected to advise principals on instructional matters through a Professional Personnel Advisory Committee. Principals, who lost tenure under the reform, gained authority to budget discretionary funds and to select and hire new teachers without regard for seniority.

Funds from local foundations and corporations supported implementation of the new governance procedures, and community and business groups provided training for LSC members.

***New roles for key players shifted oversight of school system improvement from the school board to an external agency.***

The School Finance Authority (SFA), an entity created during the earlier fiscal bailout of the school system, gained responsibility for approving plans for downsizing and restructuring the school system. The sitting school board members and superintendent were dismissed. An interim board, selected by the mayor, began

restructuring the system, negotiating a new teachers' contract, and selecting a new superintendent. A new commission was created to screen permanent candidates for the central board—a responsibility that previously had been the mayor's.

***Chaos and inaction marred initial efforts to improve the school system.***

The district's financial problems and threats of a teachers' strike plagued Chicago's early reform efforts. Chronic financial difficulties lead to near-yearly fiscal crises. A multi-year agreement on teachers' salaries, negotiated by the interim school board, was rescinded by the permanent board.

The School Finance Authority refused to approve the board's decentralization and restructuring plans—three years in a row. The SFA finally wrote its own restructuring plan and demanded that the board implement it. The new school superintendent, Ted Kimbrough, drew criticism for weak efforts at system restructuring. Frequent downsizing eroded the central office's capacity to respond to routine requests from schools, and Local School Councils mistrusted the information they did receive.

***Changes in the principal's role, coupled with an attractive early retirement incentive, brought major changes in school leadership.***

Three years into reform, 43 percent of schools had new principals. The number of female, minority, and young principals increased dramatically.

***The 1988 reform failed to produce broad institutional change, although it did spark action in many elementary schools.***

Four years into the reform, research revealed that about one-third of elementary schools had begun to collaborate with parents and neighborhood residents to strengthen school-community ties and to improve teaching and

learning. Another third of the schools seemed to be moving in that direction. The remaining schools appeared unchanged by reform and unlikely to improve if left to their own resources. These results suggested that many schools needed extra help to make significant improvements.

***Political changes at the state level launched a second stage of reform in 1995, bringing corporate-style leadership, new funding structures, and more shifts in authority.***

After Republicans gained control of the state legislature in early 1995, new reform leaders decided to make the following changes:

- Replace the member school board with a five-member Reform Board of Trustees
- Give the mayor authority to directly appoint the school board
- Create a corporate-style management team, headed by a Chief Executive Officer, with members appointed by the mayor
- Consolidate separate streams of state funding into two block grants and suspend the authority of the SFA
- Eliminate barriers to the privatization of school and district functions, including most teacher work rules
- Forbid teachers to strike for 18 months
- Give principals greater authority over building hours and service staff working in the schools

***Accountability structures created by the second stage of reform replaced many of the goals of the original reform effort by returning authority to the central office.***

Although the governance structure of Local School Councils was not substantively altered,

the district's new CEO had authority to impose remediation, probation, or reconstitution on schools where academic performance did not improve. The most drastic of these options—reconstitution—allowed the CEO to dismiss the Local School Council, fire the entire staff, and bring in teachers and other personnel working on one-year contracts.

The new system used norm-referenced, standardized tests to measure students' ability to progress from one grade to the next. Students who tested well below grade level were required to attend summer school, and those whose test scores did not improve had to repeat the grade. These rules affected dozens of schools and thousands of students. After the first year, 109 schools were put on academic probation, including nearly half of the high schools. Other schools were put on remediation status and encouraged to adopt a back-to-basics curriculum.

*By 1996, the district and many individual schools demonstrated significant improvements that could be traced to the original reform.*

District-wide gains in student learning appeared at almost every grade level in elementary reading and mathematics achievement. Although progress was slower than many would like, the results indicated that the 1988 effort to build school-level authority ultimately did improve student learning in some elementary schools. However, no similar improvements were apparent in high schools.

The changes in central office roles and responsibilities were just beginning as the six-city study ended.

**Example 3:**  
**Cincinnati, Ohio**

Dissatisfied with rising education costs, discipline problems, and falling test scores, Cincinnati voters defeated a \$7.2 million tax levy in 1990. The school superintendent, facing bankruptcy

and major budget cuts in the school system, appealed to the business community for help.

The Cincinnati Business Committee (CBC) formed a task force on public schools, chaired by banker Clement L. Buenger. In 1991, the Buenger Commission concluded that the school system was "an organization plagued with problems: political discord, inefficient management, antiquated systems, and an administrative structure that has the tendency to maintain the status quo."

A new superintendent, Michael J. Brandt, accepted the Buenger Commission report as a template for school improvement—in exchange for union, business, and community support of a tax increase. The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT) linked a pay raise for teachers to the levy, the cost of which was partially offset by cuts in the districts' administration.

*Streamlining the central office, combined with school-based management and an incentive pay system, empowered principals and teachers.*

The Buenger Commission recommended making the central office smaller and less intrusive to transform the system from "a top-down pyramid into an organization focused on individual schools and administered by professional managers who are given the incentives and the responsibility to produce superior educational performance."

The plan also called for (1) upgrading the school system's infrastructure; (2) creating a pilot "mini-district" to serve as a catalyst for innovation; (3) ending the practice of promoting students simply because of their age; and (4) establishing targets for graduation, dropout rates, and other indicators of performance.

The new structure eliminated all of the associate superintendent positions, the entire Department of Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction, and 60 percent of central office jobs. The district's 80 schools were reorganized into nine

mini-districts, one of which was to function as a system-wide research laboratory.

***A major commitment to staff development helped teachers and principals develop leadership skills.***

Before the reform began, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers won approval for teacher peer-review and a career ladder. Designated lead teachers mentored new teachers and helped determine which teachers should receive contracts. The CFT leader also gained support for teacher-administration panels that would increase the union's voice in decisions about instruction.

The Mayerson Human Resource Development Academy, created in 1991 with funds from local foundations and corporations, expanded these efforts. The Mayerson Academy worked under contract with the district to train administrators and teachers. The academy played a significant role in developing capacity for leadership by training principals, lead teachers, and other school staff as needed. However, it did relatively little whole-school training.

***Linking school performance with administrators' salaries and school bonuses increased school accountability for results.***

Cincinnati tied salaries for principals and other education administrators to school performance. School performance measures included students' results on standardized and state proficiency tests; rates of promotion, graduation, and dropping out; and the percentage of students who receive passing grades. Schools that met their goals received bonuses. Sanctions for low-performing schools remained weak, however.

***New roles for principals were intended to improve communication between schools, communities, and the central office.***

Each mini-district identified a lead principal to act as a liaison between principals and the central

office. Teachers reported directly to principals, who reported to the superintendent or his designee. The Buenger Commission expected lead principals to funnel information from schools and communities to the superintendent.

Because all principals reported to the superintendent, however, the new role of *lead principal* was unclear. Despite the training they received at Mayerson Academy, lead principals struggled with this ambiguity. In 1995, the district abolished those positions and the mini-district structure and reinstated a more hierarchical management system with four regional administrators.

***Reforms focused on academic improvement as well as restructuring.***

Cincinnati's school reform got a much-needed boost when the National Science Foundation awarded the district a \$15 million grant for a systemic math, science, and technology education program. This marked a shift from the structural changes of the Buenger Commission's plan to a direct focus on academic improvement. The district also forged an agreement with the New American Schools Development Corporation to bring new school designs to at least 14 Cincinnati schools in 1996.

***School-level authority for decision making began slowly but grew.***

During the first year of reform, lead principals gained authority over schools in their mini-districts and teachers gained a voice in the hiring and firing of other teachers through representation on a school hiring board and through the peer review process. Lead teachers gradually received more responsibility for curriculum and instruction.

Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) began to make school decisions. Each team consisted of lead teachers, the principal, parents, a special education teacher, and staff representatives. With guidance from their ILTs, schools used

discretionary funds to hire specialized staff and traded in existing staff slots to free up funds for special purposes.

*Cincinnati's second stage of reform hoped to fill gaps in site-based management and accountability, school-wide improvement, and student achievement of high standards.*

A five-year plan for restructuring the school system, adopted in 1996, required all non-magnet schools to adopt a model of whole-school change—preferably one of the New American Schools designs. Every school was to set annual goals for test scores and other measures of student achievement. In return, the district gave each school an unrestricted, lump-sum annual budget.

Although the new plan did not mandate specific instructional strategies, it required the following changes:

- Schools were to use teaching teams and multi-age student grouping for all grade levels except eleventh and twelfth grade.
- Junior high and middle schools were to be eliminated, and students in kindergarten through eighth grade were to attend the same schools.
- Teachers were to remain with the same students for more than one year and be responsible for ensuring that the students met performance goals.

These changes created the first rift in the reformers' relationship with teachers' unions since the Buenger Commission report. When the three-year decentralization study ended, it was unclear whether union opposition to team teaching, multi-age grouping, the loss of junior high schools, and incentive pay for teachers would undermine these key components of the reform.

#### **Example 4:** **Denver, Colorado**

In 1990, the Colorado legislature mandated open enrollment within school districts, and Gov. Roy Romer mandated decentralization of the Denver school system. The specific form that these changes were to take caused friction between the teachers' union and school board, however.

The board advocated greater principal authority over teacher hiring, a longer work day for teachers, and authority to remove the issue of student discipline from the teaching contract. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association sought shared decision-making councils and characterized the board's efforts as top-down management. When the union and the board came to an impasse in contract negotiations, and the union voted to strike, Gov. Romer—who was then chairman of the National Education Goals Panel—stepped in.

During six public hearings, beginning in January 1991, the governor invited testimony from school administrators, teachers, and district residents on how the needs of teachers and administrators might be accommodated while improving the quality of children's education. The resulting labor contract contained some traditional teacher protections in exchange for much greater decision-making authority at the school level.

*Collaborative Decision Making committees (CDMs) in each of the city's 115 schools were intended to help schools and communities develop diverse programs and services to meet the unique needs of their students.*

Individual schools gained authority for scheduling teachers; selecting new faculty; and determining strategies for instruction, budget allocation, instructional support, curriculum structure and implementation, school climate, building safety and maintenance, and community relations. The school board retained control over the school calendar, collective bargaining, the overall curriculum framework and desired

outcomes, evaluation, food services, transportation, and court-ordered desegregation.

The CDMs were composed of the school principal, four teachers elected by the faculty, one classified employee chosen by his or her colleagues, three parents, and a representative from the business community. Group decisions required consensus; if the group could not reach a consensus, the principal determined the school's position. Committee members could appeal a principal's decision to one of four new, district-wide improvement councils, which also provided technical assistance and training in collaborative decision making.

Each collaborative committee created a subcommittee to recommend candidates for vacant positions within the school. Although the central office made final decisions, it was expected to confer with the subcommittees when hiring teachers and principals.

***Cash rewards for schools that made effective improvements spurred innovation and leadership.***

The reform plan required the district to contribute \$100,000 annually to an incentive fund. The district also was expected to conduct annual evaluations of the level and effectiveness of support for reform among central office administrators and principals.

***Battles over decision-making authority pitted the central administration against schools and limited school's authority to act.***

The central office interpreted reform provisions narrowly. For instance, when CDM leaders in five schools petitioned to eliminate standardized testing in favor of more authentic assessments, the board blocked their efforts. Citizens' groups who supported school autonomy—such as Denver's newly created research and advisory group, Citizens for Quality Schools—reacted against what they perceived as a power grab by the central office.

Denver schools remained locked in battles over decision-making authority between 1990 and 1996. Some schools succeeded in adopting alternative performance assessments, and some CDMs received waivers from district policy that permitted them to develop programs responsive to student and community concerns. But the re-introduction of district-wide teacher working conditions in 1994 represented a retreat from the effort to promote decentralization.

***Failure to provide funding for specific school system improvements left the reforms vulnerable to other political priorities.***

Denver's reforms created a need for additional funds at the very time that the district was losing revenue. In the second year of the new education plan, the reforms faced challenges from state ballot initiatives that would have pushed decentralization in different directions—toward vouchers, a tax spending limit, and a governor-supported tax increase. Passage of the limits on tax spending created a \$28 million deficit in the city's budget. By 1993-94, the shortfall had doubled, leaving little money for key elements of the education plan.

***Inadequate training for school-level decision makers weakened the collaborative school-community groups.***

Teachers and parents who served on Collaborative Decision Making committees received training on building consensus and making decisions, but they received little or no training about education or school operations. Even with training, committee members found it hard to reach consensus, and the time and energy required to collaborate discouraged many participants. A study by Citizens for Quality Schools found particularly high turnover among business representatives on the CDMs: Twenty-five percent left within the first year.

***Community dissatisfaction with minority education and teachers' responsibilities continued to complicate reforms.***

In 1994, soon after the district hired new superintendent Irv Moskowitz, Denver's Hispanic community called for a boycott of classes to protest slow progress in hiring Hispanic educators and bilingual teachers. In 1995, the courts released Denver schools from mandated busing; state law forbade districts to engage in voluntary busing. Efforts to improve education in schools with high concentrations of minority students stumbled again in late 1995, when voters defeated a tax levy for this purpose.

The teacher's union approved a strike in 1994 over salary and reform concerns. The union wanted to end principals' authority to veto decisions made by the CDM committees and to put teachers' working conditions back into the collective bargaining contract, thus removing them from CDM discretion. Gov. Romer arranged the following compromises:

- Inclusion of teacher working conditions in the contract—including planning time and limits on class size—in exchange for extra parent representation on the CDMs
- Creation of an additional appeals process to override principal vetoes

*Success remained elusive, and long-term benefits from Denver's reform may depend on the community's ability to sustain strong civic interest in improving beleaguered schools.*

A comparison of 1990-95 scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades showed that only the junior high level had significantly more schools improving than declining. Elementary and high schools showed no evidence of whole-school progress, with as many schools declining as improving.

**Example 5:**  
**Los Angeles, California**

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has undergone many attempts to shift

authority for education from the central office to school communities. The earliest reforms began in 1989, as part of a compromise to end a bitter 11-day teachers' strike.

*Leadership councils and school-based management gave schools authority for decision making.*

A 1989 agreement endorsed leadership councils at each of the system's schools. The councils had between six and 16 elected members; half were teachers and the rest were parents, community residents, other school staff, and the principal. The councils had power to make some decisions about staff development, student discipline, scheduling school activities, and the use of some state lottery money.

The 1989 contract also created a school-based management (SBM) process. Schools that could state their education goals, describe how the goals would enhance student performance, and propose a method for evaluating success received more latitude for shared decision making. School-level plans for improvement had to be approved by the principal, the school's union representative, a parent or community member, and two-thirds of the teachers in the school. They also had to be submitted to a newly created SBM central oversight committee.

Initial results of the SBM process were disappointing. A first-year report on shared decision-making councils criticized the system for weakening principals' authority, providing too little training for council members, and under-funding the effort. Of more than 650 schools in the system, only 84 ever received full SBM status. In 1992, Superintendent William Anton eliminated all district support for SBM in the wake of continuing budget shortages.

*Broad coalitions of community groups helped support school change.*

Several community groups entered the school improvement process with plans of their own.

The five-year-old Los Angeles Educational Partnership (LAEP), a business-led public education fund, contributed \$10,000 in grants for restructuring and arranged corporate management consulting for 26 schools. Four neighborhood groups joined forces in 1990 around issues of school safety and quality. Known as Kids 1st, this grassroots coalition represented Hispanic, black, Jewish, and other ethnic neighborhoods. Kids 1st held rallies and drafted principles for school improvement; businessman (and later mayor) Richard Riordan co-chaired the group.

By February 1992, Kids 1st and LAEP had forged an uneasy alliance with United Teachers of Los Angeles and the district superintendent. The new, bipartisan coalition was called the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN). A former state legislator became LEARN's president, and the chief executive of Atlantic Richfield Corporation was chairman.

LEARN organized 500 people into seven task forces to draft plans for governance, accountability, school facilities management, assessment, professional development, the integration social services with education, and student preparation for careers. The task forces drew on the resources of corporate consulting firms and university faculties, and the school board accepted their plan in March 1993.

***The LEARN plan featured school-level autonomy, incentives for accountability, and training for school staff to take on new roles.***

LEARN leaders wanted schools to become semi-autonomous sites responsible for their own budgets, staff selection, and teaching methods. The reformers envisioned principals as the primary decision makers who, in consultation with school teams, would develop plans for school improvement based on district standards. Although principals would continue to be hired by the central office, they would be selected with

community input, placed on three-year contracts, and subject to removal for cause.

The plan rewarded high-quality teaching with advancement on a career ladder, to be developed in consultation with the union. Weak teachers were to be transferred or given remedial assistance. Parents, students, teachers, and other staff at high schools would receive annual surveys so they could register their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the school's progress. Principals who did not receive satisfactory ratings would be transferred.

To help school professionals prepare for their new roles, the plan established a training academy. Corporations and foundations pledged to provide first-year funding of about \$3 million.

The plan also sought: (1) per-pupil funding for schools, rather than staff allotments; (2) the inclusion of school-based social services; (3) waivers of legislative requirements to enable over-crowded schools to rent unused office space rather than building new facilities; and (4) a new student assessment system linked to district performance standards, including goals for workforce preparation.

The LEARN plan was to be phased in over five years, beginning in three clusters of high schools and the schools that fed into them. Before any school could adopt the plan, 75 percent of the teachers in the school had to vote to support it, and a waiver of any union provisions required assent from at least two-thirds of the teachers. No high school could muster this level of teacher support, so the reform began as a pilot program in 35 elementary schools.

***Budget problems at the beginning of the reform put the union and LEARN on a collision course.***

The LEARN plan began in the midst of a 12 percent shortfall in the district's \$3.9 billion education budget, when the teachers' union and school board were locked in acrimonious debate

over how to spend the available funds. In exchange for salary cuts, a new contract gave teachers control over professional development and allowed elementary teachers to choose the grade they would teach.

Union representatives voted not to support the LEARN plan by a 2-1 margin. The union president, Helen Bernstein, succeeded in reversing the vote, but the union members' mistrust and skepticism remained.

For two years, the district's corporate and foundation partners kept their pledge to fund training for principals and lead teachers, as the program added 54 schools. By 1995, LEARN added 103 more schools and the price of training reached \$7 million. When corporate funders decided that they did not want to be the sole supporter of training, LEARN created a private training institute, using \$2 million in district funds and \$5 million from an Annenberg grant. The institute provided training to 105 new LEARN schools in 1996.

***Conflicting agendas among business and education partners pulled the reform in many directions.***

Early on, LEARN ran into competing reform goals. One segment of the business community joined a grassroots movement to support vouchers as an alternative to any system-wide reform. That movement sponsored an unsuccessful voucher initiative on the California ballot in 1993. That same year, new superintendent Sid Thompson announced a plan to reorganize the district into 25 self-governing clusters. A move to divide the district into several smaller districts remains a popular option, and the school-based leadership councils occasionally challenge decisions made by teachers and the principal under LEARN governance arrangements.

***Despite these problems, several other initiatives reinforced LEARN's focus on school-level authority.*** For example:

- A management audit by Arthur Anderson in 1992 called for downsizing the central office and restructuring it to reflect effective business practices.
- Also in 1992, the school board settled six years of legal debate over inherent inequities in the seniority system for teacher assignments. The consent decree in *Rodriguez vs. LAUSD* gave the board five years to allocate all funding to schools on a more equitable per-pupil basis, beginning in 1994.
- The Los Angeles Metropolitan Project (LAMP), a county-wide project supported by \$50 million in Annenberg Challenge Grant funds, built on the LEARN plan for reform. The LAMP board included LEARN partners.

***Los Angeles' decentralization initiatives have become increasingly comprehensive but less universally applied, and it is difficult to attribute specific education achievements to LEARN.***

Many schools had competing versions of shared decision-making, and the district had no system-wide policy for reconciling these procedures with LEARN. Nor had the school system resolved conflicting language in the union contract. The district made only limited progress in bringing all schools into the reform in accordance with the original five-year plan.

Even so, a 1996 study of children who participated in 29 of the LEARN pilot schools showed positive results. The Evaluation and Training Institute reported that half of these schools increased the percentage of fourth-graders who scored above average in reading, math, or language arts on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. These schools also reported increased attendance. Although no comparable data on student achievement were reported for non-LEARN schools, reformers considered the results encouraging.

**Example 6:**  
**Seattle, Washington**

Seattle was ripe for school improvement in the 1990s. The city had lost half of its student population during the previous two decades, mostly because of the departure of white students. Asian and Latino students had moved into the district, and the special needs of students with limited English proficiency taxed the system. Average scores on standardized tests were stuck near the 50th percentile, and a persistent gap between the performance of white and minority students troubled community leaders. School buildings badly needed repairs. And controversy had simmered for years over plans to desegregate schools through controlled choice rather than busing.

In 1990, newly elected Mayor Norman Rice convened neighborhood meetings and a city-wide summit to identify new education goals. Residents identified five broad, system-wide goals: stronger ties between schools and communities, increased spending on education, creation of a better learning environment, child health and safety, and cultural diversity.

The state legislature released a study of Seattle's school system in 1990, criticizing the central office and school board for failing to serve the increasingly diverse student population. The report also recommended eliminating the district's geographic zones. In response, the superintendent drafted a plan that phased out busing and emphasized improving school facilities and making better use of technology.

A new teachers' contract in 1992 included language promoting school-based management. Also that year, Roger Erskine left the National Education Association to head the Seattle Education Association. Erskine brought with him a mandate from the national association to make Seattle a model of union-sponsored school reform. A proponent of decentralized authority, Erskine worked closely with the superintendent on plans for restructuring the system. The

Seattle Alliance, a business group, began monitoring the changes and encouraging efforts to reduce the size of the central administration.

*Early efforts to build school autonomy proceeded fitfully through administrative downsizing, restructuring, and the development of school advisory councils—but the reforms lacked comprehensive planning and a commitment to decentralization as an overarching goal.*

Before 1996, Seattle adopted popular elements of other cities' decentralization reforms but did not always implement them. Abandoned plans included school-based control of discretionary funds and Vanguard Schools, a group of 10 schools slated to receive their entire budgets in lump-sum form.

Two changes *were* implemented. In 1994, the district eliminated 20 percent of central office jobs, including three of the five administrators who previously reported to the superintendent. As a result, principals began reporting directly to the superintendent. By the end of 1995, about half of the schools had established local advisory councils. The councils' role was limited, however, and the school board sometimes overturned council decisions.

When Seattle's long-serving superintendent agreed not to seek reappointment in 1995, the school board hired John Stanford, the city's first black superintendent and a retired U.S. Army general who had previously served as county manager in Fulton County, Georgia. Stanford had a reputation for good customer service and efficient operations. He also was committed to turning principals into chief executive officers of their schools—leaders who were accountable for school performance and empowered to improve teaching and learning

*Reform elements included new roles for teachers in setting working conditions and leading instructional initiatives, lump-sum*

*funding for schools to increase their autonomy, and leadership training for principals.*

In mid-1996, Stanford and Erskine negotiated an agreement that gave teachers great latitude in collaborating with principals to set working conditions and classroom initiatives. Stanford and Erskine jointly supported an effort to re-program the district's expenditures so that most funds reached schools in an unencumbered lump sum. Stanford and the business coalition also set out to develop a principals' training center modeled after Cincinnati's Mayerson Academy.

*Intervention with weak principals and schools improved leadership and accountability.*

Stanford transferred and reassigned more than half the district's principals before the beginning of the 1996-97 school year. He also reconstituted low-performing schools. In collaboration with the Seattle Alliance and the union, the district defined a new mission for these schools, replaced the principals, opened all teaching jobs to competitive applications, and sought voluntary student enrollment.

*Failed bond issues and levies, court battles over desegregation, and initiatives for charter schools and vouchers pushed school decentralization from the center of public concerns. However, recent state and local efforts may enliven interest in school reform.*

In 1996, the school board resolved to phase out busing in favor of a system of neighborhood schools. The board promised to allocate extra resources to schools with high proportions of disadvantaged students. A state systemic reform initiative was passed in 1993, leading to the development of new state standards in education. The legislature approved the accountability system in 1999, and new state tests for fourth-, seventh-, and tenth-graders will be mandatory beginning in 1999-2000. Current and future activities include additions to the state standards and development of a high school exit exam.

**Has Decentralization Worked?**

Although each of the six cities made some progress over the course of the three-year study, no city fully met the fundamental challenge of creating a system in which schools are publicly funded and accountable for results yet have the independence they need to reach diverse students and communities. In particular:

- ❖ The amount of resources and authority actually devolved to schools remained modest.
- ❖ It was unclear whether powers newly devolved to schools would stay under school control.
- ❖ Many teachers, principals, and parents remained cautious and assumed that—like so many previous reforms—the effort to transform the school system would not last.
- ❖ Most changes occurred in elementary schools, while high schools saw much less improvement.

The best evidence of improvement came from Charlotte-Mecklenburg, where some schools reported rapidly increased test scores, especially for minority students. Positive trends in test scores emerged in Chicago, where all elementary grades reported substantial improvements in standardized reading and mathematics scores for the first time in 1996.

In addition, Chicago and Denver institutionalized school leadership and built ties with communities. Cincinnati, Chicago, and Denver strengthened professional development for teachers and principals.

## What Works?

### Lessons Learned About Decentralization and Community Schools

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The six-city study revealed valuable lessons about: the scope and depth of reforms that build school-level responsibility for education, key characteristics of community-linked school systems, strategies for connecting schools with parents and communities, and conflicts that can surface during efforts to create decentralized community schools.

#### Lessons on the Scope and Depth of Reforms

1. *There is no single model for decentralized school systems, although there are certain common features.*

The only feature that all approaches shared was the schools' ability to request waivers from district policy. Most reforms also called for central office downsizing; changes in the role of school principals; and engagement of the private sector, especially in providing training for school leaders.

As school reforms mature, they begin to resemble each other more. Most of the initiatives in the six-city study grew to include mandatory school leadership councils; a new, limited role for the central office; greater school-level authority over teacher selection and retention; and new procedures to hold schools accountable for student performance.

2. *Decentralization requires system-wide changes for which some people may not be prepared.*

School-level responsibility for education creates new responsibilities for teachers, principals, and sometimes parents to engage in curriculum development, program design, and strategic analysis. Although school staff might express enthusiasm for these tasks, they rarely have the experience needed to immediately assume new roles. When reforms cut central office

expenditures, they often fail to leave funding for local training and preparation.

3. *Senior business, civic, and political leaders provide much of the energy and many of the ideas central to school system reform.*

Although community organizations play major roles in advancing school-level authority and implementing it on a day-to-day basis, municipal leaders remain key players. System reform is expensive, politically threatening, and time consuming. It requires knowledge, expertise, and political will far beyond the level that most business and civic leaders have devoted to public education in the past.

#### Partners Outside the Education System Are Vital to Success

The drive for school system reform often emerges from outside the conventional structure of school boards and professional education bureaucracies. Researchers in the six-city study found little evidence of cooperation among teachers, principals, and district staff to construct their own ideas for change. Instead—even where union leaders or a new superintendent played a role in initiating improvement—districts relied on businessmen, local policy leaders, and foundation directors for ideas and activism.

**4. *Effective systems of decentralized community schools require long-term vision and commitment.***

In particular, reforms need comprehensive restructuring plans, stable leadership, and sustained political activity to guide efforts until the changes are institutionalized. Collaborators must assemble and maintain an unwieldy coalition of business and community leaders, school board members, union leaders, school administrators, and educators. They must continuously press for changes that people may find unfamiliar and threatening.

**5. *A shift from a centrally controlled system of schools to a system based on school-level autonomy seems to stimulate major changes in elementary schools more easily than in secondary schools.***

Because secondary schools are organized around semi-autonomous departments, teachers in these schools tend to be more involved with specific subject matter than with larger organizational concerns. The complex, anonymous environment of many high schools also may prevent them from engaging the passion, creativity, and commitment of key partners in school change.

## **Lessons on the Characteristics of Decentralized Systems of Community Schools**

An effective approach to decentralized, community-linked education requires:

- A comprehensive restructuring plan
- The political will needed to engage diverse partners in long-term collaboration

- Time for challenging improvements to take root
- Adequate resources
- Access to specialized knowledge and training needed to build local capacity
- Shared motivation and a willingness to improve

A good plan for a system of autonomous community schools also clarifies four aspects of the relationship between schools, communities, and the central office: (1) school-level autonomy and leadership, (2) new roles and responsibilities for participants, (3) external supports for schools engaged in improvement, and (4) accountability provisions.

### **School-level Autonomy and Leadership**

**1. *To have freedom of action, individual schools must control real-dollar resources.***

Having authority over resources allows schools to pursue their own priorities, attract high-quality staff who appreciate the school's mission, and select programs that build on the school's specific strengths and needs. The ability to negotiate salaries and benefits for principals also gives schools a way to keep good leaders long enough to institutionalize change.

**2. *To be fully responsible for their own performance, individual schools must control key decisions about employees.***

This includes decisions about hiring, compensating, evaluating, and firing teachers and administrators.

In order to undertake education approaches that build family and neighborhood strengths—for example, becoming a truly bilingual school to serve an immigrant community—schools need

the power to hire and maintain staff whose skills and habits match the mission. Schools also need to be able to remove teachers who resist the improvements that are needed.

Control over hiring also allows schools to invigorate their faculties. Chicago, Cincinnati, and Seattle each set aside their seniority systems so schools could choose new staff members who supported improvement goals.

- 3. To allow schools to pursue distinctive strategies for instruction, parents must be able to choose the school whose approaches they understand and support.*

A school cannot build or maintain a coherent approach to instruction if parents and teachers disagree about what children should learn and what types of learning experiences are most effective. Forcing parents to send their children to a school whose pedagogies do not suit their needs and preferences can seriously undermine the school-community connection. On the other hand, allowing parents who do not accept their neighborhood school's approach to choose another school can strengthen both the neighborhood and school communities.

- 4. Each school must have a systemic agenda for change.*

The plan should identify the school's core goals, the philosophy and strategies that will drive teaching and learning, the professional development programs that can help move staff toward the goals, and the incentives and sanctions needed to encourage improvement.

- 5. School autonomy creates a need for strong leadership.*

More than any other person in a school, principals have the power to create, lead, and sustain improvement and to foster connections with families and neighborhoods. Conversely, a principal with poor leadership skills can

undermine the efforts of an entire school and community.

The reforms in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Denver dramatically altered the resources and authority available to principals and created new sanctions and incentives for school leadership. As a result, most principals became entrepreneurs of goals, ideas, and resources. Their leadership now is publicly endorsed and valued.

#### **New Roles for Principals Vary Across Districts and Over Time**

- ❖ Chicago's principals initially lost tenure, and their positions changed from a reward for career administrators to an appointed post in which fresh ideas about school change carried more weight than prior service. This brought more minorities, women, and young professionals into school leadership roles. Principals retained their responsibilities to the local school councils that hired them but also were required to meet new job qualifications. The central office monitored principals' performance on operational issues, and a principal could be immediately dismissed by the district's CEO if a school was found to be failing its students.
- ❖ In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, principals became directly accountable to the superintendent, who had sole authority to hire and fire them.

#### **New Roles and Responsibilities for the Central Office and Educators**

- 1. The new governance system must clearly outline the powers of the central office and the legal terms under which individual schools operate.*

Agreements between a school and school board should define the school's mission, guarantee

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public funding, and specify grounds for accountability. In effect, the school board becomes the trustee of a portfolio of schools—supporting those struggling to improve, causing new schools to be organized in place of failed ones, expanding the number of successful schools, and terminating agreements with schools that do not improve.

### **Principals Benefit from Leadership Programs**

- ❖ The Mayerson Academy in Cincinnati, and a similar organization being considered in Seattle, focuses on developing of principals' skills and addresses the new behaviors required of principals under decentralized accountability arrangements.
- ❖ In Chicago, the principals' association is collaborating with the district and business groups to create an induction program for new principals and a two-year professional development program for senior principals.
- ❖ Denver's School Leadership Academy helps train all principals in the district.
- ❖ Los Angeles' LEARN program has a management training component for principals that focuses on leadership development and operates in collaboration with local universities.

By the end of the three-year study, only Cincinnati and Charlotte-Mecklenburg had begun to deal with the fiscal incentives and disincentives embedded in their systems for recruiting and compensating principals. These cities' principals and other administrators participated in slowly developing pay-for-performance programs. However, because principals as a group tend to be politically weak when it comes to collective bargaining, their remuneration may actually decline relative to teachers in decentralized school systems.

## **2. *New roles and responsibilities are required for staff and administrators at the school and district levels and for teachers' unions, service providers, and community organizations.***

In particular, a system of community schools requires:

- A superintendent who suggests appropriate standards and performance measures, interprets evaluation results for the school board, and recommends whether the board should continue to fund a particular school
- A teachers' union that serves as a professional organization, helping to develop good practitioners and practices and matching teachers with schools on the basis of skills, instructional approaches, and working styles
- Teachers who have opportunities for professional development, collaboration with colleagues, and influence over school decisions
- Private, fee-charging service providers that compete with one another and the central office staff to assist schools
- Charitable organizations, supported by businesses and foundations, that provide funds for research and development to expand the intellectual resources and tools available to schools
- Principals who do not merely enforce central office requirements but stimulate innovation within their schools, between schools, and with the community

### How do Districts Redefine Roles?

- ❖ Chicago's reform created a parent-led council at every school. These groups had authority to hire and fire principals. Teachers gained influence over curriculum, staff development, and new programs.
- ❖ Cincinnati dramatically reduced the size of its central office and enhanced the role of principals and teachers in school district management. A teacher development process and career ladder facilitated teacher recruitment, induction, and mentoring.

### External Support for Schools

**1. Schools need outside help to develop capacity for local leadership.**

In a system of community schools, individual schools must envision their own futures and chart their own path through issues involving curriculum, staff development, assessment, budgeting, planning, and evaluation. However, school staff may not have the expertise, resources, or experience they need to prepare them for these tasks. They need help to gather and maintain support for improvement, to stimulate initiative in failing schools, and to expand the educational opportunities available for children and families.

**2. At a minimum, schools need the following types of external support:**

- Connections with assistance organizations and mutual-help networks
- Information about the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of local assistance providers
- Links to local foundations or other sources of funds for school improvement

### Accountability

Shifting the responsibility for education from a centralized office to the school level alters expectations for how schools will answer to their constituents. For example, whose confidence and support must a school earn to retain its authority to operate? On what basis does a school demonstrate its fitness and competence?

**1. If schools have authority to act on their own goals—and access to the resources needed to support their actions—then they should be accountable to parents, students, and community members.**

A rigorous approach to school-level accountability holds schools responsible for:

- Fulfilling promises to the school board about instructional methods and approach
- Fulfilling the community's education goals, especially those outlined in local standards for student achievement or expressed by local site councils and other neighborhood groups
- Student achievement gains and other objective indicators of school performance
- Generating support from families, including the parents' choice to send their children to the school
- Generating support from teachers, including teachers' willingness to work at the school
- Meeting professional standards for teaching, as internalized by teachers and principals, evidenced in curriculum and instruction, and judged by accreditors

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## Strategies for Connecting Schools with Parents and Communities

Effective education systems recognize and respond to the needs and strengths of families living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Students in these families are more likely than their counterparts in the general population to be poor, to live in single-parent households, and to be members of racial or ethnic minorities. As a result, these students and their families often need help meeting basic needs—such as health care, shelter, and employment—before they can concentrate on education. These families also may possess skills and knowledge that go untapped.

Increasing school-level responsibility for education encourages teachers, administrators, and other school staff to look to their communities—instead of the school system bureaucracy—for guidance and feedback. In the process, community involvement can strengthen schools and bring local resources to bear on students' education.

It isn't easy to establish decentralized school systems that link schools with families and communities, however. Simply eliminating district control of schools does not guarantee that parents will connect with schools or form bonds with teachers, that schools will immediately become responsive to family and neighborhood needs, or that educators will know how to respond to families and communities. These changes do not happen quickly, and they may require several attempts.

How can an emerging system of community schools help schools forge connections with parents and neighborhoods? The six-city study identified two important strategies: changing expectations and opportunities for teachers and developing educators' leadership skills and commitment to improvement.

## Changing Expectations and Opportunities for Teachers

1. *Teachers need help learning how to collaborate and solve problems.*

These vital skills help teachers provide the learning experiences that meet parents' expectations and respond effectively to community concerns. The Mayerson Academy in Cincinnati, for example, provided training for lead and mentor teachers and, ultimately, other school staff. The academy offered courses on a range of topics including outreach to parents and communities.

2. *Routine professional development is not enough; teachers need to learn how to take responsibility and make decisions.*

Teachers' unions in Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles sponsored programs to prepare teachers to assume more professional responsibilities and improve classroom performance. In Denver, training emphasized the skills needed for collaborative decision making and conflict resolution—skills that facilitate interactions with parents and communities as well as professional colleagues—in addition to the development of instructional plans. There were few examples of sustained, whole-school instructional improvement in the six cities studied, however.

3. *The kind of professional development needed to support decentralization and school-community connections is rarely available.*

The overall level of district and school funding for staff development in the six cities studied remained very modest. Although schools in Chicago and other cities with school-based resources appeared quite ready to invest in more people, programs, and materials, they were less willing to spend resources to help current staff work together more efficiently and effectively. Nor did any of the six cities focus on improving pre-service education for teachers or providing

induction programs for new teachers. Cincinnati's decentralization plan did include a union-negotiated process in which lead teachers mentored new teachers; a similar policy initiative recently surfaced in Chicago.

Districts are becoming aware of these gaps in professional development. However, even if districts can commit adequate resources to teacher training, many still lack the infrastructure needed to deliver the services.

### **Professional Communities Can Flourish in Autonomous Schools**

In the best of these schools, teachers regularly communicate with parents, discuss school practice, observe each other's teaching, design improvements, and engage in collaborative work. For example:

- ❖ In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, an incentive system stimulated faculty cooperation. Staff receive rewards if the school meets its goals, so teachers work together to help struggling colleagues so that all can achieve the goals.
- ❖ About half of the teachers in Chicago indicated that a professional community was emerging in their schools, citing a clearer focus on standards for student learning, more opportunities for reflective conversations, and collaborative teaching in the classroom.

### **Developing Educators' Leadership Capacity and Commitment to Improvement**

1. *Schools are complex organizations, and it takes skill and commitment for teachers and administrators to improve the way they work and to become more responsive to families and communities. Yet the reality faced by many urban teachers discourages their commitment to school change.*

The school reforms of the 1970s and 1980s brought many changes for teachers: new curricula; state and federal programs targeting various categories of students; local education initiatives, many of which contradicted previous approaches and foundered during implementation; and regulations that were intended to ensure equitable opportunities for students but also limited school autonomy and encouraged compliant behavior. Years of deferred maintenance left school buildings dilapidated. Budget deficits made basic instructional materials scarce. And as the economic and social conditions of urban neighborhoods declined, teachers could no longer assume that their students would come to school ready to learn. In this context, it is understandable if educators are not sure whether their efforts can make a difference.

2. *Teachers' wariness about engaging in yet another reform initiative can be ameliorated only by steadfast, top-level leadership and consistent community support.*

Superintendents and school boards frequently promote top-down reform initiatives, only to be followed a few years later by a new administration with different goals. This pattern can be broken only if the change in leadership does not inevitably bring a different mandate for reform. The long-term success of decentralized education depends on the ability of school system leaders to keep a consistent course.

3. *When schools become accountable for results, and have authority to select their own staff, their faculties can develop personal responsibility for education, a sense of effectiveness, and a willingness to spearhead school improvement.*

Comprehensive efforts to decentralize school authority can spur teachers to engage in their own professional growth and in the collective task of school improvement. For example:

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- In a 1994 survey, Chicago and Cincinnati teachers reserved some of their most positive remarks about reform for its impact on their commitment to their current school.
  - Although it is less clear that teachers in Seattle and Los Angeles share these views, union leaders in these districts committed to a collective bargaining strategy that emphasized school unity and professional satisfaction over traditional wage-and-benefit issues.
4. *School-level authority to hire staff members who support school reform and school-community connections—and to remove teachers who do not share improvement goals—is an important factor in building capacity and commitment for change.*

Although school autonomy motivates many teachers, some still sit on the sidelines or impede the efforts of their colleagues. Their reluctance is a major problem for principals who are directly accountable for school performance. Principals who have the right to select motivated staff without regard for seniority, as they do in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Denver, have a greater chance of improving their schools.

Reformers have been less successful at removing incompetent teachers and redistributing teachers who do not share the school community's goals for change. One exception is Charlotte-Mecklenburg, where collective bargaining rights for teachers are not guaranteed in state law. Several schools replaced a substantial portion of their faculty quickly to jump-start reform. (The fact that the district was expanding and hiring new teachers made these reassignments relatively easy to accomplish.)

## Conflicts Raised by Creating Community Schools

Decentralized systems of community schools are not created easily or without conflict. Resistance from within the education system, tensions between collaborators, and other factors can cause conflicts among reformers.

1. *Educators, administrators, policy makers, and other collaborators struggle with competing interests: the desire to improve and a reluctance to change the status quo. This makes it hard to reach consensus, maintain coalitions, and keep partners moving toward an achievable goal.*

School administrators, while publicly espousing support, often resist decentralization in subtle ways. School board politics can result in new regulations that weaken the reforms. Teachers' unions may help lead initial efforts to gain school-level authority for education, but they are handicapped by their need to protect jobs. Politicians may lose interest when they refocus on their election prospects. The news media, driven by the quest for breaking stories, will jump to the next passing crisis.

The same dynamics that make educators skeptical about school reform ensure that as soon as schools adopt one change, critics will promote a contradictory idea, often by challenging the assumptions of the first reform or by calling for evaluation of results not yet realized. Teachers and principals may suspect that school-level authority is only a temporary phase, after which the central office will resume control with a vengeance. Or they may fear that their school board and superintendent—like some of the corporate leaders they emulate—will punish people who responded too zealously to the invitation to initiate change. Many school boards reinforce these perceptions by hedging on their commitments to school autonomy.

2. ***Decentralization draws a mixed response from minority groups: It can eliminate hard-won jobs in the central administration, but it also can improve minority representation in school-level decision making.***

Redefined roles for teachers, and cuts in central administrative positions, are designed to strengthen the schools that poor and non-white children attend. But these changes also threaten jobs, many of which are held by members of racial or ethnic minorities.

In particular, the six-city study found that black community organizations were divided in their views about school decentralization. Urban blacks had gravitated to civil service jobs when the market for industrial and defense workers eroded, and they had been the principle beneficiaries of affirmative action and desegregation decisions. By the late 1980s, many urban school districts had experienced large increases in the numbers of black teachers, principals, and school administrators. The central office downsizing that accompanied a move toward school-level authority jeopardized many of these jobs.

In Los Angeles and Chicago, however, Hispanic groups supported reforms that would move some decision making from the central office, where Hispanics had little representation, to schools where Hispanic students were the fastest-growing segment of the population. The number of Hispanic principals in Chicago grew by 152 percent in the first year of reform, and the number of Hispanic teachers in Los Angeles increased 34 percent in the four years after 1991.

3. ***Decentralization relies on community resources, rather than compensatory programs, to meet students' needs; community members disagree over whether this jeopardizes or improves equity in education.***

Urban blacks living in poverty were among the first recipients of need-based education programs in the 1960s, and many parents and educators who belong to minority populations still favor expanding these services. As authority for education shifts from the central office to schools, accompanied by a growing reliance on local resources rather than compensatory education, these parents fear that their children will be trapped in poor neighborhoods with weak schools.

Some black and Hispanic community leaders argue that real equity cannot exist without effective schools, however. These people believe that compensatory education, even when driven by concerns for minority rights, actually lowers expectations for people of color and stigmatizes them.

4. ***Decentralization in urban school districts can exacerbate concerns about desegregation strategies.***

School-level control over enrollment and the flow of students has implications for racial and ethnic desegregation. Some people believe that when schools have authority to make their own decisions, guided by school councils that adequately represent the community, desegregation strategies such as forced busing and magnet schools are no longer necessary. Traditional desegregation efforts came under fire in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Cincinnati, and Seattle while the school systems were involved in decentralization, and a judge in Denver ended forced busing after four years of the school reform. Other community members vehemently defend the traditional practices.

## How Do We Get There from Here? Moving from Understanding to Action

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The experiences of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle show that schools *can* be responsible for making effective decisions about education and *can* form beneficial ties with their communities—and that these actions *can* produce better outcomes for children and families. But what does it take to make these changes happen? Researchers who studied the six cities identified several challenges and implications for school reforms that promote decentralization and community ties. They also recommended a process for creating a system of community schools.

### Challenges to Building Decentralized Systems of Community Schools

1. *Be realistic about the results that community-based school improvement can accomplish under actual circumstances and time constraints.*

Political rhetoric helps reformers generate support for change, but it is no substitute for a critical, evidence-based assessment of what can be achieved. It is unlikely that any system-wide school reform—regardless of its specific features—can produce results as quickly and thoroughly as the rhetoric promises. It takes time for people to learn new roles, to change their expectations, and to build the skills they need to improve teaching and learning.

2. *Maintain civic, community, political, business, and school-level support for reform over time and despite changes in local leadership.*

It takes sustained effort by civic, community, business, and political players to improve an entire school system. Leaders must stay committed to decentralization until it is truly institutionalized. Leaders frequently change in urban districts, and reforms driven by charismatic, individual leaders—a superintendent, board member, or union leader,

for example—often do not survive after the leader moves on.

3. *Obtain the resources, autonomy, and training needed to make deep changes.*

If schools do not receive the resources and authority needed to act on their choices, they may find it hard to keep their new decision-making powers—and teachers, principals, and parents may lose their faith in the reform.

External assistance, especially professional development for educators, is especially important. School-level authority for education places important functions in the hands of teachers and principals, including curriculum development, program design, and strategic analysis. Although they may enjoy these new responsibilities, many educators have little relevant training or experience to draw on.

4. *Implement rigorous, school-based accountability systems that match local improvement goals.*

School-level authority for decision making has a price: greater accountability. Schools must demonstrate that their improvements produce results, their strategies and practices support high but attainable standards, and their programs respond to student strengths and weaknesses. Tests and other assessments must yield valid, school-level measures of student progress and achievement. Standards for achievement must

reflect realistic expectations. And performance assessments must be linked to consequences for schools that fail to achieve that fail to meet their goals.

### 5. *Achieve improvements in high schools.*

It is much harder to achieve broad-based improvement in high schools than in elementary schools, partly because reformers don't clearly understand the process, resources, and capacities needed to transform weak secondary schools into strong ones. We do know that many students enter high school without basic skills in language arts and mathematics, making it difficult for teachers to use a traditional curriculum, let alone an innovative one. Many students also are unprepared for the transition from a small, intimate elementary school to the relative chaos of secondary schools, and high schools often cannot help these students before they flounder and drop out.

## Implications for School Reform

What do these challenges mean for improvement plans that promote school-level authority and community ties? Above all, they emphasize the importance of three school-level factors: autonomy, external support for change, and accountability.

### Autonomy Requires Changes in Funding, Hiring, Enrollment Policies, and the Relationship Between Schools and the District

A school cannot act freely if its resources and staff members are chosen by people who do not understand the school's needs, goals, and instructional strategies. A school cannot be accountable for performance if its teachers have no incentive to cooperate. And a school cannot develop or maintain a coherent approach to instruction if it must cope with deep differences of values or opinions among teachers, parents, and district administrators.

*School-level control of expenditures implies that schools will be financed as organizations, not through centralized purchasing programs.*

Traditionally, districts have relied on central offices to select and pay for everything that matters in schools—staff salaries and benefits, equipment, supplies and books, building maintenance, in-service training, and advisory services. Few public schools control even 1 percent of the funds that their students generate from state and local sources. (Chicago is an extreme exception. Its schools control as much as one-fifth of their funds.)

Shifting funds to the school level implies that:

- Federal, state, and district revenues will follow students to individual schools.
- Every student will bring to his or her school the same base amount of money, with extra funds available for students who do not speak English, have handicapping conditions, or are at risk of education failure because of poverty.
- Schools will receive cash budgets based on enrollment, with few or no strings attached.
- School budget allocations will include all operating costs.
- All publicly funded schools will have equal access to public resources, including assistance organizations and restructuring networks.
- Schools will use the funds they control to procure resources for technical assistance, faculty development, and start-up activities.
- The school system will eliminate contrary arrangements for controlling funds and will reduce expenditures for central office functions and staffing.

***School control of staffing implies that basic relationships among teachers, schools, unions, and school systems will be redefined.***

Teachers currently are district employees. They are assigned to specific schools on the basis of district-wide rules or rights based on civil service rules—not because they fit the school’s instructional philosophy and staffing needs. In many districts, senior teachers can choose their assignments; when the district reduces its workforce, every school feels the fallout as senior teachers “bump” junior ones in a scramble for the best jobs.

Giving schools the power to hire staff protects them from these problems but it also implies the need to:

- Change collective bargaining laws to permit school-level hiring and teacher evaluation
- Replace guaranteed jobs with employment contingent on teachers’ contributions to an individual school
- Work with union leaders to ensure that teachers are treated as professionals, with pay and tenure contingent on performance
- Attract new teachers to replace those who leave the profession rather than take their chances in a performance-based system
- Revise teacher licensing laws so schools have a wider pool of potential staff members
- Eliminate contrary arrangements for hiring and assigning teachers

***Giving parents the right to choose their children’s schools implies that schools will be more responsive to families and communities.***

In particular, school systems will need to:

- Encourage schools to use pedagogies that suit the needs and preferences of most parents in the neighborhood
- Encourage development of new schools that expand the options available to parents; assure that these schools have fair access to qualified staff and funds for planning and staff training
- Maintain open enrollment policies that permit families to enroll in schools outside their neighborhood
- Publicize information about schools so parents can make informed decisions
- Adopt policies and practices to ensure that over-subscribed schools give every applicant a fair chance of admission
- Eliminate or modify policies and practices that conflict with parental choice, such as racial quotas, assignment on the basis of residence, and some desegregation programs—but without eliminating protections that ensure equal access to good schools for all children

***The potential for conflicts of interest between school improvement partners implies that districts must develop constitutional or contractual agreements with each school to guarantee school autonomy.***

Central office staff and teachers’ unions have strong incentives to water down changes intended to increase school autonomy. Without protective agreements, districts can permit schools to choose new teachers but not to reject unproductive teachers with site tenure. Or they can create site-controlled budgets that exclude all of the important items, such as teacher salaries and funds for staff training.

**High Expectations for Decentralized Community Schools Create a Need for External Assistance**

School professionals don't always know how to use their new-found freedom to achieve high standards, and they often are too busy teaching to find the answers on their own. They need hands-on help sustaining cooperation within the school, connecting with parents and community members, building teams, managing conflict and change, nurturing the development of high-performance work groups, and mediating breakdowns in the decision-making process.

*Schools will need a greater array of competent assistance providers to choose from in order to meet challenging expectations.*

A system that relies on various independent providers has the best chance of meeting diverse needs in all of a district's schools. A single assistance provider, such as a state or local education agency, might push all schools in the same direction, which would defeat the goals of school autonomy. A single agency assisting all schools also would be spread too thin to be effective.

Few existing assistance providers can help a school through the entire improvement process. Even fewer can claim to have indexed their methods against newly developed "world-class" student performance standards. These are mostly national organizations, funded by foundations and associated with well-known education innovators or sponsored by the New American Schools Development Corporation. Some are voluntary networks of schools that collaborate to develop new curricula, teacher training programs, and assessment methods.

The demand for whole-school assistance providers will grow as more education systems adopt decentralization and school-community linkages. Although new assistance providers ultimately should be supported by fees paid from schools' discretionary budgets, start-up and

expansion costs will require investment by states and the private sector.

Various partners could develop new assistance services, including colleges, universities, non-profit organizations, think tanks, capable district central offices, and teachers' unions. Those that reach across state lines could help increase the range of alternatives available to schools in all states.

*Schools need better information to help them identify high-quality sources of assistance.*

Few existing assistance networks can provide reliable information on the conditions in which their programs lead to higher student achievement. More and better evaluations of assistance providers will leave schools better equipped to make informed decisions.

*Struggling schools need extra help to improve.*

Some schools need temporary funding to engage a new assistance provider, retrain administrators to manage funds and staff, help current teachers develop new skills, or recruit new teachers. Other schools demonstrate so little capacity to improve that the only option is to close the school and pay the up-front costs of creating a new one.

School systems typically reserve very little funding for emergency investments. Improved education systems must keep enough resources on hand to help schools in crisis.

*Failing schools should be closed and replaced with new staffs, bolstered by capable assistance providers.*

Districts involved in decentralization have an interest in replacing consistently low-performing schools with new, higher-achieving ones. New schools expand the choices available to parents and motivate weak schools to improve.

Developing a new school is a complex process. It requires investment in planning, selecting and

training staff, and monitoring school performance. Local or state school boards can help link new schools with appropriate assistance providers and ensure that the new schools' approaches meet community needs. To keep from scaring other schools off the improvement agenda, districts should establish clear expectations for school performance and target remedial actions to specific schools.

**School-level Accountability Systems Refine Expectations for Results**

School-level authority for education implies two profound changes in accountability. It replaces the current practice of holding separate school leaders accountable for separate functions with shared, school-wide accountability for student achievement and professional standards. And it transforms accountability from a bureaucratic process of reporting upward within a narrow administrative hierarchy into a system in which schools are accountable to families, neighborhoods, and the broader community—each of which has its own distinct aspirations for children's education.

*Useful accountability systems for autonomous schools rely on a combination of measures.*

These include:

- The school's fulfillment of agreements with the school board regarding school programs and student achievement gains; these agreements should set high but attainable expectations that reflect the best experience of real schools
- Parental support, as registered in the decision to send a child to the school
- Teacher support, as indicated by teachers' willingness to work at the school

- The school's fidelity to professional standards, as internalized by teachers and principals and judged by inspectors
- The school's fulfillment of community aspirations, as reflected by the actions of representative groups such as local site councils
- Testing programs that give valid, school-specific measures of student growth, measure all students against high standards, and do not deter schools from serving students who achieve below age-appropriate standards
- Consequences for schools that fail to help children learn

**How Deeply Has School System Reform Affected Accountability?**

None of the communities in the six-city study created the balanced accountability system envisioned by researchers, although several have a few elements in place. Charlotte-Mecklenburg created explicit school performance agreements, and Seattle also moved toward using them. Seattle, Chicago, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg allow family choice in a fairly broad range of situations. Chicago is developing a combination of performance indicators and school reviews but has not yet used them for accountability purposes. Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles created active local site councils.

The only accountability mechanism not represented in any of the six districts was teacher choice. None of the districts allowed teachers to move freely among schools or schools to choose freely among teachers.

## Moving Toward a Decentralized System of Community Schools

Saving big-city schools is too big a job for educators alone. Real improvement—better learning opportunities for all children, especially those who are at risk of failing or dropping out—requires sustained effort by every member of the school community, including school boards, superintendents, teachers' unions, principals, teachers, parents, business leaders, policy makers, and community groups. It takes the courage to think boldly and to take risks. And it takes financial investment by foundations, local businesses, and government.

How can collaborators create a system of community schools, each with its own decision-making authority and accountability but all pursuing the same goals for improving children's chances of success? The suggestions outlined below provide a starting point for schools, communities, and districts that want to move in this direction.

### What Does the System Look Like?

A system of community schools has the following features:

- Schools are not excessively regulated, but they have a constitutional relationship with an overarching public authority.
- The central education office has clearly defined, limited powers.
- The terms under which schools operate are clearly stated and agreed upon by schools and the district-wide boards that govern them.
- Each school operates under an agreement between itself and the school board. This agreement defines the school's mission, guarantees public funding, and establishes accountability

provisions. It also ensures the school's right to provide a focused and distinctive instructional program and to freely organize its efforts toward this end.

- Each school draws on the skills and resources of community members and makes it a priority to strengthen families and neighborhoods.

In this system, each school is a semi-independent organization with its own staff, mission, and approach to instruction. The school board and central office serve essentially as investors and portfolio managers. They authorize schools to receive public funds, support struggling schools and replace those that fail, expand successful schools, and help students whose schools have failed them find better alternatives.

The central office helps set district-wide goals for student and school performance but lacks the authority or capacity to micromanage schools or to compete with school staff for control of instructional methods, curricula, professional development, or teacher selection and evaluation.

### What Role Does Each Collaborator Play?

*The school board is responsible for (1) establishing agreements with each school that, collectively, provide a range of programs and services to meet children's needs and (2) ensuring that all children receive a high-quality education.*

The school board needs to:

- Determine the needs and strengths of students, families, and schools
- Maintain a portfolio of diverse schools able to meet those needs and to draw appropriately on community strengths
- Evaluate schools and publicize information about their performance

- Close and replace schools that consistently fail their students or do not honor their agreements; require schools to make substantial changes when their performance falls below standard
- Hire and fire the superintendent

***The superintendent is responsible for long-range planning, evaluation, and analysis.***

If the school board is similar to a portfolio manager, the superintendent can be compared to the chief executive officer of a highly diversified organization. His or her role is to:

- Analyze the match between community needs and school services
- Advise the school board about standards and performance measures
- Evaluate individual schools, interpret evaluation results, and publish accurate information about all schools' programs and performance
- Recommend continued funding or termination for specific schools
- Supervise central-office staff who negotiate agreements with individual schools; advise the school board on whether to approve proposed agreements
- Keep financial accounts and make payments to schools on the basis of their enrollments
- Oversee a lottery-based admissions process for over-subscribed schools

***The central office's focus changes from administration to assistance.***

The central office becomes smaller as schools take on more responsibility for curriculum

design, professional development, and accountability. The role of central office staff is to:

- Help schools find sources of help
- Provide some services to schools, such as building maintenance, food service, accounting, legal representation, and negotiation with insurance and annuity providers—on a fee basis and at the discretion of individual schools
- Join other assistance providers in offering technical advice and training

***Teachers' unions serve as professional associations rather than labor negotiators.***

If schools can choose their own teachers, if teachers and school administrators can choose their workplaces, and if educators' salaries are determined less by collective bargaining than by market-driven competition for good teachers and incentives for high performance, the role of the teachers' union changes substantially. In a system of decentralized community schools, the union is responsible for:

- Articulating best standards for teaching and encouraging schools and districts to adopt them
- Arranging insurance and other fringe benefits for teachers
- Offering training for current and prospective teachers
- Serving as a hiring pool or guild from which schools can select teachers

***Independent organizations, funded by foundations and businesses, provide essential resources and guidance for school improvement.***

Few school districts have enough money to help all of the schools that need assistance or to conduct the research, program development, and evaluation that yield real improvements. This is unlikely to change just because schools have greater autonomy and control over resources. The pressure to add new programs in schools or to reduce class size virtually guarantees that limited funds will go to direct services for students and salaries for teachers, rather than to long-term investments.

Independent organizations can help fill the gap. Their role is to:

- Help fund some of the peripheral costs of school improvement, such as training staff, sharing information about best practices, and reporting findings to schools and communities
- Monitor and assess the progress of the overall reform initiative
- Identify and address deficiencies in the school improvement effort

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## Conclusion:

### Connecting Schools, Communities, and Families to get Better Outcomes for Children

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It isn't easy to transform the goals and structure of school systems so that they do a better job of educating students and connecting with communities. It takes hard work and collaboration. It shakes up long-held assumptions about how schools, districts, and neighborhoods should relate to each other. It eliminates some jobs and redefines others. It requires the courage and commitment to do what's right for children.

The results of these efforts often are not immediate or complete. None of the districts in the six-city study achieved the dramatic, large-scale improvements in student achievement that reformers promised. Many elementary schools and most high schools in some cities remained untouched by the change. None of the districts developed all of the necessary arrangements for autonomy and accountability.

But this is a task worth doing. Cities that build school-level responsibility for education and link schools with communities *do* make progress, especially at the elementary school level. Charlotte-Mecklenburg saw early improvement in student achievement; Chicago posted substantial gains in test scores. And the creation of new school-level responsibilities—for decision making, program development, teacher training, and accountability—prepares collaborators in all cities for the ultimate challenge of educating children, developing families, and transforming neighborhoods.

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