Leadership for Urban Public Schools

by Janice Jackson

Not far from my office is a unique and important landmark: America's first public school. From this small beginning in 1635, a vast movement grew and resulted in public education for all the nation's children. The education of the young, at public expense, was important in the formation of the United States as a republic. The early leaders of this fledgling nation wanted to ensure that citizens would be prepared to make informed decisions about its governance.

Today, the United States finds itself in the middle of a new political battle over the education of children. The current wave of reform places unprecedented pressure on public schools to educate *all* children, meet a specific set of academic standards, and produce evidence of learning using high-stakes standardized tests as the only assessment tool. This pressure (Blankstein and Noguera 2004) occurs in the midst of serious fiscal crises in states and municipalities—particularly in urban districts that enroll a large percentage of U.S. children.

Urban districts' fiscal problems (Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002) are exacerbated by other challenges, such as complex and dysfunctional bureaucracies, lack of material and human resources, diversity in the student population, high student mobility, disconnection from families, high levels of poverty, persistent achievement gaps, and large numbers of adults who hold low expectations for certain groups of children. Urban district schools are being attacked on other fronts as well, including calls for vouchers, charters, and privatization.

Urban school leaders must think critically and act courageously to ensure that the children they serve have access to public education at its best. According to a report prepared for the Council of the Great City Schools (Snipes, Doolittle, and

Herlihy 2002), there were 16,850 public school districts in the United States, of which 100 served 23 percent of all students. Many were in urban areas and served 40 percent of the country's minority students and 30 percent of its economically disadvantaged students.

This article examines the issue of leadership in urban school districts, calls on leaders in urban districts to be leaders of learning, and makes recommendations for leading in an increasingly complex world.

The Commitment of a Fledgling Nation

The purpose of public schooling in this nation—a nation founded on principles of freedom, justice, and measures of happiness for all—is to educate the citizenry in understanding and abiding by these principles. They are not embedded in our consciousness at birth. Goodlad (2004) reminded us that the purpose of public schools is to support a great nation, grounded in an experiment called democracy. Barber (2004, 11) affirmed the contribution of public schools to the health of a democracy:

> To take the public out of public schools is to take the common out of the commonwealth. It is to undermine the function of what Alexis de Tocqueville sagely called the arduous 'apprenticeship of liberty.' It is to forget that liberty must be learned, that while we are, to be sure, 'born free' we are also born private individuals whose God-given rights are abstractions until realized through engaged and competent citizenship. Stated simply: born free in theory, but free in reality when we become citizens. We are not born citizens but acquire the rights and responsibilities that comprise citizenship only through Tocqueville's long and arduous apprenticeship for which public education is the chief instrument.

Public education is rooted in a long tradition. At several important points in history (Kauchak, Eggen, and Carter 2001), through federal court decrees and Congressional acts, America has recommitted itself to public education due to its importance in individual success and national progress. The Goals 2000 Act of 1994 introduced the idea of curriculum standards as a key element of the reform movement. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 solidified the United States' commitment to the education of all children and championed the notion of whole school reform. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 ushered in the current climate of high-stakes accountability.

Along with accountability for student learning, school leaders are being called upon to redesign schools and districts to serve the learning needs of all children in their care. The creation of reform agendas that will lead to success by all children requires leaders who can learn from past lessons, heed the findings of current educational research, and rely on the wisdom of their own experiences.

Urban Schools and Districts: Daunting Challenges

The challenges in urban schools and districts often seem overwhelming. The Institute for Educational Leadership's Task Force on School District Leadership (2001, 2) articulated the changes well:
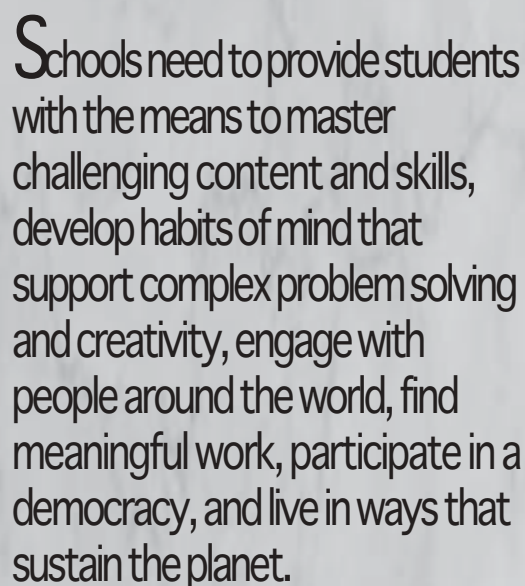
District leaders are operating in an environment of ever-shifting priorities. During the first half of the 20th century, says the conventional wisdom, district management could be defined by 'the four Bs': Bonds, Budgets, Buses, and Buildings. By the 1970s, it had become 'the four Rs'—Race, Resources, Relationships, and Rules—as heretofore mostly ignored groups such as members of minority groups, teachers, students, and communities began asserting themselves. Priorities shifted again in the 1980s when the contemporary school reform movement gained traction. Today, district leaders must concern themselves with a host of different concerns: 'the four As'— Academic standards, Accountability, Autonomy, and Ambiguity and 'the five Cs'—Collaboration, Communication, Connection, Child advocacy, and Community building.

The context in which these priorities must be met falls into five areas: a shift in the purpose and focus of public education, a punitive political agenda, the nature and challenges of cities, organizational incoherence, and problems of capacity and sustainability.

Shifting Purpose and Focus of Public Education

The primary mission of school districts in the United States is threefold:
- ensure that all students meet state learning standards;
- close the achievement gaps among students of various backgrounds; and
- provide evidence of progress in meeting the first two.

Schools need to provide students with the means to master challenging content and skills, develop habits of mind that support complex problem solving and creativity, engage with people around the world, find meaningful work, participate in a democracy, and live in ways that sustain the planet.

Given that student learning is the goal of all schools and districts, superintendents and principals are being asked to become "leaders of learning" (Fuller et al. 2003; Harvey 2003; Knapp et al. 2003a; King 2002). The standards movement of the 1990s, which was intended to be the first step in improving student learning, has been overshadowed by its partner, the accountability movement. The original approach was to align standards with the district's curriculum and assessment system and make clear what students should know and be able to do. The focus on accountability as measured by high-stakes achievement tests pushed the goal of student learning to the background in favor of "tested achievement."

If schools are going to remain true to their primary purpose, the focus must return to learning. Schools need to provide students with the means to master challenging content and skills, develop habits of mind that support complex problem solving and creativity, engage with people around the world, find meaningful work, participate in a democracy, and live in ways that sustain the planet (Hargreaves 2003; Knapp et al. 2003a). A focus on test scores rather than student learning has led to standardized instruction (Hargreaves 2003, 86) that deprives students of "creativity, spontaneity, deep understanding, critical thinking, and the development of multiple forms of collective intelligence." All of these are essential attributes for participation in the world economy. For children served by urban districts, a deprivation in learning is life threatening.

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A Punitive Political Agenda

Public education is under attack. Policy makers at all levels of government make reforms in pre-K–12 education a major plank in their agendas. Though charter schools, vouchers, and privatization are all elements of reform, high-stakes testing is the most invasive. The Bush Administration charted a course of public policy that assumed intense public scrutiny would embarrass school personnel and lead to improved student and teacher performance. This attack has intensified both students' and teachers' frustrations, leading to low morale among teachers and administrators and a diminished sense of hope for many students. An accountability agenda that emphasizes one measurement of learning fails to recognize that the context for urban schools differs dramatically from their counterparts in middle-class and affluent districts (Cuban 2004; Harvey 2003; Cuban 2001).
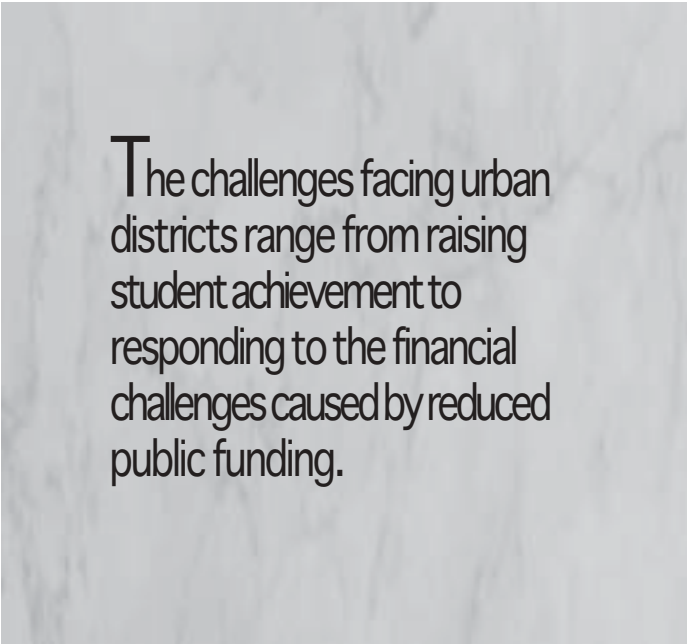
The Nature and Challenges of Cities

Urban schools are forced to deal with issues related to race and class–assimilating immigrants, teaching students whose first language is not standard English, desegregated schools, and the effects of poverty. Those who lead in urban school districts are forced to deal with "racial isolation, ethnic conflict, and economic disparities as they affect academic achievement both in the schools and in the city itself" (Cuban 2001, 5). Urban schools are plagued by low expectations for student learning, lack of focus on learning, lack of a challenging curriculum, discouraged teachers, wary parents, and inadequate resources. Those who pressure urban school administrators and teachers to make huge increases in test scores fail to recognize the depth of change that is being asked of them.

Another distinguishing characteristic of urban schools is the strong belief that schools can revitalize a city's economy, culture, and social life. Though urban school districts are often among the largest employers in the community and their superintendents oversee organizations "that enroll more students than the state university, serve more meals than the local convention hall, transport more people than the city's bus service, and do more to provide a preliminary diagnosis of everything from playground scrapes to seizures than most emergency rooms," (Harvey 2003, 10) they cannot bear this burden alone.

Organizational Incoherence

The demands of leading districts and schools can be overwhelming. Many leaders fail to align the organization's structure and functions with its primary goals. Instead, attention often is given to restructuring the reporting and supervisory structure.

The challenges facing urban districts range from raising student achievement to responding to the financial challenges caused by reduced public funding.

The Council of the Great City Schools sponsored a Colloquium of Former Urban Superintendents. Participants stated that the challenges facing urban districts range from raising student achievement to responding to the financial challenges caused by reduced public funding. Superintendents (Harvey 2003) also had to contend with principal and teacher shortages, while increasing the capacity of central office and school personnel to respond to state standards.
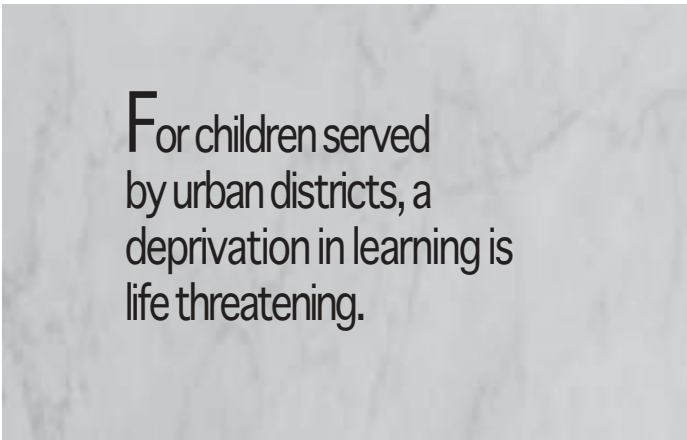
These ideas were supported in a study of superintendents in 100 of the nation's largest urban and ex-urban school districts conducted for the Center on Reinventing Public Education (Fuller et al. 2003). Superintendents felt that their jobs were structured in ways that precluded them from doing well. Some superintendents reported progress in improving achievement, but were frustrated that the progress was slow and districts lacked the capacity to close the achievement gaps at the required pace.

Payne and Kaba (2001) painted an even more dismal picture. They contended that there are deeply rooted, social, political, and organizational obstacles to improving schools. Some of the most difficult schools (Payne and Kaba 2001) had weak social webs that were permeated by distrust, had sunken under the weight of power dynamics that precluded the dialogue necessary for engaging in deep change, had low expectations for

students and the adults who teach them, were battered by an external turbulent environment, and were asked to implement change at a pace that was too fast for their level of organizational development.

Capacity Building and Sustainability

Districts and schools need the capacity to implement desired changes and sustain them over time. Many approaches are driven by quick fixes. Though test scores may increase, this does not equate to an improvement in learning. To avoid these outcomes, leaders of learning must shape organizations that attend to student, professional, and system learning in their deepest and most sophisticated senses.

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Professional learning should be a mainstay of the organization and focus on supporting student learning. Though professional learning has increased in urban school districts, many employees still are unprepared to meet new expectations.

There are several sides to the problem. First, teaching has long been considered an individual endeavor (Lortie 1975; Jackson 1968). Autonomy in one's classroom was a hallmark of being a professional. With the profession under siege, the emotional and career price for exposing needed growth areas can be even higher. The push for making classroom practice transparent as a way to improve has been resisted by many teachers and their unions. Second, teachers are being pushed to engage in professional development that can't be implemented when they return to their classrooms (Joyce and Showers 1995; Newmann and Wehlage 1995; Little 1990). Third, time constraints prohibit the delivery of high-quality professional development that treats teachers like intellectual beings who hold their own theories and beliefs about the teaching and learning process (Lieberman 1988). Last, teachers are not the only individuals in the organization who need to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Support for learning across all levels, beginning with the superintendent, is vital. The cruel reality, however, is that when budgets shrink, professional development is treated as an expendable luxury to be sacrificed on the chopping block of balanced budgets.

Too often, teachers and principals are asked to change while others in the district do not. Asking teachers to adopt new approaches to instruction puts high demands on their intellectual space and time. The call for principals to be instructional leaders requires their regular presence in classrooms and their interaction with teachers about instruction. Yet, the administrative demands on them are rarely reduced.

System learning is the forgotten agenda in most districts. The demand for student achievement data is so deafening that little data are sought on how the school or district functions to meet its goals (Togneri 2003). Superintendents and school leaders must include measures that provide information about the effectiveness of the policies, practices, and procedures that shape their daily work. Several tools are available to guide school leaders in system-wide assessment. These include the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's *School Communities that Work for Results and Equity* (National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts 2002); the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy's *Leading for Learning Sourcebook: Concepts and Examples* (Knapp et al. 2003a) and *Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders* (Knapp et al. 2003b); and Learning First Alliance's *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools* (Togneri 2003).

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Leading in Times of Complexity and Uncertainty

Leaders of learning in urban districts need to understand the multilayered and complicated structures of their organizations. Complexity theory provides a mental model for gaining this understanding. It is not uncommon to hear school leaders talk about "systemic thinking" or "learning organizations." Much of this conversation is grounded in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge 1995). Leaders in urban districts need a coherent and morally courageous framework for thinking through the challenges of an environment where the purpose of education is being narrowed, where public schools are being attacked for not solving the problems of cities, and where the shift to meet the current agenda leaves many districts without the human capacity to meet their goals.

Schools and school districts are socially constructed entities that continuously adapt to their environments. Deep and long-lasting change does not result from a tightly controlled reform agenda. A different approach to leadership is needed. Several studies highlighted common district strategies associated with notable progress in improving student achievement (Corcoran and Lawrence 2003; Togneri 2003; Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002; David and Shields 2001; Massell 2000). These strategies can be categorized into six action areas:

- creating a sense of urgency for deep change;
- creating new systems to support aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- developing new roles and responsibilities to support improved instruction and student learning;

- ensuring that when individuals are given responsibilities, they are given the authority to meet them;
- attending to multiple sources of information to judge progress toward meeting the goals of the reform effort; and
- engaging ongoing community support of the reform agenda.

Implementing all of these strategies simultaneously presents enormous challenges of complexity. The most critical step in creating a sense of urgency often is not accomplished because little attention is given to ensuring that the message is heard, understood, and accepted throughout the organization.

Urban school leaders must develop an informed citizenry that guides democracy and participates in the economy at the highest levels possible, irrespective of background.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for being a leader of learning in an urban district are based on research studies, my recent experience as a senior administrator in three urban school districts, and my involvement with programs that support existing school administrators and develop future ones.

Make the case for the value of public education that is focused on learning. Initiate an ongoing public conversation about the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind and heart that you believe are essential in developing and nurturing all of your students into informed citizens. Put forward a vision that engages the community in a shared agenda. Too often, those outside the formal power structure do not understand the reform agenda. The work of urban school district leaders is part of a commitment to develop an informed citizenry that guides democracy and participates in the economy at the highest levels possible, irrespective of background. This approach is a forward-moving strategy that engages educational leaders and individuals from the community in a discourse aimed at developing broad-based support for the reform effort and providing students with skills and knowledge beyond subject matter content.

Focus on student learning as the core of the district's work. If the case is made for deep learning and not merely achievement in the basics, the district has to remain focused on it. Build the reform agenda around instruction that will lead to success for all children. The diversity of the student population must be addressed. Ask the research community to assist in developing additional student learning measures.

When aligning district standards with curriculum, instruction, and assessment, develop a system that helps teachers see connections to their classroom work. Begin with clear expectations for instructional practice in terms of student learning and

achievement. Follow this with increased support for professional development programs that enable teachers to retain effective practices while learning and incorporating new ones. Strategies for professional development that treat teachers as thinking adults are critical in changing practice (Elmore 2002; Joyce and Showers 1995; Newmann and Wehlage 1995; Little 1990). Encourage and provide resources for inquiry groups within the district, across school sites, and with other districts. Adult learning should include training on how to manage and interpret data about student learning and its connections to instructional practices.

No individual will be around forever. Investing in leadership development throughout the organization, in both the short- and long-term, is essential.

The district also should support the continued learning of school administrators and central office personnel. School administrators and curriculum administrators in the central office should remain current on research and practices on student and adult learning, the academic content for which those in their charge have responsibility, and organizational change. District leaders should make their own learning an essential part of their jobs. Central office administrators who are responsible for operations should stay current on best practices and be aware of how their work affects teaching and learning. Many operational demands that detract school leaders from focusing on instruction might be lessened by central office administrators if they gave more attention to the impact of their work on schools.

Design and support functional relationships to support the district's student learning goals. Organizational coherence does not happen by chance. Give careful thought to developing new roles and responsibilities, keeping in mind the possible interactions that will ensue. The organization is a web of relationships. No one person can meet all expectations of the job. No individual will be around forever. Investing in leadership development throughout the organization, in both the short- and long-term, is essential.

Invest in the evaluation of the system's progress in meeting its functional responsibilities while striving for deep learning by all students. Tools by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts 2002), the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (Knapp et al. 2003a), and the Learning First Alliance (Togneri 2003) provide good starting points for this work.

To make the needed progress, all role groups—teachers, building-level administrators, members of the school board, the superintendent, and central office administrators—must center their work on improving instruction and learning, with high

achievement for *all* students as the end result. Disaggregating student achievement data makes it easier to see where schools are meeting their responsibilities and where they are falling short. Measure the success of each individual's work against its impact on students' learning. This shift requires that:

- school board members stop focusing on operations that do not enhance instruction and learning, and give priority to policy making that supports them;

- superintendents and administrators in central offices provide support at each individual school;

- district leaders push for compliance with instructional expectations while providing flexibility as teachers work to change their practice; and

- individuals in formal leadership roles build internal capacity to assure leadership for the future. Leadership cannot rest with a few individuals (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001).

> When budgets shrink, professional development is treated as an expendable luxury to be sacrificed on the chopping block of balanced budgets.

Engage the community in the reform process. The reform process should embrace all stakeholders and transform adversaries into advocates and allies. Though schools are heavily involved in raising children to live in the world, they do not bear this responsibility alone. Honesty about the district's current state, coupled with a well-articulated and widely communicated shared vision, is critical in bringing many stakeholders into supportive roles. Honesty builds trust and leads to support. It helps stakeholders who are not directly involved in reform planning understand what is happening and determine how their expertise and resources can support the district's efforts.

Document the journey of reform. Though the pace of reform is rapid, it does not take strong roots unless lessons are learned about its implementation. Tell the journey of the reform experience so that others can understand what lies ahead and possibly avoid some mistakes. Talk about the messiness along the way. Too often, only successes are shared. Talk about the untenable nature of the job and push for changes. Take opportunities to learn from one another and encourage others to do the same. Though difficult to carve out time for reflection, failure to do so will leave districts in the never-ending spiral of making progress toward goals but never reaching them.

Conclusion

Educational reform is not new. The changes needed in public education are complex. The continued prosperity of the United States rests on its citizens' ability to participate in the life of a democratic republic that is deeply interconnected with the political and economic life of a larger world. There are many successful urban schools. There are many

urban districts headed in the right direction. None have met the twin missions of improved student learning for all students and closing the achievement gaps. Leading urban districts is no easy task. Think systemically and systematically. Focus on instruction and deep learning for students. Measure the district's and schools' progress in improving student learning and in organizing itself to support instruction and the learning of students and adults. Our children are relying on us to do whatever it takes to facilitate their learning. This is our time to add to the legacy of a nation's commitment to its people and their future. We cannot walk away.

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Janice Jackson is Assistant Professor in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. She previously was the Deputy Superintendent for the Boston Public Schools and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education for the U.S. Department of Education. She has been a consultant on issues related to the reform of urban schools.