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Going Local: Priorities and Strategies for Municipal Leaders

by Audrey M. Hutchinson



“Municipal officials know that education is tied to quality of life and public safety; cities are better off when more people are well-educated.”

OUTLINING PRIORITIES

In my world, working with mayors, councilmembers, and school districts across the country, the focus is on cradle to career. National League of Cities (NLC) recently convened our Mayors' Education Task Force, and this is what emerged as I listened to the conversations:



Mayors want to focus on improving the quality of education, providing wraparound supports in schools (especially for the neediest students), and, of course, seriously thinking about how to create or strengthen pathways connecting post-secondary and career success, with workforce preparation as an important component. Our mayors also emphasized the importance of career technical education, the highest form of vocational education, where young people can receive the necessary skills to help them successfully enter the workforce. Municipal officials are serious about helping their young people achieve a credential or a degree to make them marketable

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in the workplace. Our mayors are also concerned about increasing the graduation rate, decreasing the drop-out rate in cities, especially for schools in low-income communities. They are also very keen on addressing early learning by focusing on supporting families, beginning with prenatal care and beyond. The mayors on the task force also felt that ensuring all students are reading at grade level by third grade is critical to their success. They noted that engaging families by potentially using home visits is a critical part of that strategy.

Afterschool, out-of-school time, and other expanded learning opportunities were significant aspects of the task force's conversation as well. The demand for high-quality afterschool remains critical because we know that at the end of the day, based on the [Afterschool Alliance's data](#), programs help to support academic achievement, working families and keeping kids safe. Afterschool is a venue for developing STEM skills which are critical because we know that there is a growing focus on STEM-related jobs. Science, technology, engineering, and math – jobs that require those skills are driving the global economy at the moment. Afterschool and summer learning opportunities can provide activities that develop social emotional learning, which can strengthen young people's resiliency and ability to adapt in the workforce. Our mayors are concerned about summer learning loss and the importance of using time during the summer to strengthen young people's skills. And, of course, we know that low-income students lose the most because families often have less resources to place them in meaningful programs and opportunities.

Looking forward, school districts need to pay attention to teacher quality, making sure that high-quality teachers are in every classroom, especially for communities that do not have as many resources. I think focusing on low-performing schools is critical, and that the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) implementation remains intact. In terms of providing wraparound services in low-performing schools and making sure that young people have supports to keep them in school – we are seeing the community school model expanding in more and more cities across the country with mayors and superintendents being vocal champions for this strategy. If a child is having trouble with vision and does not have proper glasses, it is impossible for him/her to learn. If a child is hungry and does not have adequate food and nutrition, learning becomes secondary, and if proper health checks are not done to screen for asthma or lead this can cause absenteeism. Another key piece that I would want to share with the President-elect is the importance of those supports that will help take young people through the different transition stages, such as from middle school to high school, assuming that supports are in place to enable them to move from one level to the next.

Creating rigor and opportunities for them to graduate, and then go off to college is the ideal.

CITY-LEVEL SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While changes are occurring at the federal level and there is growing concern about whether we will be able to rely upon the critical federal funding streams that have historically been used to support education, I am delighted to say that at the local level we saw voters asking for support for children, using new tax revenues. NLC saw 12 out of 15 ballot measures approved – in places like Baltimore, Muskingum County, Ohio, and Boulder, Colorado – where cities are using new taxes and the renewal of existing taxes, or in some cases soda tax to augment supports for children and youth. For many years, Seattle has had their city-level education levy which they use to support a number of initiatives, including afterschool programs. There is a groundswell of activities. Some cities have had these in place for a long time, but we're seeing more and more movement, where mayors are taking their responsibility seriously to make kids a priority, and are beginning to see the benefits of making an investment in children

2016 Local Funding Initiatives Supporting Services for Children and Youth

Information and links provided by the National League of Cities

Baltimore (MD) [Children and Youth Fund](#): charter amendment requiring city officials to commit more than \$11 million per year for youth activities and programs

Cincinnati (OH) [Early Childhood Education Levy](#): raises property taxes to generate new revenue for schools, including expanding preschool access

Dayton (OH) [Income Tax Increase](#): raises income tax to support preschool education and other city services and infrastructure

Hamilton County (OH) [Children's Services Levy](#): renews property tax to support children and family services

Jackson County (MO) [Children's Services Fund](#): increases sales tax to support social service agencies serving children

Mercer County (OH) [Children's Levy](#): new tax levy to support children's services

Muskingum County (OH) **Children's Levy**: renews levy to support services for children and youth

Fairfax County **Human Services and Community Development Bond**: supports a range of services for families and youth

Soda taxes that generate revenue for public health programs for children and adults were passed in:

- Boulder (CO)
- San Francisco (CA)
- Oakland and Albany (CA)

Mayors across the country are dedicating staff to focus on key education issues – to work on partnerships between school districts, their colleges and universities, and to create multi-sector partnerships and collaboratives to support education. Clearly municipal leaders can do this by using their own bully pulpits, convening authority, and leadership to help their public understand the importance of education - even without authority over their school districts. Mayors can also hone and nurture other partnerships among every sector in the community including businesses, chamber of commerce, faith-based, non-profit, philanthropic community, and even their own city resources through city agencies to support young people.

NLC has been building the capacity of municipal leaders to be strong advocates for education, building stronger cities together. In 2003, NLC created our Mayors' **Education Policy Advisors Network (EPAN)**, which represents senior education advisors in mayor's office from the 75 largest cities across the United States. We convene them on a regular basis to discuss a broad array of K–12 and post-secondary issues, along with afterschool, summer and other expanded learning opportunities. EPAN is our longest-standing and strongest network at NLC, addressing issues such as equitable educational opportunities and college and career readiness. The Post-Secondary Success City Action Network (P-SCAN), a subset of EPAN, focuses on increasing postsecondary attainment rates in their cities. I should mention that there are also cities that are not in the largest 75 group that we have invited to be part of EPAN because their mayors are so focused and committed to education outcomes. And mayors and city council members in cities of all sizes across the country are highly engaged in supporting afterschool programs, so we also created the mayors' **Afterschool Policy Advisors Network** in 2004, another long-standing network. With the new federal administration, a groundswell of local innovation will continue to thrive.

Mayors are not engaged in education just to be doing it – the success of education is really tied to their cities’ economic well-being, and to ensure that they have a strong workforce and highly engaged citizens in their community. Municipal officials know that education is tied to quality of life and public safety; cities are better off when more people are well-educated.

FINDING OPPORTUNITIES AND COMMON GROUND

It is hard to tell what is coming with the new administration – and I am sure it is evolving. What I have seen so far of this administration’s agenda is school choice, charters, and vouchers. But there are some opportunities in other priorities that have been mentioned – expanding college affordability, and access to career and technical skills, which I think is fantastic. I’m just hoping that the public can convince the new administration to keep programs like Title I and IDEA intact, in terms of making sure that more young people receive this support, especially for low-income kids, kids who are immigrants, kids of color, and kids with special needs. I hope that this administration and the new Secretary of Education honor how much work went into passing ESSA and will work to implement it as it was intended.

At our Mayors’ Education Task Force meeting, I heard mayors say that they may still have an opportunity to influence the new administration. I think there is some concerns, but they want to figure out, where are the intersections, where are the sweet spots and issues that resonate with the new administration? One mayor talked about the opportunity that might exist to work with the new leadership around access to career and technical skills, and also college affordability. I did not hear much discussion of school choice, charters, or vouchers. Maybe they were being cautious – I don’t know. I think they were talking mainly about the issues that matter to them.

The mayors are focused on where they can intersect with the administration’s education agenda. The hope is that there are no major reduction in funding that supports school districts across the country as well as afterschool programs, such as the [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#), which are funded through ESSA and housed in the US Department of Education. We want to keep what we have; our school districts and our cities need these resources.

From where I sit at the NLC, our task is to find ways to work with this administration by sharing what we know and what we have seen that works in local communities. We want to try to use data, evidence and stories to influence decisions they are going to make and also to provide

them with information, in terms of how cities are experiencing the education climate right now and what cities need. We are going to try to find common ground, wherever we can find it because cities know there is no time to waste. Our youth are the future of cities and the success of our nation depends on them.

Related topics:

- College Readiness
- Early Childhood Education
- Equity
- Expanded Learning Time
- Partnerships for Collective Impact

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